William Nicholson Encyclopedia Article

William Nicholson

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William Nicholson

1753-1815

English chemist who discovered the electrolysis of water. Nicholson was a veritable jack-of-alltrades, working at times as a hydraulic engineer, inventor, translator and scientific publicist. In 1800, intrigued by the electric battery invented by Italian physicist Alessandro Volta, he built his own version. Nicholson became the first to produce a chemical reaction via the use of electricity, when he placed leads from the battery in water, which broke the water down into its separate elements, hydrogen and oxygen. His discovery was later used in chemical research and industry. In 1797, he founded the *Journal of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and the Arts.*