

Alfred Nobel and His Times

On November 27, 1895, Alfred Nobel put his signature to what would become one of the most famous last wills in the world. This will was not based on last-minute emotion. It had been preceded by several earlier versions, and the road leading up to the final draft wound its way through the intellectual and material landscapes of the day. The will was the sum of Alfred Nobel himself, people he had met, places where he had spent time, and the thoughts that had confronted him.

One reason his will came into being at all was that Alfred Nobel was childless. Who would inherit the huge fortune he had made through his inventions and industries? Some of his relatives received part of the inheritance, as did a few other individuals. But Nobel had other plans for the largest portion of his wealth: it would be managed in a fund, and the interest used to reward and support people with good ideas.

Alfred Nobel's will was an affirmation of belief in human creativity, a belief prevalent in his day. The will mirrors common views of the late 1800s regarding creativity, progress, and development. But Alfred Nobel was a unique individual and, in a number of ways, his will is an expression of his personality.

What were the ideas behind Alfred Nobel's will? Why were individuals to be rewarded? Why were the prizes to be awarded internationally? And why were the prizes to be given specifically in the areas of physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, and peace?



Alfred Nobel. Oil painting by Emil Österman painted after Nobel's death.