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Historical Vignettes, Sir Humphry Davy

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Sir Humphry Davy

HISTORICAL VIGNETTES

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MANY of us have taken for granted that modern anesthesia is strictly American. But the work of the British pneumatic chemists and physicians laid the ground work for the American discovery. In this regard the contributions of Sir Humphry Davy played an important role.

Humphry Davy was born at Penzance, in Cornwall, England, on December 17, 1778. He was the eldest of five children and after the death of his father in 1794 he had the responsibility of helping to support the family. He became apprenticed to an apothecary and surgeon in Penzance. There he became much interested in chemistry. In 1798, Davy joined the "Pneumatic Institution" at Bristol, which recently had been established by Beddoes, and there he began his work on the medical powers of "airs" and gases. Some of Davy's essays, including those on heat, light, oxygen and its combination, and his theory of respiration, were published in 1799. In 1800 in his 22nd year, his famous work, *Researches, Chemical and Philosophical; Chiefly Concerning Nitrous Oxide, or Dephlogisticated Nitrous Air, and Its Respiration*, appeared. It is in this work that Davy discussed the possible use of nitrous

oxide as an anesthetic agent. Davy said "As nitrous oxide in its extensive operation appears capable of destroying physical pain, it may probably be used with advantage during surgical operations. . . ."

In 1801, Davy was engaged by the Royal Institution as assistant lecturer in chemistry, director of the chemical laboratory and assistant editor, and in 1802 he was promoted to professor of chemistry. A year later he was elected a member of the Royal Society, in which he became very active. Among other achievements was his development of the chemical action of the voltaic battery and, consequently, the discovery of sodium and potassium. In 1812, he was knighted by the prince regent. In 1815, he invented a safety lamp for miners, and although others have claimed this invention, Davy is generally credited with its successful use. In 1818, Davy was created a baronet, and in 1820 he was elected president of the Royal Society. He died on May 1829, at Geneva and was buried in the cemetery of Plain-Palais. His widow placed a tablet to his memory in Westminster Abbey and a statue of him was erected in Penzance.

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