Conference Report

The Second International Symposium on the History of Anaesthesia

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The First International Symposium on the History of Modern Anaesthesia was held in Rotterdam, Holland, in May, 1982.¹ It brought together anaesthetists from all parts of the world who were interested in the history, development, and pioneers of our specialty. Since that time the Anesthesia History Association has been formed in North America and the History of Anaesthesia Society in Great Britain. The Second International Symposium on the History of Anaesthesia was held in London, England, from 20–23 July 1987 at the Royal College of Surgeons.

The advancement of anaesthesia from a menial task performed by untrained personnel to its present level of excellence and safety is largely due to the efforts and persistence of a few anaesthetists. It is only in the past 50 years that anaesthesia has been recognized as a specialty with its own national societies, examinations, and centres for teaching and research. To see and hear some of the specialists from different countries who helped to achieve these goals was an honour in itself.

During the three days of the Symposium many aspects of the history of anaesthesia were presented, from biblical times to the present day. The excellent attendance at every session reflected the sustained interest of registrants, and the high quality of the presentations. For anaesthetists who could not be there the Proceedings² will provide fascinating information, much of which is unlikely to be found in any standard textbook of anaesthesia.

The opening ceremony was performed by Her Royal Highness Princess Alexandra, a cousin of the queen and an honorary Fellow of the Faculty of Anaesthetists of the Royal College of Surgeons (Figure 1). Following an address given by R.H. Ellis, of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London, on the life, work, and residences of

John Snow the princess unveiled a commemorative plaque which has now been placed above the front door of 54, Frith Street, Soho, London where Snow lived from 1838 to 1853.

Invited speakers covered selected subjects, related mostly to general anaesthesia and resuscitation. These included attempts to produce anaesthesia, from ancient times to the discovery of ether anaesthesia, the spread of the news from Boston through America to Great Britain, Europe, Canada, and Australia in the late 1840's, and the history of anaesthetic agents, apparatus, and techniques. One might criticise the omission from these sessions the story of the discovery of cocaine as a local anaesthetic in Vienna in 1884 and the rapid spread of its use throughout the world.

Free papers covered a wide variety of topics which reflected each author's particular interests. Some were

FIGURE 1 Opening Ceremony: (left to right) Dr. A.K. Adams (Dean, Faculty of Anaesthetists, Royal College of Surgeons of England), HRH Princess Alexandra, Dr. W.D.A. Smith (President, Section of Anaesthetics of the Royal Society of Medicine), Dr. M. Rosen (President, Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland), Dr. P.W. Thompson (Scientific Program), Dr. T.B. Boulton (Chairman, Organising Committee).

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SAINT JOHN, SATURDAY, JANUARY 23, 1847.
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SURGICAL OPERATION.—We are informed that, a tumour was on Monday removed from the arm of Mr. — Beattie, of Carleton, by Dr. Hunter Peters, of that place, while the man was rendered entirely insensible to pain by the inhalation of the vapour of a compound, of which ether appears to form the chief ingredient. Complete sleep and insensibility were produced in three minutes by this process, under the direction of Dr. Adams, of Boston; and the instant the operation was completed, an open window and a little cold water to the fore-head, immediately restored the patient, who at once expressed himself as "having been very happy and quite unconscious of having felt anything."

We bring this under the notice of the public, that others may benefit by this wonderful improvement in modern science. Many, to our knowledge, are labouring under disease in this City, who have not the fortitude to endure the pain of an operation.— This process is safe and rapid and has already been extensively used in Boston and other portions of the United States, by the most eminent Surgeons there.

The operation was performed in the presence of three Medical gentlemen, who expressed themselves perfectly satisfied with the complete and entire insensibility to pain of the patient.— *Observer.*

SURGERY.—An operation for partial removal of the hand, was successfully performed yesterday, by David Millar, Esq. Surgeon, of this City. The patient, previous to operation, was placed under the influence of Morton's Letheon, administered by Dr. S. Adams, from the United States. The effect of the Letheon in mitigating the sufferings of the patient were marked, and quite satisfactory to several professional and other gentlemen present on the occasion.

DENTISTICAL OPERATIONS,
under the influence of the
ETHEREAL VAPOR,
Which produces insensibility to PAIN.

MR. VAN RUSKIRK has operated on several persons under the influence of the above, with complete success, and will continue to use when requested, in all operations on the teeth. For further particulars please call at his Rooms, Vernon's Building, Corner King and Germain Streets.
January 23.

FIGURE 2 Reports of the first uses of ether for surgical and dental operations in British North America (now Canada), in The New Brunswick Courier, January 23, 1847.

biographical accounts of well-known and not so well-known pioneers and thinkers. Others described the first anaesthetics in a particular location, early blood storage and transfusion, the 1952 poliomyelitis epidemic in Copenhagen, and the development of modern methods of resuscitation.

