

The Myth of Baby “Anaesthesia”

James Y. Simpson (1811–1870), the young professor of midwifery at the University of Edinburgh, became chairman of that department at age 28. He discovered the anesthetic properties of chloroform on the evening of November 4, 1847, while inhaling it with two colleagues and some family members in his dining room at 42 Queen Street, Edinburgh. Four days later he administered chloroform for a few minor operations, and the next day, November 9, he performed the first delivery under chloroform.

He reported the details of the event at the November 10 meeting of the Edinburgh Medico-Surgical Society¹ and a few days later in two medical journals.^{2–3} The patient was an anxious young woman who had barely slept the two previous nights. Her first baby had been delivered by craniotomy after a three-day labor. She went into labor for the second child two weeks before her due date. Three and a half hours after the onset of her contractions, Simpson poured half a teaspoon of chloroform on a handkerchief rolled into a funnel and repeated that dose 10 to 12 minutes later. Twenty-five minutes after the onset of anesthesia, the unconscious mother delivered a healthy baby. When she awoke, she initially did not believe that she had given birth.

Allegedly the grateful mother christened her child “Anaesthesia”; and Anaesthesia, when 17, sent her photograph to Simpson, who proudly placed it over his desk.^{4–7} The source of that story seems to be Simpson’s biography published in 1896 by his daughter Eve.⁸ Simpson certainly never mentioned the fact in his abundant publications or correspondence.

The son of the “Chloroform Baby” disposed of that story in a 1948 letter he sent to the Scottish newspaper *The Scotsman*.⁹ He explained that Simpson’s parturient had been Jane Carstairs, the wife of Dr. William Carstairs, a physician retired from the Indian Medical Service and living in Cupar, Fife. She had come to Edinburgh to be under Simpson’s care. Her child was baptized Wilhelmina on Christmas day, 1847. Wilhelmina married in 1868 and died in 1910. “Anaesthesia” and “St. Anaesthesia” were affectionate nicknames Simpson had given the baby.

The origin of the photograph (fig. 1) is controversial. In 1911, Alexander S. Simpson, J.Y. Simpson’s nephew and successor to the Chair of Midwifery, claimed that Wilhelmina had been photographed at the age of 17 by a Mr. Roger, and that the picture had been sent to J.Y. Simpson by his friend, Dr. John Adamson, of St. Andrews.¹⁰ However, Douglas Guthrie, M.D., F.R.C.S., Ed. (University of Edinburgh), one of the organizers of the 1947 Simpson Centenary, quotes a letter (unfortunately without giving a date or an addressee) written by a Dr. R.O. Anderson who claimed that his father, Dr. John Anderson, had taken the photograph in 1860.⁹ Thus Wilhelmina at the time would have been 13, not 17 as claimed elsewhere.^{4,8,10}

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Fig. 1. Wilhelmina Carstairs, “Baby Anaesthesia” [Source: Simpson, 1911; reference 10]

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Support was provided solely from institutional and/or departmental sources.

(Accepted for publication April 27, 2009.)