

CHLOROFORM IN CHILDBIRTH

It is sometimes asserted that the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century condemned the use of chloroform in childbirth, but permits its use today. It is then claimed that the Church will one day permit Abortion.

If you consult medical books, you will often see a similar assertion regarding chloroform. Usually the books are less specific, but have phrases such as: 'The Church' or 'religion' or 'the clergy' opposed the use of chloroform in childbirth.

SO WHAT ARE THE FACTS?

Chloroform was discovered in 1831 and, on November 10th 1847, Dr. James Young Simpson, a midwifery specialist, made use of it during a birth. He was pleased to observe how effective and safe it was. A short time afterwards he made his discovery known to the Medico-Chirurgical Society of Edinburgh, Scotland.

Most doctors approached the new practice with caution. The gas had been used for a few minutes during amputations, but the effects when used for a long period were unknown. Many doctors were concerned that they would lose the information normally provided by mothers during a birth. Others were worried that the gas would stop contractions.

These doubts were soon overcome and within a few years the gas was being widely used, at least in difficult cases. It is often said that public opinion was changed when Queen Victoria made use of the gas during the birth of Prince Leopold in 1853. But modern historians hold that it had become widely accepted before this date.((AF 2.2)).

WHAT WAS THE REACTION OF THE CHURCHES?

The simplest answer is: NONE. The clergy of the various churches and their leading laity did not see a moral problem. The churches had always been at the forefront of medical progress and the reduction of suffering, so it didn't occur to them that the use of chloroform in childbirth presented a moral problem existed. A few individuals said the procedure was against their personal interpretation of the Bible. They disturbed the consciences of the poorly educated, but they did not represent any church.

Yet there is an anti-religious myth in circulation that most churchmen, on biblical grounds, bitterly resisted Simpson's new practice.

So let us look at the evidence.

1. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN SCOTLAND

Andrew Carruthers was Vicar Apostolic of the Eastern District of Scotland from 1833 - 1852 and lived in Edinburgh. As Simpson developed his new medical practice in Edinburgh, Carruthers would have been very aware of Simpson's work. Yet a search through his papers for the years after 1847 does not show any reference to the matter in his Pastoral Letters, Episcopal correspondence and Ad Clera (Circulars sent out to his clergy). ((SCA)). The Catholic community did not possess a publication of its own at the time, so there was no other manner in which a 'condemnation' could have been made known.

2. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. IN ENGLAND

The hierarchy had been re-established and the weekly 'Tablet' reported Catholic news and views. As we go through its pages for the years 1847 -1853 there is no sign of any comment by the English bishops. The paper reported the progress of the Queen as she carried prince Leopold and congratulated her on his birth. But no criticism was made on the publicized fact that the Queen had been assisted with Chloroform.

3. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRELAND

It has been specifically alleged that the Catholic hospitals of Ireland refused, for religious reasons, to use Chloroform in childbirth. But when the correspondence for 1847 - 1853 of the Archbishop of Dublin is checked, there is no sign of any concern. ((DDA)). In the relevant period Catholic hospitals in Ireland delivering babies didn't exist.

4. ROME

The use of chloroform spread quickly to Catholic countries, yet no one has produced any evidence of a condemnation by Rome.

5. THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

When we look at the 'Acts of the General assembly of the Church of Scotland', (including abridgements of the Proceedings) covering October 1846 to December 1849, there is no mention of the subject. ((AF 2.1)).

6. THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

There is no mention in the 'Acts and proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland', for the same period. Dr. Thomas Chalmers, its Moderator (leader), was a personal friend of Simpson and frequently visited his surgery. He firmly supported Simpson's work. ((AF 2.1)).

7. THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

As Governor of the Church of England, Queen Victoria had a very high religious profile, yet there was no outcry from Anglicans when she personally welcomed the use of chloroform during the birth of prince Leopold.

At the time, Dr. Protheroe Smith was the main medical authority regarding obstetrics in London. On his death, The Lancet wrote that he was 'A man of marked religious views, of the Evangelical school' who 'made those views prominent in every relationship of life' ((AF 4)). It is almost certain he was also an Anglican ((AF 3.3)). He composed a pamphlet in support of what Simpson was doing ((AF 3.3)).

