

**‘Reason’s Dim Telescope’:  
A Poetic Tirade Against Joseph Priestley, F.R.S.**

by

A. V. Simcock

*Museum of the History of Science, Broad Street, Oxford OX1 3AZ*

The famous riots on Bastille Day, 14 July 1791, which destroyed the house and laboratory of Joseph Priestley, F.R.S. (1733-1804) at Fair Hill, just south of Birmingham, occasioned much contemporary comment, usually sympathetic to Priestley. Many of the accounts and comments have been quoted by historians.<sup>1</sup> But the highly literate communities of Birmingham and nearby places like Walsall and Lichfield left others that have remained obscure. It is interesting to stumble across them from time to time – for even such a bigoted tirade as the one printed below can give fresh insights into the attitudes which shaped the event.

I have taken this poem from a rather odd book entitled *Poems by Mrs. Pickering*, printed at Birmingham in 1794.<sup>2</sup> The book consists of three sections, separately paginated, containing respectively poems by Mrs Pickering, by her patron and encourager John Morfitt, and by the editor and organizer of the volume, Joseph Weston of Solihull. Mrs Pickering, born Priscilla Pointon (ca.1750-1801), was blind from the age of 12, and, with her harmless social verse and precocious personality, was taken up as a kind of prodigy by the literary circles of the west midlands, especially at Chester and Lichfield. Her first volume of poems, in 1770, contained 52 pages of subscribers!<sup>3</sup> By the time of the second volume in 1794 she had been married and widowed. Both books were published with the same motive – to raise some financial support for ‘Prissy’ in a way that did not smack of charity.

The midlands society within which she moved was the heartland of English intellectual liberalism – the world of the Birmingham Lunar Society, the Lichfield literary clique of Erasmus Darwin and Anna Seward, and the business and industrial axis of Birmingham-Colebrookdale-Potteries-Chester. There was, of course, Church and King conservatism in these circles, especially among their noble patrons and to some extent in the church and legal professions. But generally speaking it was an environment entirely suitable for Joseph Priestley, full of liberals, Dissenters, lovers of science and supporters of the French Revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Mrs Pickering’s friend John Morfitt held very different views, and expressed them in ‘A Poetical Effusion ...’, printed below.<sup>5</sup> It voices an extreme, jingoistic conservatism, and speaks for the attitude of mind which both created and justified the Birmingham riots. It was written in 1791 or 1792, during the justification

phase, the period which extended from the riots in 1791 to Priestley's departure for America on 7 April 1794. Priestley had continued to be the butt of intense public invective, focused especially by the court case over compensation in 1792. While the value of his house and furniture was not particularly in dispute, that of his library, apparatus and personal manuscripts was vigorously challenged, in court and outside.<sup>6</sup> It was this continuing bitterness against him, and the danger of further violence, as well as the outbreak of war with France in 1793, that drove him into exile.

While Morfitt's poem belongs to this aftermath, there is no reason to doubt that it equally represents opinion at the time of the riots. Indeed, it goes well with a broadside print published two weeks before the riots, on 1 July, which shows 'Doctor Phlogiston, The Priestley politician or the Political Priest!' with various seditious writings, some of them in flames, and standing on a book entitled 'Bible explained Away'.<sup>7</sup> If its date is authentic, the print must have played a part in arousing the rioters' feelings. In the event the 'mob' had more immediate incitement: from the Anglican clergy, it has usually been supposed, though contemporary accounts were more ready to blame the magistrates. Yet even some of Priestley's friends felt that he was himself 'one of the primary causes', and should have kept to natural philosophy instead of 'rousing the spirit of bigotry' by pronouncing upon political and religious matters.<sup>8</sup> Priestley of course saw his moral duties differently, and was always first and foremost a man of religion.

