

William T. G. Morton, the discoverer and revealer of surgical anesthesia, at last in the hall of fame : a vindication.

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WILLIAM T. G. MORTON, THE DISCOVERER
AND REVEALER OF SURGICAL ANES-
THESIA, AT LAST IN THE HALL
OF FAME—

A VINDICATION.

BY S. ADOLPHUS KNOFF, M.D.,

NEW YORK.

THE MEDICAL RECORD has been good enough from time to time to publish the letters and comments referring to my humble efforts to get the name of William T. G. Morton, the most outstanding figure in American medicine, into the Hall of Fame. I am sure the whole medical profession is indebted to this periodical and the medical press of the entire country for the publicity given to the matter. The MEDICAL RECORD may claim to have in no small degree helped in the election of Morton's name as one of the immortals among the great men of our country.

The outcome of the recent election must be gratifying to every American physician who is familiar with Morton's life, his struggles for recognition and the sad experience he was made to undergo by those who attacked him during life and those who up to this time wished to withhold the credit for his work. To any one who cares to know more about the sufferings and struggles poor

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Morton had to endure, I beg leave to recommend the book entitled "Trials of a Public Benefactor, as Illustrated in the Discovery of Etherization," by Nathan Payson Rice, published by Putney & Russell, 1859.

Our never to be forgotten Osler, with his keen sense of justice, gave us the result of his profound study of historical medicine concerning Morton's share in the discovery and promulgation of ether anesthesia in the following words: "William T. G. Morton was a new Prometheus who gave a gift to the world as rich as that of fire, the greatest single gift ever made to suffering humanity." And Professor Welch confirms the investigation of his life-long friend and in one of his recent letters to me says: "Surgical anesthesia has been America's greatest contribution to medicine and surgery and it would be a thousand pities not to have this recognized in the Hall of Fame. As only one name can be selected for this purpose, it is clear to me that this name should be Morton." Prof. Welch was one of the electors and his influence was no doubt an important factor in Morton's final triumph, for from the result of the election it is evident that the majority of the electors were of the same opinion as Professor Welch.

It will doubtlessly interest the readers of the MEDICAL RECORD to know the exact outcome of this year's election of America's immortals for the Hall of Fame. Of the 178 names voted on, the following seven were chosen: Samuel Langhorn Clemens (Mark Twain), who received 72 votes; James Buchanan Eads, the engineer, 51; Patrick Henry, statesman, 57; William Thomas Green Morton, discoverer of ether, 72; Augustus Saint-

Gaudens, the sculptor, 67, and Roger Williams, the minister, a leader in liberal religion and founder of Providence, R. I., 66. The only woman who received enough votes to place her name on the roll was Alice Freeman Palmer, the educator, who received 53 votes.

In view of the remarkable and pleasing result of the election to the Hall of Fame, it is regrettable that certain Southern lay papers, and particularly the *Atlanta Constitution*, should have lent their columns to an attack on the electors of the Hall of Fame because they had not honored the name of Dr. Crawford W. Long of Athens, Ga., to whom that paper states belongs the priority of the use of sulphuric ether as an anesthetic. The article was signed by Dr. Joseph Jacobs of Atlanta, who says: "Surely, this electorate of the University of New York, prior to their voting could have made little, if any, effort to weigh the evidence that so conclusively gives the honor of this unsurpassed achievement in medicine and surgery to Dr. Crawford Williamson Long of Jefferson and Athens, Ga."

The electors of the Hall of Fame, 102 in number, are men and women of national renown and certainly of irreproachable integrity. The officers of the Hall of Fame are Robert Underwood Johnson, Director (absent in service as Ambassador to Italy); Mrs. William Vanamee, Secretary and Acting Director. The entire electorate of the Hall of Fame is composed of actual or former university or college presidents, historians and professors of history, scientists, authors and editors, actual or former high public officials, actual or former justices—national or State, and men and women of affairs. The medical profession in this


present election was represented by Major-General Leonard Wood, Professor William H. Welch and Drs. Charles H. and William J. Mayo. I hope the good and great general will forgive me for still claiming him as one of us.

