

The Chloroformist

By Christine Ball, M.B.B.S. (Hons), F.A.N.Z.C.A., M.D. Melbourne, Australia, Melbourne University Press, 2021. Pages: 322. Price: Paperback, \$34.99; Ebook, \$22.99.

Many anesthesiologists will recognize the names of William Morton and John Snow as influential figures in the history of anesthesiology. In *The Chloroformist*, Dr. Christine Ball elevates another notable physician, Dr. Joseph Clover, to a similar status in our modern consciousness. Ball's text is the first *comprehensive* look at this man as both a scientist and as, perhaps, the earliest Western physician solely dedicated to the practice of anesthesiology. Clover was respected in London's medical circles for his quiet persistence, scientific integrity, and attention to safety. Taken in total, his work was integral in drawing surgeons to trust the new and revolutionary idea of anesthesia.

Dr. Ball's account of Clover reveals an aspiring mid-19th-century surgeon-turned-anesthetist who had shifted the focus of his clinical practice after the discoveries of surgical anesthesia and aseptic surgery. A family inheritance funded Clover's boarding school and sustained him financially during his professional apprenticeship. At this early stage of his career, he contracted the tuberculosis that would compromise his health for the remainder of his life. Undaunted by debilitating disease, Clover pursued medical school at the University Hospital in London, so readers of *The Chloroformist* catch glimpses of medical education in the mid-19th century. Clover's dedication and determination elevate him through the professional ranks at the University Hospital in London to the apothecary role, a position later called "resident medical officer." At this time, chloroform anesthesia was not universally accepted, yet Clover cleverly sensed the possibilities for safer surgical anesthesia with proper administration. Innovative throughout his career and a careful clinical scientist, Clover developed an apparatus to precisely deliver chloroform. He would continue to iterate and improve this apparatus and other systems throughout his medical practice. Although respiratory and renal failure cut his life short at age 57, Clover participated in the beginnings of international scientific communities and contributed to the rigorous scholarship of medical practice.

Far from a sterile discussion, *The Chloroformist* is also a personal story. We follow Clover through his life and the milestones of childhood, marriage, and building a family. He suffered continuously from poor health while also losing his eldest child to illness. As his professional life soared, we as readers witness the complexities of life in the exciting and often tragic backdrop of 19th-century England. Whether in a rural small town of Aylsham, England, or the industrial city of London, we are drawn into Clover's world and can see, hear, and feel what it is like to be alive at this time.

It is a pleasure to read a biography by an author who deeply cares for and respects her subject. Dr. Ball is an accomplished clinician and historian currently recognized as the Wood Library-Museum Laureate of the History of Anesthesia, an honorary curator of the Geoffrey Kaye Museum, and an author of the historically inspired "Cover Notes" for *Anesthesia and Intensive Care*. *The Chloroformist* stands out as an intimate look at one of the great minds of early anesthesiology. Ball is well versed in the life and times of Joseph Clover from decades of research and thousands of miles traveled in the pursuit of journals, case logs, and correspondence. The engaging descriptions and personal accounts convey her careful study of Clover and capture the essence of a man who was a pivotal yet, until now, overlooked figure in anesthesia's history.

Ball seems to have a dual purpose in writing this book: not only for a broader audience to appreciate Clover's unparalleled scientific contributions to the field of anesthesiology, but also for the modern anesthesiologist to appreciate the value of professional and personal relationships in the progress of science. Clover had many qualities that contributed to his success and scientific achievements, including intelligence, creativity, and persistence; however, his ability to build mutually respectful partnerships with surgical colleagues hastened acceptance of surgical anesthesia by London's medical elite. Clover designed a brilliant apparatus for administering chloroform safely, but without patients to anesthetize, this apparatus, and anesthesiology at large, would likely have languished in obscurity from fear and mistrust of chloroform's potentially dangerous properties.

Written in engaging prose, this book will appeal to a wide range of audiences. The anesthesia historian will appreciate new insights into Clover's life and the early days of our specialty. Anesthesiologists who are less historically inclined as well as laypeople will find an inspiring study in perseverance. This story transports us from modern busy lives, placing us into the social, political, and medical context of Clover's day. Through Dr. Joseph Clover, we see the struggles and rewards of medicine, remember that science is rarely straightforward, and realize that beauty often lies in the complexity and challenges of science.

Beyond merely recounting facts, figures, and dates, historians contemplate what an audience wants to gain from history. They approach this task with thoughtful understanding. They connect to her readership in *The Chloroformist* with an engaging narrative about one man and medicine itself at a consequential time in human

history. Clover's story helps us understand how surgery and anesthesia evolved in parallel. And what better way to do this, as she notes, than *via* the life and career of one who often "existed in the shadows...watching, listening, recording, allowing others to do their job, providing support inside and outside the operating theater"? Most significantly, Ball frames Clover's medical contributions within the context of his personal life. This portrayal transforms him from a symbol of anesthetic achievement to a relatable man dedicated to his patients, practice, and family. Remarkably, in *The Chloroformist* by Dr. Christine Ball,

challenges faced by pioneering anesthetist Joseph Clover provide invaluable insights into dealing with the dilemmas and challenges of anesthetic practice today.

Melissa L. Coleman, M.D. Penn State College of
Medicine, Hershey, Pennsylvania.
mcoleman@pennstatehealth.psu.edu

*(Accepted for publication December 30, 2021. Published
online first on February 2, 2022.)*
