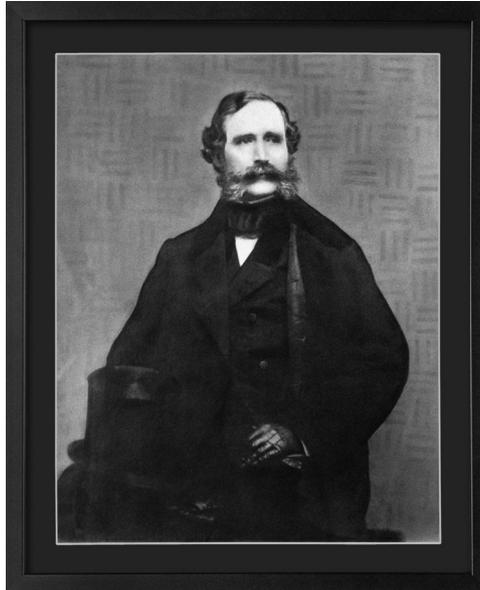


Ether Day's William T. G. Morton

Public Benefactor . . . and Antisocial Narcissist?

IN this month's issue of ANESTHESIOLOGY, Martin *et al.* offer an intriguing "retrospective psychiatric analysis" of the man behind the first successful public demonstration of surgical anesthesia, William T. G. Morton, M.D. (*b.c.*) (dentist-anesthetist, public demonstrator of surgical etherization, Boston, Massachusetts; 1819–1868). Perhaps the world's most renowned etherist, Morton and his enigmatic personality have puzzled medical historians ever since that fateful ether anesthetic in October 1846. Martin *et al.* are suggesting that Morton suffered from a sociopathic personality disorder, more correctly characterized nowadays as an antisocial and evolving narcissistic personality disorder.¹

For more than a century and a half after Ether Day, most of the world considered Morton a "public benefactor," a savior who brought the blessing of anesthesia to mankind. This image was carefully crafted by Morton himself, who arranged for biographer Nathan P. Rice, M.D. (physician, author, New York City, New York; 1828–1900), to romanticize Morton's achievements in the 460-page tome titled *The Trials of a Public Benefactor*.² This altruistic portrait of Morton sketched by Rice in 1858 bore little resemblance to the self-absorbed, ruthless Morton who forsook creditors and fiancées in nearly every city in which he resided outside of New England. Ironically, Morton himself never fully paid



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hometown of Charlton, Massachusetts, Morton began representing himself as a self-taught dentist.

When Morton's ham-handed talents failed him in his new dental practice in Farmington, Connecticut, he would ride 8 miles to pay for lessons from Hartford's wizard of dentistry, Dr. Horace Wells (dentist-anesthetist, discoverer of nitrous oxide anesthesia, Hartford, Connecticut; 1815–1848). An altruistic and inventive genius, Wells was perhaps naïve in agreeing to serve as Morton's part-time dental preceptor from mid-1841 through late 1842. Morton's home-

Rice for penning the biography, which would be titled by Morton to dub himself "a public benefactor."³

Fortunately, the truth about Morton was finally unveiled by Richard J. Wolfe, M.L.S. (historian, author, former curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Countway Library of Medicine, Boston, Massachusetts). His 672-page tome was published in 2001 as *Tarnished Idol: William Thomas Green Morton and the Introduction of Surgical Anesthesia: A Chronicle of the Ether Controversy*. Wolfe's biography of Morton revealed that from the winter of 1836 through early 1841, Morton lived in multiple locations, including Rochester, New York; Cincinnati, Ohio; St. Louis, Missouri; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Baltimore, Maryland. In most of these cities, he embezzled funds, stole goods, and forged documents until forced to flee. By mid-February 1841, Morton had been pilloried as a one-man crime wave by newspapers from St. Louis to Baltimore to Rochester.⁴ After retreating to his

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town of Charlton was halfway between Wells' Hartford dental office and the future branch of the short-lived Wells-Morton partnership in Boston. Fortunately for Morton, Wells never learned while passing through his junior partner's hometown that Morton had started his criminal career by embezzling from Charlton's Rider Tavern.^{2,4}

Wells' invention by 1843 of a noncorroding dental solder held much promise. Yet barely a month after partnering in October of that year with Morton, an anxious Wells wrote Morton about dissolving their partnership. Besides characterizing his ex-partner later as possibly "a drunkard ... most deceitful" and a man "without any principle whatever," Wells echoed the assessment of his Hartford dental office mate, John M. Riggs, D.D.S. (dentist, "Father of Periodontics," Hartford, Connecticut; 1811–1885), that Morton was "not qualified for the profession."⁴

As his dental practice somehow prospered without Wells in a prime area in Boston, Morton began revisiting the town of his first dental practice, Farmington, to woo a former patient, Elizabeth Whitman (housewife, author, Farmington, then Hartford, Connecticut; 1826–1904). In May 1844, Morton married the girl, who was almost 7 yr his junior. Morton's deceit would even extend to his parents-in-law, the Whitmans. By November he had enrolled at the Massachusetts Medical College of Harvard University in order to satisfy the Whitmans' wishes of having him pursue a career in medicine. Not only would the wily Morton continue practicing dentistry during his medical schooling, he would also skip classes, including the disastrous daytime one at the future "Ether Dome" in which Wells would only partially anesthetize a dental patient with nitrous oxide. Elizabeth's parents would soon be mortified by young Morton: Mrs. Whitman, by his failing to ever earn his medical doctorate; Mr. Whitman, by having to pay for the circumcision that Morton endured while wooing, yes, an earlier fiancée.^{2,4}

In this month's issue of *ANESTHESIOLOGY*, using modern psychiatric criteria, Martin *et al.* retrospectively analyze Morton as the disordered personality behind "Ether Day." Their analysis glimpses into the mind of a man that contemporaneous newspapers would vilify as a sinner yet most of whose later biographies would hail as a saint. Remarkably, the analysis of Morton's personality by the three authors ascribes "the success of Ether Day" to Morton's "expansive imagination."¹ Sadly for Morton, they observed from historical accounts that besides exhibiting antisocial traits, Morton's personality would evolve from narcissistic traits into full-blown narcissistic personality disorder. The authors also suggest that "W.T.G. Morton's demonstration of ether as an anesthetic was inspired by a narcissistic personality trait/disorder that also limited his further development of anesthesia as a specialty." Be sure to read the article by Martin *et al.* and to peek with them behind the mask of that saint, that sinner, that antisocial narcissist, W.T.G. Morton.

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