

Constructing Humphry Davy's Biographical Image

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This paper, which is also a contribution to the somewhat understudied area of the history of biography, discusses a couple of short accounts of Humphry Davy's life and the three major biographies published in the years following his death. These were an "anti-biography" by John Ayrton Paris (1831) and two admiring biographies by Davy's younger brother John Davy (1836, 1858). By examining the processes surrounding their writing and publication, this study illustrates how Davy's biographical reputation was constructed, how his surviving manuscripts and related documents came to be collected and preserved and so help us understand the effects they continue to exert on Davy scholarship.

Introduction

The career trajectory of Humphry Davy (1778-1829) from provincial obscurity to international fame is well known. He moved from serving as an apprentice apothecary in the far west of England to working at the Medical Pneumatic Institution in Bristol where he discovered the astonishing physiological properties of nitrous oxide, to becoming the leading metropolitan scientific figure during the opening decades of the nineteenth century, first as a chemistry professor at the Royal Institution and later as a Secretary and, finally, President of the Royal Society of London.

Our very familiarity with this biographical story seems to prevent us from perceiving the extraordinary nature of his trajectory. We feel that, somehow, he naturally followed this path to fame with a certain inevitability. This story of Davy's rise comes directly from the biographies published shortly after his death, by John Ayrton Paris (1785-1856) and by

Davy's younger brother John Davy (1790-1868) who also, nearly thirty years after Davy's death, edited an additional biographical volume publishing predominately manuscript letters.¹ This paper will discuss, in turn, the construction and publication of each of these texts locating them within the careers and lives of the authors, their interactions with each other and also with Davy's widow, Jane Davy (1780-1855).²

All those concerned with constructing these texts spent considerable effort in obtaining accounts of his very early years before he left Penzance for Bristol just before he turned twenty. This exercise in collecting documents and anecdotes was undertaken on the basis that without understanding that departure, none of the rest of his career trajectory could have occurred. Although Jan Golinski has recently illustrated how Davy self-constructed his image from his time in Bristol onwards to meet various cultural and social expectations, he did not discuss the contingencies of Davy's early years which allowed him that opportunity, devoting only a couple of pages to Davy's early life.³ Nor did Golinski address the issue of how the conventional image of Davy came to be constructed, even though it continues to exert considerable influence both inside and outside the history of science⁴ – which may perhaps account for a review the book received by a retired chemist, who, doubtless brought up on familiar tropes, found it sketchy and not the full biography that he clearly expected.⁵

¹ John Ayrton Paris, *The Life of Sir Humphry Davy, Bart.* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1831). This was a quarto volume published in January 1831. A two-volume octavo edition, with the same title, was issued in March 1831. Though not denoted in the imprint as a second edition, it did have some additional material and was sometimes referred to in correspondence and adverts as a second edition. In this essay specific references are to the two-volume text. John Davy, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Humphry Davy, Bart.* 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1836). *Fragmentary Remains, Literary and Scientific of Sir Humphry Davy, Bart.* ed. John Davy (London: Churchill, 1858).

² Due to the number of different members of the Davy family discussed in this essay all, aside from Humphry, will be referred to using their forename.

³ Jan Golinski, *The Experimental Self: Humphry Davy and the Making of a Man of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 20-21.

⁴ For example, David Knight, *Humphry Davy: Science and Power* (Oxford: Blackwell / Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992/1996) and June Z. Fullmer, *Young Humphry Davy: The Making of an Experimental Chemist* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2000) both rely on material published in the early biographies.

⁵ Richard Joyner, review of Golinski, *Experimental Self*, *Times Higher Education*, 5 May 2016, 49.

What has not been sufficiently appreciated is the limited number of book length biographies of scientific figures published during the first half of the nineteenth century. For instance, the prominent natural philosopher Henry Cavendish (1731-1810) did not receive a biography until 1851, over forty years after his death.⁶ Davy's slightly older and equally significant contemporaries, Thomas Young (1773-1829) and William Hyde Wollaston (1766-1828), who all died within six months of each other, a coincidence used to some extent during the Decline of Science debate of the early 1830s,⁷ did not receive full-scale biographies until 1855 and 2015 respectively.⁸ The increasing number of biographies that began to be published in the 1850s, exemplified by the writings of Samuel Smiles (1812-1904),⁹ doubtless accounts for Cavendish and Young receiving biographies then. Wollaston was evidently forgotten, with the result that in so many critical areas of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century science, there is hardly any historical understanding or appreciation of his importance.¹⁰ What needs to be explained is not the absence of biographies in the early nineteenth century, which would be the expectation, but why Davy received two within seven years of his death and another one twenty-nine years afterwards.

Given the enormous number of biographies published since the mid-nineteenth century and their impact as one of the most popular of forms of historical writing, it does seem strange that the genre's development has received little historical attention. This is all the more surprising, at least so far as scientific figures are concerned, given the recent growth in the study of other commemorative practices in science, such as portraiture, public statues, plaques, lectures, exhibitions, meetings and dinners.¹¹ Mostly these studies link the

⁶ George Wilson, *The Life of the Hon^{ble} Henry Cavendish* (London: The Cavendish Society, 1851).

⁷ For example, in [David Brewster], "Observations on a Pamphlet, entitled, 'On the Alleged Decline of Science in England'. By a Foreigner [Gerard Moll]," *Edinburgh Journal of Science* 5 (1831): 334-58.

⁸ George Peacock, *Life of Thomas Young* (London: John Murray, 1855); Melvyn C. Usselman, *Pure Intelligence: The Life of William Hyde Wollaston* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁹ John Hunter, *The Spirit of Self-Help: A Life of Samuel Smiles* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2017).

¹⁰ Not that having a life and letters necessarily means the subject will receive appropriate historical attention, as my student Paul Ranford has pointed out to me in relation to his work on George Gabriel Stokes (1819-1903).

¹¹ Representative, but by no means exhaustive, studies would include Geoffrey Cantor, "The Scientist as Hero: Public Images of Michael Faraday," in *Telling Lives in Science: Essays on Scientific Biography*, ed. Michael Shortland and Richard Yeo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 171-93; Ludmilla Jordanova, "Presidential Address: Remembrance of Science Past," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 33 (2000):

commemoration of individuals to prevailing social, cultural and political needs and trends, including the need for collective and individual identity. For example, Golinski used portraits as evidence to support his argument about Davy's self-construction, while Christine MacLeod has written about his statue in Penzance.¹² Much more remains to be said about non-print forms of commemorating Davy, but that is outside the scope of this essay.

The studies of biography that do exist generally deal with literary figures as conventionally understood.¹³ There has been very little discussion of biographies of scientific practitioners, a point noted more than fifty years ago by June Fullmer and more recently by David Amigoni, who made a start to address the lacuna.¹⁴ There is a (limited) bibliography of scientific biographies¹⁵ and a couple of volumes of collected essays which discuss the biographies of various scientific figures,¹⁶ but few that explore why and how such texts were written and in such large numbers since the 1850s. The major exception here is Rebekah Higgitt's study of the biographies of Isaac Newton (1642-1727) published in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. She historically roots those biographies in arguments, such as the Decline of Science, that came, eventually, to define what constituted

387-406; Patricia Fara, "Isaac Newton Lived Here: Sites of Memory and Scientific Heritage," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 33(2000): 407-26; G.M. Prescott, "Forging Identity: The Royal Institution's Visual Collections" in *'The Common Purposes of Life': Science and society at the Royal Institution of Great Britain*, ed. Frank A.J.L. James (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 59-96; Janet Browne, "Presidential Address: Commemorating Darwin," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 38 (2005): 251-74; Christine MacLeod and Jennifer Tann, "From Engineer to Scientist: Reinventing Invention in the Watt and Faraday Centenaries, 1919-31," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 40 (2007): 389-41; Frank A.J.L. James, "Presidential Address: The Janus Face of Modernity: Michael Faraday in the Twentieth Century," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 41 (2008): 477-516.

¹² Golinski, *The Experimental Self*. Christine MacLeod, *Heroes of Invention: Technology, Liberalism and British Identity, 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 309-12.

¹³ For example, Richard D. Altick, *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America* (New York: Knopf, 1966) and Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ June Z. Fullmer, "Davy's Biographers: Notes on Scientific Biography," *Science* 155 (1967): 285-91; David Amigoni, "Writing the Scientist: Biography and Autobiography," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century British Literature and Science*, ed. John Holmes and Sharon Ruston (London: Routledge, 2017), 128-140.

¹⁵ Leslie Howsam, *Scientists Since 1660: A Bibliography of Biographies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997).

¹⁶ *Telling Lives and The History and Poetics of Scientific Biography*, ed. Thomas Söderqvist (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

science in Britain, though not necessarily elsewhere.¹⁷ Although biographies say as much about their authors as their subject, nevertheless by examining how and why Davy's biographical image came to be constructed in the years immediately after his death, this essay provides evidence suggesting, in general, that the construction of biographies is subject to specific historical contingencies and human agency.

Jane Davy

Davy's widow, Jane Davy, began the biographical process just over a month after his death in Geneva on 29 May 1829, when she set about collecting materials for her husband's biography, initially for the *éloge* to be delivered by Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) to the *Académie Royale* des Sciences in Paris. In November 1819 Davy had been elected one of the eight foreign associates of the *Académie*, the supreme accolade for a European man of science. That Jane Davy chose to concentrate on the *Académie* rather than the Royal Society of London, of which Davy had been President between 1820 and 1827, suggests both the influence of her sense of European identity as well as some ill will on her part towards the Society due to the disasters of Davy's Presidency. These included his failure to increase the number of scientific Fellows and his alienation of the navy faction within the Society owing to the spectacular failure of his method of electro-chemically protecting the copper bottoms of ships.¹⁸ Jane Davy's concentration on providing biographical information for the *Académie* is ironic since Davy seems to have initiated the presentation of biographical accounts of recently deceased Fellows, some of which he published in his collected

¹⁷ Rebekah Higgitt, *Recreating Newton: Newtonian Biography and the Making of Nineteenth-Century History of Science* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007).

