

The School Houses

IV - PRIESTLEY.

JOSEPH PRIESTLEY was born in 1733 into changing times - after the affects of the Restoration of the Monarchy had expended their full force, but before the real start of the Industrial Revolution. He was a Nonconformist when it was neither dangerous nor comfortable to be one, and was recognised as a Natural Philosopher (not as a Scientist, for that term was as yet unused).

Priestley had the good fortune to be born with a first-rate brain. In his early youth he made full use of this, mastering eight languages, the principles of logic and metaphysics, and - a significant addition - Gravesand's "Natural Philosophy." This early education, mainly at the hands of a Nonconformist minister, laid the foundation for the three main trends of his life, as will be explained later. He became a Nonconformist minister himself and spent the greater part of his life in either preaching or teaching in various academies.

Chemistry first attracted Priestley's interest while he was teaching at Warrington Academy, and he immediately recognised his own strong experimental bent. By the age of thirty-three this researches in the electrical field had gained him a place in the Royal Society. Then, while at Leeds, he discovered how to "impregnate water with fixed air," that is, he invented soda water. This is now so common that it does not seem a very brilliant invention, but it was important enough in the eighteenth century to assure Priestley's fame. He obtained the patronage of Lord Shelburne, and, while with him, he made his most famous discovery of oxygen. Priestley did not realize the true nature of his discovery and this was only understood later by the Frenchman, Lavoisier. He insisted on calling it "Dephlogisted Air," for he belonged to the school of chemists who wrongly believed that an element called phlogiston was present in all combustible materials and that the more there was present the more acutely did the material burn on ignition. By his discovery of oxygen Priestley contributed much to the overthrow of his own theory. He made many other observations and discoveries in the field of gases, most of which can be found in any large scientific text book.

While Priestley is remembered solely by his work for science, it must not be forgotten that that was not his only purpose in life. He lived for philosophy in its three aspects, divine, natural and human, and these are proportionately represented in his voluminous theological, scientific and political writings.

Unorthodox in religion to start with, his opinions, as his learning increased, gradually went further and further away from the orthodoxy of his own church. Nonconformists in those days still claimed the right to protest not only against the ritual of the Established Church, but also against its dogma. So Priestley joined the Socinian sect of the Unitarians, who denied the doctrine of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ and the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. Yet, in all his own unbelief, he could still be shocked by the "unbelief" of others.

In politics he disagreed with the Crown's American policy, and attempted to point out what he considered to be other mistakes made by it. He made these attacks in masses of political pamphlets. He was under the delusion that an error had only to be pointed out for it to be admitted, and so went on attacking the Government, unconscious of the trouble he was making for himself. He had left the patronage of Lord Shelburne, himself a prominent politician, with an annuity for life and settled in Birmingham as a minister. There the great tragedy of his life occurred. Already disliked by the men in power for his political views, he made the mistake of supporting in part the French Revolution. A mob burned his chapel and wrecked his house, destroying his writings and scientific apparatus. He himself managed to escape to London, but, after holding a "living" there for three years, he emigrated to America and "a new free nation." He died there ten years later a disappointed man.

Priestley's character was almost a personification of the age, the ideal of which is very well expressed by the words on the tomb of the greatest soldier of the age, the Duke of Marlborough :—" In religion he was as far removed from enthusiasm as from indifference." The eighteenth century attempted to be lucid and unemotional, an ideal which Priestley did in fact attain. He had a curious equanimity of spirit, underlying a mind of steel. He was gentle, kindly and good, seldom laughed aloud and equally 'seldom lost his temper. His outlook, like that of many men of his time, was limited, but, within its limits, complete. He saw things keenly and swiftly and never doubted that he saw all. He was " a man of the perfect mean" to the end, living no more and no less than the appointed three score years and ten.

Boys of Priestley House are drawn from West Thurrock, Aveley, Purfleet, Rainham, Romford and some areas north of Lodge Lane. Their House colour is gold.

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