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. 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.

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. Accord­ ing to one source, Father Mathew obtained more than 5 million abstinence pledges within 3 years in Ireland alone. 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."

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 potee." "Potee" 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 spir­ its of wine; however, its taste and composition were virtually identical to those of the pure ether.

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