¹⁸ David Philip Miller, "Between Hostile Camps: Sir Humphry Davy's Presidency of the Royal Society of London 1820-1827," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 16 (1983): 1-47; Tim Fulford, "The Role of Patronage in Early Nineteenth-Century Science, as Evidenced in Letters from Humphry Davy to Joseph Banks," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, forthcoming; Frank A.J.L. James, "Davy in the Dockyard: Humphry Davy, the Royal Society and the Electro-Chemical Protection of the Copper Sheeting of His Majesty's Ships in the Mid 1820s," *Physis* 29 (1992), 205-25. See also Sharon Ruston, "Humphry Davy: Analogy, Priority, and the 'true philosopher'," *Ambix* 66 (2019): \$\$.

addresses to the Royal Society of London.¹⁹ It was left to Davy's early patron and successor as President, Davies Gilbert (Giddy until December 1817, 1767-1839), MP for Bodmin, to eulogise Davy to the Society.²⁰

One of the benefits of dying aged fifty, especially if originating from an obscure background, is that a reasonable number of relations, friends and other acquaintances should still be living who can provide recollections of your youth, which could otherwise have so easily gone unreported. So Jane Davy first wrote to two of Davy's sisters,²¹ one of whom, Katherine Davy (1781-1860), eventually produced five short recollections, though only one is dated.²² At least some memories from the other sister, Elizabeth Millett (1788-1830), are apparently contained in the letter that Jane Davy wrote to Cuvier's step daughter Sophie Duvancel (1789-1867) providing the information she had gathered for the *éloge*.²³ Jane Davy also wrote to Davy's early friends in Penzance including Robert Dunkin (1761-1831) and Joseph Batten (1778-1837). She copied the former's reply to Duvancel in August,²⁴ but as Batten took a bit longer to respond she sent it to Paris where it remains in the archives of the *Académie*.²⁵ Despite all these efforts Cuvier did not make much use of this material in his *éloge* delivered on 26 July 1830,²⁶ which does not compare well with, say,

¹⁹ John Davy, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, 130. Humphry Davy, *Six Discourses Delivered before the Royal Society at their Anniversary Meetings, on the Award of the Royal and Copley Medals; Preceded by an Address to the Society on the Progress and Prospects of Science* (London: John Murray, 1827).

²⁰ The text of this address, delivered on 30 November 1829, is in *Philosophical Magazine* 3 (1830): 33-46.

²¹ Jane Davy to Katherine Davy, 5 July 1829 and Jane Davy to Elizabeth Millett, ?5 July 1829, *The Collected Letters of Sir Humphry Davy*, ed. Tim Fulford and Sharon Ruston, advisory ed. Jan Golinski, Frank A.J.L. James and David Knight, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), vol. 4, letters 1218 and 1220. Hereafter cited as Davy, *Collected Letters* followed by volume and letter number.

²² These are Royal Institution (hereafter RI) MS HD/26/D/71 (undated), /75 (4 January 1831, watermark 1828), /79 (watermark 1828), /80 (watermark 1825 and evidently addressed to John Davy) and /81 (watermark 1825). The author is identified in /75, 1.

²³ Jane Davy to Sophie Duvancel, 3 March 1830, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1241.

²⁴ Jane Davy to Sophie Duvancel, 11 August 1829, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1222.

²⁵ Joseph Batten to Jane Davy, 7 October 1829, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1223.

²⁶ Georges Cuvier, "Éloge de Sir Humphry Davy," *Mémoires de l'Académie Royale des Sciences* 12 (1833): i-xxxvii

the (later) *éloge* of the midlands engineer and chemist James Watt Sr. (1736-1819) by François Arago (1786-1853).²⁷

After this initial burst of collecting activity, Jane Davy's attitude towards the biographies and biographers of her husband becomes rather hard to fathom. As we shall see she provided only the most limited co-operation and information to both Paris and John Davy in their projects. Although she wished to "enlarge" Davy's fame as she told John Davy in an 1837 letter, not collaborating in one of the major ways to attain this aim seems strange.²⁸ Perhaps such reluctance was another reflection of the state of their marriage. From early 1816 until mid-1824 no letters between them have survived, while in 1822 there was discussion about a formal deed of separation, but nothing seems to have come of that, though by then, according to Davy's solicitor, they had agreed to "*live separate*."²⁹ So perhaps her limited co-operation was caused by concern about what might be found in Davy's correspondence or what his biographers would say about their relationship. Or, perhaps, she contemplated writing her own biography which she hinted at in the same letter, suggesting she might publish Davy's letters to her, doubtlessly suitably edited, and also those manuscript poems of his that she retained. Nothing came of this suggestion.

John Ayrton Paris

The first significant piece on Davy published in England was written by the physician John Ayrton Paris. On 9 June 1829 *The Times* reported Davy's death with a longer report, including a description of the funeral, the following day.³⁰ Less than a month afterwards Paris began a six-part account of Davy's life published in *The Spectator*.³¹ Born in Cambridge,

²⁷ D.F.J. Arago, "Éloge Historique de James Watt," *Mémoires de l'Académie Royale des Sciences* 17 (1840): lxi-clxxxviii. Watt was elected a foreign associate in October 1814. His death in 1819 created the vacancy to which Davy was elected.

²⁸ Jane Davy to John Davy, 18 March 1837, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1257.

²⁹ Daniel Moore to Charles Babbage, 23 August 1822, BL add MS 37182, ff.437-8. See also Jan Golinski, "'The Fitness of Their Union': Travel and Health in the Letters of Humphry and Jane Davy," *Ambix* 66 (2019): \$\$.

³⁰ *The Times*, 9 June 1829, 2d and 10 June 1829, 2d.

³¹ [John Ayrton Paris], "A Sketch of the Life and Labours of the Late Sir Humphry Davy," *The Spectator*, 27 June 1829, 408-9, 4 July 1829, 423-4, 18 July 1829, 458-9, 25 July 1829, 476-7, 22 August 1829, 539-41, 7 November

Paris studied medicine at the University there (MB 1808; MD 1813), where he also attended the chemistry lectures of William Farish (1759-1837) and those of Edward Clarke (1769-1822) on mineralogy.³² Then followed some time at Edinburgh University, attending the chemical lectures of Thomas Hope (1766-1844) and those on natural philosophy by John Playfair (1748-1819). Moving to London, Paris continued pursuing these non-medical interests by, for example, attending Davy's lectures on geology at the Royal Institution.³³

Paris somehow came to the attention of William Maton (1774-1835) a physician at Westminster Hospital. Aside from medicine, both men were interested in mineralogy and geology. In 1794 and 1796 Maton had toured the south-west and the resulting publication included the first attempt at a geological map of part of England.³⁴ On his resignation from Westminster Hospital in 1809, Maton successfully recommended Paris to take his place, enabling him to marry at the end of the year. In May 1813 the physician to the Penzance dispensary John Bingham Borlase (1753-1813), under whom Davy had served his curtailed medical apprenticeship between 1795 and 1798, died. Maton, who on his tours of the south-west had become acquainted with several leading Cornish families, was asked, following Borlase's death, to suggest a suitable replacement. Maton recommended Paris who, after some hesitation, accepted and moved to Penzance in September 1813.

Aside from practising medicine, and beginning a family,³⁵ Paris concerned himself with several areas of the life of the town and surrounding area. Within a year of arriving he became involved in the subscription project to build public baths in Penzance linked with the Dispensary.³⁶ In his final year in Cornwall, he published a pamphlet on a way to prevent

1829, 715-17. With some corrections and additions this formed the basis of [John Ayrton Paris], "Sir Humphry Davy," *The Annual Biography and Obituary* 14 (1830): 39-85.

³² Information on Paris in this and the following paragraphs is drawn, unless otherwise noted, from William Munk, *A Memoir of the Life and Writings of John Ayrton Paris* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1857).

³³ Paris, *Life*, vol. 1, 306 described seeing Davy's demonstration in the lecture theatre of an artificial volcano.

³⁴ J.D. Mather, "William George Maton (1774-1840) and his Mineralogical Map of the Western Counties of England," *Geoscience in South-West England* 13 (2013): 159-64.

³⁵ Paris's first two daughters were baptised in Penzance in September and October 1814.

³⁶ Mortgage dated 23 February 1816, Cornwall Record Office (hereafter CRO) CF/1/2128 and a thousand-year lease dated 14 June 1814, CRO CF/1/2127/1 and /2.

gunpowder exploding prematurely in tin and copper mines.³⁷ Also keen to maintain what he regarded as medical standards, Paris refused to acknowledge that the medical practitioner Henry Penneck (1761-1834) was a physician with an MD, an insult that resulted in Penneck physically attacking Paris in his own home; Penneck was convicted at the Cornwall Assizes, though the sentence is not recorded.³⁸ Paris later satirised him in his *Philosophy in Sport made Science in Earnest*, first published in 1827, a popular text that reached its ninth edition in 1861.³⁹ Referring to Penneck as “Dr Doseall,” Paris showed a jeering streak in his writings about those whom he did not like, an entertaining tendency that helped sell books, earn him an income, but not make friends.

