

# The History of Anesthesiology

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Scylla—"We are having this baby, and We are having chloroform."

John Snow's most illustrious patient, as he knew her. Queen Victoria in 1855; age 36. He gave chloroform to her in 1853 and again in 1857. From *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, edited by A. C. Benson and Viscount Esher. 1907. 3 volumes. London: John Murray. Published by authority of H.M. the King.

## FAMOUS PATIENTS IN ANESTHESIA

Portrait of Queen Victoria reprinted from W. Stanley Sykes' *Essays on the First Hundred Years of Anaesthesia, Volume I*, facing page 77. Reprinted by permission of Churchill-Livingstone, publisher.

# ESSAYS ON THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS OF ANÆSTHESIA

*by*

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## CHAPTER 4

### AN OBSTETRICAL SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS, OR, VICTORIA AND MR. WAKLEY

VICTORIA, Queen of Great Britain and Empress of India, is sometimes, quite wrongly, thought to be an uninteresting person, or even stodgy. I once made this mistake myself. Lytton Strachey, that debunking biographer, probably had the same idea when he began to write about her.<sup>1</sup> If so, he very soon found out that he was wrong. For Victoria refused to be debunked and emerged from his scrutiny as a person of tremendous vitality. She and her husband, apart altogether from their exalted position, turned out to be strong characters in their own right, an impression which is confirmed by my own search through their writings, many volumes of which I read before dipping into Strachey's book. The reason for this excursion into Royal biography will appear later.

Victoria was a woman of abounding energy, to whom nine pregnancies were a minor incident in life. Her will was as hard as steel and she had a most overwhelming personality, in spite of her very small stature and lack of beauty. In October, 1857, she wrote to the British Ambassador in Germany about her eldest daughter's marriage:

"The Queen *never* could consent to it (taking place in Berlin) both for public and private reasons, and the assumption of its being *too much* for a Prince Royal of Prussia to *come over* to marry the *Princess Royal of Great Britain* in England is too *absurd*, to say the least. . . . Whatever may be the usual practice of Prussian Princes, it is not *every* day that one marries the eldest daughter of the Queen of England. The question therefore must be considered as settled and closed. . . ."

It was. The marriage took place at the Chapel Royal, St. James's.

A person who could so naturally assume this arrogant and effortless authority and calmly impose her will upon the head of another dynasty is not without interest, to say the least of it. And yet she could be very modest. On one occasion she presented Charles Dickens with a copy of her own published work.<sup>2</sup> She had written in it, "From the humblest of writers to one of the greatest." She was diffident about her own attainments, especially as compared to the brilliancy of Albert's, but she was never modest about the greatness of her position.

She was certainly one of the world's great lovers. Her life with Albert was ideally happy and she worshipped him to adoration. Lytton Strachey says, when he died at the age of forty-two: "With appalling suddenness Victoria had exchanged the serene radiance of happiness for the utter darkness of woe," and this was no exaggeration. The steel-willed autocrat, iron-hard and self sufficient, wrote to her uncle after Albert's death in 1861:

"My own dearest, kindest Father, For as such have I *ever* loved you! The poor fatherless baby of eight months is now the utterly broken-hearted and crushed widow of forty-two! *My life as a happy one is ended!* The world is gone for *me!* If I must live on . . . it is henceforth for our poor fatherless children—for my unhappy country, which has lost *all* in losing him—and in *only* doing what I know and *feel* he would wish, for he is near me—his spirit will guide and inspire me! But oh! to be cut off in the prime of life—to see our pure, happy, quiet, domestic life, which *alone* enabled me to bear my *much* disliked position, cut off at forty two—when I *had* hoped with such intuitive certainty that God never *would* part us, and would let us grow old together . . . is *too awful*, too cruel! And yet it *must* be for *his* good, his happiness! His purity was too great, his aspiration *too high* for this poor, *miserable* world! His great soul is *now only* enjoying *that* for which it *was* worthy! And I will *not* envy him—only pray that mine may be perfected by it and fit to be with him eternally, for which moment I earnestly long. . . .

