Nobel and his prizes

A man who cursed his birth left a legacy to make amends

Before announcement of the 1967 winners 250 persons had received Nobel Prizes in science. Many of their names stir instant recognition—Einstein, Bohr, Fermi, Pavlov. Some have been forgotten. (Who was Johannes Fibiger?) The list would total 251 except that Marie Curie won twice—physics in 1903 and chemistry in 1911.

The members of this select group are the legatees of a sad millionaire who wished he had never been born, but lived to read his own obituary.

Alfred Nobel was probably one of the most unhappy men who ever lived. He made a tremendous fortune—he invented dynamite and smokeless powder—and then was terribly conscience-stricken. That is why his last will, written by hand just a year before he died on Dec. 10, 1896, directed that most of his vast fortune should be used to institute five munificent international prizes, for physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature and peace.

When a scientist receives a Nobel Prize, he must feel much like a mountaineer who has reached the peak of Everest. He also has the additional delight of suddenly finding himself in pocket to the tune of some tens of thousands of dollars. But the prestige of being a Nobel Prize Winner is far greater than the mere cash reward.

The Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine is judged by the Caroline Medical Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, and the physics and chemistry ones by the Swedish Academy of Science. The literature award is determined by the Swedish Academy; a committee selected by the Norwegian Parliament chooses the recipient of the peace prize.

Although other awards are older or richer, the Nobel is, by common consent, the greatest prize. How are the winners chosen? Nobel decided that himself. Invitations to nominate candidates are sent out in the fall of each year to previous prize winners, and to the principal universities and institutes in some 15 countries. Six months later, when the nominations are in, sifting committees get down to business and produce a short list from which the winners are picked.

Behind this procedure, clear cut as it may seem, a lot of lobbying goes on. It has not been unknown for representatives from embassies in Sweden to let it be known, discreetly, in most cases, that their government would be very appreciative if the prize (especially for literature or peace) went to one of their citizens. It has even been known for scientists to recommend themselves, or their friends.

It is not difficult for Nobel judges to ignore these pressures, but Alfred Nobel imposed an almost impossible task on them. He stipulated that his prizes should go to "those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit to mankind."

Even leaving aside the fact that it takes some 15 months to sort out the nominations, there is the difficulty in defining Nobel's demands.

He decreed that the physics prize winner was to be "the person who shall have made the most important discovery or invention;" the winner of the chemistry award had to have made "the most important discovery or improvement." while the person getting the award for physiology or medicine was to be the one making "the most important discovery."

Nobel did not trouble to define such words as "discovery," "improvement" and "invention," nor did he elaborate on "the greatest benefit to mankind." Nor did he think much about his stipulation that his awards should go for discoveries made "during the preceding year." As everyone knows, it often takes many years before the full significance of any discovery is apparent. (Prof. Ragnar Granit, one of this year's winners of the Prize for Physiology or Medicine, makes no secret of the fact that his award-earning work was done between 1929 and 1947.)

Alfred Nobel was an individualist; he lived long before there were big teams of scientists working on single projects. Nobel's Peace Prizes have already been awarded to institutions, such as the International Red Cross, the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, and the American and British Quaker organizations. The time may well come when entire research groups will be considered eligible for a prize.

Nobel was a quirky, strange and complex man. He was sickly for most of his youth. He never married. He was deeply attached to his mother but resented his formidable father who was a brilliant, though spasmodic, inventor. He had few close friends, no real home, and once said that his biography should begin: "Alfred Nobel's miserable existence should have been terminated at birth by a humane doctor as he drew his first bawling breath."

Despite these handicaps, or maybe because of them, Nobel managed to combine his delight as a research chemist and inventor with the role of tycoon. His biggest and most profitable successes were a percussion cap for detonating nitroglycerine, blasting gelatin, smokeless powder and dynamite.

Nobel lived for his inventions. There was the whisper of a romance with an Austrian girl named Sofie Hess, who claimed to be his common-law wife, but she did not dare to dispute his will.

When he died, he left a large part of his fortune—at least $9 million—to establish the prizes that now bear his name. His relatives, children of his brothers, first thought of opposing his will, but later cried off because Alfred Nobel was obviously of sound mind, even though his will was a simple handwritten document.

It is probable that the one thing that determined Nobel to put his ideals into practice was reading, in 1888, his own obituary in a French newspaper. (It was one of his brothers who had died). He saw himself described as the "dynamite king and merchant of death."

This year, as they have been since the start of this century, the Nobel Prizes will be presented on Dec. 10—the anniversary of his death.

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