During his time in Penzance, Paris wrote a superior guidebook to the area.⁴⁰ As well as covering the topography, antiquities, history, mining and industry, Paris placed a strong emphasis on mineralogy including a section on the mineral collections that had been made by various prominent individuals.⁴¹ To those collections he added that of the Cornwall Geological Society, its “cabinet of Minerals, although in its infancy, possesses the most complete series of rock specimens in the County.”⁴² This Society, founded at a meeting held on 11 February 1814, became Royal the following October when it received the patronage of the Duke of Cornwall, that is the Prince Regent, later George IV (1762-1830).⁴³ If Paris’s account is to be believed he was the moving force behind the Society’s formation; he certainly served as its first secretary, while Giddy served as President.⁴⁴ As Secretary Paris

³⁷ John Ayrton Paris, *On the Accidents which Occur in the Mines of Cornwall in Consequence of the Premature Explosion of Gunpowder in Blasting Rocks, and on the Methods to be Adopted for Preventing it, by the Introduction of a Safety Bar, and an Instrument Termed the Shifting Cartridge* (Penzance: T. Vigurs, [1817]).

³⁸ “King versus Penneck,” *The Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 13 April 1816, 4b-c.

³⁹ [John Ayrton Paris], *Philosophy in Sport made Science in Earnest; being an Attempt to Illustrate the First Principles of Natural Philosophy by the Aid of the Popular Toys and Sports*, 3 vols. (London: Longman, 1827).

⁴⁰ [John Ayrton Paris], *A Guide to the Mount's Bay, and the Land's End; being a Sketch of the Topography, Natural History, Agriculture, Fisheries, Antiquities, Mineralogy, and Geology of Western Cornwall* (Penzance: T. Vigurs, 1816).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴³ Denise Anne Crook, “The Early History of the Royal Geological Society of Cornwall: 1814-1850” (PhD thesis, Open University, 1990), 37.

⁴⁴ [Paris], *Guide*, 12; see Crook, “Early History” for a more contextual account.

formed close friendships with a number of Cornish figures, especially William Gregor (1761-1817) whose memoir was the last paper that Paris read before the Society before returning to London late that year.⁴⁵ On his departure from Penzance he received a service of plate, the subscriptions for which came from many leading West Cornish families.⁴⁶

In London he lived in Dover Street where he developed a lucrative medical practice; he commented that during his first month there he had already received more fees than he would have done in Penzance.⁴⁷ He quickly joined the Royal Institution (located in the next street to the east) with which he became very familiar, later serving as a Manager. In 1823 he was present when the laboratory assistant, Michael Faraday (1791-1867), liquified a gas, chlorine, for the first time.⁴⁸ Continuing his biographical studies, Paris following the death of the long-time Secretary of the Board of Agriculture, Arthur Young (1741-1820) quickly wrote a substantial (31 page) memoir. Young died on 20 April 1820 and Paris published the memoir the following July in the *Quarterly Journal of Science*, which had close connections with the Royal Institution.⁴⁹

The following year Paris was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of London. One of his nominators was Davy's brother, John Davy,⁵⁰ which suggests that Paris was then on reasonable terms with the Davys (Davy did not sign his nomination certificate owing to his Presidency). Paris saw at close quarters the issues that surrounded Davy's Presidency, dining with him and attending (according to Paris) the slightly disorganised soirées hosted in his London home.⁵¹ Paris in his biography wondered what purpose the Society now served,

⁴⁵ John Ayrton Paris, *A Memoir of the Life and Scientific Labours of the Late William Gregor* (London: William Phillips, 1818).

⁴⁶ Listed in John Ayrton Paris to Henry Boase, late October 1817, British Library (hereafter BL) add MS 29281, f.123-4.

⁴⁷ John Ayrton Paris to Henry Boase, 7 December 1817, BL add MS 29281, f.127-8.

⁴⁸ Michael Faraday to John Ayrton Paris, 6 March 1823 in *The Correspondence of Michael Faraday*, ed. Frank A.J.L. James, 6 vols. (London: Institution of Electrical Engineers / Engineering and Technology, 1991-2012), vol. 1, letter 188.

⁴⁹ John Ayrton Paris, "A Biographical Memoir of Arthur Young," *Quarterly Journal of Science* 9 (1820): 279-309.

⁵⁰ Royal Society of London MS EC/1821/26.

⁵¹ Paris, *Life*, vol. 2, 209 and 182-3 respectively.

concluding that it should be an international centre for scientific communication.⁵² The Society had a significant aristocratic component and Paris suggested that Davy's "inordinate admiration of hereditary rank, ... the cardinal deformity of ... [his] character" contributed to his ineffectiveness as President.⁵³ Writing in 1831, Paris surely intended for this to resonate with the Decline of Science debate, but there seems to be no evidence that it did.

By the time of Davy's death, Paris possessed significant experience in quickly writing biographical memoirs of people he had known. He claimed he wrote *The Spectator* articles because its editor, Robert Rintoul (1787-1858), showed him in manuscript an account of Davy's life which "contained some of the most vituperative passages I ever read."⁵⁴ The offending document was destroyed on condition that he produced something instead. Because he wrote so soon after Davy's death, Paris's accounts are largely about Davy's scientific papers in *Philosophical Transactions* and are unexceptionable. The more biographical parts show all the traces of haste or lack of knowledge: for instance, Davy's year of birth and to whom he was apprenticed were given incorrectly.⁵⁵ Both errors suggest that Paris had not learnt much about Davy while working in Penzance, but there would have been no pressing need for him to have then made any enquiries. He had, however, in the second edition of his guide to Mount's Bay referenced the significance of Penzance as Davy's birthplace.⁵⁶

The jeering tone that Paris later used so devastatingly was already present in these *Spectator* pieces. For example, referring to Davy's time at the Royal Institution:

Behold him in the theatre of the Royal Institution! surrounded by an aristocracy of intellect, as well as of rank, by the flowers of genius, the élite of fashion and the beauty of England;- whose very respirations were suspended

⁵² Paris, *Life*, vol. 2, 179.

⁵³ Paris, *Life*, vol. 2, 182.

⁵⁴ John Ayrton Paris to Davies Gilbert, 12 October 1829, sold at Bonhams, 15 November 2017, Lot 93. See also Paris, *Life*, vol. 1, x.

⁵⁵ [Paris], "Sketch," 408.

⁵⁶ [John Ayrton Paris], *A Guide to the Mount's Bay, and the Land's End; being a Sketch of the Topography, Natural History, Agriculture, Fisheries, Antiquities, Mineralogy, and Geology of Western Cornwall*, 2nd ed. (London: W. Phillips, 1824), 40.

in their eagerness to catch his novel and satisfactory elucidations of the mysteries of Nature! We admit that his vanity was excited by such extraordinary demonstrations of devotion; that he lost that simplicity which constituted the charm of his character, and assumed the garb and airs of a man of fashion⁵⁷

Despite *The Spectator* articles' anonymity, their author had been identified and a number of publishers invited Paris to write a substantial biography of Davy.⁵⁸ By the end of September he was negotiating with Colburn and Bentley, but with the proviso that if Jane Davy objected strongly to the idea of a biography he would withdraw.⁵⁹ A month later she returned to England⁶⁰ and, according to Paris,

On her arrival in London, in consequence of a letter she had addressed to Mr. Murray, I requested an interview with her ladyship, from whom I received not only an unqualified permission to become the biographer of her illustrious husband, but also the several documents which are published with acknowledgement in these memoirs.⁶¹

This does not explain why at the end of the final *Spectator* article, published on 7 November, he hinted, despite his discussions with Colburn and Bentley, that the publisher John Murray already had a biography in hand.⁶² But it may suggest that Jane Davy had formed a plan to commission a biography. A month or so later she told a correspondent that Paris's *Spectator* articles had covered Davy's life "tolerably correctly" adding "A life is I believe already undertaken."⁶³ From just before Christmas for a period of seven weeks Jane

⁵⁷ [Paris], "Sketch," 423.

⁵⁸ John Ayrton Paris to Davies Gilbert, 12 October 1829, sold at Bonhams, 15 November 2017, Lot 93.

⁵⁹ John Ayrton Paris to Richard Bentley, 30 September 1829, BL add MS 46636, ff.13-14 (copy).

⁶⁰ Jane Davy to John James Tobin, 10 November 1829, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1231.

⁶¹ Paris, *Life*, vol. 1, x-xi.

⁶² [Paris], "Sketch," 717.

⁶³ Jane Davy to Hendrik Carel van der Boon Mesch, 9 December 1829, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1234.

Davy stayed with the Spencers at Althorp⁶⁴ which meant that Paris had only limited contact with her. She evidently had no strong objection to his writing a biography, but his claim, made when asking others for information on Davy, that he had “the sanction and ... the assistance of Lady Davy” seems somewhat exaggerated.⁶⁵ His continuing negotiations with Colburn and Bentley did not conclude until May 1830 when they agreed that he would write Davy’s biography for which he would receive the substantial sum of £1000 for the copyright to be paid in three instalments in the twelve months following the date of publication.⁶⁶

A few days after her return to England, Davy’s will was proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury at under £30,000.⁶⁷ The will, of which Jane Davy was the sole executrix, made provision for some small legacies for friends, larger legacies for his brother and sisters, with the residue of around £20,000 going to his widow.⁶⁸ Crucially he bequeathed his “brother my Chemical Books and Chemical MSS” and left “the copyright of Salmonia my Dialogues and any other of my works which my friends may think it proper to republish to my brother John Davy M.D. to be published in the manner he may think most fit and proper.”⁶⁹ Jane Davy was particularly upset about this provision especially regarding the Dialogues which later became *Consolations in Travel* as she had looked after the manuscript.⁷⁰ It thus seems a reasonable assumption that all these papers were physically kept in the Davys’ Park Street house. Certainly, the Royal Institution had to ask Jane Davy, as executrix, to return its folio laboratory notebooks which “had several years ago been taken away by Sir H Davy” but were certainly not his property.⁷¹

⁶⁴ Jane Davy to Francis Chantrey, 13 February 1830, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1239.