Ever your devoted, wretched, child, Victoria R."

Albert himself was perhaps one of the most conscientious men who ever lived. He had a first-class brain, was an expert musician and a tremendous worker. By seven o'clock in the morning he was at his desk, abstracting papers, writing memoranda and doing everything he possibly could to relieve his wife of the burden of State affairs which she had to carry. He is generally thought to have been devoid of a sense of humour, and it is true that he was somewhat stiff, with a formal aloofness which made him a difficult man to know. This was one of the causes of his undeserved unpopularity. But he could tell a story against himself, which is a fair test of that undefinable thing a sense of humour.<sup>3</sup>

"Balmoral is in full splendour. . . . The deer were so polite as to show themselves yesterday . . . in the sacred number of three. Whether from a reverential feeling on our part, or from boundless lack of skill, I know not, but three of us also, to wit, Lord Malmesbury, Col. Phipps and myself, shot . . . and missed them, each of the others twice, and I, as became my rank and station, four times."

On one occasion a man was seen in the street waiting for this resolute pair with a pistol. He escaped in the confusion, so the next day Victoria and her beloved drove past the same spot with the deliberate idea of bringing the matter to a head at once rather than have a continuous threat hanging over them. Their bold plan was successful, but how many of us would have had the cold courage to try it?

The English-speaking world on both sides of the Atlantic owes a great debt to Albert. One of his last actions, at a time when he was feeling very ill indeed (it was the beginning of the attack of typhoid fever which killed him) was to rewrite a provocative diplomatic message which would probably have led to war between the two countries.

In 1853 Mr. Wakley, the fearless and incorruptible watchdog of *The Lancet*, began to hear extraordinary rumours about Her Majesty, rumours which he could hardly believe.<sup>4</sup> Being Mr. Wakley he could not possibly ignore these tales, nor could he keep quiet about them. A leading article appeared:

“A very extraordinary report has obtained general circulation connected with the recent accouchement of her most gracious Majesty Queen Victoria. It has always been understood by the profession that the births of Royal children in all instances have been unattended by any peculiar or untoward circumstances. Intense astonishment, therefore, has been excited throughout the profession by the rumour that her Majesty during her last labour was placed under the influence of chloroform, an agent which has unquestionably caused instantaneous death in a considerable number of cases. Doubts on this subject cannot exist. In several of the fatal examples persons in their usual health expired while the process of inhalation was proceeding, and the deplorable catastrophes were clearly and indisputably referrible (sic) to the poisonous action of the chloroform, and to that cause alone.

“These facts being perfectly well known to the medical world, we could not imagine that anyone had incurred the awful responsibility of advising the administration of chloroform to her Majesty during a perfectly natural labour with a seventh child.” (It was, as a matter of fact, the eighth child). “On inquiry, therefore, we were not at all surprised to learn that in her late confinement the Queen was not rendered insensible by chloroform or by any other anæsthetic agent. We state this with feelings of the highest satisfaction. In no case could it be justifiable to administer chloroform in perfectly ordinary labour; but the responsibility of advocating such a proceeding in the case of the Sovereign of these realms would, indeed, be tremendous. Probably some officious meddlers about the Court so far overruled her Majesty’s responsible professional advisers as to lead to the pretence of administering chloroform, but we believe the obstetric physicians to whose ability the safety of our illus-

trious Queen is confided do not sanction the use of chloroform in natural labour. Let it not be supposed that we would undervalue the immense importance of chloroform in surgical operations. We know that an incalculable amount of agony is averted by its employment. On thousands of occasions it has been given without injury, but inasmuch as it has destroyed life in a considerable number of instances, its *unnecessary* inhalation involves, in our opinion, an amount of responsibility which words cannot adequately describe.

“We have felt irresistibly impelled to make the foregoing observations, fearing the consequences of allowing such a rumour respecting a dangerous practice in one of our national palaces to pass unrefuted. Royal examples are followed with extraordinary readiness by a certain class of society in this country.”