John Morfitt (1758-1809) was an Oxford-educated barrister in practice in Birmingham. A Yorkshireman like Priestley, he was the son of a clergyman. In the year of the riots he published a compendium of Acts of Parliament relating to Birmingham. Later, during the Napoleonic Wars, he wrote a patriotic, call-to-arms pamphlet.<sup>9</sup> Some of his poems are jingoistic songs written to be sung at the 'True Blue Club', and Priestley is vituperated in several of them. The Association of Loyal True Blues, and the Church and King Club, surfaced in Birmingham during 1792, but certainly existed secretly before then, and may well have been the cabals in which the 1791 riots were plotted. Of the instigators whose names are known, several were leaders of these societies.<sup>10</sup> And Morfitt, who was associated especially with the True Blues, can be taken to express not only the opinions but also the hysteria of which they were a breeding ground.

It is easy for historians to dismiss hysterical bigotry – especially when expressed in verse. But Morfitt was an intelligent and sane man, as typical of one attitude among the educated middle class of his time as were those with liberal inclinations, of whom we hear so much more. He believed sincerely that the English legal system, the hierarchies in English life and government, and of course the Anglican Church, were perfectly evolved and unassailably right. The image of the 'Pyramid' in his poem is not a random one: this is just how stable (and durable) he felt the established system was, and conversely how unstable he imagined it would be if turned on its head by radicals. He saw such subversion in democracy and the ideals of the French revolution, and in religious sectarianism – especially in Unitarianism, which denies the trinity (hence his emphatic description of God as 'tri-une').

But these time-worn ingredients of English controversy were joined in 1791 by a rarer issue. While political and religious questions have always appeared to be at the heart of the riots, Morfitt's poem gives evidence of Priestley as the scapegoat of an irrational distrust of science. The print of 'Doctor Phlogiston' carries the same implication. And so does the mob's cry: the conventional 'Church and King for ever' was preceded by 'No philosophers', by which (in the vocabulary of the time) they meant scientists.<sup>11</sup> The controversy over compensation shows the same antipathy. A scientist and a Unitarian, Priestley was the perfect example of how the scientific mind – 'Reason's dim telescope' – threatened the premises upon which the stability of society was assumed to depend. 'Reason' was used as a term of abuse by some nonconformists to describe any attitude not subservient to Biblical and spiritual truth. Hence there were like-minded people as well as religious and political opponents who saw Priestley's science, and also the industrial technology with which it was associated, as both blasphemous in itself and blind to the real truth, that of 'things divine'.

Morfitt enthusiastically deploys scientific terms in his 'Effusion'. An 'electric flash' has dramatic prominence at the start; then 'steams / Of philosophic sulphur' reveal that it is the Devil at work in Priestley's laboratory; and 'optics' and 'telescope' are used to suggest *limitations* to vision. The Diabolical 'steams' introduce the smokey imagery which is maintained (quite cleverly) throughout the poem – especially in the last stanza where the pure breezes of Birmingham are 'tainted by thy breath', his fiendish message is 'Flam'd from the pulpit', and finally his home and laboratory ('Sedition's Temples') lie in ruins, 'smoking'.

This attack on science invites comparison with the doctrinal prejudices which confronted Galileo in 1633, or with the defensive arguments used in the evolution debate of 1860. It seems in a way more sinister, for scientific equipment and the very business of experiment and observation are condemned as if, linked with liberal theology, they not only create atmospheric pollution but threaten to destroy Christian civilization. It would be interesting to know how far the mob, which deliberately included Priestley's scientific equipment and library among its targets, was consciously venting a hatred of science – to what extent they were attacking 'Doctor Phlogiston' rather than just a 'political priest'. It certainly seems probable, from the evidence of Morfitt's poem, that science was one of the bugbears used to frighten and provoke them.

