

The pioneering 'great men' of Victorian science were once attacked for being unmanly

March 8 2017, by Heather Ellis



'Dandy philosopher', Sir Humphry Davy. Credit: Thomas Phillips

In the late 19th century, scientists were made into heroes. Science fiction novels such as H G Wells's *The Time Machine* and science textbooks such as Oliver Lodge's [Pioneers of Science](#) helped create the popular [image](#) of the Victorian scientist as a powerful, authoritative figure, subjecting the forces of nature to his will. It's an image that endures today, cemented by the narrative of 19th century science as the work of a series of great men: Humphry Davy, Michael Faraday, Charles Darwin

and the rest. And this was the story the scientific establishment told about itself.

Today, historians such as [Ann B Shteir](#) argue that the professionalisation of [science](#) over the course of the 19th century entrenched the dominance of men and the exclusion of women. This professionalisation was partly a cultural process that formed the stereotypical identity of the Victorian "man of science" as a secure and authoritative masculine persona.

Yet research for my new book, [Masculinity and Science in Britain, 1831-1918](#), suggests this was not how Victorian "men of science" saw each other or themselves. Historians have been somewhat too willing to believe the confident public image projected by 19th century male scientists. In fact, a number of prominent male scientists from this period were accused of effeminacy and unmanliness.

For example, Sir Humphry Davy, inventor of the famed miners' safety lamp and President of the Royal Society, was denounced by a writer in [The Chemist magazine](#) in 1824 as "one of the most exquisite triflers of the day". The same writer went on to attack the leading men of science as "dandy philosophers" whose highest ambition was to "cut a figure in the drawing-rooms of good society".

To understand why male scientists received such gendered attacks, we need to recognise the intellectual and cultural position science held at the time. Far from enjoying the kind of dominance it does within academia and wider society today, science had no base at the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge and was widely [perceived to be in decline](#). Scientists, by extension, also lacked cultural authority and were popularly seen as reclusive and effete figures.

The charges of effeminacy directed against scientists were also connected with broader changes in the way manliness was viewed at the

time. The Regency ideal of manliness, which idolised the rich and fashionable aristocrat, was gradually giving way to a more [serious and sober Victorian vision](#) highlighting individual merit and character. This reflected the growing influence of the professional middle class.

A noble profession

In the first half of the 19th century, [male scientists worked hard](#) to associate themselves with the older ideal of manliness represented by the landed aristocracy. Founded in 1831, the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS) had no fewer than six noble presidents in the first ten years of its existence. It cultivated a distinctly aristocratic style, holding lavish banquets and balls at its annual meetings.



Thomas Huxley, sheltering from the rat race. Credit: Theodor Blake Wirgman

Yet at a time when ideals of masculinity were shifting towards a more sober and middle-class vision, it was precisely these attempts by male scientists to ape aristocratic style that often led to the gendered attacks made against them in the 1830s and 40s. Addressing the "defunct ... gentlemen philosophers" of the BAAS, [The Times declared in 1839](#):

Away with you; betake yourselves to your academic bowers and

cloisters, to your studies and laboratories; and there, if you are able, become known to us by your labours! ... What are your persons to us, your limbs and lineaments? We wish not to see how you eat and drink, and speak, and sport.

By the 1840s and 50s, the next generation of male scientists, including Charles Darwin and fellow evolutionary theorist Thomas Huxley, were increasingly accepting the new meritocratic ideal of manliness. Yet they too were subject to accusations of effeminacy based on reasons that were different from those used against the previous generation.

Davy had been exposed to ridicule for his aristocratic lifestyle and foppish dress. For the likes of Darwin and Huxley, it was the tendency to carry out their research in private laboratories, located in their own homes with their wives and children assisting them, that provoked charges of unmanliness. Huxley even [liked to compare science](#) to the feminine comforts of home, describing it as a welcome refuge from the external world of male struggle, where men "toil to cut one another's throats".

It was not until the First World War that these suspicions about the masculinity of male scientists finally dispersed. For the first time, the British government had to engage decisively with men of science and to fund scientific work properly. The image of science changed dramatically over the course of the war as it [generally became acknowledged](#) that the work of scientists had been crucial to achieving victory.

This promoted a new self-confidence among British men of science that, in turn, encouraged them to demand much greater recognition and long-term funding from the government after the war. In doing so, the natural and physical sciences secured the position which they still enjoy to this day.

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