
The Barrell House in Somerville, Massachusetts, was built in 1792–3. The architect was Charles Bulfinch. The mansion later became the McLean Asylum for the Insane. The connection between the Barrell House and the first demonstration of ether anaesthesia is not a close one. Dr Charles T. Jackson, one of the co-contenders for the discovery of the use of ether, had worked at the Asylum, however, before he was incarcerated and died there. The cryptic title of this pamphlet probably refers to these events although they happened many years after the 1846 demonstration of ether anaesthesia.

Seven pages of the 40 are actively dedicated to the Barrell House/McLean Asylum with no less than five illustrations of the Bulfinch Flying Double Staircase. For Somerville residents this might be of potential interest, but for readers outside New England it is probably too detailed and too distant from the subject matter.

There is no doubt, that Dr Lai’s pamphlet is a well-researched, scholarly little book—but unfortunately the author fails to deliver what is promised in the subtitle: an account of the Places Associated with the First Public Demonstration of Ether Anesthesia. Instead Dr Lai presents many interesting, intriguing and/or irrelevant facts about life in New England in the 19th century—facts that you often did not know you were missing.

Did you, for example, know that Elizabeth Whitman, William Morton’s wife-to-be, went to Miss Porter’s School for Young Ladies in Farmington, Connecticut? And that other well-known alumni, in later times, were Nellie Grant, only daughter of President Grant, and Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy? Or that Charles Dickens read from his Pickwick Papers at Lorenzo Papanti’s Dancing Academy located at 21 Tremont Row—next door to Morton’s dental office in Boston?

The pamphlet is nicely produced and adorned with five ethereal and beautiful poems by Emily Dickinson. A magnifying glass will be useful for perusal of the five maps of Somerville/Boston.

For the serious student of the history of anaesthesia this book is not a sine qua non, but if you are a Bostonian, I advise that you read this amusing compilation of stories from your past.

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