The poem is written in unrhyming decasyllabics, in stanzas of inconsistent length. The dominant verse form at the time was the decasyllabic rhyming couplet, which Erasmus Darwin (a friend of Priestley) employed with such mastery. Morfitt may be dissociating himself intentionally from Darwin and his circle (even though Mrs Pickering was part of it), for 'Darwinian' poetry, as it was called, was liberal and friendly to science, and often took science and industry as its themes. Morfitt's style is more akin to the verse drama, and it may be that he had links with a theatre or a musical society, like many other amateur poets.<sup>12</sup> Or perhaps there was enough scope for this sort of thing at the True Blue Club. A phrase like 'Away / To Bedlam-Regimen ...' is particularly theatrical: one can imagine him declaiming it in a histrionic manner before an audience of 'true blues'. One

can also imagine the same kind of thing being spouted by the inciters of the riots. It seems likely that John Morfitt may have been one of them.

A POETICAL EFFUSION,

*On the Religious and Political Character of Dr. P—y.*

PRESUMPTUOUS man! can thy *electric flash*  
Oppose the great artillery of the sky,  
And mock the rolling thunder? can thy steams  
Of philosophic sulphur dim the blaze  
Of light celestial? dares thy earth-born rant  
Insult the seraph choirs, that ceaseless sing  
Their loud Hosannas to the TRI-UNE GOD?

Child of the dust! thy optics cannot bear  
*Terrestrial* glory; the meridian sun  
Dazzles thy sense: the smallest blade of grass  
That drinks the dew is mystery to thee.  
And canst thou level, with unfalt'ring hand,  
Reason's dim telescope at things divine –  
Incomprehensibly divine? Away  
To Bedlam-Regimen, dark rooms and straw!  
How dar'st thou question the Almighty's word?  
Can truth speak falshood? God himself deceive?

With *giant* arm, that wars with *truth* and *heav'n*,  
The glorious PYRAMID of English law  
Thou gladly would'st *reverse*; and crush the *crown*  
Beneath the people's overwhelming *Base*.  
Vain thought! like EGYPT'S, the stupendous pile  
Shall stand; the lasting WONDER of the WORLD!

Well may thy sacrilegious hands assail  
All *earthly* dignities, that dare invade  
Heav'n's awful constitution – wrest the crown  
Eternal from the pow'r that gave thee breath,  
Thus loudly to blaspheme! Contemner vile  
Of what is sacred deem'd in earth and heav'n,  
Bridle thy *dragon* lips, nor let thy *smoke*  
Ascend for ever! 'Troubled ocean, cease  
Thy factious foam; nor cast up endless mire!'

Pure was the breeze that fans this 'seat of arts',  
 Ere tainted by thy breath: in every street  
 The voice of labour sung it's cares.  
 The Church and Sectaries, harmonious, breath'd  
 The genuine Spirit of fraternal love. –  
 But, when thy puritanic *scowl* appear'd,  
 The heavens grew dark; and thy *familiar fiend*  
 Flam'd from the pulpit, thunder'd from the press,  
 Till all was uproar, and just vengeance hurl'd  
 SEDITION'S TEMPLES, smoking, to the ground!

---

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See especially John Alfred Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life ... From 1741 to 1841*, Birmingham, 1868, vol.1, pp.472-499, quoting many extracts from contemporary newspapers, poems, etc.; R. E. W. Maddison & Francis R. Maddison, 'Joseph Priestley and the Birmingham Riots', *Notes Rec. R. Soc. Lond.*, 12, pp.98-113, 1956, quoting several contemporary accounts, the only hostile one being William Cobbett's; R. B. Rose, 'The Priestley Riots of 1791', *Past and Present*, 18, pp.68-88, 1960. Other studies of Priestley which cover the riots include Anne D. Holt, *A Life of Joseph Priestley*, Oxford University Press, London, 1931; F. W. Gibbs, *Joseph Priestley: Adventurer in Science and Champion of Truth*, T. Nelson, London, 1965; A. D. Orange, *Joseph Priestley*, Shire Publications, Princes Risborough, 1974; Robert E. Schofield in *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, ed. Charles Coulston Gillispie, vol.11, New York, pp.139-147, 1975; Jennifer Tann, Stephen Price & Dorothy McCulla, *Joseph Priestley in Birmingham*, University of Aston, City of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham Central Library, Birmingham, 1980. See also *Letters of Erasmus Darwin*, ed. D. King-Hele, Cambridge University Press, pp.215-216, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Mrs Pickering [& others], *Poems by Mrs. Pickering. To which are added Poetical Sketches by the Author, and Translator of Philotoxi Ardenae*, Birmingham, 1794. Bodleian Library, 280 e. 3193; British Library, 11633 bb. 33; Cambridge University Library, 7720. d. 1255.

