Dr William Russ Pugh: A remarkable character comes to life

The deaths of his two infants, an accusation of manslaughter, a challenge to a duel and multiple court actions marred the remarkable life of one of Tasmania’s most colourful historical characters, Dr William Russ Pugh.

Yet he proved to be one of the most successful doctors of his era, his feats documented in Not Just An Anaesthetist: The Remarkable Life of Dr William Russ Pugh, MD, which is being launched on Wednesday October 30, 2013.

The book was written by Dr John Paull, a retired anaesthetist who moved to Tasmania nearly 15 years ago. He became fascinated in Pugh’s life after being given a folder of press clippings and other records to write a chapter for a book.

“I decided I owed him a more complete history of his life in Launceston,” he said.

Dr Pugh is famous for being the first doctor in Australia to demonstrate surgical anaesthesia for the first time. This occurred in Launceston when he used ether to remove a growth from the jaw of “Mrs L”, just eight months after the world-first public demonstration of ether by William Thomas Green Morton on October 16, 1846 in Boston, US.

“Pugh was a great character,” Dr Paull said. “He was accused of not being medically qualified and of poisoning patients with cyanide but he confounded his critics by gaining an MD from Germany.

“He was very outspoken and had a strong social conscience - he believed ending transportation was the only way to end child sexual abuse in Van Diemen's Land.”

Not Just An Anaesthetist is more than just a biography of Pugh. It is a fascinating snapshot of Launceston in the mid-19th century.

The chapters are written in different voices, for example, the first chapter is told through the eyes of Captain Riddell of the Derwent, the ship on which Pugh emigrated. Other chapters are told in Pugh’s voice and that of his beloved wife, Cornelia Kerton, who Pugh met aboard the Derwent. He walked from Hobart to Launceston to court Cornelia.

The information for the book was gleaned from a 1934 reprinting of Pugh’s lost journal, articles in The Examiner newspaper and other historical documents.

For more information or to request an interview with Dr Paull, please contact Clea Hincks on 0418 583 276 or chincks@anzca.edu.au.