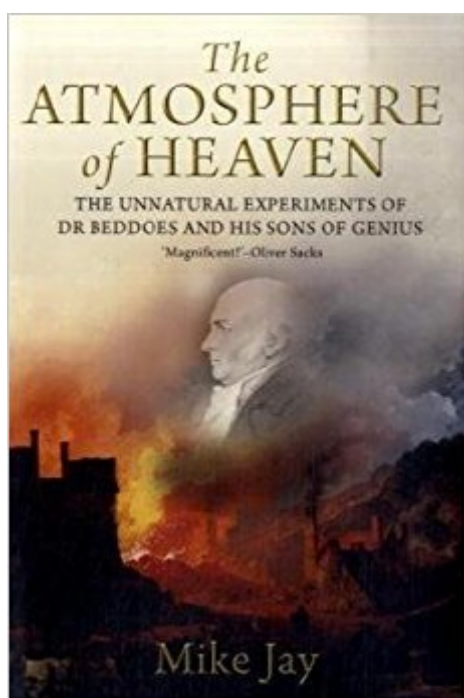


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The Atmosphere Of Heaven: The Unnatural Experiments Of Dr Beddoes And His Sons Of Genius



Synopsis

At the Pneumatic Institution in Bristol, England, founded in the closing years of the eighteenth century, dramatic experiments with gases precipitated not only a revolution in scientific medicine but also in the history of ideas. Guided by the energy of maverick doctor Thomas Beddoes, the institution was both laboratory and hospital—the first example of a modern medical research institution. But when its members discovered the mind-altering properties of nitrous oxide, or laughing gas, their experiments devolved into a pioneering exploration of consciousness with far-reaching and unforeseen effects. This riveting book is the first to tell the story of Dr. Beddoes and the brilliant circle who surrounded him: Erasmus Darwin, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey, who supported his ideas; James Watt, who designed and built his laboratory; Thomas Wedgwood, who funded it; and the dazzling young chemistry assistant, Humphry Davy, who identified nitrous oxide and tested it on himself, with spectacular results. Medical historian Mike Jay charts the chaotic rise and fall of the institution in this fast-paced account, and reveals its crucial influence on modern drug culture, attitudes toward objective and subjective knowledge, the development of anesthetic surgery, and the birth of the Romantic movement.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In this brilliantly researched and written study, British medical historian Jay (*The Air Loom Gang*) tells the story of Thomas Beddoes (1760–1808), who established a Pneumatic Institution near Bristol to test his theories about using various gases to treat illness. Beddoes's science fell somewhere between alchemy and a truly modern medicine, and he attracted

a circle that was dazzling even for its time, when salons brought together the most gifted conversationalists from across the spectrum of society. Beddoes employed the young Humphrey Davy, who quickly made important discoveries about batteries and electricity, and whose investigations of nitrous oxide lent Beddoes's work on gases some degree of respectability. Poets Samuel Coleridge and Robert Southey also came into Beddoes's orbit, as did James Watt and Josiah Wedgwood as both sponsors of Beddoes and fathers of two of his consumptive patients. Fans of scientific biography and history of science, as well as history buffs in general, will be engrossed by Jay's marvelous study of an unusual man and the political and intellectual ferment of his time. Illus. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"'Magnificent!' Oliver Sacks 'Enthralling. This is exactly the kind of cross-cultural biography we need. Lively and sympathetic, it restores the renegade Dr Thomas Beddoes to his rightful place in scientific history, but also to his revolutionary circle of literary friends.' Richard Holmes" --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

This is an amazing story, extremely well communicated by the author Mike Jay. Although the hardcover came out a couple years ago, if you like medical history, or the history of psychoactives, or the way that mind-altering drugs affect culture and medicine, this is a really outstanding book by a true expert in the field. Strongly recommended.

Dr. Beddoes was searching for a cure for tuberculosis and thought the new science of separating air into its components--oxygen, nitrogen, etc--might yield a cure. The climax of the story comes when he and his fellow researchers began experimenting with inhaling nitrous oxide (laughing gas). The poet Robert Southey, one of many friends who gathered at Dr. Beddoes' clinic to try the "gas bag," remarked after his first experience, "The atmosphere of the highest heaven must be composed of this gas." A delightful and well-written story for those interested in the history of science. I learned a lot about the late 18th century, too.

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