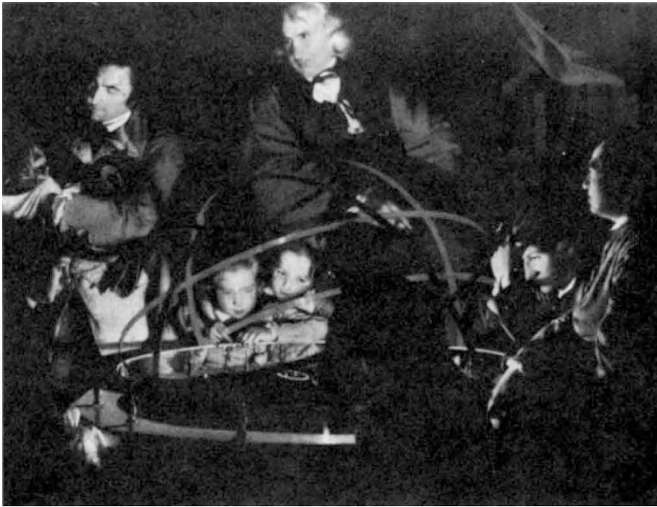


# nature

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## Wright of Derby

ONE of the greater pleasures of boyhood was the prospect of five or six weeks of holiday completely devoid of thoughts about school. It was in the second or third week that long days of two-a-side football games with the other boys in the street would begin to pall. Simultaneously the semi-annual visit to the dentist loomed large and one bleak morning I would be despatched on the fourpenny-return busride into Derby to be told the results of six months of neglect. The only consolation was spending the rest of the day in the Public Library.

Derby was no delicate maiden of a town, no Salisbury, Ely or Hereford. Instead it had industrial prides such as a large locomotive factory; it built aeroplane engines and, so they said, had the best bus station in the country. This was more relevant stuff to a nine-year-old. The Public Library abutted on to the Museum and Art Gallery and the whole of what might now be called an arts complex, but then was not called anything in particular, was intended to serve a very industrial town.

The library books, among which most of the rest of my post-dental day was spent, were witness to what had made the town great. Shelf after shelf of books on stern industrial subjects, devoted to the self-improvement of the populace. There was a limited number of volumes of a lighter character so after an hour or two of flipping through books explaining conjuring tricks or giving tips on home photography, my attention would wander to the art gallery next door. It was not exactly stacked with crowd-pulling impressionists nor do I recall seeing any Picassos there. It was really a one-man show, and to my mind, a two-painting show. The man was Joseph Wright (1734-97) and the two paintings *The Alchymist*, on our cover this week, and *The Orrery*, on this page.

Wright was a contemporary of Reynolds, Gainsborough and Romney and, like them, he made his living from portrait and landscape painting. Unique among painters of that period, or almost any other period for that matter, he was, however, fascinated by the scientific experiments and industrial inventions that were beginning to stir the country's consciousness. He had discovered a rich seam and it is our loss that he did not exploit it more frequently; the *Air Pump* in the Tate Gallery, London is the only other full-scale painting of his on a scientific theme.

Wright used light to the full, particularly the effect of low illumination from candles—indeed it was the sight of *Nature's* staff similarly illuminated which reminded us of the paintings. He was also positively photographic in his detail. The characters are all either local practitioners of science and alchemy or, as the audience, identifiable schoolmasters, businessmen or their children. His observations of scientific instruments seem to have the same precision, and it is reasonable to assume that even the bizarre phosphorescent scene has its basis firmly in actual observation by the artist.

The pictures tell a fascinating story not only of eighteenth century experiments in the name of science but of a time when science was probably more uniformly spread through the country. Each town had its own vigour; the pull of the metropolis and the universities for science barely existed.

The effect of Wright's paintings was always overpowering. The bus journey home to tea was filled with the afterglow of confronting this view of the past. How many other Derby boys had their scientific awakenings from such an unusual source?

## 100 years ago



WE have received the first Annual Report of the "Haileybury Natural Science Society." It contains preliminary lists of the fauna and flora of the place, together with observations on the meteorology of the locality, and a humorous description of an experimental dinner at which the principal dish consisted of esculent snails which had been specially fed and fattened for the purpose by certain members of the Society. It need scarcely be added, that the repast amply rewarded the members for their generous devotion to the cause of Science.

From *Nature*, 9, 274, February 5, 1874.