

■ BOOK REVIEW

Carol A. Hirsbman, M.D., Editor

Robert C. Hinckley and the Recreation of the First Operation Under Ether. Richard J. Wolfe. Boston, The Boston Medical Library in The Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, 1993. Pages: 182. Price: \$20.

Probably everyone involved in anesthesia has seen the epic painting, "The First Operation Under Ether" in one form or another. The idea for this work of art, which now hangs in the Countway Library building at Harvard Medical School, was conceived about 1882 by the artist, Robert C. Hinckley (1853–1941). Background research and execution of the representation then occupied several more years. The author believes that this particular painting is now on its way to becoming the world's best known medical painting of its type.

Wolfe's book is an account of the history of Hinckley's picture. Topics considered include a brief survey of the representation of medical subjects in painting over the ages as well as biographic and educational details concerning the artist. Of particular interest are the sections of the book dealing with verification, almost 40 yr after the event, of the roster of personages who were present at the events depicted as well as those who were believed to be in attendance but actually were absent. Also related is detailed material on how the

artist established the contemporaneous appearance of the involved individuals. The work of art emphasized the perceptive group of surgeons who immediately recognized the significance of what they had witnessed and started the dissemination of the concept of anesthesia around the world with a speed unparalleled in the history of medicine. In the final analysis, the painting is said to depict a composite of the three etherizations of October 16, October 17, and November 7, 1846. The author believes that all three demonstrations were necessary to establish the incontrovertible efficacy of ether as an anesthetic.

This book is recommended for individuals with an interest in anesthesia history and certainly for all libraries with collections dealing with this topic. Publication of the volume is particularly appropriate at this time as the sesquicentennial of the events shown in Hinckley's painting approaches.

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