⁶⁵ John Ayrton Paris to James Watt Jr., 6 December 1829, Library of Birmingham (hereafter LoB) MS 3219/6/4/1.

⁶⁶ John Ayrton Paris to Colburn and Bentley, 22 May 1830, BL add MS 46636, f.9 (copy). In Richard Bentley to John Ayrton Paris, undated but probably second half of January 1831, BL add MS 46639, 6 (copy), Bentley refused to modify the terms of payment which Paris had evidently requested. (NB the pound (£) was divided into twenty shillings (s). A guinea was twenty-one shillings or one pound, one shilling).

⁶⁷ “Will of the Late Sir H. Davy, Bart.,” *The Times*, 4 December 1829, 2e.

⁶⁸ Jane Davy to Jules-Paul-Benjamin Delessert, 29 March 1830, Morrab Library MS DAV/4a (copy).

⁶⁹ The text of Davy’s will is given in Paris, *Life*, vol. 2, 459-63; the quotations are on 459 and 462 respectively.

⁷⁰ Jane Davy to Christian VIII, Prince of Denmark, 29 April 1830, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1243.

⁷¹ These are now RI MS HD/6 and 7. See RI MS MM, 2 October 1829, vol. 7, 276; 7 December 1829, vol. 7, 285.

Paris's approach to writing the biography was to contact many of Davy's friends and acquaintances to obtain from them whatever documents and recollections they might have and in this he was diligent. He had already asked Gilbert, whom he clearly knew well from his time in Penzance, to retain the papers he possessed relating to Davy.⁷² In the end Paris published fourteen letters from Davy to Giddy/Gilbert (apart from one, the originals have not been traced). In the preface Paris singled out Gilbert for profuse thanks for his "powerful assistance."⁷³ No one else received such thanks including the poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) who in Bristol had formed a close friendship with Davy; he gave Paris several anecdotes but no letters.⁷⁴ Thomas Hope provided an account of the role he played in Davy appointment to the Royal Institution.⁷⁵ The former Brentford tanner, Samuel Purkis (1755-1832), supplied an extended description of his and Davy's walking tour through Wales in August and September 1802.⁷⁶ Faraday secured for Paris the permission of the Royal Institution to read Davy's manuscripts and to permit an artist to draw his original miners' safety lamps.⁷⁷ These latter, if made, were not published, but Paris did quote from the (returned) Royal Institution laboratory notebook (which he called the Register) where Davy recorded his discovery of potassium in October 1807.⁷⁸ Faraday also provided Paris with an account of his early interactions with Davy, lending him the first letter Davy had sent him, which Paris returned.⁷⁹ Some of Davy's acquaintances exercised caution before helping Paris. Davy's friend from his Bristol days, the former tanner Tom Poole (1766-1837) asked John Davy about whether he should give Paris the letters that Davy had written to him.⁸⁰ And, according to Poole's recollection,

⁷² John Ayrton Paris to Davies Gilbert, 12 October 1829, sold at Bonhams, 15 November 2017, Lot 93.

⁷³ Paris, *Life*, vol. 1, xii.

⁷⁴ Paris, *Life*, vol. 1, 61, 74-5.

⁷⁵ Paris, *Life*, vol. 1, 114-15.

⁷⁶ Paris, *Life*, vol. 1, 152-6.

⁷⁷ RI MS MM, 21 December 1829, vol. 7, 286-7.

⁷⁸ RI MS HD/6, 61; Paris, *Life*, vol. 1, 274-7.

⁷⁹ Michael Faraday to John Ayrton Paris, 23 December 1829, Faraday, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, letter 419; Humphry Davy to Michael Faraday, 24 December 1812, *ibid.*, letter 17 and Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, letter 358.

⁸⁰ Thomas Poole to John Davy, 27 January 1830, RI MS HD/26/D/52.

Gilbert wrote to him providing reassurance about the propriety of giving Paris the letters⁸¹ which he did and twenty-seven were published; the vast majority of the originals have disappeared.

Concerns about Paris's project were shared by Robert Gray, Bishop of Bristol (1762-1834). Gray in the summer of 1815, when Rector of Bishopwearmouth, had played a key role in securing Davy's services to investigate how to light coal mines safely without causing explosions. By December 1815 Davy had invented the gauze miners' safety lamp, but his claims to originality and indeed to effectiveness were challenged by the Newcastle mining engineer George Stephenson (1781-1848). There then followed an unedifying dispute between them and their supporters during 1816 and 1817.⁸² Then, as now, Davy's invention of a form of miners' safety lamp was the piece of work for which he became, and remains, most renowned. Such was Paris's interest in the lamp and the ensuing controversy that he devoted just over a hundred pages to the subject, by far the longest chapter in his *Life*. He thus spent considerable effort in collecting material from those in the North-East who had been involved in the episode.

In mid-1830 following Paris's approach, Gray asked Jane Davy about the propriety of helping him. She responded that "Paris has had my good will; & one document of infant life & youthful energies I allowed him to copy: but I have furnished no matter, nor given any letters." Scarcely a ringing endorsement of Paris's project, it also flatly contradicted the claims he made, both in correspondence and in print, that he had her "unqualified" support and had provided significant access to documentation. Nevertheless, Jane Davy had no objection to Gray providing letters.⁸³ He provided not only Davy's letters to him, but also letters from the mining engineer John Buddle (1773-1843), a strong supporter of Davy. Of these letters Paris published eight from Davy (of which the original manuscripts of two have

⁸¹ Thomas Poole to John Davy, 31 March 1831, RI MS HD/26/D/53.

⁸² Frank A.J.L. James, "How Big is a Hole?: The Problems of the Practical Application of Science in the Invention of the Miners' Safety Lamp by Humphry Davy and George Stephenson in Late Regency England," *Transactions of the Newcomen Society* 75 (2005): 175-227; Sharon Ruston, "Humphry Davy in 1816: Letters and the Lamp," *Wordsworth Circle* 48 (2017): 6-16; Geoffrey Cantor, "Humphry Davy: A Study in Narcissism?," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 72 (2018): 217-37.

⁸³ Jane Davy to Robert Gray, June/July 1830, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1244. The document Jane Davy mentioned was probably one of Katherine Davy's recollections.

been located) and six from Buddle (of which none of the originals have been found). It was as well that Paris published them as otherwise they would probably have been destroyed when Gray's palace was burnt down during the Reform Act riots of 1831.

Paris also contacted the historian Cuthbert Sharp (1781-1849), whom he described as a friend, about the lamp.⁸⁴ Paris asked Sharp to find out all that he could about the events, quoting a letter from Davy (not traced) referring to the "rascally proceedings of the Brandlings"⁸⁵ – a mine owning family who strongly supported Stephenson's claims. Paris's interest was so strong he told Sharp that one day he had called four times (unsuccessfully) on Buddle when he was in London;⁸⁶ later they corresponded.⁸⁷ Sharp made enquiries of those involved including John Hodgson (1779-1845), Rector of Jarrow-with-Heworth, who replied with a letter saying he was not sure what Paris wanted to know, but provided a brief recollection of events, adding he was too busy (excavating Hadrian's Wall) to do anything further.⁸⁸ Sharp also secured three letters (all safely returned) from Davy to John George Lambton (Earl of Durham from 1833, 1792-1840) seeking, successfully, to secure support for his claims to the lamp. As a boy Lambton had been taught by Davy in Bristol and he may well have imbibed something of the radical political milieu in which Davy then moved. Though Davy had ostensibly moved publicly to a more conservative political position, this did not prevent him in 1816 from implying a shared radical Whig position with Lambton. Davy wrote:

I consider the renewal of my acquaintance with you a fortunate event, & I shall now witness with an additional pleasure your efforts in the cause of liberal & independent politics & your attacks upon corruption. It is only by bold measures & decided attacks upon the profligate consumers of the public

⁸⁴ Paris, *Life*, vol. 2, 112.

⁸⁵ John Ayrton Paris to Cuthbert Sharp, 22 June 1830, Lambton Park MS.

⁸⁶ John Ayrton Paris to Cuthbert Sharp, 22 June 1830, Lambton Park MS.

⁸⁷ John Buddle to John Ayrton Paris, August 1830, Paris, *Life*, vol. 2, 132-3.

⁸⁸ John Hodgson to Cuthbert Sharp, 7 July 1830, Lambton Park MS.

wealth that the country can be saved. – I wish the government may feel & know this in time.⁸⁹

In the same way that Paris had made no reference to politics in his chapter on Davy in Bristol, he silently omitted this paragraph from the text of the letter that he published.⁹⁰ In view of the general jeering tone of Paris's biography, this elision is particularly interesting since it suggests that Paris sought not to remind his readers of Davy's youthful association with radical politics and thus protect his reputation. Davy, like many others, either voluntarily or under the force of circumstance, distanced themselves from their earlier views and connections or concealed them altogether.⁹¹

About a year after Paris had started work on the biography *The Times*, near the start of October 1830, announced that it was "nearly ready."⁹² This seems a remarkable achievement bearing in mind the length of the text (nearly 900 octavo pages) and that nearly two thirds of that was Paris's own narrative (Table 1). However, the announcement in *The Times* was premature and in mid-November *The Age* reported that the volume would be published on St Andrew's day – the anniversary day of the Royal Society of London.⁹³ In early December *The Morning Post* reported that Paris had acquired a further eighty letters written by Davy (it is not clear what these were) and publication would be delayed for a few days.⁹⁴ All of which illustrates the strong media interest that the work engendered.