It would be futile to recapitulate here, or even summarize, the controversies which were started during the lifetime of Morton by his adversaries and after his death by the heirs of Dr. Charles T. Jackson and Dr. Horace Wells of Hartford, Conn. (the latter also a claimant to priority of the invention of sulphuric ether as an anesthetic and an admirer of Crawford W. Long). Concerning the priority claims of Long and Jackson, I shall copy the following paragraphs from a letter Dr. J. Collins Warren, Moseley Professor of Surgery Emeritus, Harvard University, wrote me only recently in reference to this matter:

It is probable that Long performed three or four minor operations with primary anesthetic and then abandoned his claims. As Dr. Keen says, he is deserving of nothing but censure for not having appreciated the value of the agent. Regarding the claims of Jackson and his heirs, it cannot be too strongly insisted upon that Dr. Charles T. Jackson was very unwilling to have anything to do with the discovery at first. According to a letter by a son of one of those present at the first operation, Dr. J. C. Warren, it was not until he had attended an operation in Dr. Warren's father's office, to which he was invited and saw Morton give the ether most successfully, that Jackson came out the next day with an article in the newspapers claiming a share in the discovery. The heirs of Dr. Jackson now say that he was prevented from making the first public demonstration, that is to say, prevented from doing what Morton did at the Massachusetts General Hospital on October 16, 1846. The reason for Jackson's not doing this is given by the heirs as his being obliged to fill an important engagement to survey some mines in Maryland, but they state that he had directed Morton



W. L. Morton.



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what to do and how to do it and assumed all responsibility. According to this Jackson evidently thought the surveying of some mines more important than to give in person the first administration of sulphuric ether to a human being to prevent the pain and suffering which patients and surgeons had endured for centuries. Jackson's claim to have assumed all responsibility without himself administering the ether, would not have cleared Morton from guilt (homicide) had the patient not survived the experiment. Thus to Morton and not to Jackson belongs the honor of demonstrating to the world the greatest conquest of the age.

Regarding the responsibility for the result of the first demonstration of general anesthesia and the method of administering the ether, Dr. George W. Gay, Senior Surgeon of the Boston City Hospital and ex-President of the Massachusetts Medical Society, very pertinently says:

The man who gave the anesthetic upon that memorable occasion at the Massachusetts General Hospital was Dr. William Thomas Green Morton. He had experimented with sulphuric ether, had demonstrated its safety and efficiency and sought an opportunity to show its efficiency in general surgery. He assumed the sole responsibility of the demonstration. The results, whatever they might be, rested upon him. His enterprises, his enthusiasm and his courage brought success. Whatever suggestions or assistance he may have received from others, he was *the* man that made anesthesia a practical, everyday blessing to mankind.

Francis Darwin is indeed right when he says: "In science credit goes to the man who convinces the world, not to the man to whom the idea first occurs." (*Eugenics Review*, 1914.) Morton convinced the world, the credit is his.

There is perhaps no one in this country who has devoted more time to a painstaking investigation to sift the evidence of priority in this matter than Prof. William H. Welch of Baltimore. In answer to Dr. Jacobs' attack on the electors, and

thus on Prof. Welch, who, as already stated, was one of them, I will quote the following paragraph from his anniversary address on "Ether Day," October 16, 1908:

The attendant circumstances were such as to make the operation performed on October 16, 1846, at the surgical amphitheatre of this hospital, by John Collins Warren, upon the patient, Gilbert Abbott, placed in the sleep of ether anesthesia by William Morton, the decisive event from which dates the first convincing public demonstration of surgical anesthesia, the continuous, orderly, historical development of the subject, and the promulgation to the world of the glad tidings of this conquest of pain. Had this demonstration or any subsequent one of like nature failed of success, it is improbable that we should have heard much of claims to the prior discovery of surgical anesthesia.

In defense of the other electors, if such would be deemed necessary, may I say that to judge from the correspondence I had with many of them, they have weighed the evidence of Morton's and all other claims carefully. Not one of these gentlemen committed himself beforehand, but each made me understand that he would investigate all the presented claims thoroughly and judge according to their merits. Dr. Joseph Jacobs is grievously wrong in ascribing to these electors superficiality in their work or partiality in their judgment. As evidence of the thoroughness and conscientiousness of the gentlemen may I be permitted to quote from a letter from Professor R. S. Woodward, the president of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D. C., in which he writes in reply to the evidences at my disposal I had sent him, including a facsimile of Oliver Wendell Holmes' letter, addressed to a Mr. Snell, which appeared in the *Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, of August, 1904:

I had already seen most of the data you furnish,

but it will all be useful for reference in connection with the rather arduous tasks the electors of the Hall of Fame have assumed. It is a great pity that partisanship with respect to the merits of various candidates should be pushed so hard as it is. But data such as you have furnished serve to mitigate the severity of such partisanship. The facsimile of the letter of Oliver Wendell Holmes is very convincing in respect to the case of Morton.

