

**THE INVENTION OF
ANAESTHETIC INHALATION,
OR "DISCOVERY OF
ANAESTHESIA**

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The Invention of anaesthetic inhalation, or "discovery of anaesthesia by William J. Morton

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WILLIAM J. MORTON

**THE INVENTION OF
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OR "DISCOVERY OF
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THE INVENTION
 OF
 ANÆSTHETIC INHALATION;
 OR,
 "DISCOVERY OF ANÆSTHESIA."

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THE INVENTION OF ANÆSTHETIC INHALATION,
OR "DISCOVERY OF ANÆSTHESIA."

"The invention all admired, and each how he
To be the inventor missed, so easy it seemed,
Once found, which yet unfound most would have thought
Impossible."

MILTON.

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THAT a new "discoverer of Anæsthesia" has been discovered, at this late date even; that extraordinary and novel claims for him have been recently brought before the medical and general public with energy and persistency by a special advocate;* that, in short, the Ether controversy, long since considered as a *res adjudicata*, has been again reopened, forms in itself a sufficient apology for presenting a fresh review of the subject in a manner which shall include the claims made for this third and latest after-claimant. And whether this

* Dr. J. Marion Sims, "Virginia Medical Monthly," May, 1877, and subsequent editions of reprints. A third position assumed by the same writer, who, in 1861, following the lead of Parker, Mott, Francis, and hundreds of others of the best-known physicians of this city, appended his name to the memorial stating that, "for this discovery, the first great triumph of placing in the hands of the profession an agent capable of rendering the patient safely and at will utterly insensible to the stroke of the surgeon's knife, the world is indebted to Dr. W. T. G. Morton, of Boston"; who again, in 1873, said in a public address, "To my mind it is as clear that Wells was the discoverer of Anæsthesia as it is that Columbus was the discoverer of America"; and who now, in 1877, thinks "that Long was the first man to intentionally produce Anæsthesia for surgical operations," and was therefore "the true discoverer of Anæsthesia."

modern revival of a claim never viable will be found to be based upon an accession of new and reasonably valid proofs and facts, or whether it is a needless resurrection of long-buried antiquarian remains, unwarranted by any new fact developed, and interesting merely in an incidental and historical way, is a point which will best appear upon making a plain presentation of the case.

Before 1846, in all time, surgery was agony.

(The universal practice of Anæsthesia, as it is understood to-day, began in 1846. Before this date pain was inevitable. Mankind in hospitals, in homes, on all occasions of pain incident to surgery and medicine, suffered without relief. After this date pain was avoidable. Mankind was offered and accepted immunity, and every physician and surgeon in the world held in his hand the means and the method of annihilating it.

(Thus voluntary escape from pain forms an epoch in the world's history) as definite as the beginning of the Christian era, of vaccination, or of telegraphy; an epoch marked, moreover, by results to humanity more important and more enduring than those gained by any single contribution ever made to medicine.* The practice of surgery underwent at this date a striking revolution, brought about by the revelation of the fact that sulphuric ether, properly managed, would produce complete insensibility to the pain of surgical operations.)

(This revelation to the world was made by Dr. W. T. G. Morton, of Boston; † he was the issuer of the new facts. At

¶ "If America had contributed nothing more to the stock of human happiness than Anæsthesia, the world would owe her an everlasting debt of gratitude." —Professor S. D. Gross, Address delivered April, 1872.

(It is probable that the American inventor of the first anæsthetic has done more for the real happiness of mankind than all the moral philosophers from Socrates to Mill.) —Lacey, "History of European Morals," vol. I., p. 88.

† At the time of the invention of anæsthetic inhalation Dr. Morton was a young man of twenty-six years, industriously making his own way through the world. Early thrown upon his own resources by an unfortunate business venture of his father's, but with a good New England academy education, moderate ambition, courage, and a clear conscience to back him, he had started out, and had met with those obstacles which usually attend the career of the self-made man—obstacles which, while they delay success, at the same time develop character. His final goal was the attainment of a medical degree and the practice of medicine. With this in

hand stood a Bigelow, with the incisive insight to welcome and counsel, and the will and the ability to sweep aside the prejudice and doubt of the hospital surgeons, and within the historic walls of the Massachusetts General Hospital were found a Warren and a Hayward to verify the revelation with judicial fairness, and to place upon it verified the stamp of their scientific and professional approval; and a Holmes suggested the terms Anæsthesia and Anæsthetics.*

Thus issued, fostered, verified, and christened, the revelation went forth into the world in 1846, perfect at its outset.

view, he had already, in 1844, entered his name as a student in the office of a physician in Boston, and had shortly afterward matriculated in the Harvard Medical School, where he faithfully attended the courses of lectures. While still a student of medicine, practicing the allied branch of dentistry by the way as a means of support, his attention became fixed upon the anæsthetic properties of sulphuric ether. Soon came his announcement of success in its use, and the all-absorbing controversy which ensued of course precluded further medical studies. Afterward the honorary degree of M. D. was conferred upon him by the Washington University, of Baltimore, Md. That Dr. Morton was "ignorant of medicine and without a degree" has been so often repeated by the tireless and bitterly personal detractors of the early days of the controversy, and thoughtlessly reiterated since, justifies this brief allusion to a branch of the subject slightly apart from the points at issue.