	Content pages	Narrative	Letters from Davy	Notebooks	Poems	Lectures	Published	Other
Paris, <i>Life</i> , v.1 & v.2, 880pp	1.0	63.9	13.0	0	2.1	0.5	13.9	5.5

⁸⁹ Humphry Davy to John George Lambton, 9 September 1816, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, letter 531.

⁹⁰ Paris, *Life*, vol. 2, 112-13.

⁹¹ Kenneth Johnston, *Unusual Suspects: Pitt's Reign of Alarm and the Lost Generation of the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁹² *The Times*, 8 October 1830, 4d.

⁹³ *The Age*, 14 November 1830, 362.

⁹⁴ *The Morning Post*, 9 December 1830, 2a. Thomas Poole to John Davy, 31 March 1831, RI MS HD/26/D/53 noted the repeated announcements.

Davy, <i>Memoirs</i> , v.1 & v.2, 926pp	0.5	38.5	9.7	21.0	4.0	13.2	11.9	1.2
Davy, <i>Collected Works</i> , v.1, 475pp	0.5	45.0	10.9	30.4	8.2	0.1	0.4	4.7
Davy, <i>Fragmentary Remains</i> , 330pp	0	25.4	38.4	5.7	3.6	0.8	1.2	24.9

Table 1. Percentage of pages devoted to different types of text in Davy's biographies.

On 7 January 1831, Colburn and Bentley released the single volume quarto edition of Paris's *Life* to booksellers, price three guineas,⁹⁵ a sum that one reviewer found outrageous.⁹⁶ The following day it received the opening, highly favourable, review in *The Literary Gazette* which continued over the following three issues, occupying about eighteen columns in all, but in the usual practice of such reviews included copious quotations.⁹⁷ However, the heavyweight *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly* reviews did not notice it, presumably because Paris was regarded as a popular author. On 18 March 1831, the publishers issued the two-volume octavo edition, price twenty-eight shillings, which contained some additional material.⁹⁸ New items included a letter from Coleridge to Purkis of 17 February 1803 and an expanded epigram of an imagined conversation between Davy and the chemical baryt.⁹⁹

John Davy

Paris's biography outraged Poole who wrote telling him so, copying the substance of his comments to John Davy. For example, Poole disputed Paris's claim that as Davy's "celebrity

⁹⁵ BL add MS 46668, f.2-3.

⁹⁶ *The Athenaeum*, 15 and 22 January 1831, 39-41 and 54-6 respectively on 39 and 56.

⁹⁷ *The Literary Gazette*, 8, 15, 22 and 29 January 1831, 17-18, 39-40, 52-4, 69-71 respectively.

⁹⁸ BL add MS 46668, f.34-5. This was noted, somewhat belatedly, in a single column in *The Literary Gazette*, 1 October 1831, 632-3.

⁹⁹ Paris, *Life*, vol. 1, 173-5 and 287 respectively. From the mineral baryte, Davy, in 1808, had isolated the chemical element barium.

increased, that he in some measure discarded his old Friends.” But Poole devoted most of the letter to explaining how he had come to agree to let Paris have the letters and hoping that John Davy would write his own biography.¹⁰⁰ The Professor of Chemistry at the Royal Dublin Society, Edmund Davy (1785-1857), who had worked for his cousin Humphry at the Royal Institution, was equally scathing: “There is a hollowness in his [Paris’s] professions, and a want of sincerity throughout the work.”¹⁰¹ Walter Scott (1771-1832), who in 1805 had climbed Helvellyn with Davy and William Wordsworth (1770-1850), while visiting Malta late in 1831 for the sake of his health met John Davy who noted their discussion: “This morning Sir Walter Scott conversed with me respecting Dr. Paris’ life of my Brother. He said he was not pleased with it; it was not kindly or gentlemanly written.”¹⁰² Strong words indeed.

Poole need not have worried about John Davy writing a biography: that had been precisely his intention since at least August 1830.¹⁰³ His biography of Davy should therefore not be viewed simply as a response to Paris.¹⁰⁴ Indeed writing from Malta, before he had received a copy of Paris’s biography, John Davy expressed the hope to a very young James David Forbes (1809-1868) that Paris’s work “will be good – popular I have no doubt it will be – for he has always aimed at popularity in all his writings – but most of all I desire it may be accurate – I should be sorry to be under the necessity of coming forward in any way in opposition to him.”¹⁰⁵ Once he had read Paris, there was no holding him back as John Davy in his own biography took every conceivable opportunity to criticise severely Paris’s text. While it is entirely understandable that John Davy regarded Paris’s work as “objectionable,”¹⁰⁶ nevertheless one does feel that the frequency and trenchancy of his criticisms provide a jarring tone which detracted from the authorial intention of extolling his brother’s reputation.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Poole to John Davy, 31 March 1831, RI MS HD/26/D/53.

¹⁰¹ Edmund Davy to John Davy, 10 September 1831, RI MS HD/26/D/21.

¹⁰² Note by John Davy, 6 December 1831, RI MS HD/26/D/61. Published in John Davy, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 507, though dated 7 December 1831.

¹⁰³ John Davy to Davies Gilbert, 30 August 1830, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1245.

¹⁰⁴ Contra Knight, *Davy*, 3-4.

¹⁰⁵ John Davy to James David Forbes, 4 February 1831, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1249.

¹⁰⁶ John Davy, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, vii.

John Davy was born in May 1790 making him about twelve and a half years younger than his brother and eight years old when Davy departed for Bristol.¹⁰⁷ He stayed with Davy at the Royal Institution from autumn 1808 for three years, a period he recollected with fondness. After studying medicine at Edinburgh University (MD 1814), he returned briefly to London (elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of London in early 1814) before being commissioned into the army medical service as an hospital assistant. During his thirty-three years of active service, John Davy rose through the ranks, finishing as an Inspector General.¹⁰⁸ His postings included Ceylon, Yorkshire, the Mediterranean (Malta and the Ionian Islands) and the West Indies as well as five years at the Fort Pitt hospital, Chatham. His writings, both printed and in manuscript, provide invaluable accounts of the colonial territories where he was stationed.

Granted leave in March 1829 John Davy attended his brother first in Rome and then on the journey to Geneva where he was present at Davy's death.¹⁰⁹ Shortly afterwards John Davy returned to Malta¹¹⁰ but in mid-November arrived in London. However, he quickly departed for Cornwall¹¹¹ and at the start of 1830 went to Yorkshire to see his fiancée, Margaret Fletcher (1798-1869) whom he married at the beginning of March.¹¹² Although absent from London for some of the time he was not "absent from England" as Paris asserted in his preface. Paris made this claim to allay his concerns that John Davy might want to undertake the biographical task himself; Paris had been assured (he does not say by whom) that this was not so.¹¹³ In the preface to his *Memoirs*, John Davy disputed strongly Paris's version of events writing that he had between November 1829 and March 1830 spent much time in London editing Davy's last work, *Consolations in Travel*, published

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Lacey, "New Light on John Davy," *Ambix* 66 (2019): \$\$.

¹⁰⁸ His promotions, but not his postings, are listed in A. Peterkin and William Johnston, *Commissioned Officers in the Medical Services of the British Army 1660-1960*, vol. 1 (London: Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1968), 258. See also his service record in The National Archives WO/25/3907, no. 43.

¹⁰⁹ John Davy, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, 347-67.

¹¹⁰ Jane Davy to John Murray II, 5 June 1829, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1215.

¹¹¹ Jane Davy to Augustin Pyramus de Candolle, 23 November 1829, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1232.

¹¹² John Davy to John Murray II, 30 January 1830, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1238.

¹¹³ Paris, *Life*, vol. 1, xi – by Jane Davy?

posthumously by Murray in January 1830.¹¹⁴ (This would have been one reason why publishing the biography with Murray would have made sense). Furthermore, John Davy wrote that he had met Paris in society, but he had said nothing of his proposed biography.¹¹⁵ Paris in print refuted John Davy's claim, writing "I met Dr. Davy at the Athenaeum, and was about to express my surprise at his appearance in England, and to converse with him on the subject in question; but he repulsed my approach, in a manner which rendered any further advance on my part impossible."¹¹⁶

Following his return to Malta at the end of April¹¹⁷ John Davy found that he had considerable leisure¹¹⁸ and by August 1830 at the latest decided to write his own biography.¹¹⁹ In terms of source material he was in a much stronger position than Paris. At some point Jane Davy had handed almost everything covered by Davy's will to him. He told Poole that he had "collected a great quantity of materials ... from the store of note books, journals, Lectures &c which were bequeathed to me."¹²⁰ Furthermore, John Davy also had possession of the letters that Davy had written to him (he published 22), to their mother (20) and sisters (2); doubtless he collected those family letters during his November 1829 visit to Cornwall. After his departure from London, all this primary material was essentially inaccessible to Paris or anyone else putting John Davy in a very powerful position to control what could be written about Davy. It also meant that unlike Paris's rush for publication he

¹¹⁴ Jane Davy to John Murray II, 23 January 1830, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1237. On *Consolations* see Golinski, *Experimental Self*, 164-78 and James A. Secord, *Visions of Science: Books and Readers at the Dawn of the Victorian Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 24-51.

¹¹⁵ John Davy, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, vi. See also John Davy to Thomas Poole, 28 May 1831, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1251.

¹¹⁶ *The Spectator*, 27 February 1836, 205. Paris was a founder member of the Athenaeum, but John Davy was never a member. With thanks to the Athenaeum's archivist, Jennie de Protani, for this information.

¹¹⁷ John Davy, "Some Notices of My Life," Keele University MS Raymond Richards (hereafter KU MS RR) M118/4/1, [62r]. These autobiographical notes have been transcribed and edited by Andrew Lacey and can be found at <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/litscimed/john-davy-some-notice-of-my-life> (accessed 24 January 2019).