When I first came across this article I was almost as astonished as Mr. Wakley was, but for a different reason. The first thing to notice is the date—five weeks after the birth of Prince Leopold on April 7th, 1853, so the article obviously refers to this confinement. I checked these details very carefully to make certain that they were correct. This led to further researches into Victoriana, in an effort to explain a conflict of evidence.

*The Lancet* not only makes it clear that chloroform in normal labour is never justified under any circumstances, but it also states definitely, as a fact, that it was not used. This surprised me very considerably, for I knew that Benjamin Ward Richardson, in his long biographical preface to John Snow's book on chloroform,<sup>5</sup> states categorically that Snow gave chloroform to Her Majesty at this very confinement on the date mentioned above.

“A note in his diary records the event. The inhalation lasted fifty three minutes. The chloroform was given on a handkerchief in fifteen minim doses, and the Queen expressed herself as greatly relieved by the administration. He had previously been consulted on the occasion of the birth of Prince Arthur in 1850, but had not been called in to render his services. . . . On April 14th, 1857, another note in his diary records the fact of the second administration to her Majesty, at the birth of the Princess Beatrice.”

That sounds authentic and detailed enough, and it is in flat contradiction to *The Lancet's* leading article. What is the explanation of this discrepancy? Was John Snow a liar, or did Richardson forge the entries in his diary, or was the usually reliable Mr. Wakley mistaken? I think the last of these three alternatives is the correct one, and there is a certain amount of evidence and a good deal of presumption, to support this view, whereas there is none whatever in favour of the other two theories.

I say Mr. Wakley was mistaken. What I really mean is that he was deliberately misled.

The obstetrician and the other Royal doctors were in a very perilous dilemma. They were between the devil and the deep sea, so they quibbled. On the one hand was their illustrious patient, who probably demanded chloroform. And when Victoria asked for something she was in the habit of getting it. Her very decisive victory over the German Royal House in the matter of the marriage is distinctly relevant here. If she could bulldoze a crowned head in this effortless way, surely the opposition of a few doctors was child's play to her. After all, only a few years before doctors were expected to use the tradesman's entrance at the back of the house, if indeed they had altogether ceased this habit.

Also a person with a will like hers was not likely to hesitate in making up her mind very definitely on the question of chloroform for her own confinement. No doubt, as *The Lancet* says, the royal doctors were very reluctant to use it. The reasons against it, put forward by Mr. Wakley, were not new to them. They were common knowledge, and a large percentage of doctors agreed with them, at that time. No doubt also the Queen and Albert would listen politely to their objections. After all they had had a lot of practice at listening. Politicians, statesmen, ambassadors, mayors, and deputations of all kinds had been talking at them for years. But I imagine the end of the discussion was in character. "Thank you, gentlemen, for your opinions. *We* are having this baby, and *We* are having chloroform." And another question was settled and closed. I find it quite impossible to imagine the doctors persisting in their refusal in the face of that imperious and inflexible will.

On searching through the relevant parts of the nine volumes of the *Letters of Queen Victoria* I could find no direct reference to this incident.<sup>6</sup> These letters are, of course mainly political, written to her ministers. A few personal and family details are mentioned in those addressed to her relatives, especially those to her uncle the King of the Belgians. But she did not need to ask his advice on an intimate subject like this, which after all concerned nobody but herself and Albert.

On only one occasion—apart from her remarks to John Snow—did she record her opinion of chloroform, and it was entirely favourable. In a letter<sup>7</sup> to Princess Augusta, the mother of the Prince Frederick who married her eldest daughter, also called Victoria, she said, "Vicky appears to feel quite as well and to recover herself just as quickly as I always did. What a blessing she had chloroform! Perhaps without it her strength would have suffered very much."

