

The Monuments Men

In the History of Anesthesia, Too

Luca Borghi, M.A.

ABSTRACT

A 2014 American-German war movie directed by and starring George Clooney (Actor, Screenwriter, Film Director, and Producer; Los Angeles, California and Laglio, Italy) (1961-current) popularized the work of a special United States Army unit devoted to the rescue of art treasures stolen or hidden by the Nazis during World War II. A similar story occurred in Paris to a curious little monument closely linked to the history of Anesthesia. This happened about 70 years ago, in December 1944. (ANESTHESIOLOGY 2015; 122:521-3)

DURING the German occupation of Paris in World War II (June 1940 to August 1944), many medical monuments, especially bronze ones, were removed and destroyed “in order to recycle the metallic components for industrial production.”¹ Of course, there was also a good amount of ideology in getting rid of the material memories of the achievements of Germany’s main competitor in medical science of the late 19th century. And so, among many others, the big bronze statues of the father of neurology, Jean-Martin Charcot (M.D., Professor of Neurology, *La Sorbonne*, Paris, France) (1825–1893), of visionary surgeon Jules-Émile Péan (M.D., Chief Surgeon, *Hôpital Saint-Louis*, Paris, France) (1830–1898), and of the creator of experimental medicine, Claude Bernard (M.D., Professor of Physiology, *Collège de France*, Paris, France) (1813–1878), were forever lost.¹ Little stone monuments were usually less at risk. But if they occurred to celebrate American and French medical achievements together, well, in that case...

Luckily, even the history of medicine had its “Monuments Men”—although not as qualified as those portrayed in the recent movie directed by George Clooney—and when Nazi troops started to express their displeasure for something that was displayed in the little gardens of *Place des Etats-Unis* a wise keeper of the place, unfortunately nameless, hid it in a shack nearby.² But what was that *unpleasant* object?

It was a marble bust of American dentist Horace Wells (D.D.S. *in memoriam*,³ dentist, Hartford, Connecticut, U.S.A.) (1815–1848) which, since March 27, 1910, was perched on a pedestal made of the same material, where the profile of French physiologist Paul Bert (M.D., Professor of Physiology, *La Sorbonne*, Paris, France) (1833–1886) had also been carved by the author of the monument, the French sculptor René Bertrand-Boutée (1877–1950) (fig. 1).^{*} A



Fig. 1. The monument to Horace Wells and Paul Bert, *Place des Etats-Unis*, Paris, France. Picture taken by Luca Borghi, July 2014.

Corresponding article on page 489.

Submitted for publication September 24, 2014. Accepted for publication November 10, 2014. From the Institute of Philosophy of Scientific and Technological Practice, Università Campus Bio-Medico di Roma, Rome, Italy.

* See the online photograph record of the monument, still in the sculptor’s workshop: “Monument Horace Wells et en médaillon Paul Bert par Bertrand Boutée, 24-3-1910.” Available at: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b69139413/f1.item>. Accessed September 23, 2014.

Copyright © 2014, the American Society of Anesthesiologists, Inc. Wolters Kluwer Health, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Anesthesiology 2015; 122:521–3

rather curious association if you do not remember the relevant contributions by both of them to the rise of modern anesthesiology. Wells, as it is known, was the first to use nitrous oxide as an anesthetic in dental extractions in 1844, but his first attempt to give a public demonstration of his discovery in January 1845—in front of Massachusetts Medical College students in a Boston public hall—turned out to be a partial failure due to an improper administration of the gas.³ Along the hard and controversial battle to give credit of the invention of anesthesia, some French medical societies were among the first, in 1848, to recognize the merits of Wells but this was too late: the unfortunate and upset dentist from Hartford had already committed suicide in January of the same year.³

However, Paul Bert, one of the most brilliant pupils of Claude Bernard, became involved in the problems of anesthesia during his important studies on the physiology of respiration in the 1860s.^{4,5} His main contribution to anesthesiology—and his strongest connection with the work of Wells—consisted of developing a method to safely use nitrous oxide not only in dental practice but also in general surgery as an alternative/complement to the more effective but also more risky ether and chloroform.^{2,6} In 1878, he succeeded in doing so by administering nitrous oxide together with oxygen to animals in a positive pressure chamber of his invention.⁶



Fig. 2. Bust of Horace Wells with inscription. Picture taken by Luca Borghi, July 2014.



Fig. 3. What remains of the carved profile of Paul Bert. Picture taken by Luca Borghi, July 2014.

During the last dramatic months of World War II, anesthesia was used more frequently on the battlefields and in the rear hospitals than studied from a historical point of view. Yet, apparently there was someone in liberated Paris of 1944, who had the presence of mind to celebrate in some way the centennial of (dental) anesthesia. The bust of Wells (fig. 2) was then recovered from its hideout, restored and replaced upon its pedestal where Paul Bert—much less visible, as a matter of fact (fig. 3)—was still waiting for him.² Seventy years ago, on December 10, 1944, the monument was re-inaugurated in the presence of a United States Army colonel, a dentist, then stationed in Paris. The ceremony was followed by a 2-day celebration of Wells' discovery, that took place at the *École Dentaire* of Paris, where René Bénard (M.D., cardiologist, historian of medicine, *Société Française d'Histoire de la Médecine*, Paris, France) (1882–1957) gave a lecture on nitrous oxide.²

The double monument is still there and, when you are in Paris, I think it deserves a short deviation from the touristic mainstream of the nearby *Champs-Élysées*. The Wells and Bert monument is not memorable as a piece of art, but it still has more than a story to tell.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Guy Cobolet, M.A., Bibliothèque Inter-universitaire de Santé, Paris, France.

Supported by Agenzia Nazionale Lifelong Learning Programme Italia, Florence, Italy.

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Correspondence

Address correspondence to Dr. Borghi: Via Alvaro del Portillo 21, 00128 Rome, Italy. l.borghi@unicampus.it. Information on purchasing reprints may be found at www.anesthesiology.org or on the masthead page at the beginning of this issue. ANESTHESIOLOGY's articles are made freely

accessible to all readers, for personal use only, 6 months from the cover date of the issue.

References

1. McIntyre N: The medical statues of Paris. *Vesalius* 1998; 4:79–89
2. Fouré J: [About the statue of Horace Wells]. *Hist Sci Med* 1989; 23:69–74
3. Haridas RP: Horace Wells' demonstration of nitrous oxide in Boston. *ANESTHESIOLOGY* 2013; 119:1014–22
4. Hohl C: [Paul Bert. Scientist, Politician, Administrator]. Auxerre, Graphi-Union, 1983, pp 61–6
5. Bert P: [Lectures on the Comparative Physiology of Respiration]. Paris, Baillière, 1870, pp 472–81
6. Tindal A: The perfect anaesthetic. *Anaesthesia by the method of Paul Bert: Surgo*, vol. VII, No. 2, 1941. *Anesth Analg* 1973; 52:361–8