

Book Reviews

Cone of Oblivion. L. J. LUDOVICI. London: Max Parrish, 1961, pp. 224. 25s.

This book tells the story of the great controversy which arose from the first use of ether as an anaesthetic by William Thomas Green Morton of Boston.

The dramatic history of the way in which Morton was hounded to an early death is well told by L. J. Ludovici, whose theme is 'anaesthesia was a boon to the world, a tragedy to its author and his family'.

Charles Thomas Jackson is presented as the villain of the piece, Morton as the wronged hero, and the evidence, as Ludovici presents it, is very convincing.

We are shown in some detail the background and early histories of the two men, and their relationship to one another: at first, as master and pupil, living in the same house; then, following the painstaking efforts of Morton in his investigations of ether, we read of the false claims made by Jackson, driven by the monomaniac devil which possessed his tortuous and obsessive mind. Mr. Ludovici has done well in collecting together the evidence, much of it little known. We are told of Jackson's previous actions against Samuel Morse, the inventor of the electric telegraph, whom he pestered for seven years, claiming that he, Jackson, had given Morse the idea of his useful invention. As Ludovici points out, the pattern of Jackson's behaviour is similar in this controversy to that which he followed in the ether quarrel, namely, denigration of his opponent, self-laudatory newspaper articles, and letters to influential scientists and politicians at home and abroad.

William Beaumont, the father of gastric physiology, also suffered from an attempt by Jackson to plagiarise his work upon Alexis St. Martin, and that Jackson's monomania was recognized by his contemporaries is evident from the opinions of his associates on the Geological Survey of Lake Superior in 1848, when the belief that he was not sane was current amongst them.

Jackson was a gifted man, his scientific knowledge was considerable, and he had many influential friends and defenders, but Ludovici's detailed examination of the records shows beyond doubt that the credit for the demonstration and widespread introduction of ether as an anaesthetic agent, belongs to William Thomas Green Morton, and to him alone.

The book includes a fairly comprehensive bibliography, but detailed references would have been helpful, as would an index, though these are, perhaps, rather too much to expect in a book evidently written for the general reader. Portraits of the main protagonists, too, would have been a welcome addition. Few mistakes have been found. Oliver Wendell Holmes was not the author of the word *anaesthesia*, which was used by Dioscorides: Holmes merely suggested its use in this connexion. There is an odd error on p. 158, where Horace Wells is credited with giving nitrous oxide in the New York Hospital in 1858, ten years after his unfortunate death. Anaesthetists will not take kindly to Ludovici's statement that even nowadays it is not unusual for a surgeon to remark 'Blood's turning a little black.'

These are small points in a well-written book which will interest both the anaesthetist and the medical historian, and it may well be that the last and definitive word has been written upon the great ether controversy.

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