

ALFRED NOBEL – A MAN OF CONTRASTS

Alfred Nobel, the great Swedish inventor and industrialist, was a man of many contrasts. He was the son of a bankrupt, but became a millionaire; a scientist with a love of literature, an industrialist who managed to remain an idealist. He made a fortune but lived a simple life, and although cheerful in company he was often sad in private. A lover of mankind, he never had a wife or family to love him. A patriotic son of his native land, he died alone on foreign soil.

He invented a new explosive, dynamite, to improve the peacetime industries of mining and road building, but saw it used as a weapon of war to kill and injure his fellow men. During his useful life he often felt he was useless: «Alfred Nobel», he once wrote of himself, «ought to have been put to death by a kind doctor as soon as, with a cry, he entered life». World-famous for his works he was never personally well known, for throughout his life he avoided publicity. «I do not see» he once said, «that I have deserved any fame and I have no taste for it», but since his death, his name has brought fame and glory to others.

He was born in Stockholm on October 21, 1833 but moved to Russia with his parents in 1842, where his father, Immanuel, made a strong position for himself in the engineering industry. Immanuel Nobel invented the landmine and made a lot of money from government orders for it during the Crimean War, but went bankrupt soon after. Most of the family returned to Sweden in 1859, where Alfred rejoined them in 1863, beginning his own study of explosives in his father's laboratory. He had never been to school or university but had studied privately and by the time he was twenty was a skilful chemist and excellent linguist, speaking Swedish, Russian, German, French and English.

Like his father, Alfred Nobel was imaginative and inventive but he had better luck in business and showed more financial sense. He was quick to see industrial openings for his scientific inventions and built up over 80 companies in 20 different countries. Indeed his greatness lays in his outstanding ability to combine the qualities of an original scientist with those of a forward-looking industrialist. But Nobel's main concern was never with making money or even with making scientific discoveries.

Seldom happy he was always searching for a meaning of life and from his youth had taken a serious interest in literature and philosophy. Perhaps because he could not find ordinary human love — he never married — he came to care deeply about the whole of mankind. He was always generous to the poor: «I'd rather take care of the stomachs of the living than the glory of the dead in the form of stone memorials», he once said. His greatest wish, however, was to see an end to wars and thus peace between nations, and he spent much time and money working for this cause until his death, in Italy in 1896. His famous will in which he left money to provide prizes for outstanding works in Physics, Chemistry, Physiology, Medicine, Literature and Peace is a memorial to his interests and ideals. And so, the man who felt he should have died at birth is remembered and respected long after his death.