¹¹⁸ John Davy, "Some Notices of My Life," KU MS RR M118/4/1, [64v].

¹¹⁹ John Davy to Davies Gilbert, 30 August 1830, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1245.

¹²⁰ John Davy to Thomas Poole, 28 May 1831 Davy, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1251.

could be more leisurely: “I shall proceed without any undue haste ... In two or three years I hope I shall be prepared for the press.”¹²¹

Nevertheless, John Davy pursued the same strategy as Paris and indeed Jane Davy before him, in seeking anecdotes and letters from Davy’s friends and acquaintances. What is striking is that with very few exceptions he approached a different set of people than Paris; indeed, the overlap in documentary evidence between the two biographies is miniscule, though John Davy was not above copying a few letters from Paris’s *Life*.¹²² The exceptions included Davies Gilbert (who wrote that John Davy was welcomed to whatever information he had about Davy, but added that the letters to him were in Paris’s possession¹²³), Jane Davy (who provided only limited cooperation, refusing point blank to give him access to Davy’s letters to her¹²⁴) and Faraday.¹²⁵ He asked Forbes to contact various Scotsmen who Davy had known including Hope, Scott and David Brewster (1781-1868);¹²⁶ it is not clear if anything came of this request, certainly no letters were published. Others whom John Davy approached included his cousin Edmund Davy¹²⁷ and Sophia Brownrigg (1769-1837), whom he met when she was in Ceylon as the Governor’s wife in the late 1810s.¹²⁸

One problem that John Davy faced was that despite spending the first eighteen years of his life in Cornwall, he seems to have known comparatively little about his birthplace, the Davy family background and Davy’s early life which lacuna prompted a stream of enquiries to Penzance. John Foxell (1777-1852), librarian of the Penzance Library, provided him with some population statistics which formed the background to John Davy’s vivid account of

¹²¹ John Davy to Thomas Poole, 28 May 1831, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1251.

¹²² For example, Humphry Davy to Thomas Poole, 6 February 1829, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1191 and Humphry Davy to John George Lambton, 29 October 1816, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, letter 549.

¹²³ John Davy to Davies Gilbert, 30 August 1830, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1245; Davies Gilbert to John Davy, 13 October 1830, RI MS HD/26/D/33.

¹²⁴ Jane Davy to John Davy, 3 October 1830, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1246.

¹²⁵ John Davy to Michael Faraday, 7 November 1830, Wellcome MS 8505/1. Unfortunately, Faraday’s reply has not been found.

¹²⁶ John Davy to James David Forbes, 16 October 1830, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1247.

¹²⁷ Edmund Davy to John Davy, 15 December 1830, RI MS HD/26/D/20.

¹²⁸ Sophia Brownrigg to John Davy, 23 December 1830, RI MS HD/26/D/8 and John Davy, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 270-2. John Davy, *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon, and of its Inhabitants. With travels in that island* (London: Longman, 1821), vii. John Davy, “Some Notices of My Life,” KU MS RR M118/4/1, [37v].

West Cornwall at the end of the eighteenth century, still quoted by some quite recent authors.¹²⁹ Henry Penneck obtained a recollection from Davy's headmaster at Truro Grammar School, Cornelius Cardew (1748-1831).¹³⁰ John Davy obtained details about his mother's family, the Milletts, from his brother-in-law and further information from his sister.¹³¹ But above all he obtained the "Mem^{dums} of what Humphry Davy has" written by Davy's early patron John Tonkin (c.1719-1801). Tonkin noted at the beginning that "this is not meant or intended as a charge ag^t. M^r Davy, only for my own Satisfaction to know what he has [had] from time to time." This remarkable document recorded Tonkin's interactions with the Davy family, from cow-keeping to supporting Davy's education, from 1784 until 1800, the year before his death.¹³²

Away from Cornwall John Davy's well-connected mother-in-law, Eliza Fletcher (1770-1858) contacted the writers Walter Scott and Robert Southey (1774-1843) as well as the chemist William Henry (1774-1836) in Manchester and John Craig in Edinburgh. Scott said he and Davy had never corresponded, but referred to Coleridge's high praise of Davy's poetry;¹³³ Southey replied that the few letters that Davy had written to him were at John Davy's disposal and that he could identify Davy's poems in the two volumes of *The Annual Anthology* (1799, 1800),¹³⁴ while Henry provided some recollections, adding that when John Davy next visited England he would show him the letters he possessed.¹³⁵ Through Craig James Watt jr (1769-1848) provided an account of Davy's friendship with his half-brother

¹²⁹ John Foxell to John Davy, 7 June 1831, RI MS HD/26/D/32. John Davy, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 8-12, partly quoted in Peter A.S. Pool, *The History of the Town and Borough of Penzance* (Penzance: The Corporation of Penzance, 1974), 115-16.

¹³⁰ Cornelius Cardew to Henry Penneck, 5 January 1831, RI MS HD/26/D/9

¹³¹ John Millett to John Davy?, 7 June 1831, RI MS HD/26/D/48; Catherine Davy? to John Davy, 4 July 1831, RI MS HD/26/D/28 (copy in John Davy's hand).

¹³² John Tonkin, "Mem^{dums} of what Humphry Davy has," RI MS HD/26/D/66. Published in Gillian Green, "The Boyhood of Humphry Davy in Penzance" in *In and around Penzance during Napoleonic Times*, ed. June Palmer (Penzance: Penwith Local History Group, 2000), 70-77 on 72-5.

¹³³ Walter Scott to Eliza Fletcher, 18 December 1830, *Fragmentary Remains*, 113.

¹³⁴ Robert Southey to Eliza Fletcher, 30 March 1831, RI MS HD/27/B/7 (copy).

¹³⁵ William Henry to John Davy, 31 January 1832, RI MS HD/26/D/34.

Gregory Watt (1777-1804).¹³⁶ The Royal Institution's instrument maker John Newman (1783-1860) sent John Davy a letter from Davy and an account of his experimental approach.¹³⁷

After the start of 1832, John Davy's enquiries tailed off. He repeated his request to Forbes for information about Davy's Scottish friends¹³⁸ and tried to contact those whom Davy knew in Bristol from 1798 to 1801, but interestingly was rebuffed by John King (1766-1846). He referred to his correspondence with Davy as "confidential" and suggested that John Davy should come to England to interview Davy's Bristol friends, a view with which another old friend of Davy's, William Clayfield (1772-1837), concurred.¹³⁹ All this would seem to be part of the deliberate effort to suppress knowledge of the youthful radical views and connections of Davy and others in Bristol, as Paris had done in his biography.

With the recollections, letters, poems and Davy's notebooks (extracts from which constituted over a fifth of the *Memoirs*, Table 1) that John Davy had gathered, he quickly began his biography. The preliminary notes, written neatly mostly by his wife, ran to seven large manuscript volumes.¹⁴⁰ They are dated from October 1830 to July 1831. In the final volume, after receiving a copy in Malta, John Davy referred briefly, and unfavourably, to Paris's *Life*.¹⁴¹ The following months were doubtlessly devoted to drafting the biography rebutting Paris at every opportunity. In the "Advertisement" to *Memoirs*, dated 24 December 1835, he claimed that he had completed the text in the summer of 1832; the preface was dated "Malta, August 14. 1832."¹⁴² He added that the delay in publication gave

¹³⁶ John Craig to James Watt Jr., 19 September 1831, LoB MS 3219/6/4/6; James Watt Jr. to John Craig, 24 September 1831, RI MS HD/26/D/67.

¹³⁷ John Newman to John Davy, 6 September 1831, RI MS HD/26/D/49.

¹³⁸ John Davy to James David Forbes, 3 July 1833, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1254.

¹³⁹ Reported in John Eden to J.H. Townsend, 7 January 1833, RI MS HD/26/D/29. At least one letter (Humphry Davy to John King, 14 November 1801, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, letter 46) hints at sexual promiscuity.

¹⁴⁰ KU MS RR M117/2/2-5, M118/2/6-7 and RI MS HD/9. For a short account see John Davy, "Some Notices of My Life," KU MS RR M118/4/1, [63r].

¹⁴¹ KU MS RR M118/2/7, 176.

¹⁴² John Davy, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, [iii], viii.

him time to add further information.¹⁴³ Whether John Davy knew how long he would be stationed in Malta is not known, but the estimate as to time of publication he had given to Poole in 1831 showed impeccable prescience.¹⁴⁴ He sailed from Malta on 10 April 1835 to take the role, the following month, of Principal Medical Officer at the Fort Pitt hospital.

Now fairly close to London, he could see his biography through the press. Longman had published John Davy's only book to date, on Ceylon,¹⁴⁵ and also the four English editions of Davy's *Elements of Agricultural Chemistry*.¹⁴⁶ John Davy quickly arranged for Longman to produce a fifth edition which he commented was the same text as the fourth (1827), but with a few additional footnotes by him.¹⁴⁷ With these existing links Longman would have been seen by John Davy as the most appropriate publisher for the biography.

It soon became known that John Davy was about to publish his biography. In July 1835 Paris, as an explicit response to John Davy's impending publication asked Colburn and Bentley about producing a new edition of his biography which would have entailed some major additions.¹⁴⁸ This provoked a serious row between Paris and his publishers over the interpretation of the original contract in regard to new editions. Paris wrote that he would modify the book, but not rewrite.¹⁴⁹ This resulted in Colburn and Bentley drawing up a suit for the Court of Chancery¹⁵⁰ and in August a second edition was advertised.¹⁵¹ It is not clear what became of the legal action nor have I found any example of a second edition, which suggests that Colburn and Bentley may simply have recycled the octavo volumes advertised

¹⁴³ John Davy, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, [iii], viii. Among items added later were two letters from John Buddle to John Davy (discussing the safety lamp) of 4 December 1833 and 21 August 1835, John Davy, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, 54-6 and 58-9 respectively.

