

‘Work in Progress in Romanticism’

Literature Compass

Editing Humphry Davy’s Letters

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An editorial team of Tim Fulford (De Montfort University) and Sharon Ruston (Lancaster University) (co-editors), and Jan Golinski (University of New Hampshire), Frank James (the Royal Institution of Great Britain), and David Knight¹ (Durham University) (advisory editors) are currently preparing *The Collected Letters of Sir Humphry Davy*: a four-volume edition of the c. 1200 surviving letters of Davy (1778-1829) and his immediate circle, for publication with Oxford University Press, in both print and electronic forms, in 2020.

Davy was one of the most significant and famous figures in the scientific and literary culture of early nineteenth-century Britain, Europe, and America. Davy’s scientific accomplishments were varied and numerous, including conducting pioneering research into the physiological effects of nitrous oxide (laughing gas); isolating potassium, calcium, and several other metals; inventing a miners’ safety lamp (the bicentenary of which was celebrated in 2015); developing the electrochemical protection of the copper sheeting of Royal Navy vessels; conserving the Herculaneum papyri; writing an influential text on agricultural chemistry; and seeking to improve the quality of optical glass. But Davy’s endeavours were not merely limited to science: he was also a poet, and moved in the same literary circles as Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, and William Wordsworth. Since his death, Davy has rarely been out of the public mind. He is still the frequent subject of biographies (by,

¹ David Knight died in 2018. David gave generously to the Davy Letters Project, and a two-day conference at Durham University was recently held in his memory.

most recently, Knight, Fullmer, Lamont-Brown, and Holmes), and of public lectures by contemporary scientists (by, for example, Thomas); he also features strongly in academic studies by both literary critics and historians of science (see, for example, Golinski 1992, Jenkins, Golinski 1999, Underwood, Golinski 2011, Hindle, and Golinski 2016). The Royal Society, meanwhile, continues to award the Davy Medal for ‘outstandingly important’ discoveries in chemistry.

In spite of Davy’s significance and fame, very few of his letters have appeared in print edited to modern standards; fewer than 250 have been published even in the form of quoted extracts or, expurgated and unannotated, in Victorian volumes (see Paris, Davy 1836, and Davy 1858).¹ *The Collected Letters* will therefore increase the number of published letters written by Davy approximately fivefold. The edition will provide complete, fully annotated texts, making Davy’s scientific terminology more intelligible to contemporary readers and expanding our knowledge of the scientific and literary networks of which he was part. It will feature previously unpublished letters to such notable correspondents as: André-Marie Ampère, Sir Joseph Banks, Thomas Beddoes, William Buckland, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Georges Cuvier, John Dalton, Davies Giddy/Gilbert, William Godwin, Sir John Herschel, Lord Holland, Alexander von Humboldt, Lord Liverpool, Gideon Mantell, Alexander Marcet, John Murray, Hans Christian Ørsted, Sir Robert Peel, Sir Stamford Raffles, August Wilhelm Schlegel, James Edward Smith, Mary Somerville, Henry Fox Talbot, James and Gregory Watt, Josiah and Thomas Wedgwood, and William Whewell.

Scholarly enquiry into Davy has grown steadily since the 1980s, when both literary critics and historians turned, in the wake of Michel Foucault and Bruno Latour, to the examination of the complex cultural contexts within which literary activity and scientific enquiry were

practised before they became the professionalised disciplines ‘literature’ and ‘science’. For a number of influential historians, Davy is a significant figure whose career not only revealed his brilliance as an experimentalist and discoverer, but also precipitated fundamental cultural changes that inaugurated the modern culture of science. Since the 1990s, Davy has been an exemplary figure for the recently emerged sub-discipline of ‘literature and science’, now firmly established within the UK and US with its own scholarly associations (the British Society for Literature and Science, and the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts) and journals (first *Configurations* and now the *Journal of Literature and Science*). There have been a number of publications devoted to the connections between Davy’s poetry and science in recent years with more forthcoming (see, for a recent example, Ruston). As well as publishing much-needed texts of Davy’s letters edited to modern standards and with full annotation, *The Collected Letters* will make accessible a number of new poems only extant in manuscript letters.

The Davy Letters Project, the culmination of which will be the publication of *The Collected Letters*, has been ongoing since 2008. At the start of the Project, the editorial team was given the unpublished typescript of an edition of Davy’s letters which the late June Z. Fullmer left incomplete at the time of her death in 2000. This typescript, of 736 transcriptions, proved invaluable in leading the editorial team to archives holding the manuscript letters, and in laying the basis for an online database.² It soon became clear, however, that it omitted many letters not known to Fullmer. It was therefore decided that a new comprehensive survey of worldwide archives must be undertaken, using location registers and online search tools that were unavailable to Fullmer. Accordingly, in 2010 the editorial team began a search by these means and by making e-mail or postal enquiries of all major libraries and museums in Britain, Europe, and America. Private collections thought likely to have Davy-related

material were also approached. Dealers in rare books and manuscripts were notified of the Project team's interest. The scholarly community was alerted by means of listservs. This survey has unearthed hundreds of letters untranscribed by Fullmer in over 100 archives worldwide. In 2010, the editors began visiting these archives to transcribe manuscript letters and/or to check Fullmer's transcriptions against the originals.

At the time of writing, *The Collected Letters* is in press. Throughout the edition, letters will be presented in chronological order, each letter being assigned its own number. All letters will be transcribed in full and editorial intervention in the text will be kept to a minimum. Davy's original spelling (and mis-spelling), grammar, and punctuation will be retained. The edition will also include a detailed General Introduction, a List of Letters, Biographies of Correspondents, a Chemical and Technical Glossary, a Bibliography of Davy's Manuscript Notebooks and Publications, a General Bibliography, and a comprehensive Index.

The Davy Letters Project has benefited from funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the British Academy (BA), the British Society for the History of Science, the Leverhulme Trust, the Scouloudi Foundation, the Society for the History of Alchemy and Chemistry (SHAC), the Society of Antiquaries of London, and the Wellcome Trust. Funding secured by Sharon Ruston from the Modern Humanities Research Association, the AHRC, the BA, and SHAC enabled the editorial team to employ Andrew Lacey (Lancaster University) as Senior Research Associate on the Project.

For more information, see the Davy Letters Project website: <http://www.davy-letters.org.uk>.

The Collected Letters of Sir Humphry Davy. Eds Tim Fulford and Sharon Ruston, advisory eds Jan Golinski, Frank A. J. L. James, and David Knight. 4 vols. Oxford: Oxford UP, forthcoming (2020).

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¹ A few more letters have been published in scholarly articles. Letters to Faraday appear in the edition of Faraday's correspondence recently edited by Frank James. Some, but not all, of Davy's letters to André-Marie Ampère, Jöns Jacob Berzelius, Hans Christian Ørsted, and Marc-Auguste Pictet appear in editions of these scientists' letters. Short extracts of letters – most already published, but a few new – have also appeared in biographies of Davy.

² See <http://www.davy-letters.org.uk>. Working transcriptions of letters can be presented and/or searched in the following ways: by date, by person writing, by location of author, by recipient, by holding archive, by place of previous publication, and by keyword/phrase.