* Professors Henry J. Bigelow, George Hayward, John C. Warren, and O. W. Holmes, of the Harvard Medical School. Only lately a distinguished American writer states that the word Anæsthesia "was coined and introduced into our medical nomenclature in 1847, by the late Sir James Y. Simpson." The following characteristic letter establishes the fact that the word originated in America. Dr. Morton at first used the term *Letheon*, suggested by the fabled river *Lethe*, to denote oblivion both to pain and to consciousness, but quickly adopted the new word.

"Boston, November 21, 1846.

"MY DEAR SIR: Everybody wants to have a hand in a great discovery. All I will do is to give you a hint or two as to names or the name to be applied to the state produced and the agent.

"The state should, I think, be called 'Anæsthesia'; this signifies insensibility, more particularly (as used by Linnæus and Cullen) to objects of touch. The adjective will be 'anæsthetic.' Thus we might say, the state of anæsthesia or the anæsthetic state. The means employed would be properly called the anæsthetic agent. Perhaps it might be allowable to say anæsthetic agent, but this admits of question. . . . I would have a name pretty soon, and consult some accomplished scholar, such as President Everett or Dr. Bigelow, senior, before fixing upon the terms which will be repeated by the tongues of every civilized race of mankind. You could mention these words which I suggest for their consideration; but there may be others more appropriate and more agreeable. Yours respectfully,

O. W. HOLMES.

"Dr. Morton."

The news quickly reached Europe. So sudden was this conquest of pain that, as is well said by Sir James Paget,* in referring to the event, "it might almost be said that in every place, at least in Europe, where the discovery was promoted more quickly than in America, the month might be named *before* which all operative surgery was agonizing, and *after* which it was painless." Anæsthesia came into universal practice; ether remained alone in the field as an anæsthetic for more than a year, when Dr., afterward Sir James Y. Simpson † suggested chloroform as a substitute for it. ‡ A number of other substitutions have since been made, but have failed to supplant the original ether. And we may note, in passing, the gratifying fact that the practice of Anæsthesia is wholly of American origin.

Proof that previous to 1846 surgery was agony.

But it may be asked, was this knowledge new to the world? Was it in 1846 for the first time placed in the possession of mankind? That it was, absolutely and without

* "Escape from Pain: the History of a Discovery." By Sir James Paget, Bart. "The Nineteenth Century," December, 1879.

† In sending to Dr. Morton his first publication upon chloroform, Dr. Simpson writes:

"MY DEAR SIR: I have much pleasure in offering for your kind acceptance the accompanying pamphlet. In the 'Monthly Journal of Medical Science' I have a long article on Etherization, vindicating your claims over those of Jackson.

"Of course the great thought is that of producing insensibility, and for that the world is, I think, indebted to you.

"With very great esteem for you, allow me to subscribe myself, yours very faithfully,
J. Y. SIMPSON.

"EDINBURGH, November 19, 1847."

Afterward Dr. Simpson diffused this credit over a great number of observers and experimenters, leaving the main idea ascendant that the settled and fixed practice of Anæsthesia as known to-day did not begin until 1847. The files of all medical journals throughout all countries published between October, 1846, and November, 1847, are sufficient refutation of this view of the case.

‡ This interval of a year is sometimes strangely forgotten, as witness the following recent remark: "The men who taught us had seen the introduction of chloroform rendering possible prolonged operations, and an accuracy of surgical dissection which was before unattainable."—"Advances in Surgery during the Past Twenty Years." By Roderick Maclaren, M. D., etc. "Lancet," January 31, 1880. If we say, rather, that they had seen all this by *ether* for a year before chloroform was mentioned as an anæsthetic, we shall utter the fact.

reservation, is established by the common consent of all eminent authorities, tracing them up to the very day even of Dr. Morton's first demonstration.

In 1839 the distinguished surgeon Velpeau wrote: "To avoid pain in surgical operations is a chimera which it is not allowable to pursue at the present day. The cutting instrument and pain are two words which never present themselves singly to the mind of the patient, and of which we must necessarily admit the association." And Orfila, in his "Toxicology," declares "absolute insensibility to pain under surgical operations by etherization to be a discovery entirely new."

Professor J. C. Warren, already referred to, says: "The discovery of a mode of preventing pain in surgical operations has been an object of strong desire among surgeons from an early period. I have freely declared, that, notwithstanding the very large doses of narcotic substances, this desideratum had never been satisfactorily obtained." And again, January 6, 1847: "I hereby declare and certify that I never heard of the use of sulphuric ether by inhalation as a means of preventing the pain of surgical operations, until it was suggested by Dr. William T. G. Morton in the latter part of October, 1846."

Sir Benjamin Brodie, in an address delivered at St. George's Hospital, London, in October, 1846, said: "There is no greater desideratum either in medicine or surgery than to have the means of allaying or preventing bodily pain, not only in surgical operations, but in other cases also; but there is good reason to apprehend that it has not been reserved for the revival of animal magnetism under a new name to accomplish that *for which all physicians and surgeons have been looking in vain from the days of Hippocrates down to the present time.*" What Brodie despaired of became an accomplished fact within twenty-four hours of the delivery of his address.

The facts thus far detailed are fixed and immutable. Not a word admits of discussion or denial; they demonstrate clearly that something novel was revealed to the world in 1846—something not yet in the possession of mankind; in themselves they are *prima facie* evidence that what was new