



Media Review

Corridors of Blood, a 1958 Drama Starring Boris Karloff and Loosely Based on Ether Day

Boris Karloff was the stage name of English actor William Henry Pratt (1887–1969). He will be long remembered as the monster in the 1931 film *Frankenstein* (and its sequels) (Figure 1).¹ Following his iconic role as a creature of surgical science misadventure, he was a mainstay of the horror genre and was an obvious choice to star in a drama about pre-modern surgery. (Since the Frankenstein monster underwent reanimation, it is interesting that “Anesthesiology” is often called “*Anesthésie et de Réanimation*” in France.) Karloff did a fine job in the film *Corridors of Blood*, loosely based on Ether Day and the surgical terrors preceding it (Figure 2). The black-and-white film was completed in 1958 and released in 1962 by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios. The British screenwriter was Jean Scott Rogers (1908–2000).

Ether Day, the first public demonstration of inhaled sulfuric ether vapor for surgical anesthesia, occurred in Boston on October 16, 1846 (Figure 3).^{2–4} The movie is set in London in 1840 instead of Boston in 1846. So, straight away, it is not intended to recapitulate the precise events. However, it starts with graphic exhibition of the horror that indeed attended surgery before the advent of ether. As the movie opens, a bell is tolled, alluding to the “operation bell” of London Hospital (Figure 4). Its knell was the call for brawny accomplices to come and restrain a patient about to undergo agony and possibly death during surgery without anesthesia. It also summoned spectators, including voyeurs seeking a ghoulish spectacle. The bell bids movie viewers into a room in which sawdust is being put down to catch the forthcoming gore. Soon, post-traumatic stress disorder is illustrated as consequence of “successful” but mentally unbearable surgery.^{5–7}

Karloff plays surgeon Thomas Bolton (supposedly 1778–1841), who possesses “a sureness and speed not matched by anyone” (Figures 2 and 5). The same was said of Robert Liston (1794–1847), who amputated a leg in 28 seconds in the first English trial of etherization. The fictional Bolton is a composite character inspired by several figures important in the history of surgery and anesthesia. He is initially a kind person who serves disenfranchised patients and toils in his laboratory in search of a potion to prevent surgical agony. Bolton is assured by skeptics that “the pain and the knife are inseparable.” He is told, as were anesthesia pioneers, that he is “bound to fail” because, “ever since surgery began, man’s [sic] destiny has been to suffer in order that he might be cured.”

Like Humphry Davy (1778–1829), Horace Wells (1815–1848), James Young Simpson (1811–1870), Robert M. Glover (1815–1859), William S. Halsted (1852–1922), and others, he resorts to self-experimentation.^{8–10} Unlike Simpson and Davy (who recovered from a nitrous habit), but like the others aforementioned, he suffers dire consequences of addiction. Indeed, like Wells, Bolton develops bizarre behavior, sometimes under acute influence and sometimes under sustained influence of inhaled substances.¹¹

Multiple aspects of Bolton mirror the tragic life of Wells. Both pioneers are deeply crushed when an attempted public demonstration fails because of inadequate anesthetic depth. Both encounter difficulties with the excitement phase of the induction of inhaled anesthesia. They each run afoul of the law while intoxicated. Both appear to lose mental health. In a relatively specific example, both have an incident in which they throw sulfuric acid as a weapon against others. Both suffer anesthesia-related deaths but are posthumously vindicated as inventors of a blessing for humanity.

Surgeons of the early 1800s were frightening for two reasons: they often needed to cause horrific pain, and some of them overzealously sought cadavers upon which to practice their eerie arts. Patients knew or suspected that murders were sometimes committed to provide surgeons with cadaveric merchandise. For instance, William Burke (1792–1829) and William Hare were convicted of 16 murders committed over a period of 10 months in 1828 in Edinburgh, Scotland. They supplied the bodies to surgeon Robert Knox (1791–1862), who turned a blind eye to the mechanism for the bounty. Fresh graves were often robbed. The appalling entrepreneurs were known as “body snatchers” or “resurrection men.”

