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978-1-108-01419-9 - Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley, to the Year 1795, Volume 1

Joseph Priestley

Frontmatter

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### Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley, to the Year 1795

Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) was an eighteenth-century English polymath with accomplishments in the fields of science, pedagogy, philosophy and theology. Among his more notable achievements were the discovery of oxygen and his work in establishing Unitarianism. Often a controversialist, Priestley's efforts to develop a 'rational' Christianity and support for the French Revolution eventually made him unwelcome in his native land. His 1807 *Memoirs* relate the story of his life until the time of his 1794 emigration to America and include other biographical materials written by his son. This first volume also contains five appendices discussing his philosophy, scientific work and religious opinions. Priestley's memoirs are an important source for anyone interested in the state of epistemology, rationalism, and religious belief in the age of the Enlightenment, and in a man who, in the words of his son, 'gave unremitting exertions in the cause of truth'.

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Memoirs of  
Dr. Joseph Priestley,  
to the Year 1795

*With a Continuation, to the Time of his  
Decease by his Son, Joseph Priestley*

VOLUME 1

JOSEPH PRIESTLEY



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MEMOIRS  
OF  
DR. JOSEPH PRIESTLEY,  
TO THE YEAR 1795,  
WRITTEN BY HIMSELF:  
WITH A CONTINUATION, TO THE TIME OF HIS DECEASE,  
BY HIS SON, JOSEPH PRIESTLEY:  
AND OBSERVATIONS ON HIS WRITINGS,  
BY THOMAS COOPER, PRESIDENT JUDGE OF THE  
4TH DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA: AND THE  
REV. WILLIAM CHRISTIE.

LONDON:

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1806.

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## ADVERTISEMENT.

THE Analysis of my father's Theological writings mentioned in the Preface to this work, is in the press and will be printed in the same manner as the Memoirs now presented to the public, and may be purchased with the Catalogue of his writings separately to bind with the present Volume, or may be had bound up with four Sermons which my father desired me to print, making therewith a second volume.

I had an expectation of presenting the public with an Engraving of a striking likeness of my father, to be prefixed to the present volume. In this expectation I have been disappointed. I hope however to be able to do it, by the time the second Volume will make its appearance.

J. P.

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## P R E F A C E.



**M**Y father, Dr. Priestley, having taken the trouble of writing down the principal occurrences of his life, to the period of his arrival in this country, that account is now presented to the public in the state in which he left it, one or two trifling alterations excepted. The simple unaffected manner in which it is written, will be deemed, I have no doubt, far more interesting, than if the narrative itself had been made the text of a more laboured composition.

Independent of the desire, so universal among mankind, to know somewhat of the private as well as the public history of those who have made themselves eminent among their fellow citizens, the life of my father is likely to be more useful as well as more interesting than those of the generality of literary men; not only as it is an account of great industry combined with great abilities, successfully exerted for the extension of human improvement, but because it affords a striking proof of the value  
of



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of rational christianity, adopted upon mature reflection and practiced with habitual perseverance.

Few men have had to struggle for so many years with circumstances more straitened and precarious than my father ; few men have ventured to attack so many or such inveterate prejudices respecting the prevalent religion of his country, or have advanced bolder or more important opinions in opposition to the courtly politics of the powers that be ; few have had to encounter more able opponents in his literary career, or have been exposed to such incessant and vindictive obloquy, from men of every description, in return for his unremitting exertions in the cause of truth ; yet none have more uniformly proceeded with a single eye, regardless of consequences, to act as his conviction impelled him, and his conscience dictated. His conduct brought with it its own reward, reputation and respect from the most eminent of his contemporaries, the affectionate attachment of most valuable friends, and a cheerfulness of disposition arising in part from conscious rectitude which no misfortunes could long repress. But to me it seems, that conscious rectitude alone would hardly, of itself, have been able to support him under some  
of

## P R E F A C E.

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of the afflictions he was doomed to bear. He had a farther resource, to him never failing and invaluable, a firm persuasion of the benevolence of the Almighty towards all his creatures, and the conviction that every part of his own life, like every part of the whole system, was preordained for the best upon the whole of existence. Had he entertained the gloomy notions of Calvinism in which he was brought up, this cheering source of contentment and resignation would probably have failed him, and irritation and despondency would have gained an unhappy ascendancy. But by him the deity was not regarded as an avenging tyrant, punishing, for the sake of punishing his weak and imperfect creatures, but as a wise and kind parent, inflicting those corrections only that are necessary to bring our dispositions to the proper temper, and to fit us for the highest state of happiness of which our natures are ultimately capable.

With these views of the present and the future, it is no wonder that he submitted with perfect resignation to the inevitable vicissitudes of human life, and looked forward to futurity, as a period of existence when his capacity for receiving happiness would be greater because his capacity for communicating it would be enlarged.

My

My father's narrative closing with his arrival in this country, where he has done so much for the promotion of useful knowledge of all kinds, I have completed the account of his life from that period to the termination of it. The Notes have been added to the narrative as desirable illustrations of the passages to which they refer.

I have likewise thought it proper to add a review of my father's literary labours, in order to give the reader a knowledge of his opinions on many important subjects, likewise, of the share in the increase of human knowledge, which may be justly ascribed to his exertions. The Appendices giving an account of his Chemical, Philosophical, Metaphysical, Political and Miscellaneous writings, as well as the Summary of his religious opinions, are written by my friend Judge Cooper, formerly of Manchester in England. For the Appendix containing an analysis of my father's Theological writings, I am indebted to the Rev. W. Christie, formerly of Montrose in Scotland.

The work might have been made more interesting as well as entertaining, had I deemed myself at liberty to have published letters addressed to my father

by

## P R E F A C E.

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by persons of eminence in this country, as well as in Europe. But those communications that were intended to be private, shall remain so; as I do not think I have a right to amuse the public either against, or without, the inclinations of those who confided their correspondence to his care.

I regret, that more of the present work is not the production of my father's pen; and I hope the reader will make allowance for the imperfection of that portion of it, for which I have made myself responsible.

JOSEPH PRIESTLEY.

NORTHUMBERLAND, PENNSYLVANIA,

May 1st, 1805.