

Extract from Porter, Roy. *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity*. New York: Norton, 1997.

Anaesthesia became accepted, but ether, which irritated the lungs and caused vomiting, was soon displaced by chloroform which, discovered in 1831, was powerful and easy to administer. Tradition has it that James Young Simpson (1811-70), professor of surgery in Edinburgh, had been testing chemicals with his assistants when somebody upset a bottle of chloroform. On bringing in dinner, his wife found them all asleep. Simpson tried it out on a woman in labour (half a teaspoon on a rag, applied to the nose), and was so pleased that he had given it to some thirty patients within a week.

The key event happened on 7 April 1853: Queen Victoria took chloroform for the birth of Prince Leopold; John Snow (1813-58) administered the anaesthetic. "The effect was soothing, quieting & delightful beyond measure," Her Majesty recorded in her journal. Protests followed; some were religious (the Bible taught women were to bring forth in pain) but most were medical, on safety grounds. "In no [367/368] case," boomed the *Lancet*, "could it be justifiable to administer chloroform in perfectly ordinary labour" (367-68).