

The Experimental Self: Humphry Davy and the Making of a Man of Science (Synthesis)

By Jan Golinski

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What did it mean to be a scientist before the profession itself existed? Jan Golinski finds an answer in the remarkable career of Humphry Davy, the foremost chemist of his day and one of the most distinguished British men of science of the nineteenth century. Originally a country boy from a modest background, Davy was propelled by his scientific accomplishments to a knighthood and the presidency of the Royal Society. An enigmatic figure to his contemporaries, Davy has continued to elude the efforts of biographers to classify him: poet, friend to Coleridge and Wordsworth, author of travel narratives and a book on fishing, chemist and inventor of the miners' safety lamp. What are we to make of such a man?

In *The Experimental Self*, Golinski argues that Davy's life is best understood as a prolonged process of self-experimentation. He follows Davy from his youthful enthusiasm for physiological experiment through his self-fashioning as a man of science in a period when the path to a scientific career was not as well-trodden as it is today. What emerges is a portrait of Davy as a creative fashioner of his own identity through a lifelong series of experiments in selfhood.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Golinski...unpicks the chemist's complexities and contradictions. As a gifted scientist and charismatic personality, Davy has been a magnet for biographers for two centuries. Golinski takes a new approach. *The Experimental Self* does not claim to be a comprehensive biography. Instead, it investigates the different identities that Davy constructed, along with those ascribed to him by others: enthusiast, genius, dandy, discoverer, philosopher, traveller. Golinski thus provides a fluid view of Davy, hopping back and forth between different periods of his life. It's a refreshing approach.”

(*Nature*)

"Golinski's biography of Davy is explicitly not comprehensive, although it includes many of the salient details of Davy's life and work. It seeks to tell us how, in an experiment that lasted throughout his life, he constructed and reconstructed himself. Golinski's focus is on Davy as enthusiast, genius, dandy, discoverer, philosopher and traveller....His great enthusiasm was for using himself as an experimental subject."

(*Times Higher Education*)

"This work is not merely another biography of Sir Humphry Davy. While Golinski has not aimed to be comprehensive, he thoroughly details the various personas of this fascinating scientific pioneer. In the period preceding 'professional' scientists, Davy progressed through a brilliant career, surmounting prejudices based on social class, ethnicity, and gender. Davy's personas, which were overlapping yet distinct and often self-described, ranged from enthusiast, genius, and dandy to discoverer, philosopher, and traveler. Davy was primarily a chemist and authored a chemistry textbook. However, his many travels inspired extensive writings on geology, agriculture, and poetry. The chemist was a controversial figure, and the established scientific society had difficulty in evaluating Davy and his varied personas. He was thought to both hinder and encourage the advancement of science, and was often criticized for his promotion of the education and scientific advancement of women. Golinski offers a superb, well-rounded view of Davy's life and contributions to the field of science. This work will be enjoyed by scientists, historians, and educators. Recommended."

(*Choice*)

"Insightful about many aspects of the self-made Davy's ideas and personality."

(*The Lancet*)

“Humphry Davy is an extremely important figure in the history of chemistry and has attracted a multitude of biographers—but Golinski's fresh, powerful insights are a very welcome addition. With *The Experimental Self*, Golinski wrestles with the noble challenge of evoking a particularly eminent man of science from the Second Scientific Revolution, when specialization and professional careers in science were still a relatively new idea. Golinski's way of making sense of this is novel: he perceives Davy as self-fashioning, presenting a number of personae—the enthusiast, the genius, the dandy, the discoverer, the philosopher, and the traveler. This yields a series of thematic chapters with a broadly chronological flow. Golinski does not attempt a full blow-by-blow biography but instead sees Davy as a fragmented figure, and so we are given a new, perceptive, sophisticated, and thought-provoking study in a readable style.”

(*David M. Knight, emeritus, Durham University*)

“Golinski has written an outstanding study of the English chemist Humphry Davy. *The Experimental*

Self is significant in two regards: first in the distinction of the six identities discussed, and second in the evidence of Davy's self-inventions. Golinski tells Davy's life as a thematic narrative, a form that is both true to its subject and gripping in its presentation. Anyone with an interest in biography or scientific genius will find *The Experimental Self* to be fascinating and persuasive."

(Gabriel Finkelstein, University of Colorado, Denver)

"Engagingly written and insightful, Golinski's *The Experimental Self* explores the ways in which the iconic Romantic figure and man of science Humphry Davy consciously wove together the identities of a chemist, philosopher, dandy, traveler, poet, genius, and discoverer. Golinski brilliantly reveals a world in which such experimentation and self-invention were necessary, before the establishment of modern science with its institutions and career paths. While Davy has often been treated as an enigmatic figure, Golinski makes sense of his life and sheds light on his many modes of being by eschewing traditional narrative biography and its demands for continuity of selfhood, instead treating separately the many selves of a single individual. It is, therefore, a book that belongs alongside recent histories of science that explore the figure of the scientist and the emergence of science as a professional enterprise, but it is also one that should be read by anyone with an interest in Romanticism, biography, or the nature of selfhood."

(Carin Berkowitz, author of *Charles Bell and the Anatomy of Reform*)

About the Author

Jan Golinski is professor of history and humanities at the University of New Hampshire. He is the author of *Making Natural Knowledge* and *British Weather and the Climate of Enlightenment*, both published by the University of Chicago Press.

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