

## Book Reviews

skills. A study of surgery as craftsmanship awaits its author.

Bonney made money. He operated in nursing homes and toured the West End in two slick cars, one for himself and another going ahead to set up his equipment in private houses. He lived in the style that pre-war teachers had cultivated. He had homes in the West End and Herefordshire. He gave frequent elegant dinner parties. Politically conservative but no prig, he danced at night clubs and enjoyed horse racing. He was never knighted. Rumour had it that this was because he called Queen Mary "Darling" (but, there again, he called everybody darling). The historian must ask the question: what was the relation between this style of life and the organization and practice of gynaecology Bonney tried to foster?

Bonney's life raises other questions too, notably the issue of specialization. Bonney obviously cared little for obstetrics in a vocational sense. He saw gynaecology as a surgical discipline firmly wedded to the Royal College of Surgeons of England (he continued to do general abdominal surgery all his life). Obstetrics he envisioned as occupying a similar place. He fought a losing battle against the establishment of a college of obstetricians and gynaecologists (the word order here might be revealing, clearly the alphabet did not take precedence). Geoffrey Chamberlain, Emeritus Professor at St George's Hospital, has written a slim, but valuable conventional medical biography picturing a medical world perhaps not lost but certainly no longer visible. There are few references but there is a useful bibliography of all Bonney's publications. The volume is packed with detail in a small compass. There is much food for historical thought here.

**Christopher Lawrence,**  
The Wellcome Trust Centre for the  
History of Medicine at UCL

**Richard J Wolfe,** *Tarnished idol: William Thomas Green Morton and the introduction of surgical anaesthesia. A chronicle of the ether controversy*, San Anselmo, CA, Norman Publishing, 2001, pp. xv, 672, illus., US\$125.00 (hardback 0-939495-81-1).  
Orders to: Norman Publishing, PO Box 2566, San Anselmo, CA, 94979-2566, USA.  
E-mail: orders@jnorman.com.

This book could be described as the first revisionist history of the early years of general anaesthesia. Standard texts, both academic and popular, tell that the first successful public demonstration of inhalation anaesthesia was by the Boston dentist William T G Morton at the Massachusetts General Hospital in October 1846 and the succeeding events are drawn from two traditional biographical sources, Benjamin Perley Poore's *Historical materials for the biography of William T G Morton of 1856*, and Nathan P Rice's *Trials of a public benefactor of 1858*, which was commissioned by Morton himself. In these, Morton was the hero who picked up the baton dropped by Horace Wells, and carried it through to victory. More recent studies, for example the work of Leroy Vandam, questioned the accuracy of the established view, noting that there was no evidence that Morton ever qualified as either a dentist or a doctor. Against this background of uncertainty, and after nearly 150 years, comes this first full biography of Morton.

Richard J Wolfe, a distinguished medical librarian, has undertaken extensive research into previously unpublished material fundamental to the elucidation of the "ether controversy" and to the parts played by the many pivotal characters, such as Charles T Jackson. This includes correspondence, Congressional papers, and Land Registry documents. The first chapters come as a shock to the traditionalist, since they describe Morton's unscrupulous business dealings, failed partnerships, fraudulent practices, and debts. That Morton lacked

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any formal qualifications prior to the demonstration with ether is also confirmed.

Interweaving the traditional story with his new information, Wolfe leads the reader through a very different tale of the introduction of ether by a man not conditioned by scientific training and lacking in moral principles. The notion is raised that it was Charles T Jackson who put the idea for the use of ether into Morton's mind, and that on the same day came its first use on Eben Frost in Morton's surgery. The possibility of the use of nitrous oxide for the painless fitting of false teeth, and the financial benefit that this could bring to his dental practice, originated by Horace Wells, was not lost on Morton. He persevered, found success with ether, and sought to patent the concept so as to benefit commercially from the sale of licences. Failing to make the expected profits, he applied to Congress for financial reward. This resulted in a twenty-five year long marathon, during which his dental practice declined. For a time he became a successful farmer, but the purchase of land, bought, as in his youthful business enterprises, with borrowed money that he could not repay, ultimately led to financial disaster.

*Tarnished idol* provides a rich insight into the interplay of personalities and circumstances of the "ether controversy", and much material about the nature and behaviour of the various characters. One example of their interaction occurred during Morton's second appeal to Congress. This was the sensational trial of a Harvard professor, John White Webster, for the murder of one of Harvard's benefactors, George Parkman. The victim's dismembered remains were found in the privy in Webster's office. The verdict relied heavily, for the first time on record, on the forensic dental evidence, given by three people deeply involved in the ether controversy, Charles T Jackson, Nathan C Keep and William Morton. Since they were on opposite sides, Morton was able to use this as an opportunity to take revenge on Keep

for the dissolution of their partnership some three years earlier. Wolfe surmises that Morton was paid handsomely for his participation.

It may be felt that Richard Wolfe is overly critical of Morton and his character, in comparison with his gentle handling of Jackson, whose duplicitous behaviour is also susceptible of serious criticism; but with regard to Morton, as the rich tapestry of events and people, of opportunism and disappointment, unfolds throughout the book, regardless of any sympathy he may feel, the reader is bound to be left with the impression of a "tarnished" rather than a "fallen" idol.

Neil Adams,  
West Suffolk Hospitals Trust

**Vincent Barras and Micheline Louis-Courvoisier** (eds), *La Médecine des lumières: tout autour de Tissot*, Bibliothèque d'Histoire des Sciences, Geneva, Georg, 2001, pp. x, 358, SFr 50.00 (paperback 2-8257-0704-X).

This collection of essays is the outcome of a 1997 conference commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Swiss medical professional's death. It brings together a wide variety of interpretations and perspectives on Samuel-Auguste-David Tissot and the larger context of Enlightenment medical knowledge. Born in 1728, Tissot did not rise to fame due to his scientific discoveries or new theories, but rather for his diagnostic skills called upon by the élite of Europe and his popular treatises, most importantly *Avis au peuple sur sa santé*, re-edited countless times and in many languages after its publication in 1761.

But, as this collection demonstrates, Tissot was also intimately involved in a European circle of enlightened medical professionals, part of an epistolary republic