

BOOK REVIEW

Horace and Elizabeth: Love and Death and Painless Dentistry

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This exquisitely reproduced soft back monograph detailing the letters of Horace Wells and his extended family has been lovingly compiled not by an anaesthetist, but by the daughter of one. Emily Bunker's father, John Bunker, was the first Chair of the University Department of Anesthesiology at Stanford University (Palo Alto, CA, USA) and had an interest in anaesthetic history. At the end of his life, he asked Emily to collate some of his papers detailing the history of anaesthesia in the West Coast of America. But she got somewhat diverted and became interested in the papers of the East Coast entrepreneur, Horace Wells. In this book, Emily has reproduced several of Horace Wells's letters and those of his extended family, which she managed to access from the archives of the University of Pittsburgh library.

All these letters are reproduced in their original format, which is often difficult to read. Hence a transcript of each letter is produced alongside the copy of the original. This must have been at times an arduous task. Ms Bunker has named her book after not only Horace, but also his wife, Elizabeth Wales, whose correspondence to him is also reproduced. This was an era of inveterate letter writing, an art now sadly lost, and such epistolary exercises often about sweet nothings were then commonplace. Elizabeth was a devoted wife, but I do not consider that her correspondence was comparable to modern-day love letters.

Horace Wells was a renaissance man, but his main work was as a dentist in Hartford, CT, USA. He dabbled in many other business ventures and was very financially aware. Transactions of thousands of dollars are mentioned in the letters: considerable sums of money in the mid-1800s. He even developed and marketed (with some difficulty) a shower unit, in which the user had to pump a foot pedal to produce the overhead flow of water! He was, in typical dentist fashion, a mercenary! And, as with dentists today, he referred to himself as a doctor! He also showed interest in mesmerism (magnetism) in the early 1840s, attending lectures on the subject. Wells had a moiety of business associates who came and went throughout his career, one of whom was W.T.G. Morton, with whom he formed a tempestuous partnership in 1844, within

weeks describing him as a drunkard 'without principle whatsoever'.

The letters are reproduced in chronological order and hence there are varying time intervals between them, which are not always immediately apparent. I would have preferred to have had more editor's notes between each group of letters to clarify the passage of time. There is little mention of Wells's anaesthetic exploits in the early pages of this book, nor is there much mention of the huge controversy that occurred over many years even after Wells's death as to who gave the very first general anaesthetic and the exact date. Not surprisingly, many tricksters were after such acknowledgement, including Morton, who had become Wells's *bête noire*, and who undoubtedly realised the money that could potentially be made from such recognition. For many years after Wells's early death in 1848, the US government was holding standing committees to decide who most deserved financial recognition for this seminal contribution. Some things don't change!

One of the reasons I would have liked more notes between the letters is that it is unclear from reading them which general anaesthetics were used first and when in Hartford, CT, USA: nitrous oxide, diethyl ether (then known as sulfuric ether), or chloroform. Wells did not discuss such details. There is certainly evidence of a paper published in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* as early as 1845 by Pinckney W. Ellsworth MD of nitrous oxide being used satisfactorily in dental procedures: the 'patient appears very merry during the operation'. It is apparent that medical practitioners in Boston and New York were very sceptical of the anaesthetic exploits of the cavaliers in Connecticut, however. It is only towards the end of the correspondence that it becomes clear that Wells was definitely the first to use nitrous oxide in his dental practice in November 1844 to extract a tooth, having first used it repeatedly on himself aided by his loyal assistant, John M. Riggs! It would seem that Wells experimented on himself with all three anaesthetic agents, which was blamed by his wife for his subsequent insanity and death by his own hand in a mental institution aged only 33 yr. Hypoxic brain damage was probably a factor!

I did not realise that Wells came to Europe to describe his anaesthetic exploits. He sailed to Liverpool, UK in December 1846, a trans-Atlantic crossing taking 24 days, describing the city as 'remarkable for nothing except its magnificent docks'. He journeyed on to London and then to Paris, where he was met with widespread acclaim and superb hospitality. The French seemed to appreciate his contributions to medical science to a greater degree than his American or British counterparts.

The book ends with a chapter entitled 'Afterword', which is probably its most informative section, certainly for anaesthetists. It details the controversies that occurred before it was ultimately decided, several years after Horace Wells's death,

that he had given the first general anaesthetic in 1844 using nitrous oxide.

This book would be a pleasing gift for any anaesthetist interested in their specialty's history. It is a delight to browse through such an assiduously prepared act of devotion.

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