The terms “body snatcher” and “resurrection man” both invoke *Frankenstein*, a story involving snatched body parts and reanimation. Accordingly, one of the villains in *Corridors* is dubbed Resurrection Joe, performed by Christopher Lee (1922–2015).

In *Corridors*, Karloff is blackmailed by graverobbers. He portrayed a graverobber in the 1945 RKO picture entitled *The Body Snatcher*, based on the novel so-named by Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894). A different sense of the phrase added spice to the 1956 horror film entitled *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (adapted from a 1954 novel by Jack Finney, 1911–1995).

With regard to Stevenson, the history of inhaled anesthesia has a faint but recognizable element of the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, his novella of 1886. Like Dr. Jekyll’s fictional brew, general anesthetics are disinhibiting agents, a feature that is important in *Corridors*. Karloff portrayed Dr. Jekyll in 1953, albeit in a parody film starring the comedy duo Bud Abbott (1897–1974) and Lou Costello (1906–1959).

Corridors contrasts starkly with two other cinematic renditions of Ether Day. A 20-minute silent film entitled *The Advent of Anesthesia* was produced at Massachusetts General Hospital in 1936. It strove for historical accuracy. While illustrating events of 1846, *Advent* allows viewers to see physicians from the MGH department of surgery of 1936. Those surgeons were the cinematic actors. For instance, Edward D. Churchill (1895–1972) portrayed his MGH predecessor John Collins Warren (1778–1856). The production was sponsored by the Mallinckrodt Chemical firm. In the 1930s, they were the major producer of medical-grade ether. Edward Mallinckrodt, Jr. (1878–1967), son of the founder, studied chemistry at Harvard, and he endowed anesthesia professorships in Boston and his hometown of Saint Louis. Alas, Henry K. Beecher (1904–1976) does not appear in the film. Churchill had sent him to Copenhagen on a research



Fig. 1. Boris Karloff in his unforgettable role as Frankenstein's monster. The makeup was designed by Jack Pierce (1889–1968). This image was a promotional one for *Bride of Frankenstein*, released by Universal Pictures in 1935. The novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* was published anonymously in 1818 by English author Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797–1851). The Shelley tale is sometimes taken as medical allegory.¹



Fig. 3. Soon after *Ether Day*, John Collins Warren (front, right) commissioned daguerreotype images of the operating theater of the Massachusetts General Hospital. This is a cropped image of that which adorns the Bulfinch Building containing that theater. The photographic process required the subjects to hold still for several minutes. Notwithstanding, there are many idle hands, including those of the fellow in rolled-up shirtsleeves. He is there to offer physical restraint of the patient, an offer that will be blessedly unnecessary. Next to J.C. Warren is George Hayward (1791–1863), the surgeon who performed an above-knee amputation while Morton administered ether. In this reenactment, ether is being offered by Jonathan Mason Warren (1811–1867) by means of a large sponge with a hollow cut into it. This was rapidly favored at MGH over the glass inhaler of Morton, who is absent in daguerreotypes that were staged by J.C. Warren. Daguerreotypes were usually reversed from left to right, and this one is shown that way.⁴ In *Corridors*, Karloff is a surgeon such as Warren, and there is perhaps a visual resemblance.

