

**HUMPHRY DAVY,
POET AND
PHILOSOPHER**

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Humphry Davy, poet and philosopher by T. E. Thorpe

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T. E. THORPE

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PHILOSOPHER**



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HUMPHRY DAVY

POET AND PHILOSOPHER

BY

T. E. THORPE, LL.D., F.R.S.



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PREFACE

For the details of Sir Humphry Davy's personal history, as set forth in this little book, I am mainly indebted to the well-known memoirs by Dr. Paris, and Dr. John Davy. As biographies, these works are of very unequal value. To begin with, Dr. Paris is not unfrequently inaccurate in his statements as to matters of fact, and disingenuous in his inferences as to matters of conduct and opinion. The very extravagance of his laudation suggests a doubt of his judgment or of his sincerity, and this is strengthened by the too evident relish with which he dwells upon the foibles and frailties of his subject. The insincerity is reflected in the literary style of the narrative, which is inflated and over-wrought. Sir Walter Scott, who knew Davy well and who admired his genius and his many social gifts, characterised the book as "*ungentlemanly*" in tone; and there is no doubt that it gave pain to many of Davy's friends who, like Scott, believed that justice had not been done to his character.

Dr. Davy's book, on the other hand, whilst perhaps too partial at times—as might be expected from one who writes of a brother to whom he was under great obligations, and for whom, it is evident, he had the highest respect and affection—is written with candour, and a sobriety of tone and a directness and simplicity of statement far more effective than the stilted euhuistic periods of Dr. Paris, even when he seeks to be most forcible. When, therefore, I have had to deal with conflicting or inconsistent statements in the two works on matters of fact, I have generally preferred to accept the version of Dr. Davy, on the ground that he had access to sources of information not available to Dr. Paris.

Davy played such a considerable part in the social and intellectual world of London during the first quarter of the century that, as might be expected, his name frequently occurs in the personal memoirs and biographical literature of his time; and a number of journals and diaries, such as those of Horner, Ticknor, Henry Crabb Robinson, Lockhart, Maria Edgeworth, and others that might be mentioned, make reference to him and his work, and indicate what his contemporaries thought of his character and achievements. Some

of these references will be found in the following pages. It will surprise many Londoners to know that they owe the Zoological Gardens, in large measure, to a Professor of Chemistry in Albemarle Street, and that the magnificent establishment in the Cromwell Road, South Kensington, is the outcome of the representations, unsuccessful for a time, which he made to his brother trustees of the British Museum as to the place of natural history in the national collections. Davy had a leading share also in the foundation of the Athenæum Club, and was one of its first trustees.

I am further under very special obligations to Dr. Humphry D. Rolleston, the grand-nephew of Sir Humphry Davy, for much valuable material, procured through the kind co-operation of Miss Davy, the granddaughter of Dr. John Davy. This consisted of letters from Priestley, Kirwan, Southey, Coleridge, Maria Edgeworth, Mrs. Beddoes (Anna Edgeworth), Sir Joseph Banks, Gregory Watt, and others; and, what is of especial interest to his biographer, a large number of Davy's own letters to his wife. In addition were papers relating to the invention of the Safety Lamp. Some of the letters have already been published by Dr. John Davy, but others now appear in print for the first time. I am also indebted to Dr. Rolleston for the loan of the portrait representing Davy in Court dress and in the presidential chair of the Royal Society, which, reproduced in photogravure, forms the frontispiece to this book. The original is a small highly-finished work by Jackson, and was painted about 1823. The picture originally belonged to Lady Davy, who refers to it in the letter to Davies Gilbert (quoted by Weld in his "History of the Royal Society"), in which she offers Lawrence's well-known portrait to the Society, and which, by the way, the Society nearly lost through the subsequent action of the painter.

For the references to the early history of the Royal Institution I am mainly indebted to Dr. Bence Jones's book. I have, moreover, to thank the Managers of the Institution for their kindness in giving me permission to see the minutes of the early meetings, and also for allowing me to consult the manuscripts and laboratory journals in their possession. These include the original records of Davy's work, and also the notes taken by Faraday of his lectures. The Managers have also allowed me to reproduce Miss Harriet Moore's sketch—first

brought to my notice by Professor Dewar—of the chemical laboratory of the Institution as it appeared in the time of Davy and Faraday, and I have to thank them for the loan of Gillray's characteristic drawing of the Lecture Theatre, from which the illustration on p. 70 has been prepared.

I have necessarily had to refer to the relations of Davy to Faraday, and I trust I have said enough on that subject. Indeed, in my opinion, more than enough has been said already. It is not necessary to belittle Davy in order to exalt Faraday; and writers who, like Dr. Paris, unmindful of George Herbert's injunction, are prone to adopt an antithetical style in biographical narrative have, I am convinced, done Davy's memory much harm.

I regret that the space at my command has not allowed me to go into greater detail into the question of George Stephenson's relations to the invention of the safety lamp. I have had ample material placed at my disposal for a discussion of the question, and I am specially indebted to Mr. John Pattinson and the Council of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle-upon-Tyne for their kindness in lending me a rare, if not unique, collection of pamphlets and reprints of newspaper articles which made their appearance when the idea of offering Davy some proof of the value which the coal owners entertained of his invention was first promulgated. George Stephenson's claims are not to be dismissed summarily as pretensions. Indeed, his behaviour throughout the whole of the controversy increases one's respect for him as a man of integrity and rectitude, conscious of what he thought due to himself, and showing only a proper assurance in his own vindication. I venture to think, however, that the conclusion to which I have arrived, and which, from the exigencies of space, is, I fear, somewhat baldly stated, as to the apportionment of the merit of this memorable invention, is just and can be well established. Stephenson *might* possibly have hit upon a safety lamp if he had been allowed to work out his own ideas independently and by the purely empirical methods he adopted, and it is conceivable that his lamp *might* have assumed its present form without the intervention of Davy; but it is difficult to imagine that an unlettered man, absolutely without knowledge of physical science, could have discovered the philosophical principle upon which the security of the lamp depends.

May, 1896.

T. E. T.

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