



NEW

October 2010

From the Annals of the World History

Alfred Nobel

21 October 1833 - 10 December 1896

Alfred Bernhard Nobel was a Swedish chemist, engineer, innovator, armaments manufacturer and the inventor of dynamite. He owned Bofors, which he had redirected from its previous role as primarily an iron and steel producer to a major manufacturer of cannon and other armaments. Nobel held 355 different patents, dynamite being the most famous. In his last will, he used his enormous fortune to institute the Nobel Prizes. The synthetic element Nobelium was named after him.



Personal background

Alfred Nobel was the third son of Immanuel Nobel (1801-1872) and Andriette Ahlsell Nobel (1805-1889). Born in Stockholm on 21 October 1833, he went with his family to Saint Petersburg in 1842, where his father (who had invented modern plywood) started a "torpedo" works. Alfred studied chemistry with Professor Nikolay Nikolaevich Zinin. When Alfred was 18, he went to the United States to study chemistry for four years and worked for a short period under John Ericsson. In 1859, the factory was left to the care of the second son, Ludvig Nobel (1831-1888), who greatly improved the business. Alfred, returning to Sweden with his father after the bankruptcy of their family business, devoted himself to the study of explosives, and especially to the safe manufacture and use of nitroglycerine (discovered in 1847 by Ascanio Sobrero, one of his fellow students under Théophile-Jules Pelouze at the University of Torino). A big explosion occurred on the 3 September 1864 at their factory in Heleneborg in Stockholm, killing five people, among them Alfred's younger brother Emil.

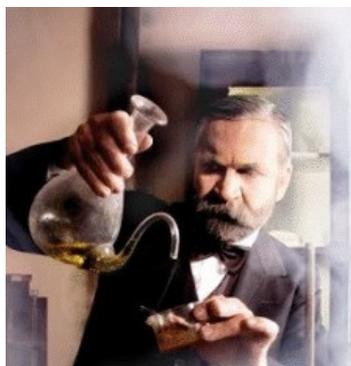
Though Nobel remained unmarried, his biographers note that he had at least three loves. Nobel's first love was in Russia with a girl named Alexandra, who rejected his proposal. In 1876 Bertha Kinsky became Alfred Nobel's secretary but after only a brief stay left him to marry her previous lover, Baron Arthur Gundaccar von Suttner. Though her personal contact with Alfred Nobel had been brief, she corresponded with him until his death in 1896, and it is believed that she was a major influence in his decision to include a peace prize among those prizes provided in his will. Bertha von Suttner was awarded the 1905 Nobel Peace prize, 'for her sincere peace activities'.

Nobel's third and long-lasting love was with a flower girl named Sofie Hess from Vienna. This liaison lasted for 18 years and in many of the exchanged letters, Nobel addressed his love as 'Madame Sofie Nobel'. After his death, according to his biographers - Evlanoff and Fluor, and Fant - Nobel's letters were locked within the Nobel Institute in Stockholm and became the best-kept secret of the time. They were released only in 1955, to be included with the biographical data of Nobel.

The foundations of the Nobel Prize were laid in 1895 when Alfred Nobel wrote his last will, leaving much of his wealth for its establishment. Since 1901, the prize has honored men and women for outstanding achievements in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, for work in peace and now economics. Nobel was elected a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in 1884, the same institution that would later select laureates for two of the Nobel prizes, and he received an honorary doctorate from Uppsala University in 1893.

Dynamite, ballistite, and gelignite

Nobel found that when nitroglycerin was incorporated in an absorbent inert substance like kieselguhr (diatomaceous earth) it became safer and more convenient to handle, and this mixture he patented in 1867 as 'dynamite'. Nobel demonstrated his explosive for the first time that year, at a quarry in Redhill, Surrey, England. In order to help reestablish his name and improve the image of his business from the earlier controversies associated with the dangerous explosives, Nobel had also considered naming the highly powerful substance "Nobels Safety Powder", but settled with Dynamite instead, referring to the Greek word for 'power'.



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Nobel later on combined nitroglycerin with various nitrocellulose compounds, similar to collodion, but settled on a more efficient recipe combining another nitrate explosive, and obtained a transparent, jelly-like substance, which was a more powerful explosive than dynamite. 'Gelignite', or blasting gelatin, as it was named, was patented in 1876; and was followed by a host of similar combinations, modified by the addition of potassium nitrate and various other substances. Gelignite was more stable, transportable and conveniently formed to fit into bored holes, like those used in drilling and mining, than the previously used compounds and was adopted as the standard technology for mining in the Age of Engineering bringing Nobel a great amount of financial success, though at a significant cost to his health. An off-shoot of this research resulted in Nobel's invention of ballistite, the precursor of many modern smokeless powder explosives and still used as a rocket propellant.

The Prizes

In 1888 Alfred's brother Ludvig died while visiting Cannes and a French newspaper erroneously published Alfred's obituary. It condemned him for his invention of dynamite and is said to have brought about his decision to leave a better legacy after his death. The obituary stated *Le marchand de la mort est mort* ("The merchant of death is dead") and went on to say, "Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday." Alfred was disappointed with what he read and was concerned with how he would be remembered. On 27 November 1895, at the Swedish-Norwegian Club in Paris, Nobel signed his last will and testament and set aside the bulk of his estate to establish the Nobel Prizes, to be awarded annually without distinction of nationality. He died of a stroke on 10 December 1896 at Sanremo, Italy. After taxes and bequests to individuals, Nobel's will gave 31,225,000 Swedish kronor (equivalent to about 1.8 billion kronor or 250 million US dollars in 2008) to fund the prizes.



Nobel Prize

The first three of these prizes are awarded for eminence in physical science, in chemistry and in medical science or physiology; the fourth is for literary work "in an ideal direction" and the fifth prize is to be given to the person or society that renders the greatest service to the cause of international fraternity, in the suppression or reduction of standing armies, or in the establishment or furtherance of peace congresses. There was also quite a lot of room for interpretation by the bodies he had named for deciding on the physical sciences and chemistry prizes, given that he had not consulted them before making the will. In his one-page testament, he stipulated that the money go to discoveries or inventions in the physical sciences and to discoveries or improvements in chemistry.

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