¹⁴⁴ John Davy to Thomas Poole, 28 May 1831, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 4, letter 1251.

¹⁴⁵ John Davy, *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon*.

¹⁴⁶ See Frank A.J.L. James, "'Agricultural Chymistry is at Present in it's Infancy': The Board of Agriculture, The Royal Institution and Humphry Davy," *Ambix* 62 (2015): 363-85, 380-2.

¹⁴⁷ Humphry Davy, *Elements of Agricultural Chemistry in a Course of Lectures for the Board of Agriculture*, 5th ed. (London: Longman, 1836). John Davy's comments, dated Fort Pitt, 5 November 1835, are on [iii].

¹⁴⁸ John Ayrton Paris to Colburn and Bentley, 25 July 1835, BL add MS 46636, f.9v-10r (copy).

¹⁴⁹ John Ayrton Paris to Colburn and Bentley, 28 July 1835, BL add MS 46636, f.10v-11v (copy).

¹⁵⁰ The documentation is in BL add MS 46636, f.1-20.

¹⁵¹ *The Times*, 22 August 1835, 7e.

in 1831 as a second edition, though that did not appear on the imprint. Whatever the precise nature of the spoiling action it does not seem to have had much effect. John Davy's biography published in early 1836 was reviewed, by Brewster (though anonymously), in the April issue of the *Edinburgh Review*,¹⁵² an honour not accorded to *Paris's Life*.

The following year, John Davy proposed compiling a *Collected Works* of Davy's printed books, published papers and some manuscript lectures. The earliest reference to this project occurred in a letter to Jane Davy asking for her help with providing manuscripts in her keeping, which swiftly received the same negative response as before.¹⁵³ As might be expected he originally offered what would in the end be nine volumes to Longman who declined.¹⁵⁴ Instead Smith, Elder agreed to publish them, but ran into copyright issues especially with Longman who objected to the inclusion of both *Agricultural Chemistry* and *Memoirs* in Davy's *Collected Works*. The former problem was resolved by Longman bringing out a sixth (and final) edition of *Agricultural Chemistry* in 1839¹⁵⁵ while Smith, Elder published it across two volumes (seven and eight) of *Collected Works* in 1840 thus avoiding significant competition between the two editions.

In the case of *Memoirs* John Davy made it clear that the new text would omit "controversial and vindictory" material and offered to forego all further payment for the volumes which Longman accepted.¹⁵⁶ Without noting anywhere that he had made any changes, the condensed *Memoirs*, forming the first volume of *Collected Works*, was radically different from John Davy's original publication. He omitted the preface containing his diatribe against Paris and also many other disparaging remarks about him (suggesting that by now he realised that his attacks had gone too far). Since later volumes would include most of Davy's published texts and also some lecture notes, these were removed from this

¹⁵² [David Brewster] review of John Davy, *Memoirs*, *Edinburgh Review* 63 (1836): 101-35.

¹⁵³ John Davy to Jane Davy, 15 March 1837; Jane Davy to John Davy, 18 March 1837. Copies of both in Morrab Library MS DAV/4a.

¹⁵⁴ John Davy to Longman, 27 June 1839, RI MS HD/26/1/07 (copy).

¹⁵⁵ Humphry Davy, *Elements of Agricultural Chemistry in a Course of Lectures for the Board of Agriculture*, 6th ed. (London: Longman, 1839); John Davy's "Advertisement," [iii], was dated Fort Pitt, 26 March 1839.

¹⁵⁶ John Davy to Longman, 27 June 1839, RI MS HD/26/1/07 (copy); William Longman to John Davy, 29 June 1839, RI MS HD/26/1/08.

version of *Memoirs*, thus increasing the proportion devoted to printing extracts from Davy's notebooks to nearly a third and doubling the amount of poetry (Table 1). John Davy also slipped in new material. For example, he noted that Davy's birth was recorded in the "large family-bible,"¹⁵⁷ a volume yet to be traced,¹⁵⁸ but not mentioned in *Memoirs*. He added the text of the letter that Davy had written to Thomas Hope in 1801 acknowledging Hope's role in his moving to the Royal Institution.¹⁵⁹ Despite the convenience of having most of Davy's writings in one place and Longman's worries, *Collected Works* did badly. In the autumn of 1843 Smith, Elder told John Davy that the volumes had so far lost nearly £1000. To remedy this as far as possible, they proposed putting it in a different binding and re-issuing volumes monthly at a reduced price.¹⁶⁰

There John Davy ceased writing about his brother for nearly fifteen years. Then on 8 May 1855 Jane Davy died. She left her estate to her first cousin, William Charles Kerr (1799-1878) a Northampton Physician. The fortune he inherited enabled him to purchase an estate at Newnham on the banks of the River Severn in Gloucestershire. Unlike Jane Davy, who had consistently refused to help either of her husband's biographers by providing access to the documents in her possession, Kerr did not share whatever her motives and feelings had been and was happy to help John Davy. At the end of 1855 Kerr began to hand over to John Davy the Davy related manuscripts that he found in Park Street, a process which took a couple of years.¹⁶¹ Unfortunately, aside from Davy's letters to Jane Davy which are referred to specifically, it is not known precisely which documents came into John Davy's possession at that time. However, in his final book on his brother, curiously entitled *Fragmentary Remains, Literary and Scientific of Sir Humphry Davy, Bart.*, John Davy included about two

¹⁵⁷ *The Collected Works of Sir Humphry Davy, Bart.*, ed. John Davy, 9 vols. (London: Smith, Elder, 1839-40), vol. 1, 2.

¹⁵⁸ It is possible that John Davy only had access to a transcription by Katherine Davy of the family information contained in this Bible which is in RI MS HD/26/D/74.

¹⁵⁹ Humphry Davy to Thomas Charles Hope, 28 June 1801, Davy, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, letter 43; *The Collected Works of Sir Humphry Davy*, 1, 83. Hope gave John Davy a copy of this letter in early 1838, noted in a memorandum, RI MS HD/26/D/37. Paris, *Life*, vol. 1, 114-15 had reported the circumstance, but he does not seem to have had the letter; John Davy had not referred to Hope in *Memoirs*.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, Elder to John Davy, 4 October 1843, RI MS HD/26/l/12.

¹⁶¹ William Charles Kerr to John Davy, 24 November 1855, RI MS JD/2/5/12 and 16 December 1857, RI MS HD/26/D/41. Acknowledged in *Fragmentary Remains*, vi.

thirds of the letters that Davy had written to Jane Apreece/Davy, and letters to him from Southey, Coleridge, Gregory Watt, Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849) and Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). It would appear Jane Davy had interpreted Davy's will not to include letters; however, she had also retained, whether accidentally is not known, some notebooks from which John Davy also quoted at length.¹⁶² John Davy also published three letters from Davy to John King (previously regarded as confidential), Davy's letters to Thomas Andrew Knight (1759-1838) and Thomas Allan (1777-1833), although he obtained copies of these somewhat earlier.¹⁶³ In all nearly two-fifths of this volume of published letters were written by Davy, while nearly a quarter consisted of letters written to him (Table 1). The publication by yet another publisher, Churchill, of *Fragmentary Remains* in the autumn of 1858 brought to an end John Davy's extensive endeavours to promote knowledge of his brother, his achievements and his reputation, though he continued to defend the latter from time to time, for example from the aspersions of Charles Babbage (1791-1871).¹⁶⁴

Conclusion: Preserving Davy's Papers for the Future

While some, including Davy himself, compared him to Newton,¹⁶⁵ Davy's image seems not to have exerted the same kind of influence during the middle decades of the nineteenth century in defining what constituted science as did Newton's. The publication disaster of *Collected Works* amply illustrates that. The difference was that from shortly after Newton's death he had been portrayed as an Enlightenment icon;¹⁶⁶ the difficulties of his Presidency of the Royal Society of London had been forgotten. With Davy, the disasters of his Presidency were all too fresh in people's memory. Paris's Royal Society of London obituarist

¹⁶² For example, *Fragmentary Remains*, 115-18.

¹⁶³ Frances Stackhouse Acton to John Davy, 6 February 1840, RI MS HD/26/D/1 and memorandum by John Davy about Davy's letters to Allan, 28 July 1840, RI MS HD/26/D/04a.

¹⁶⁴ "A letter from John Davy, M.D., F.R.S., to the editors of the Philosophical Magazine in Reply to certain charges made by C. Babbage, Esq., F.R.S., etc., against the late Sir Humphry Davy, when President of the Royal Society [of London]," *Philosophical Magazine* 28 (1864): 480-4.

¹⁶⁵ For a summary see Cantor, "Davy," 219. For Davy's own comparison see his August 1799 notebook, RI MS HD/20/B, 182, where in large letters, under the influence of several litres of nitrous oxide, he wrote "Davy & Newton" (note the word order!).

¹⁶⁶ Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2000), 134-8.

noted that his *Life* of Davy was “a most felicitous instance of perfect biography”¹⁶⁷ suggesting that Davy’s Presidency was not forgotten. Just over a decade later John Davy’s obituarist commented that “one of the most marked features in his character for the whole ... of his life, was the well-deserved gratitude and veneration with which he regarded that famous philosopher [his brother Davy].”¹⁶⁸ This is particularly striking since apart from when John Davy was very young, during the three years he was at the Royal Institution and possibly occasionally while he was posted to Yorkshire during the 1820s, after 1811, owing to where the Army sent him, they seldom met. In Yorkshire, John Davy was largely removed from the various crises at the Royal Society of London during Davy’s Presidency in a way that Paris was not. Nevertheless, John Davy did recognise that Davy’s Presidency was not a success, but blamed the Society rather than his brother.¹⁶⁹ Yet, while Paris sought to diminish Davy, John Davy wrote about a man, his elder brother, whom he admired enormously.