It must be remembered that, conservative though she was in some ways, in others she was far in advance of her time. In an era when ladies of quality were kept in bed for weeks after their confinements she put into practice—no doubt against strong opposition—the modern idea of getting up early. The Prince Consort himself makes this quite clear in a letter to his stepmother after the birth of the Princess Beatrice (the occasion of the Queen's second anæsthetic): "Victoria is already on the sofa and very well."<sup>8</sup> The birth was on the 14th April and the letter was written on the 19th.

Sidney Lee's biography<sup>9</sup> and Queen Victoria's own book<sup>10</sup> do not mention chloroform at all. There is no particular reason why they should.

So the probability is that the *accoucheur* had to do as he was told, making the best of a bad job by unloading the terrific burden of responsibility on to the competent shoulders of John Snow. He was the acknowledged expert, and had been ever since the beginning of anæsthesia—the only anæsthetist in the kingdom, with the possible exceptions of Clover and Potter.

But imagine the *accoucheur's* horror at the thought of what the formidable Mr. Wakley would say. For he was the other horn of the dilemma, and he was in his own way as inflexible as the Queen herself. Nothing would induce him to be quiet if he had something to say, and he had seen to it that his opinions about chloroform were generally known amongst his professional brethren. He was unbribeable, incorruptible, and utterly fearless. Rank, position and power meant nothing to him, nor was he afraid of the law. Chloroform in normal labour he condemned utterly as a treacherous drug—not knowing yet that it was far safer in labour than in surgery. Mr. Wakley was perhaps even more intimidating than the Queen—if that were possible—for there is no evidence that he ever softened or mellowed at all, whereas Victoria occasionally did. So he had to be pacified by a half-truth—that the Queen was not rendered insensible, which Mr. Wakley interpreted, as he was intended to do, as not having chloroform at all. In actual fact the Queen got her chloroform, given by the best possible man, but she got analgesia only, not anæsthesia—chloroform *à la reine*, in fact. Snow knew quite a lot about anæsthesia by this time, quite enough to use analgesia deliberately. His fifteen minim doses were in fact designed for this purpose, and they did their work well. The Queen herself said so. Mr. Wakley's conjecture that "a pretence of giving chloroform" might have been used was unworthy of his intelligence. Was Victoria the sort of person to be tricked like this?



Technically correct the statement may have been, but as an example of hair-splitting casuistry it takes some beating. For the Editor of *The Lancet* was certainly left with a totally wrong impression. He goes on to pontificate, "In no case could it be justifiable to administer chloroform in normal labour."

Not a very creditable episode, really. One wonders if Victoria and Albert ever got to hear about it. Probably not. It is very unlikely that they had either the time or the inclination to read *The Lancet*. It is equally unlikely that anyone would dare to tell them about it. Anyway John Snow was employed again at a future confinement, so it is quite certain that his work met with the royal approval. But it cost me several weeks of work to ferret out the facts and the background of this affair and to explain the incident in a reasonable way. I can think of no other theory which fits the facts. Whether Mr. Wakley ever found out how he had been diddled is not yet clear. Further researches in later numbers of *The Lancet* should clear up this point.

A detailed search through later volumes, carried out after this chapter was written—I couldn't delay the writing of it because it interested me so much—revealed no further mention of this anæsthesia.

What it did reveal was the fact that I was not quite accurate when I stated that Mr. Wakley never mellowed at all. He, or at any rate his paper, became rather less forthright and less intimidating than before. In 1857 two of his sons were made partners in *The Lancet*. Five years later he died, at the age of sixty-seven. Perhaps he was getting a little tired of fighting, perhaps his sons had a restraining influence. After all, he had corrected so many abuses, defended so many libel actions, exposed so many scandals and advocated so many reforms that the old fire within had probably died down to some extent.

On April 18th, 1857, the year of the family partnership, *The Lancet* reported that "Her Majesty was safely delivered of a Princess . . . on Tuesday last." It was a normal labour, but the report goes on to state, quite calmly, that Dr. Snow began to give chloroform at intervals at 11.30 a.m. This continued for 2½ hours, and "the anæsthetic agent perfectly succeeded in the object desired."