Compared with the investigations of Dr. Welch in this matter, my own are trivial, yet in spite of numerous documents making claims for other names and letters of protests sent to me, some almost insulting because of my advocacy of Morton's name, I have come to the same conclusion as the distinguished dean of Johns Hopkins Medical School. The same opinion was strongly expressed by the great Oliver Wendell Holmes in the letter above referred to when he made an endeavor to settle once for all the then raging controversy. On April 2, 1893, he wrote as follows:

Dr. Bigelow had taken great interest in the alleged discovery. He had been present at the first capital operation performed under its influence, and was from the first the adviser and supporter of Dr. W. T. G. Morton, who had induced the surgeons of the hospital to make a trial of the means by which he proposed to work this new miracle. The discovery went all over the world like a conflagration. The only question was whether Morton got advice from Dr. Charles T. Jackson, the chemist, which entitled that gentleman to a share, greater or less, in the merit of the discovery. Later it was questioned whether he did not owe his first hint to Dr. Horace Wells of Hartford, Conn., which need not be disputed. Both these gentlemen deserve honorable mention in connection with the discovery, but I have never a moment hesitated in awarding the essential credit of the great achievement to Dr. Morton. This priceless gift to humanity went forth from the operating theatre of the Massachusetts General Hos-

pital, and the man to whom the world owes it is Dr. William Thomas Green Morton.

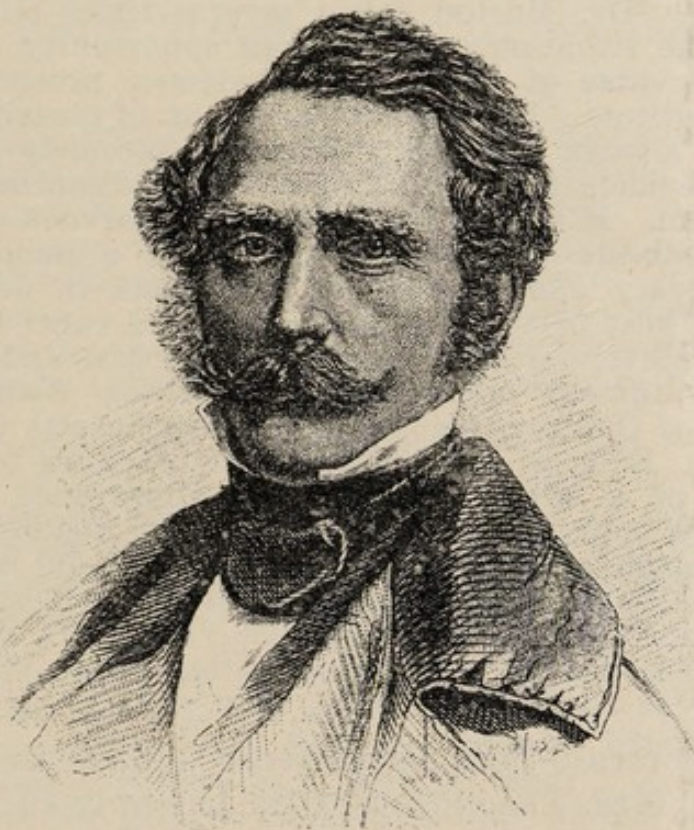
The relative claims of the four contestants for the priority of the use of sulphuric ether as a means of general anesthesia in surgical operations, William T. G. Morton, Crawford W. Long, C. T. Jackson, and Horace Wells, are well summed up by Sir James Paget in the following words: "While Long waited and Wells turned back and Jackson was thinking, and those to whom they had talked were neither acting nor thinking, Morton, the practical man, went to work and worked resolutely. He gave ether successfully in severe surgical operations, he loudly proclaimed his deeds, and he compelled mankind to hear him." (Paget in *Nineteenth Century* for December 1879, "Escape from Pain.")

For the terms "anesthesia" and "anesthetic" we are indebted to Oliver Wendell Holmes who, as just stated, was a strong supporter of the claims of Dr. Morton as the one man to whom "the essential credit of the great achievement should be awarded."

In conclusion I may say that the fact that Morton, together with our most beloved Mark Twain, should have received more votes than any other candidate is a particularly good omen for the medical profession, and it is to be hoped that in future elections the names of our other great pathfinders in medicine and surgery may not be forgotten. Such names as Ephraim McDowell, J. Marion Sims, Benjamin Rush, Walter Reed, and Lyman Spalding, the originator of the U. S. Pharmacopœia, all deserve a place among the immortals in America's Hall of Fame.