It is still not clear why precisely Paris decided to write a biography that one commentator has described as “rather malicious”¹⁷⁰ (although the significant financial inducement should not be overlooked). The tone of Paris’s “Sketch” begun so soon after Davy’s death does suggest that producing what could be termed an anti-biography was always his intention. On the other hand, John Davy’s motives were clearly personal and, following the publication of Paris’s text, corrective (from his point of view). The Government Chemist, Edward Thorpe (1845-1925), in his 1896 biography of Davy largely derived from the work of Paris and John Davy had no doubt about the merits of the two texts. For him Paris’s *Life* was “not unfrequently inaccurate in his statements as to matters of fact, and disingenuous in his inferences.” Thorpe much preferred John Davy’s *Memoirs*, though he thought them “perhaps too partial at times.”¹⁷¹ However, Fullmer, a strongly admiring

¹⁶⁷ *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London* 9 (1857): 56-7, 57.

¹⁶⁸ *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London*, 16 (1868): lxxix-lxxx on lxxix.

¹⁶⁹ John Davy, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, 127-38.

¹⁷⁰ Pool, *History of Penzance*, 120.

¹⁷¹ Thomas Edward Thorpe, *Humphry Davy: Poet and Philosopher* (London: Cassell, 1896), v.

biographer of Davy, suggested it was Paris's version that came to be seen as "reliable and definitive."¹⁷²

Paris's and John Davy's biographies and how they came to be written still exercise a strong influence on how Davy is currently perceived and studied, not least for the significant quantity of primary material they published and preserved. For example, we have the text of eighty-one (6.3%) of Davy's *Collected Letters* only because they were published in the three biographies that I have discussed. But arguably more significantly, the collection of Davy's manuscripts and anecdotes made by John Davy, together with his own correspondence and notes, preserve for future study a wealth of material which but for those biographies might easily have been lost.

The routes by which these papers came to be preserved following John Davy's death were far from straightforward. Only two of his children survived into full adulthood: Grace Davy (1831-1914), who married the physician George Rolleston (1829-1881), and Archibald Davy (1833-1890) who became an Anglican priest. He had one daughter, Helen Mary Davy (1866-1941) who joined the Anglican nursing order of the Community of St Peter. Grace Rolleston had six children who reached full adulthood including, as her eldest son, the prominent physician Humphry Davy Rolleston (1862-1944) who in turn had two sons, one of whom was killed during the Great War while the other died during a riot in Zanzibar in 1936.

Of John and Margaret Davy's seven surviving grandchildren, five came into the possession of manuscripts that they had once owned. The youngest, Christopher Rolleston (1877-1950) received six volumes of notes for *Memoirs* by John Davy, the first part of his "Some Notices of My Life," a number of volumes of his grandmother's diary, a large number of letters from her to Maria Buckle (1796-1878) and various other documents. Following his death his widow sold this material to a manuscript collector who in turned sold it to Keele University in 1957.¹⁷³ The next youngest grandchild, John Davy Rolleston (1873-1946) possessed one letter from Davy to Katherine Davy, that remains in the family.¹⁷⁴ The third

¹⁷² Fullmer, "Davy's Biographers," 287. For reasons that are not clear she regarded Paris's *Life* as an "official" biography, a term that does not seem to have been used in the 1830s.

¹⁷³ Where it now forms KU MS RR M117-119. For the details see the KU Provenance File.

¹⁷⁴ Humphry Davy to Katherine Davy, 30 September 1828, Davy, *Collected Letter*, vol. 3, letter 1164.

oldest grandchild, Rosamond Grace Rolleston (1865-1950), possessed the second part of John Davy's "Some Notices of His Life" and a collection of around seventy letters mostly from Davy to his mother, but including a few to his sisters. Her eldest son George Rolleston né Hayward (1902-1992)¹⁷⁵ gave the "Notices" to Keele University,¹⁷⁶ but sold the letters at Christie's in 1978, doubtless prompted by the celebrations marking the bicentenary of Davy's birth.¹⁷⁷

By far the largest part of the papers wound up in the possession of Helen Davy and her first cousin Humphry Rolleston, which, as the oldest descendants of John Davy's two children, might be expected. Helen Davy seems to have acted only through her cousin, taking no direct part in any discussions about the fate of the papers and other items though Rolleston always ensured that her role was acknowledged. Through him the letters that John Davy had acquired after Jane Davy's death and which had passed to Helen Davy were lent to Thorpe when he was writing his biography.¹⁷⁸ By 1899 those letters had gone to the Royal Institution, although Helen Davy had also intended for some of them to go to the Chemical Society.¹⁷⁹

The key event, however, was the death of Rolleston's mother in 1914. Shortly afterwards a family meeting held on 6 June 1914 resulted in Rolleston writing the following day to the Royal Institution's Resident Professor, James Dewar (1842-1923), offering the institution "a big box of letters and papers about Sir H. Davy."¹⁸⁰ This offer was accepted with alacrity and at the meeting of the Royal Institution's Managers on 6 July 1914, details of the fifty-two Davy notebooks donated were recorded,¹⁸¹ though the only letters were those copied into a book made by John Davy.¹⁸² It was also agreed that the donation would

¹⁷⁵ At some point before 1939 he adopted his mother's maiden name.

¹⁷⁶ George Rolleston to the Librarian, Keele University, 12 June 1976, Provenance File at KU.

¹⁷⁷ Lot 14 at Christie's sale, 5 July 1978, purchased by the Science Museum where it now forms MS 333.

¹⁷⁸ Thorpe, *Humphry Davy*, vi. However, he only included three previously unpublished letters.

¹⁷⁹ Humphry Rolleston to Edward Thorpe, 4 June 1899, RI MS Rolleston file (uncatalogued).

¹⁸⁰ Humphry Rolleston to James Dewar, 7 June 1914, RI MS Rolleston file (uncatalogued).

¹⁸¹ RI MS MM, 6 July 1914, vol. 18, 12-13.

¹⁸² Now RI MS HD/9.

not be made public “because there would certainly be many applications for permission to peruse [the] documents” which would not be beneficial “to the labours of the Officials of the Institution.”¹⁸³

Rolleston’s recollection that the box contained letters, would have been predicated on the assumption that Thorpe had returned everything, but this was not the case. Following his death in February 1925, Florence Watts (1873-1961), evidently helping her aunt, Thorpe’s widow, wind up the estate, informed Rolleston that she had found a packet of Davy letters which Thorpe had retained. Rolleston asked her to send them, by registered post, to the new Resident Professor at the Royal Institution, William Henry Bragg (1862-1942) which she did.¹⁸⁴ The donation (described as “large number of letters”) but not the circumstances of its occurrence, was announced at the General Meeting of the Royal Institution on 6 April 1925.¹⁸⁵ This was the last occasion when a major collection of Davy manuscripts used by John Davy in his *Memoirs* was deposited in the Royal Institution archive.

That is not to say that further items might not reappear in the future. For example, at some point the collector of angling memorabilia, Arthur Gilbey (1861-1939), acquired four Davy notebooks relating to his fishing activities.¹⁸⁶ To date only one of these have been located.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, two of John Davy’s grandchildren whose papers have not (yet) been located, may also have inherited manuscripts from him. And, finally, we have little idea what, in his efforts to protect his brother’s reputation, was not included (accidentally or otherwise) in the documentation ultimately retained.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Henry Young to Humphry Rolleston, 16 June 1914, RI MS Rolleston file (uncatalogued).

¹⁸⁴ Humphry Rolleston to Florence Watts, 23 March 1925; Florence Watts to William Bragg, 25 March 1925, both RI MS Rolleston file (uncatalogued).

¹⁸⁵ *Proceedings of the Royal Institution*, 24 (1925): 596. See also RI MS MM, 6 April 1925, vol. 19, 168.

¹⁸⁶ Henry B. Wheatley, “Sir Humphry Davy, Bart., P.R.S.,” *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 65 (1904): 1-25 on 23.

¹⁸⁷ Now RI MS HD/14/M, it was purchased by the Royal Institution in 1982. For the details see RI MS AD/10/B/4/C, folder 4.

¹⁸⁸ For example, I pointed out in James, “How Big is a Hole?,” 182, that no laboratory or experimental records survive relating to Davy’s work on inventing the gauze miner’s safety lamp in late 1815 which, given its significance to his reputation, seems strange to say the least.

Nevertheless, despite these gaps, by understanding how Davy's early biographies were constructed we are able to identify the interpretive and textual biases (both conscious and unconscious) in these texts and manuscripts. For example, the omission of Davy's radical connections in Bristol or the interpretations of his Presidency of the Royal Society of London, provide good evidence of Paris's and John Davy's authorial intentions and practices. This is especially useful in studying Davy's early life in Penzance since the texts and the manuscripts they generated, contain the overwhelming majority of what we can know about the boy and teenage Davy, on which much of our understanding of the rest of his life needs to be based¹⁸⁹ - that will be the subject of a future paper. As *The Athenaeum* reviewer of John Davy's *Memoirs* put it, which is equally applicable to Paris's *Life*: "The world now has materials from which the character of Sir Humphrey [sic] Davy may be formed; to this work all future biographers must have recourse."¹⁹⁰

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Note on Contributor

¹⁸⁹ Cantor, "Davy," 219.

¹⁹⁰ Review of John Davy, *Memoirs, Athenaeum*, 6 February 1836, 100-102 on 102.

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