The Wondrous Story of Anesthesia
To those responsible for the discovery and evolution of anesthesia.
This story describes events in three succeeding eras: first, events during the time preceding and immediately after the demonstration of anesthesia; then those in the subsequent 90 years of slow evolution of the specialty, ending in the 1950s; and finally those from the 1950s to the present, a period of explosive growth. Our lives span the last of these, the era in which modern anesthesia evolved from empiricism—“doing what worked”—to a practice relying on science and evidenced-based medicine. We sought to tell this story before too many grand participants died or were unable to tell their story. Many died in the past decade: Safar (2003); Marx (2004); Greene (2005)—including since we began this project in 2007—Haglund, Ibsen and Keats (2007); Gray (2008); Parsloe (2009); Smith and Terrell (2010); Gordh, Morris and Pierce (2011). We would have lost too many opportunities had we failed to act.

We enlisted 100 authors to construct 53 chapters (The Individual Stories) describing specific aspects of the evolution of anesthesia: people, countries, drugs, science, organizations, education, and more, each a thread in the tapestry of a larger story, each chapter written by anesthetists and others who lived this history. These 53 chapters make up the second part of our book. The first part wove stories from these chapters into chronologies described in 14 additional chapters (The Woven Stories) which provide a coherent picture of the development of anesthesia, a framework that facilitates an understanding of how events and people described in the second part of the book jointly shaped the development of the specialty.

Our contributors represent the Americas, Europe, the Middle and Far East, and Australia and New Zealand. They were chosen because of demonstrated expertise and/or actual participation in the development of a specific subject or of the specialty in a specific geographic area. Several chapter titles may seem idiosyncratic for a history book and were chosen because the subjects seemed to represent existing trends that were likely to influence the future.

A book of this breadth could not have been produced without the help supplied by our 100 contributors. Each endured multiple suggestions, changes, requests for no fewer than four revisions and a gentle nagging for more and more and more that in retrospect probably bordered on abuse. A few did not tolerate our intrusiveness and withdrew before completing their assignments. Fortunately, replacements were found and despite a shortened timeline for completion they met our deadlines. To all of these dear friends we offer our gratitude—we are in your debt!

The book is a story, not a recitation of pharmacology or physiology. It is not intended to educate the student in techniques or mechanisms. It describes the issues that shaped anesthesia, the incidents and humor, the anecdotes that put a human face to this wonderful specialty. We hope it shows the interactions between diverse forces that made this great specialty grow, and provides a sense of where those forces may take us in the future.

We three editors (Fig. 1) and many of our contributors hail from English speaking countries. While our respective forms of English are nearly identical they do differ slightly in spellings, e.g., an(a)esthesia, vapo(u)r, (o)esophagus, antagoni(s)ze, and many more. Rather than dictating the use of American English throughout, we elected to use the spelling common to the country of the chapter’s author(s).

Redundancy in the descriptions of subjects, persons, and events is a frequent complaint lodged against multi-authored books, especially those like ours wherein the stories span centuries. Rather than purging the text of such repetitions, we allowed them to remain where and
whenever they obviously belonged. The largest example, the discussion of Danish anesthesiologist Bjørn Ibsen’s impact upon intensive care medicine, intensive care units, and associated issues appears in five chapters, each with its own focus.

Finally, a tribute to The Power of Three (Fig. 1). As might have been expected, in the 6 years over which we wrote and re-wrote this book, we disagreed regarding the how, who, when, where, why, and whether of many things. We settled each of these disputes (mostly) without rancor by taking a vote. For anyone anticipating a similar future exercise, we advise avoiding an even number of participants.

It has been a wonderful journey that has allowed us to re-live lives we loved.

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Fig. 1 The three editors, from left to right: Edmond (Ted) Eger, Lawrence J. Saidman, and Rod N. Westhorpe
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