For the benefit of the present generation of physicians, I am very glad to be able to reproduce with this vindication not only the portrait of Wil-

liam Thomas Green Morton but also an excellent description of Morton's personality by a celebrated physician still living. It has recently been my privilege to visit the Nestor of American Surgeons, the venerable Dr. Stephen Smith, a physician who began his medical career before the epoch-making revelation of general anesthesia for capital operations. Those who have the rare good for-



Wm. T. G. Morton

tune to see Dr. Smith to-day, in his 98th year, will be surprised at the physical and mental vigor of this veteran. When I told him of my efforts to get recognition for Morton and to place his name in

the Hall of Fame, he promised me his assistance. I begged him to give me the information in writing, and on July 30, 1920, he was good enough to send me what follows:

Regarding your inquiry about Dr. William T. G. Morton, I am very glad to forward you a few personal reminiscences. At the time of the controversy in Congress over the question of priority in the discovery of anesthesia I was editor of the *New York Journal of Medicine*. Dr. Morton called several times on me to discuss the situation and I had an opportunity to estimate the value of much of the evidence presented by the competitors. Dr. Morton was a man of pleasing personality, always faultlessly dressed, extremely courteous, and evidently controlled by a highly organized nervous system. It was due to his restless nervous activity that anesthesia was finally brought to a public test. His advocacy and practice of anesthesia in dentistry created a host of enemies, who sought his ruin. He met them with ever-renewed instances of success and finally with the famous operation of Professor Warren on the 16th of October, 1846, at the Massachusetts General Hospital. Even at this operation the enemies took advantage of a slight delay in the appearance of Dr. Morton to impress the large audience of Boston's most prominent physicians and surgeons that he did not dare face a real trial of his vaunted anesthetic. It was only at the conclusion of the operation, when Dr. Warren spoke these words, heard around the world: "Gentlemen, this is no humbug," that they were silenced.

The portrait here reproduced I have been assured by Mrs. Theodore C. Otis, the only surviving daughter of Dr. Morton, is one of the best likenesses ever taken of her father.

William T. G. Morton was born in 1819, studied dentistry in Baltimore, and hoped by the practice of dentistry to gain the funds to study medicine. In due time he matriculated at Harvard as a medical student. He did not complete his medical education, but received from Harvard the honorary

degree of M.D. for his great achievements in revealing and promulgating general surgical anesthesia. Morton died in 1868, a poor man, heart-broken because he failed to receive the recognition which was his due. Our great physician poet, the late Weir Mitchell, has immortalized the tragic life of Morton in the following touching lines, which he read on Oct. 16, 1896, at the Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the First Public Demonstration of Surgical Anesthesia:

What angel bore the Christ-like gift inspired!
What love divine with noblest courage fired
One eager soul that paid in bitter tears
For the glad helping of unnumbered fears,
From the strange record of creation tore
The sentence sad, each sorrowing mother bore,
Struck from the roll of pangs one awful sum,
Made pain a dream, and suffering gently dumb!

Whatever triumph still shall hold the mind,
Whatever gift shall yet enrich mankind.
Ah! here, no hour shall strike through all the years,
No hour as sweet, as when hope, doubt and fears,
'Mid deepened stillness, watched one eager brain,
With God-like will, decree the Death of Pain.

How did we thank him? Ah! no joy-bells rang,
No peans greeted, and no poet sang,
No cannon thundered, from the guarded strand,
This mighty victory to a grateful land!
We took the gift, so humbly, simply given,
And coldly selfish—left our debt to Heaven.
How shall we thank him? Hush! a gladder hour
Has struck for him, a wiser, juster power
Shall know full well how fitly to reward
The generous soul that found the world so hard.

Oh! fruitful Mother—you, whose thronging states,
Shall deal not vainly with man's changing fates,
Of freeborn thought, or war's heroic deeds,
Much have your proud hands given, but naught exceeds

This Heaven-sent answer to the cry of prayer,
This priceless gift which all mankind may share.

In reviewing the history of Morton's life and labors, one finds indeed the justification of the inscription upon the monument erected at Mount Auburn Cemetery, Boston:

"Inventor and revealer of anesthetic inhalation, before whom in all time surgery was agony, and by whom pain in surgery was averted and annulled; since whom science has controlled pain."

16 WEST NINETY-FIFTH STREET.