

# Historical Vignette

## Ether Drinking in Ireland

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The 150th anniversary of the first public demonstration of ether is Oct. 16, 1996. The introduction of ether for general anesthesia was a seminal event in the development of modern medicine and surgery. Without general anesthesia, little progress would have been possible in surgery beyond the rudimentary stages of the early 1840s. Many medical historians credit Dr. Crawford W. Long with the first surgical anesthetic procedure in March 1842.<sup>1</sup> While a medical student at the University of Pennsylvania during the 1830s, Dr. Long participated in “ether frolics” and knew firsthand the exhilarating effects of inhaled ether vapors. He continued this type of recreation after he began his medical practice in Georgia, and the insensibility often produced was the basis for his first administration of ether for an operation.<sup>2</sup>

Even though most medical historians know about the widespread practice of ether frolics, few are aware that ether at that time was also ingested orally for its intoxicating effects, especially in Ireland. Although details about this practice are vague, apparently Father Mathew, a Roman Catholic priest, began advocating complete abstinence from alcoholic beverages in 1838.<sup>3-5</sup> According to one source, Father Mathew obtained more than 5 million abstinence pledges within 3 years in Ireland alone.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, during the early to mid-1840s, a physician in Draperstown, Londonderry County, began dispensing small portions of ether in water to those desiring a nonalcoholic libation. Thus, ether was used “as a liquor on which a man might get drunk with a clear conscience.”<sup>5</sup>

During the 1840s, illegal distillation of alcoholic spirits became more difficult because of the desire of the British government to halt such activity. Thus, another possible reason for the origin of ether drinking was that “in a country whose people in the past have been notoriously addicted to illicit distilling, the impossibility of indulging in it now...has driven the people to ether as the best substitute for poteen.”<sup>5</sup> “Poteen” was the term used for whiskey prepared by illegal distillation. At that time, a nonmedical or “adulterated” type of ether was being prepared for industrial purposes. This variant was substantially less costly than medically pure ether because it was prepared from duty-free methylated spirits of wine; however, its taste and composition were virtually identical to those of the pure ether.<sup>5</sup>

For whatever reason, ether drinking apparently became relatively common because in a short period, shops in many Irish towns were selling ether in a manner similar to taverns selling alcoholic beverages. According to a British government report, “some 100,000 Irish consume[d] 17,000 gallons of impure ether annually.”<sup>6</sup> All age-groups ingested ether, and its use was equal between male and female consumers. Neighborhood women, and even their young daughters, would have “ether bees,” and children could obtain ether for drinking purposes from local stores.<sup>4</sup>

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Because ether is poorly soluble in water, it was routinely consumed “neat” or undiluted in a small glass. One authority<sup>1</sup> on this subject described its ingestion in terms of a play:

Scene I.—The mouth is washed out with cold water. Scene II.—A draught of cold water is drunk. Scene III.—The ether is swallowed “neat.” Scene IV.—The performance closes with a second and final drink of cold water.

As proficiency in ether drinking developed, use of cold water could be eliminated.

The initial quantity of ether ingested by a beginner was usually 1 drachm or approximately 3.5 mL.<sup>4</sup> As tolerance increased, the amount ingested also increased; thus, “seasoned casks” might require “half a wineglassful.”<sup>4</sup> Hart<sup>5</sup> wrote that “the immediate effects of drinking ether are similar to those produced by alcohol, but everything takes place more rapidly; the stages of excitement, mental confusion, loss of muscular control, and loss of consciousness follow each other so quickly that they cannot be clearly separated from each other.”<sup>5</sup> These effects dissipated almost as rapidly as they occurred, and few, if any, aftereffects such as nausea, headache, or hangover were noted. Because of these “advantages,” ether inebriates were often able to imbibe several times a day, and it was observed that “the etherist can have three thorough ‘drunks’ for one of the alcoholic.”<sup>4</sup>

Adverse effects of ether drinking included profuse salivation, epigastric burning, and “rather violent eructations.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, several injuries and deaths were reported when ether drinkers were set on fire after being too close to open flames or when lighting a pipe.” Early during the history of ether, the route of elimination was thought to be the lungs because the absence of an ether odor in urine made the kidneys an unlikely route for elimination.<sup>3</sup>

People in Scotland, Norway, and Russia also drank ether. In France, ether was usually drunk with cognac, whereas in the United States, the Finns, Swedes, and Poles in northern Michigan were reported to drink ether with whiskey.

Little has been written about the demise of ether drinking. In 1890, the British government classified ether as a poison; thus, sale of ether was severely limited because only “qualified chemists” or pharmacists could sell it.<sup>8</sup> Ether drinking in Ireland apparently declined because of regulatory statutes and the focus of the medical community on such practice.

### REFERENCES

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