Canada was well represented at the Symposium, not only by the distinctive maroon variety of the Canadian Anaesthetists' Society tie, but by a total of nine papers. These included documentation of the first anaesthetics in what is now Canada in St. John, New Brunswick in January 1847 (Figure 2) (J.A. MacDougall, St. John); the earliest news and uses of ether and chloroform 1846–1848 in Upper and Lower Canada and the Atlantic colonies (J.R. Maltby, Calgary); Dr. E.D. Worthington (Figure 3) and other pioneer Quebec anaesthetists in 1847–48 (A.J.C. Holland, Montreal), the first use of divinyl ether in humans (Figure 4) (R.A. Humble, Edmonton); cyclopropane and controlled ventilation (R.I. Bodman, Nova Scotia); and H.R. Griffith's (Figure 5) contributions to anaesthesia (D.M.M. Gillies, Montreal). The history of

FIGURE 3 Dr. Edward D. Worthington (1820–95) of Sherbrooke, Quebec.

FIGURE 4 Plaque, commemorating the first use of divinyl ether in humans, which is located in the Dental-Pharmacy building on the University of Alberta Campus, Edmonton, Alberta.

the Canadian Anaesthetists' Society was presented by G.M. Wyant (Saskatoon), who included a special tribute to Dr. R.A. Gordon.

Highlights of the meeting included the pre-lunch presentations each day by pioneer British anaesthetists. Sir Robert Macintosh (Figure 6), whose 90th birthday was in October 1987, recalled how J. Eastman Sheehan, a New York plastic surgeon, arrived in Spain during the Civil War to deal with facial wounds. The anaesthetists were nuns who only practised mask anaesthesia using Ombrédanne inhalers. Macintosh was asked to help; he took a supply of endotracheal tubes but was faced with the total absence of gas cylinders of any description. He was forced to use an improvised Flagg's can with ether, and from this experience came the development of the draw-over Oxford vaporiser and ultimately the EMO system. C.F. Scurr (London) described his part, nearly 40 years ago, in early human trials – on volunteer anaesthetists! – of the depolarising muscle relaxants decamethonium, pentamethonium, suxethonium, and eventually suxamethonium (succinylcholine). W.W. Mushin (Cardiff) discussed the paucity of high quality textbooks before the Second World War, when there was little or no organised training in anaesthesia, and reviewed those texts which were influential in his life. J.A. Lee (Southend-on-Sea), whose *A Synopsis of Anaesthesia* reached its tenth edition in 1987, described his early days as an anaesthetist in the 1920's. There were no preoperative or postoperative examinations, no intravenous induction or infusion, no tracheal intubation, and no muscle relaxants. And yet an experienced anaesthetist could provide safe and adequate anaesthesia for most of the intra-abdominal operations that are performed today. T.C. Gray (Liverpool) recalled the exciting days when he and Halton first used intocostarin and d-tubocurarine during the Second World War.

FIGURE 5 Dr. Harold R. Griffith (1894–1985) of Montreal.

The Symposium was well supported by the drug and equipment firms. There were fine displays of equipment and anaesthetic machines from the early days to the present period. One firm showed black and white films on various aspects of anaesthesia made between the late 1930's to the early 1950's and also arranged an historical quiz. J.W. Pender (American Society of Anesthesiologists) presented the Living History Exhibit of the Wood library-museum of Chicago; D.J. Wilkinson (London) and T.B. Boulton (Reading and Oxford) had prepared a self-guiding walking tour of London, complete with colour slides, to sites associated with early anaesthesia.³

Each registrant received a reproduction of Goodman Levy's 1922 book *Chloroform Anaesthesia*, and each speaker was presented, through the courtesy of A. Matsuki (Hiroasaki, Japan), with a reproduction of John Snow's 1847 monograph *On the Inhalation of the Vapour of Ether*.

Social activities were of the same high standard as the scientific program. The opening reception, at which Princess Alexandra met and talked with many of the registrants, was held in the Great Hall of the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn, approached from the Royal College of Surgeons through a gateway and garden which date from the time of Henry VII in the sixteenth century. A formal dinner was held in the Banqueting House, Whitehall, a fine building completed in 1622 and embellished with Rubens' magnificent ceiling paintings. It was from this hall that King Charles I emerged to meet his death at the hands of Oliver Cromwell's executioner. The

FIGURE 6 Sir Robert Macintosh of Oxford in his 90th year.

other two evenings were spent less formally at the summer exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, Piccadilly, and on a riverboat cruise on the River Thames. For accompanying guests there were daytime tours which included the Chelsea Physic Garden and Royal Hospital, and the Old Operating Theatre, St. Thomas' Street, London Bridge.

Following the Symposium in London a three-day meeting was held in Oxford to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Nuffield Department of Anaesthetics.⁴ Lord Nuffield created the first fully endowed chair of anaesthesia in the world in 1937, and Sir Robert Macintosh was its first professor.

Preliminary preparations are under way for the Third International Symposium on the History of Anaesthesia to be held in Atlanta, Georgia, in the Spring of 1992. It will mark the 150th anniversary of the first administration of ether for a surgical operation by Crawford Long in Jefferson, Georgia on March 30, 1842.

References

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- 4 *Beinart J.* A History of the Nuffield Department of Anaesthetics Oxford 1937-87. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987.