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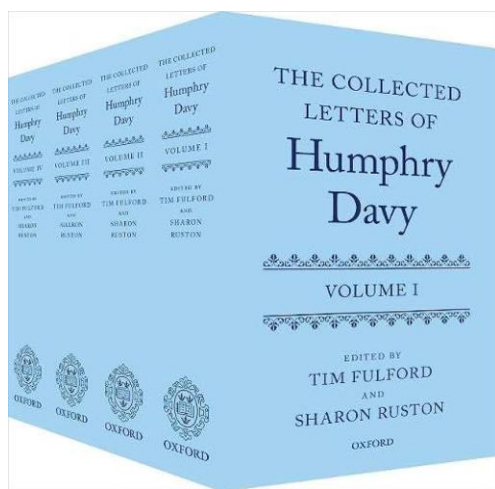
reads

The Collected Letters of Sir Humphry Davy
edited by Tim Fulford and Sharon Ruston¹

IN A LETTER WRITTEN TO HIS WIFE JANE on 24 July 1827, Humphry Davy comments on his efforts to rehabilitate his faculties after suffering from heart disease and a series of strokes: ‘I am sorry to say I cannot progress towards recovery I am obliged still to pursue the preventative system & this paper is stained by a leech which has fallen from my temples whilst I am writing’ (letter 1112, vol. IV, p. 41). This blood-stained letter, which narrates an ongoing process of self-experiment, is emblematic of how *The Collected Letters of Sir Humphry Davy* makes compelling contributions to the understanding of Davy’s approach to scientific inquiry, his relationships to other Romantic-era writers, and letter-writing as a form of knowledge making.

This four-volume, 2,320-page edition is an invaluable resource for scholars interested not only in Davy, but also in Romantic-era science and Romantic-era letters more broadly. The editors have scoured over 150 archives that span the globe. They include 1,202 letters written by Davy and a select few significant

letters written by his brother, wife, and others. Two-thirds of these letters have not been previously published, and many of them have appeared as duplicates or short extracts in volumes that lack contemporary editorial apparatus: John Ayrton Paris, *The Life of Sir Humphry Davy*, 2 vols. (London, 1831); John Davy, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Humphry Davy*, 2 vols. (London, 1836); John Davy, *Fragmentary Remains, Literary and Scientific, of Sir Humphry Davy, Bart., Late President of*



the Royal Society, etc. with a Sketch of His Life and Selections from His Correspondence (London, 1858).

Fulford and Ruston’s edition begins with an Introduction that newly illuminates the trajectory of Davy’s life and career with findings from the letters. It also includes meticulous descriptions of the letters as material artifacts—commenting on the significance of postmarks, address sheets, handwriting (and blood!)—and accounts of where and in what condition they were found (or are suspected to be lost). This emphasis sets the edition apart as

¹ Tim Fulford and Sharon Ruston, eds., *The Collected Letters of Sir Humphry Davy*, 4 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2020).

one that argues that letters are not simply sources from which to mine facts; they are complex pieces of evidence that contribute to a richer understanding of the personal, scientific, and literary networks that Davy both drew from and constructed. Every effort has been made to make the letters accessible to the reader, beginning with extensive footnotes that trace the correspondence to its various sources and reference existing scholarship on particular exchanges or ideas raised within. In addition to the Introduction, Volume I includes a helpful Biographies section with detailed entries for correspondents and other figures who appear in the letters or connected to Davy. Volume IV, similarly, contains a Chemical and Technical Glossary describing chemical terms and experimental apparatus that may be unfamiliar to the layperson or differ from contemporary nomenclature. Though the limits of publishing certainly dictate the inclusion of these supplements in separate volumes, including the Biographies for relevant correspondents in each of the volumes would have been a welcome addition.

Volume I: 1793–1808 traces the early development of Davy's 'ability to fashion and refashion himself so that he could advance his status' as he began his scientific career as an assistant to surgeon Thomas Beddoes, moved to Bristol where he befriended the radical poets Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and then entered and gradually worked his way up the ranks of the Royal Institution (ccix). The letters exchanged with Coleridge and others display 'a shared language in which revolutionary liberty and social justice, sought by communion with nature, featured large', providing 'a detailed portrait of the genesis of the network, and the mode of expression, that was later termed Romanticism' (ccx). In his first letter to Coleridge, a reply to an inquiry sent in June 1800, Davy discourages him from pursuing a translation of Blumenbach, arguing that it would interfere with the work of a 'poet philosopher': 'You were born to connect Man with Nature by the intermediate links of harmonious sounds & to teach him to disconnect his feelings from unmeaning words' (letter 84, vol. I, pp 148–49). In a May 1803 letter to Thomas Poole, Davy remarks upon the tension between his role as a scientist and his poetic spirit: 'Be not alarmed, my friend, as to the effect of worldly society on my mind . . . There are in the intellectual being of all men, permanent elements, certain passions and habits that cannot change. I am a lover of Nature, with an ungratified imagination. I shall continue to search for untasted charms,—for hidden beauties' (letter 68, vol. I, p. 133). In contrast, as the editor's note, 'Davy's correspondence had, by 1808, become that of an experienced man of business on the behalf of the Royal Institution and the Royal Society. His letters were rarely confessional or self-reflective' (ccxv).

