JAN GOLINSKI, *The Experimental Self: Humphry Davy and the Making of a Man of Science*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. viii + 259 pp. \$30.00; £22.50. ISBN 978-0226351360.

Humphry Davy (1778-1829) was arguably the most visible and influential practitioner of science in early nineteenth-century Britain. In *The Experimental Self*, Jan Golinski argues persuasively that Davy's scientific career was shaped by his willingness:

'Davy was a self-made man—so much so that there was considerable puzzlement among his contemporaries as to what sort of person he actually was' (p. 2). Golinski understands Davy's career (and by implication, perhaps, other scientific careers) as a series of intellectual, methodological, and social performances, and the key venue for these performances was the Royal Institution in London, where Davy was appointed lecturer in chemistry in 1801. At the Royal Institution, Golinski writes, Davy developed 'an embodied mode of investigation that relied on self-experimentation and public self-display' (p. 45).

Such confident self-display was viewed by Davy's nineteenth-century critics as meretricious and insufficiently masculine, and one of the identities that Golinski assigns to Davy is that of 'the dandy'. The chapters of *The Experimental Self*, which proceed in broadly chronological order, trace a range of other identities too, identifying Davy as a youthful (and politically radical) 'enthusiast' for nature and knowledge; a 'genius'; a 'discoverer' of chemical elements; a disinterested yet benevolent 'philosopher'; and, at the end of his life, a 'traveler'. It is an indication of the strength of Golinski's argument and approach that the number of these identities might have been increased. Other designations of Davy might have included the

sportsman (he enjoyed the physical exercise and social prestige of hunting and fishing), and the inventor, particular of the miner's safety lamp (Golinski discusses the lamp in his chapter on Davy as philosopher).

Another identity that might have made its way into Golinski's book is that of the poet. From my perspective as a literary historian, I would have liked to have seen fuller consideration of what Golinski terms Davy's 'experiments in authorship', as well as his 'experiments in selfhood' (p. 158). As Golinski notes, Davy wrote in a wide range of different genres, and his writings were an important element of his construction of his various selves, but while Golinski offers a detailed discussion of Davy's final, posthumously published book *Consolations in Travel*, he has less to say about the complex ways in which Davy used language to construct his identity and his discipline in his other writings. His 1801 'Discourse Introductory to a Course of Lectures on Chemistry' at the Royal Institution, for example, is a brilliant piece of rhetoric, which champions chemistry as a form of knowledge that is simultaneously rigorously empirical, aesthetically inspiring, practically useful, and socially respectable. Davy's poetry, which he wrote throughout his life (the manuscripts of many of his poems are in the archives of the Royal Institution), is also important, because shows how hard Davy worked to assimilate his view of scientific work, and of his own identity as a practitioner of science, into conventional Romantic definitions of genius and love of nature.

Davy's enthusiasm for poetry, the heterogeneity of his writings, and the diversity of his various identities seem to support Golinski's conclusion that 'one thing we can be clear about is that Davy was not a "professional scientist"' (p. 3). Golinski makes the

important point that such an identity did not exist in the early nineteenth century, and was therefore not available to Davy. However, sending his mother a copy of a recently published poem, in September 1799, Davy told her: ‘do not suppose I am turned poet. Philosophy, Chemistry, & medicine are my profession.’¹ So while Golinski is right to emphasise that Davy did not see himself as a scientist (the word was not coined until 1834, five years after Davy’s death), he did identify himself, at least at the start of his career, as a professional. And Golinski points out that, although Davy aspired to the status of a gentleman (and attained that status and more when he made a baronet in 1818), he relied throughout his career on the resources, intellectual authority, and cultural credibility conferred on him by his salaried post at the Royal Institution.

Golinski is right to point out that Davy left (to borrow the title of the book’s epilogue) ‘a fragmented legacy’. Despite his status as the pre-eminent scientific researcher and lecturer in early nineteenth-century Britain, and as president of the Royal Society between 1820 and 1827, ‘his influence was never translated into a regime for training students or a satisfactory textbook’ (p. 101). But the diversity of Davy’s self-fashionings and performances ensured that his legacy, although fragmented, was also widespread: ‘later men of science appropriated aspects of his work and modeled themselves on features of his life that appealed to them, while ignoring or downplaying the rest’ (p. 181). Over the course of the nineteenth century, aspects of Davy’s career—his paid experimental work at a specialist institution; his frequent publication of the results of his research in scientific journals, his charismatic

¹ Humphry Davy to Grace Davy, 1 September 1799, <http://www.davy-letters.org.uk> (accessed 3 May 2017).

lecturing and experimental demonstrations to non-specialist audiences, and his vocal championing of the intellectual authority and social utility of scientific methods—emerged as key elements in the self-definition of scientific practitioners. This book makes an important contribution to the history of nineteenth-century science in showing that the complexities of personal self-fashioning are closely entwined with the wider development of scientific disciplines.

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