In early 1847 the Queen, who had a very high regard for Simpson, had appointed him "Physician Accoucheur to the Queen for Scotland". ((HLG 86)). So if she had given birth in Scotland he would have attended her. [Accoucheur means Obstetrician].

So the Queen was well informed of the Christian position regarding the use of Chloroform.

The papers of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev. John Sumner, from 1848 -1862 do not record any criticism of Simpson's practice. His daughter took advantage of chloroform when she had a child in 1854. ((MRA)).

8. THEOLOGIANS:

Thomas Chalmers (1780 -1847), mentioned above, was possibly the greatest of 19th century Scottish churchmen ((AF 2.2)). When Professor Miller was preparing to write an article for the Free Church paper: 'The North British Review', regarding the use of chloroform in childbirth, he asked Chalmers to write the theological part. Chalmers replied that he could not see any theological part. Millar explained that some had quoted Genesis against Simpson's practice. Chalmers replied that if some 'small theologians' really took such an improper view of the subject, he would certainly advise Mr. Miller not to heed them in his article. ((JYSA 18)). When the article appeared there was no mention of any possibility of religious objections to midwifery ((AF 2.2)).

The American George Noyes (1798 - 1868) was described in the Dictionary of American Biography as one of the ablest Biblical scholars of his day. His view, expressed in 1848, fully supported Simpson. ((AF 3.4)).

Dr. J.T. Conquest produced a new edition of the Bible. ((AF 3.4)). He was another noted London obstetrician providing strong support for Simpson.

9. SIMPSON'S PAMPHLET

When he heard that opponents of his practice had used a 'religious' argument, he appears to have over reacted. His theological defence was sound but his pamphlet, published in December 1847, does not provide evidence of any serious need for it. On page one he says he had heard of patients and some doctors criticising what he was doing. But he does not name any religious organisation, theologian or religious leader as being responsible for spreading opposition to his work. ((JYSA)).

He says that he had been told that the leading obstetrician in Dublin had publicly denounced his work for religious reasons. The man involved, Dr. Montgomery, in a letter of 27th December 1848 to Simpson, expressed his "astonishment" that Simpson had accepted "hearsay" and had, "taken the trouble of writing a formal reply to arguments which never were made use of by me. I never advocated or locum tenanted either in public or in private the so called 'religious objection' to anaesthesia in labour, ..." ((JYSL 232)). In a later article he wrote, "I attach no value to what are called the 'religious objections' to the use of this remedy" ((AF 2.3)).

In a letter to Protheroe, Simpson reported that following the publication of his pamphlet, he had received communications from some of the best theologians "...of all churches, ... Presbyterian, Independent, Episcopalian [and Protheroe's own Anglican Church] etc. approving of the view I had taken." ((JYSL 232)). He also stated that only a few clergy had offered opposition. ((AF 164)).

10. AMERICA

There was medical opposition in America to Simpson's procedures. Charles Meigs, its leader, stated that his objections were not based on religion. ((AF 2. 3ii)).

11. THE SCOTTISH PRESS

Scottish papers at the time gave detailed reports of religious synods, meetings and discussions. There is no mention of the issue being raised at any church gathering of importance in Scotland. ((AF 2.1)).

12. THE BRITISH AND AMERICAN PRESS

A detailed study has been made of eighty-four published items (35 of literature and 49 of general magazines and reviews) for the period October 1846 - December 1849. The survey covered Britain and America. Only seven references were made in connection with anaesthesia. None was critical of Simpson's procedure and five of them (including the two theological journals) positively supported Simpson's stand on the use of chloroform in childbirth. ((AF 2. 1)).

13. BIOGRAPHIES: By 1896 two biographies of Simpson had been written. No new evidence of religious objections had been found. ((AF 2)).

This survey of the evidence confirms the findings of A. D. Farr: "On examination, this particular 'conflict' appears to be an artefact of historiography based upon a contemporary defence prepared against an attack which never materialized" ((AFE 896)).

SO WHERE DID THIS ANTI-RELIGIOUS MYTH COME FROM?

