

The Great Invention | Inventors | James Young Simpson (1811 - 1870)

Obstetrician and pioneer in the field of anaesthetics. Born in Bathgate, the son of a baker. Simpson attended the University of Edinburgh from the age of only 14, graduating in 1832. He was appointed to a Chair of Midwifery at the same institution in 1840, quickly establishing the position of this subject as a popular and essential part of medical education. He was a pioneer in the use of anaesthetics, particularly chloroform, developing its use in surgery and midwifery. He introduced ether to obstetric practice in 1847, but in a search for something better, Simpson tried different anaesthetic agents with his colleagues by inhaling their vapours around the dinner table at his home.

He championed the use of chloroform against medical, moral and religious opposition. It was not until Queen Victoria used this anaesthetic during the birth of Prince Leopold (1853) that its use became generally accepted. Simpson also pioneered obstetric techniques and responsible for much reform of hospital practice while working at the Infirmary in Edinburgh. In 1866 Simpson became the first person to be knighted for services to medicine.

Simpson is buried in Warriston Cemetery (Edinburgh). Around 1700 medical colleagues and public figures joined his funeral procession and more than 100,000 people lined the route to the cemetery. He is remembered by the Simpson Memorial Maternity Pavilion in Edinburgh, together with a statue in Princes Street Gardens and a bust in Westminster Abbey (London).