Miracles and Mystery

The story goes that a man named John H. MacColl suffered mountain fever after coming west to Nebraska for, of all things, his health. Wasn't just a setback either; inside of a day or two MacColl was unable to move from the waist down.

Somehow, he made it to Fort McPherson, forty miles away, to visit the post surgeon, who, after a long visit and checkup, simply told Mr. MacColl that there was nothing he could do.

Here's where the story begins to bend, the complication. A traditional medicine man just happened along, or so the story goes, and somehow--the two of them not sharing a language--managed to explain to the bed-ridden MacColl that, if MacColl truly believed him, that old medicine man could heal the woebegone patient up good.

John H. MacColl had no choice to speak of. Out in the middle of nowhere, his life's prospects weren't exactly soaring and he had no ride to Mayo Clinic. He signed on for the treatment.

The medicine man brought along an interpreter to make clear what he'd try to say the day before--that he could heal MacColl if MacColl would submit to the treatment he was offering. Once more, MacColl agreed.

What's to come here isn't pretty, but then, I imagine, neither was MacColl's paralysis by that hour.

The medic took a saw-tooth knife out and made a series of open cuts into MacColl's buck naked body, a hundred of them, or so the story goes. What exactly it was, MacColl never really knew, but the medic then took some kind of herb or something from a pouch and started to chew it as if it were tobacco.

Munching accomplished, he spit something of what he was chewing into his fingers and proceeded to rub it into each of those hundred cuts.

That was the promised treatment. That was all of it.

In three days, John’s sister Laura MacColl claims her brother could actually stand alone. A week later, she swears he could walk.
Listen, there’s been lots of talk about miracles in the last year, the Vatican having substantially proven two attributed to Mother Teresa, the required number for Roman Catholic sainthood.

Not so long ago in the New York Times, Jacalyn Duffin recounted a story for which she was subpoenaed to testify, the case of a woman so far gone with cancer that there was no question she'd begun the inevitable march to her death.

Not so. Months later--years later--the patient was still alive. Jacalyn Duffin was asked to testify at an ecclesiastical hearing because the church wanted to know whether what happened was or was not a miracle. Duffin was an ace witness, she says, not only because she was a specialized physician but also an atheist. Duffin says she made very clear there was no scientific reason for the patient's still being alive. Here's Ms. Duffin's final paragraph in the Times op-ed:

Respect for our religious patients demands understanding and tolerance; their beliefs are as true for them as the “facts” may be for physicians. Now almost 40 years later, that mystery woman is still alive and I still cannot explain why.

Along with the Vatican, Dr. Duffin calls it a miracle. Why should my inability to offer an explanation trump her belief? However they are interpreted, miracles seem to exist, because that is how they are lived in our world.

Don't ask me about John H. MacColl. The whole story could be a fib or a windy old myth. Maybe John H. simply had a debilitating case of gas--I don't know, and no one ever will.

As Ms. Duffin the unbeliever says, "Why should my inability to offer an explanation trump" the MacColl story?

Me? I'll just shake my head a bit and let that old MacColl story be.