But there was no further comment and no criticism of any kind. I seem to detect the influence of the brothers Wakley here, rather than that of their ruthless and caustic father. In the next week's issue there is a simple and gratified report that Dr. Locock, "who has assisted Her Majesty through so many hours of trial without the occurrence of a single mishap," had been rewarded with a title and had become Sir Charles

Locock, Bart. Sir Charles, then plain Dr. Locock, was appointed physician *accoucheur* to Her Majesty in 1846. She had had four children before this. In 1847 Dr. Robert Ferguson was also appointed to a similar position. So these two were probably responsible for her last five confinements.

Victoria had one other operation during her long life, on Sept. 4th, 1871. Mr. Lister opened an axillary abscess for her, but the reports do not mention any anæsthetic.

Many years later, however, in 1908,<sup>11</sup> Lord Lister, in a long letter to Sir Hector Cameron, gave a condensed history of his antiseptic method. He began by saying that he first treated compound fractures with undiluted carbolic acid in 1865. He then began to use it for abscesses.

"I continued to use a strip of lint as a drain for about five years with perfectly satisfactory results. But in 1871, having opened a very deeply seated acute abscess in the axilla, I found to my surprise on changing the dressing next day that the withdrawal of the lint was followed by escape of thick pus like the original contents. It occurred to me that in that deep and narrow incision, the lint, instead of serving as a drain, might have acted as a plug and so reproduced the conditions present before evacuation."

He goes on to describe in detail how he cut off a piece of rubber tubing from the Richardson's ether spray which had been used at the operation, cut holes in it and attached silk threads to one end. He then soaked it in strong carbolic solution all night and used it for the abscess next morning. He found that there was no further damming up of pus, and the abscess healed in a week. After that he continued to use drainage tubes instead of lint plugs.

Was this patient Victoria? It was the right year, and he goes into such detail that it might well have been the Queen's case. Or it may have been that he detailed it because he thought tubes were a great advance over the old method. We shall never know for certain. But the case does give a hint as to the anæsthesia used. It would certainly be the ether spray.

Much later another little sidelight on this operation was discovered. Sir St. Clair Thomson, one of Lister's house surgeons many years before, gave an address in 1927,<sup>12</sup> revealing many interesting and homely facts about his old chief. In the course of it he said:

"Like all great men he was keen on the importance of small details. In showing us how to bandage a breast he insisted on the point that, in spite of various turns, the bandage was almost sure to slip . . . if the . . . turns of the bandage, above and below . . . the mamma . . . were not prevented from

slipping up and down by uniting them with a safety pin. . . . To impress this point upon us he narrated that he had once had to open a simple abscess in the axilla for Queen Victoria. All went well. After one dressing and on arrival at the railway station to travel back to Edinburgh, he suddenly remembered that he had forgotten the important safety pin. He at once drove back to the Castle, and explained his oversight to Her Majesty, and the necessity for rectifying it. Some surgeons, I fear, would have thought first of their own reputation, and would have 'risked' the safety pin."

I have read enough about Victoria to convince me that Lister's frankness and courage in acknowledging his forgetfulness would be appreciated by the patient. Albert would certainly have approved, but, alas, Albert was no longer there.

And so the incident closes. After her second general anæsthetic Victoria had still a few years of perfect happiness with her beloved, before she entered the gloomy and weary thirty-nine years of loneliness and sorrow. Only as death approached did the shadows lighten, at the joyous prospect of reunion. When she was dead there was to be no black upon her, for the first time for four long decades. So, at eighty-one, she was buried with her wedding veil in her coffin.

Dr. Locock had the vastly increased professional prestige of his baronetcy, Mr. Wakley, though still alive, lay dormant like an extinct volcano, and Dr. Snow, being an anæsthetist, naturally got nothing out of it at all.

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- <sup>11</sup> *Lancet* (1908), June 27. 1815.
- <sup>12</sup> *Lancet* (1927), April 9. 77. Sir St. Clair Thomson. One of Lister's ex-house surgeons.

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