<sup>3</sup> Priscilla Pointon, *Poems on Several Occasions*, Birmingham, 1770. For biographical notes and samples of her verse see Charles Henry Poole & Russell Markland, eds, *Staffordshire Poets*, N. Ling & Co., Lytham, pp.387-389, 1928; Roger Lonsdale, ed., *Eighteenth Century Women Poets*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.272-276, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> For impressions of these literary and scientific circles see for instance E. V. Lucas, *A Swan and her Friends*, Methuen, London, 1907; R. E. Schofield, *The Lunar Society of Birmingham*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1963; Gibbs, *op. cit.* (note 1); Desmond King-Hele, *Doctor of Revolution: The Life and Genius of Erasmus Darwin*, Faber & Faber, London, 1977; T. H. Levere, *Poetry Realized in Nature: S. T. Coleridge and Early Nineteenth-Century Science*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981; Dorothy A. Stansfield, *Thomas Beddoes M.D. 1760-1808: Chemist, Physician, Democrat*, D. Reidel, Dordrecht, 1984; Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets*, Macmillan, London, 1986; Maureen McNeil, *Under the Banner of Science: Erasmus Darwin and his Age*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> The poem by John Morfitt is from Pickering, *op. cit.* (note 2), sig.E2<sup>v</sup>-E3<sup>v</sup>, pp.68-70 of the second pagination sequence (section entitled 'Poetical Sketches'). It was also reproduced in Langford, *op. cit.* (note 1), vol.1, pp.490-491.

<sup>6</sup> A very full account is provided by Maddison & Maddison, *op. cit.* (note 1), and Douglas McKie, 'Priestley's Laboratory and Library and Other of his Effects', *Notes Rec. R. Soc. Lond.*, 12, pp.114-136, 1956.

<sup>7</sup> It is reproduced in Orange, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.37, and R. G. W. Anderson & Christopher Lawrence, eds, *Science, Medicine and Dissent: Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)*, Wellcome Trust, Science Museum, London, p.28, 1987.

---

<sup>8</sup> Maddison & Maddison, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.99, quoting Catherine Hutton; see also King-Hele, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp.212-213, 1977.

<sup>9</sup> John Morfitt, *An Abstract of all the Acts of Parliament, that relate to the Town of Birmingham and Hamlet of Deritend*, Birmingham, 1791; *idem*, *The British Tocsin; or, the War with France justified, and the charge sounded*, Birmingham, 1803; his other work of verse was *Philotoxi Ardenae, the Woodmen of Arden ...*, Birmingham, 1788. For biographical information see Langford, *op. cit.* (note 1), vol.2, pp.280-288; Joseph Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses ... 1715-1886 ...*, vol.3, Oxford, p.978, 1888.

<sup>10</sup> Langford, *op. cit.* (note 1), vol.2, pp.162-169; Rose, *op. cit.* (note 1), especially pp.78-83.

<sup>11</sup> King-Hele, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.212, 1977.

<sup>12</sup> Erasmus Darwin's chief poetic works are *The Botanic Garden*, London, 1789-91, and *The Temple of Nature, or The Origin of Society*, London, 1803. Other significant books of verse from the Lichfield and Birmingham region include Miss [Mary] Whateley, *Original Poems on Several Occasions*, London, 1764; [F. N. C. Mundy], *Needwood Forest*, Lichfield, 1776; Stephen Chatterton, *Poems*, London, 1795; Anna Seward, *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward ...*, Edinburgh, 1810. And see note 4 above.

[from *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, vol.49 part 1, 1995, pp.79-84]