The legacy of Alfred Nobel

Alfred Nobel (1833-1896) was a very successful Swedish chemist, engineer, inventor and armaments manufacturer. He discovered how to stabilize nitroglycerine into a usable and safe explosive, dynamite. He held 355 different patents and owned scores of companies worldwide. When he died he left the bulk of his huge wealth, estimated to be worth about 250 million pounds today, to found the international prizes that now bear his name. He was motivated to do this partly by seeing his obituary in 1988 when his brother died and a French newspaper accidentally published the obituary of the wrong Nobel. It said ‘Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people than ever before, died yesterday.’ He decided he wanted to be remembered for more than dynamite. He specified that the prizes should be for physical sciences, chemistry, medical science or physiology, literary work and peace. Different Swedish academies are responsible for the physics, chemistry, medicine and literature prizes, while a committee appointed by the Norwegian parliament is responsible for the peace prize. There is also a Bank of Sweden prize in economic sciences ‘in memory of Alfred Nobel’. The committees solicit nominations each year from leading academics around the world. Once a number of nominations are received for a particular topic a committee will ask an international expert to write a confidential report.

In the period after Nobel’s death when the prizes were being established, the king of Sweden did not want the prizes to be international and pressed for them to be restricted to Swedes, or perhaps to the Nordic countries. The trustees stuck to their guns and were determined to implement Nobel’s will literally. Today the presentation of the prizes is one of the big events in the Swedish calendar and the Swedish royal family play a strong role in the ceremonies.
As I reported in December, the physics award this year, for the discovery that the expansion of the universe is accelerating, was in an area close to my interests. My wife and I were lucky enough to be invited by the Nobel Committee to attend the festivities of Nobel week in Stockholm. The Swedes certainly know how to throw a party. We were put up at Sweden’s only 5-star hotel, the Grand Hotel in Stockholm, and coaches ferried us to a series of receptions and discourses. The culmination was the Awards Ceremony, with members of the royal family on one side of the stage, the laureates on the other, and the Swedish National Orchestra up on a balcony behind the stage. This was followed by an amazing banquet for 1200 people. There is a long central table with the royal family, the Swedish cabinet, and the laureates and their spouses. The great and good of Swedish society and guests are seated at some thirty other tables. All through the banquet there are musical, dramatic and ballet performances all around us, a kind of masque. The whole week was rather magical and the laureates and their teams floated through it, as if in a dream.

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