

## CURRENT SCIENCE — 50 YEARS AGO



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**Alfred Bernhard Nobel.**  
(1833-1896)

**O**CTOBER 21, 1933, marks the Centenary of the birth of Alfred Nobel. At the age of sixty, in 1893 when the University of Upsala conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Nobel at a request for his autobiography wrote thus: "The undersigned was born at Stockholm on 21st October 1833; he acquired his knowledge in private studies and did not attend any secondary school. He devoted himself particularly to applied chemistry and discovered explosives known under the name of dynamite and smokeless powder called ballistite and C. 89. Since 1894 he has been a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, and is also a member of the Royal Society (London) and the Societe des Ingenieres Civils in Paris. Since 1880 he has been a Knight of the Nordstjarne Order. He is an Officer of the Legion of Honor. Sole publication; a lecture in the English Language which was awarded a silver medal".

Nobel's passion for researches on chemical explosives is the result probably of his association with his father Emmanuel Nobel who at an early age

went over to St. Petersburg where the father and son were engaged in the construction of submarine mines and torpedoes. Some of the wonderful achievements of the modern engineers are rendered possible by the invention of the explosive compound dynamite which is distinctly a land-mark in the progress of civilisation and probably the greatest next to the Printing Press. Dynamite was followed by blasting gelatin and years later by ballistite, one of the earliest of the nitroglycerin smokeless powders, the precursor of cordite. These inventions, including artificial India rubber, brought Nobel an immense fortune and also vexations of law suits. His exploitation of the Baku oil fields, in collaboration with his brothers, added considerably to the former. He held 129 patents in Britain and controlled fifteen explosive factories in different parts of the world and left behind him £ 1,680,000.

This amount is the foundation of five annual prizes of about £ 8,000 to £ 10,000 to be awarded for the most important discoveries in Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine and also for literary works of an idealistic tendency and for distinguished public service in the cause of Peace. The benefits of the foundation are open to all nationalities and are without restrictions of sex. The first four are awarded by the Swedish Academy and the fifth by Norwegian Storting. Dr. Rabindranath Tagore and Sir C. V. Raman are among the recipients of this greatest international honour.

Though Nobel discovered explosives he was a sensitive, nervous man always poor in health. He remained a bachelor and was of lonely disposition. He had a great horror for wars and is reported to have said, "I wish I could produce a substance or a machine of such frightful efficacy for wholesale devastation that wars should thereby become altogether impossible". Is there no other way of abolishing wars?