Davy's letters concerning scientific matters not only enabled him to make connections and share discoveries; they also played a crucial role in the development of his scientific methods. The letters in *Volume II: 1809–1816* illustrate how 'his discoveries proceeded not from a coherent theory but from his ability to garner, and then incorporate into his experimental practice,

suggestions received from correspondents' (ccxvi). A notable example is Davy's invention of a lamp that could be used safely in coal mines. Previously unpublished letters written to John Hodgson, the rector of Jarrow and Bishopwearmouth, not only provide more detail on the development of his unique wire gauze designs, but also reveal the contributions of laboring class workers in the process and provide more context for accusations of plagiarism that have surrounded the invention of the safety lamp. This is just one of many instances in the collection in which previously unpublished or undiscovered letters either adds new context or contradicts previously held ideas about Davy.

Volume II also contains the correspondence between Davy and his wife Jane (then Apreece), in which the editors observe that he woos her 'by presenting himself in terms similar to those he had used in 1800 with the Bristol circle' (ccxvii). The following July 1811 letter might be compared to above quoted letter to Coleridge: 'your mind is "of poetical frame" for there is no mind in which so much feeling is blended with so much thought . . . you have powers by which you may effect any thing—Use them—' (letter 273, vol. II, p. 109). Elsewhere in his correspondence with Jane, he continues to argue for an intrinsic link between the poetic and the scientific faculties: 'All of this you will say is romantic but who would not follow a romance of pleasure—If this be romantic, it is romantic to pursue one object in Science—to attach feelings strongly to any ideas—' (letter 283, vol. II, p. 122).

Volume III: 1817–1826 covers the period in which Davy served as President of the Royal Society; in this period the letters display a 'forerunner of the institutionalized, professional scientist who spends his or her later career dealing with administration and fundraising rather than library experimentation' (ccxxvi). Many of the letters in this volume are held at the British Library and the Royal Society and record Davy's efforts to represent and advocate for scientific advancement to the public and the government. He also argued for the integrated pursuit of literature and science. In a letter to the Home Secretary, Robert Peel, he asks the politician for his support in rejecting a petition to charter a Royal Society of Literature:

Our charter is for improving Natural Knowledge which may be considered as including almost every thing except theology or revealed Knowledge. & the Transactions contain a great number of communications on subjects of literature & antiquities—The Royal Society of Edinburgh has two classes one literary the other scientific or physical; we have never made any such division; let us hope we are a literary as well as a scientific body. (Letter 1014, vol. III, p. 551)

In Davy's view, the trend towards specialization and pursuit of knowledge through separate disciplinary institutions could only weaken the advancement of knowledge as a whole. These letters also reveal the role that Davy played in

mentoring younger colleagues such as John Frederick William Herschel, ‘dispelling the view that Davy regarded younger researchers as rivals to be quashed rather than protégés to be mentored’ (ccxxvii). After suffering a stroke in 1827, Davy retreated from public life and spent his last years traveling Europe.

Volume IV: 1827–1864, finally, provides a fascinating account of his return to his philosophical and poetic side as he exchanges texts and ideas with friends and family, turning to his own ailing body, ‘a ruin among ruins’, as a site of observation and experiment (letter 1190, vol. IV, p. 162). In a March 1827 letter to Thomas Poole from Ravenna, he writes that he is ‘wholly unfit for any kind of business and study’, and outlines his commitment to attending to his health so that he may one day continue:

‘I am leading the life of an anchorite, obliged to abstain from flesh, wine, business, study, experiments, and all things that I love; but this discipline is salutary, and for the sake of being able to do something more for science, and, I hope, for humanity, I submit to it; believing that the Great Source of intellectual being so wills it for good’. (Letter 1098, vol. IV, p. 11)

As he recovered some of his faculties, he began to pursue field naturalism in the form of fly-fishing, writing *Salmonia: or, Days of Fly Fishing* (1828). *Salmonia* is the subject of one of the significant letters included by the editors from Jane, written to Walter Scott to ask if he might review the work, explaining that the perspective of the author ‘would gratify [Davy’s] best feelings, flatter his weaker ones, in his absence be like a premature & positive Immortality, & do him a world of good physical & mental’ (letter 1156, vol. IV, p. 105).

Davy’s last, posthumously published work, *Consolations in Travel*, was dedicated to Poole, to whom he confesses in a late letter that ‘there is nothing <that annoys> me so much in my illness as my helplessness in not being able to indulge in Society’ (letter 1146, vol. IV, p. 87). This is a fitting sentiment from a figure for whom the social played such a crucial role in his achievements, and who worked so effectively to leverage personal and professional connections in the interest of widening and enhancing the sphere of human knowledge and experience. As he wrote to Jane years earlier, ‘it is romantic to love the good, to admire the wise, to quit low & mean things & seek excellence’ (letter 283, vol. II, p. 122). Fulford and Ruston, in gathering the scattered leaves of Davy’s correspondence, have filled a crucial gap in scholarship and provided a much-needed resource that suggests multiple paths for further inquiry into the life and career of this Romantic polymath.