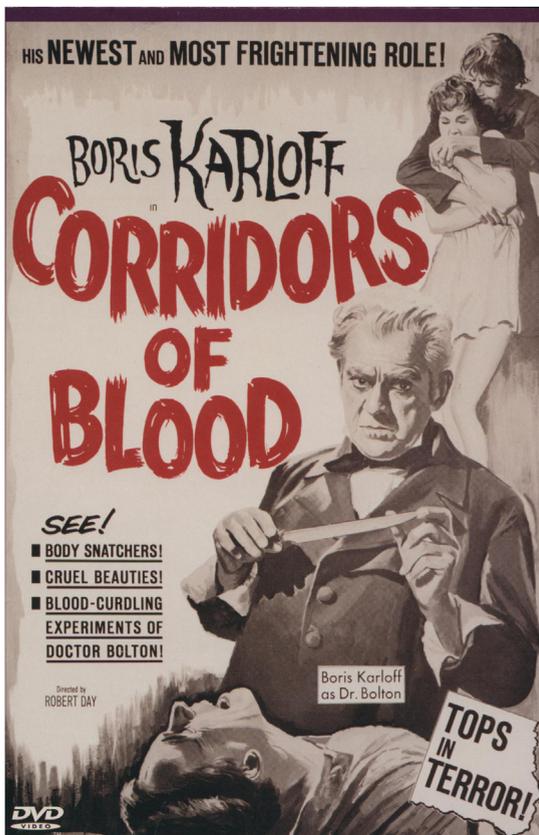


Fig. 2. Karloff in his role as the fictional surgeon Thomas Bolton. Karloff was 72 in 1958, while etherizer William T.G. Morton was 27 in 1846. Accordingly, the Bolton character was written as a composite of Morton and, among other noteworthies, surgeon John Collins Warren, who was 68 on *Ether Day*.



Fig. 4. Surgery annunciator of the London Hospital. The modern plaque is inscribed, "Operation Bell-1791. Prior to the discovery of Anaesthetics this Bell was rung before a Surgical Operation to summon attendants to hold the patient still." The bell was cast by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry. It is on display at the Museum of the Royal London Hospital and is shown with their kind permission.

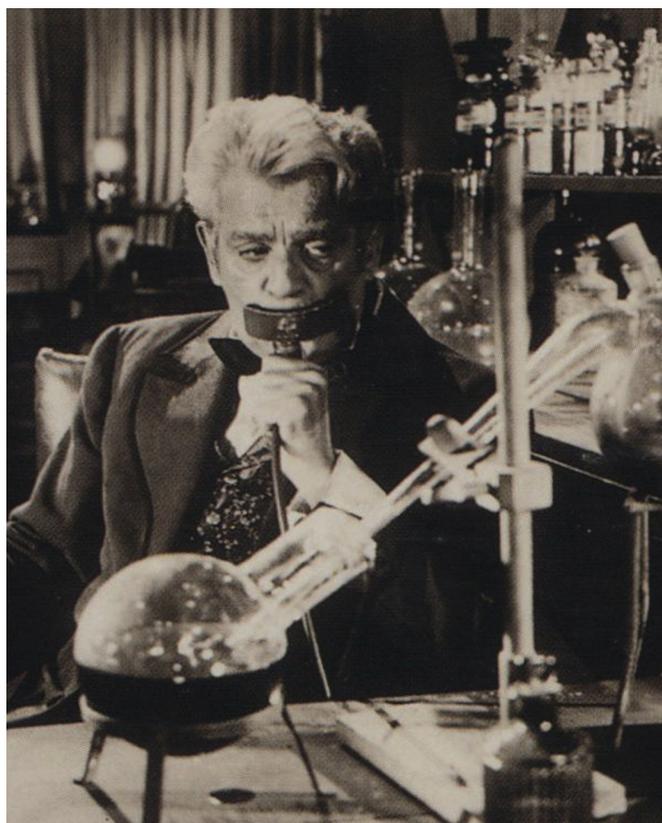


Fig. 5. Karloff self-experimenting in *Corridors* in the manner of the inhaled-anesthesia pioneers.

fellowship in physiology in preparation for Beecher's upcoming role as the chief of anesthesia at MGH.¹² The film is online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqUGWmb0RIY>. Jack Eckert of the Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard, discusses the film at <https://cms.www.countway.harvard.edu/wp/?p=12665>.

The other movie is largely a comedy. Entitled *The Great Moment*, it was written and directed by Preston Sturges (1898–1959) and released in 1944 by Paramount Pictures. It was based on an account by René Fülöp-Miller (1891–1963).¹³ A thoroughly likable William T.G. Morton (1819–1868) is portrayed by Joel McCrea (1905–1990). Modern historians are often critical of the moral character of Morton.^{2,3} It is intriguing whether he was better captured by Karloff or by McCrea. Grim or plucky, both portrayals of an anesthesia inventor evince flashes of courage and compassion in a complex person.

None of the films was a box office smash. However, anesthesia folk might well appreciate all three.

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