

The Remarkable Story of Arthur MacMurrough Kavanagh [1831—1889]

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Introduction

Arthur MacMurrough Kavanagh was born in 1831 in Borris House, County Carlow, Ireland. He was an Irish aristocrat from the mid-nineteenth century who was part of the 'Irish nobility' and by heritage a descendant of the ancient Kings of Leinster [Fig 1]. Arthur has been variously described as both 'incredible' and 'remarkable' and this short article will explore just why that was. As a boy he was described as: 'fair, handsome, charming, and resolute' and as a youth 'brave, adventurous and high minded'¹. These qualities as we will see were central to his story as in later life he became a landowner, adventurer and politician².



Arthur spent much of his teenage and early adult life travelling initially across Europe and then to Egypt and the Holy Land. He also travelled through Scandinavia, Russia and Persia before reaching India where he took work as a dispatch rider and later a surveyor with the East India Company. During his travels he developed many skills, some of which he had already excelled at as boy and all of which he was to enjoy later in life. He returned to Ireland in 1853 to take over the family estate.

Arthur was an avid yachtsman and hunter and sailed the Mediterranean, the coast of Africa, and north-west Europe.

Figure 1. Arthur MacMurrough Kavanagh PC MP

He also went salmon-fishing in Norway and participated in various hunting activities. As a politician and Member of Parliament [MP], he served several terms representing Irish interests including land reform and improving the conditions of tenant farmers. Arthur travelled regularly between Ireland and London, often using his yacht which he moored in the Thames under the great gallery of the House of Commons. He also served his local community as a Parish Commissioner [PC]. As a philanthropic landlord he showed a keen interest in improving the conditions of his workers and their families living on the estate.

He also recognised the importance of creating jobs for the local area setting up a sawmill, building houses for locals and facilitating the connection of Borris to the rail network.

Medical Considerations

Notwithstanding the obvious merits of the above, you may wonder what is so remarkable about Arthur MacMurrough Kavanagh? Well, he was born without legs below the mid-thigh and without arms below the lower one-third of the upper arm. Despite these severe physical handicaps, he led the active and adventurous life as outlined here without the use of natural or artificial limbs. His exceptional upbringing, courage, and the support of his family and others enabled him to overcome his disabilities and achieve these remarkable feats^{3,4}.

Arthur's early education was comprehensive, combining academic learning with practical skills and cultural experiences, which helped him overcome his physical limitations and lead a fulfilling life. Whilst his physical handicaps significantly influenced his education, they did not prevent him from achieving a well-rounded and active life. Many of the approaches to which Arthur was subject particularly in his early life have resonance with modern approaches that deal with disability and impairment in society including access to employment^{5,6}. It has been recognised¹ that the following shaped his educational and life experiences:

Specialized Learning Methods: Due to his lack of limbs, Arthur's education required innovative approaches. For example, his nurse challenged him by placing toys just out of reach, encouraging him to use his stumps to grasp objects. This method helped him develop dexterity and independence.

Adapted Tools and Techniques: Arthur learned to write and draw using his stumps. Initially, he wrote with a pen in his mouth, guided by his stumps. Over time, he developed the ability to hold a pen between his stumps and write fluently. He also learned to paint and sketch using similar techniques.

Physical Activities: Despite his disabilities, Arthur was an avid horse rider from a young age. He used specially designed saddles and was strapped to his pony, which allowed him to participate in traditional gentry pursuits like horse-riding and hunting.

Medical Consultations: Arthur's undertook frequent trips to Dublin for consultations with doctors and attempts to fit him with artificial limbs. Although these attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, they were an integral part of his early life.

Supportive Environment: Arthur's mother and tutors provided a supportive and encouraging environment. His mother believed in making him unaware of his limitations and instilling a sense of destiny and mission although his father took little interest in him. This philosophy was crucial in shaping his resilient and determined character.

Travel and Exposure: Arthur's education was not confined to traditional academic subjects. His travels abroad with his mother and later with his brother and tutor exposed him to different cultures, languages, and practical skills, further enriching his life.

Disability Advocacy

Arthur was a passionate advocate for disability rights and used his personal example to challenge prevailing stereotypes about physical impairment. He also saw the value of gainful employment and the positive impact that had on people, families and the local community.

There is now strong evidence to show that he was correct, and that work is generally good for physical and mental health and well-being^{7,8}. It delivers real benefits not just for individuals and businesses but also for communities, the economy and wider society. It is also recognised that unemployment, precarious work and worklessness are associated with poorer physical and mental health and well-being^{9,10}. Employers and workplaces are also key enablers for providing access to work for those with a disability and other health conditions¹¹.

Employment facilitates access to economic resources that are essential for material well-being and full participation in society¹². It is central to individual identity, social roles and social status. Within society, employment and socio-economic status are the main drivers of social gradients in physical and mental health and mortality. Consequently, being in employment and having access to a job is a key determinant of health.

Today it is agreed that there are economic, social and moral arguments that suggest work is the most effective way to improve the well-being of individuals, their families and the communities in which they live^{13,14}. As physicians, we should be advocating for this at both the patient and wider societal level recognising that occupational medicine practitioners will have an increasingly important role to play in public health and public policy in the coming years^{13,15}. In doing so, they will also promote the benefits of good work and employment and how that can assist in reducing health inequity within the population. This applies to those with physical and mental disability as well as those with chronic illness.

Arthur's handicap clearly necessitated a unique and adaptive approach to how he would develop physically, socially and psychologically. His life and achievements are an example of how disability does not define a person, but rather how personal strength and willpower can overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Of course, in the mid-nineteenth century he was born into a privileged environment, and it must be accepted that someone from a more challenged background would probably not have fulfilled their full potential. Therefore, as we consider these issues in modern day Ireland, there is a need to address the issue of social exclusion and poverty that inhibit our citizens reaching their full potential in life. This of course includes the negative contribution low socioeconomic status has on health and wellbeing creating as it does 'health inequity'.

In conclusion, Arthur's legacy lives on in the annals of Irish history, and his story can inspire people for its powerful message of determination, perseverance, philanthropy and advocacy. An inspiration for those trying to overcome challenges of physical impairment, exclusion, stigma, and access to life opportunities including education and employment. Having led a fulfilling and accomplished life, Arthur died from pneumonia in 1889 at the age of 58 - he was a truly remarkable man.

Declarations of Conflicts of Interest:

None declared.

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