In 1896, A.D. White, published his: 'History of the Warfare of Science with Theology and Christendom'. In it he claimed that: "From pulpit after pulpit Simpson's use of chloroform was denounced as impious and contrary to Holy Writ; texts were cited abundantly, the ordinary declaration being that to use chloroform was; "to avoid one part of the primeval curse on woman." Simpson wrote pamphlet after pamphlet to defend the blessing which he brought into use. White didn't cite one source for this anti-religious travesty of history. White was also guilty of creating the myth, mentioned above, regarding Irish Catholic hospitals.

The title of White's book should have put intelligent readers on their guard. But some people are very uncritical when swallowing anti-religious accounts of history. White held a high position in University life, so his 'example' of a 'typical conflict' between Science and Christian narrow mindedness, was widely accepted and repeated in book after book. Recently some Radical Feminists have been trying to exhume the myth.

In 1945 Thomas E. Keys published: 'The History of Surgical Anaesthesia'. Keys, as a librarian, had a good reputation for summarising medical history, but was not an historian. In one of his books he included a sentence, which appears to have been based on White's book. It reads: "The Scottish Calvinist clergy and others objected to Simpson's use of chloroform to prevent the pain of childbirth". ((TEK 33)) In this way Key's book gave a new impetus to the: 'narrow-minded Calvinist clergy' myth.

AN INTERESTING FIND

In researching this pamphlet we have noticed that during the middle of the 19th century, those pioneering help for British mothers in childbirth, were dedicated Christian doctors

John Simpson in Edinburgh was deeply religious. At home he led morning and evening prayers ((HLG 195)). He frequently preached to Edinburgh congregations of up to 2000 as well as preaching in the mining districts. He wrote religious addresses, tracts and hymns ((HLG 209)). He broke from the Church of Scotland when the Free Church was formed in 1842. So it is easy to see why he felt confident writing his pamphlet expounding the Christian teaching on the subject under discussion.

Protheroe Smith founded the Hospital for Women in London. This was the first such hospital in Britain. He was the first doctor to use chloroform in childbirth in England and, as mentioned above, a very committed Evangelical.

Simpson believed the rumour that Dr. Montgomery, the leading helper of mothers in Dublin, was opposed to the use of chloroform on religious grounds. If Montgomery had been non-religious, Simpson who had had previous contact with him would not have believed the rumour.

So in the three capital cities of the United Kingdom, it was committed Christian doctors who were leading the efforts to improve maternity care.

TWO MYTHS FOR THE PRICE OF ONE

Books promoting the Chloroform myth often also spin the story of Eufame Macalyane /Euphame McCalzane. They claim that Calvinists burnt her to death in Edinburgh, during 1591, because she had accepted help to ease the pains of childbirth, transgressing God's order in Genesis 3:16.

What actually occurred was that in 1591 a large group were found guilty of attempted murder by means of witchcraft. They had aimed to cause a storm at sea so as to sink a ship transporting king James VI of Scotland, and his new wife, from Denmark to Edinburgh. They were sentenced to be strangled and their bodies to be burnt. ((NFS)).

During the trial 52 accusations were made to show that one of the leaders, Agnes Simpson / Sampsoune was a witch. One of these accusations was that ten days before Euphame McCalzane expected her baby, Agnes had placed 'Mwildis' powder under the bed of Euphame and used conjurations to ease the pains of childbirth. ((LLM)). [Mwildis powder consisted of the finger, toe and knee joints of disinterred male corpses. Words of 'conjurations' were used to summon evil spirits].

The Calvinists of Scotland wished to ease the pains of childbirth just as much as the rest of Christendom. The Judges were not interested in the motive of Agnes's action but of whether she was a witch. Eufame herself was not accused of using this spell, but of adding to the strength of the spell aimed at causing the storm.

So this anti-Calvinist myth is based on a distorted rendering of these events and appears to have originated in the fertile mind of White.

CHANGES OF BELIEF

At the beginning of this article we quoted the assertion that the Catholic Church would eventually change her teaching regarding abortion. There is no sign of any such event, but there are signs in the opposite direction.

In 1937 a girl of fifteen was gang raped by four soldiers. When it was realised that she had conceived a child, she was taken to Queen Charlotte's Hospital in London where Dr. Alex Bourne was on duty. He was told that two policemen were at reception requesting evidence that the girl had conceived, so they could bring charges against the soldiers. The doctor rushed the girl into the operating theatre and carried out an abortion. He then gave himself up to the police and was charged.

