

Frederick Abel Biography

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Biography

A distinguished chemist and explosives specialist, Abel is remembered as one of the inventors of cordite, a smokeless gunpowder still used today. Born in Woolwich, near London, Abel studied under August Wilhelm von Hofmann (1818-1892), an enormously influential experimental and industrial scientist, at the Royal College of Chemistry. During a lengthy career he served as a researcher, scholar, and lecturer, and became the leading British authority on explosives. One of his most significant early discoveries was that guncotton could be chemically stabilized through thorough washing with water to remove all traces of acid and impurities.

His most important work, however, came after the British government's establishment in 1888 of an Explosives Commission, dedicated in particular to the military uses of new discoveries in the field. As a member of this Commission, Abel kept in close contact with Alfred Nobel, an acquaintance from previous years whose latest invention, ballistite, was received with skepticism due to the volatility of camphor as an ingredient. In 1889 Abel, together with James Dewar, invented cordite, a versatile smokeless powder which purportedly improved upon ballistite through the introduction of acetone and petroleum jelly.

Although Nobel contested the cordite patent, the English rights of which Abel and Dewar handed over to the government, his efforts were unsuccessful and widespread production of the propellant continued. Abel was knighted in 1891 for his invention and was made a baronet two years later.