Dr. Bourne was acquitted on the grounds that he had done it to save the girl's sanity (which the judge seems to have equated with death). This Judgement formed the basis of 'case law' until Parliament passed the Abortion Act in 1967.

'The Society for the Protection of Unborn Children' (SPUC) was formed in 1967 to mobilize opposition to the abortionists in Parliament. The early members came to know that Dr. Bourne was horrified by the results of his case. He had never imagined that the Judgement would be interpreted to allow social abortions. When approached, he leapt at the opportunity to become a founder member of SPUC. ((UI)).

Although now too frail to travel around to public meetings, he spoke at the press conference when SPUC was launched. He was still willing to accept the morality of abortion in rare cases, but pointed out that his aim had been to save the girl's sanity whereas pro-abortion doctors set out to ensure that certain babies did not survive. On another occasion he said words to effect that had he known "it would come to this, I do not think I would have done it". ((UI)).

Norma McCorvey (Roe in the Roe V. Wade Court case) sued the state of Texas for having an anti-abortion law. The case went to the Supreme Court and the judges on 22 January 1973 said that a woman had the right to have her unborn baby killed during the child's first six months.

On the same day, the Supreme Court in a case involving Sandra Cano (Doe in Doe v. Bolton Court case) extended this 'right' up to birth. This meant that the laws to protect unborn children, democratically passed by fifty States, became invalid.

After working for many years in an abortion clinic, Norma was baptised into the Baptist Church in 1990 and moved to working in the offices of a pro-life group. In 1998 she completed her autobiography, *Won By Love*, by Jane Roe, and was received into the Catholic Church. Her pro-life web site can be found by typing: Norma McCorvey into Google Search Engine. Then click on Operation Outcry and Roe No More Ministry (roenomore.org/).

Sandra Cano is also now a firm supporter of the pro-Life cause. She assists Norma's campaign to allow the States to protect unborn children. Sandra's story is available by typing: Sandra Cano into Google Search Engine, then click on Operation Outcry - Affidavit and Sandra Cano Story (Priestsforlife.org).

Dr. Bernard Nathanson, as an atheist, was a leading member of NALRO which campaigned for the repeal of American anti-abortion laws. Later, as the Director of a Medical Centre in New York, he oversaw 60,000 abortions, performed 5,000 himself including on his own child, and supervised trainees who performed another 10,000.

Eventually he rejected abortion on scientific grounds, became a leader in the Pro-Life movement and in 1996 was baptised into the Catholic Church. For details type: Dr. Bernard Nathanson into Google Search Engine then click: Former Abortion Provider (priestsforlife.org)

WHERE WOULD JAMES SIMPSON STAND TODAY?

He wrote: "Other pursuits become insignificant in their objects when placed in contrast with ours ...what are any, or what are all these objects when contrasted with the most precious and valued gift of God - human life". ((HLG 48)).

ENDNOTES

AF Religious Opposition to Obstetric Anaesthesia: a Myth? By A. D. Farr in Annals of Science 409 (1983), 159 - 177.

AFE Much of the detailed material in the 'Annals of Science' article was also set down by the same author in: 'Early opposition to obstetric anaesthesia', printed in 'Anaesthesia', 1980, Volume 35, pages 896-907.

A. D. Farr was a Senior Chief Scientific Officer at the Royal Infirmary, Foresterhill, Aberdeen, Scotland. So he was in an ideal position to research a medical subject concerning events in Edinburgh a short distance away.

DDA Dublin Diocesan Archives.

HLG 'Sir James Simpson', by H. Laing Gordon, 1897.

JYSA 'Answer to The Religious Objections', by J.Y. Simpson, 1847.

JYSL The correspondence of James Young Simpson, Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh.

LLM LLM Justiciary Court, mss 26/2, 2/2. [See Internet – Google Search Engine].

MRA Military Opposition and Religious Objections to Anesthetics, 1846-1848 by Committee for Anesthesiology 2004; 101: A 1311.

NFS 'Newes From Scotland': <http://homepages.tesco.net/~eandcthomp/newes.htm>

SCA Scottish Catholic Archives.

TEK 'The History of Surgical Anesthesia' by Thomas E. Keys, 1963.

UI Previously unpublished information.

<http://www.churchinhistory.org/> Version: 12th June 2006 [28/9/05 revision to page 4].