

Joseph Johnson – Priestley’s Publisher and Bookseller**A
CATALOGUE OF BOOKS**

**Written by
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And Printed for
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LONDON**

(At the back of most of Priestley’s publications is this heading for a list of his works with J. Johnson.)

Joseph Johnson (November 1738 – December 1809) was an influential 18th-century London bookseller and publisher. His publications covered a wide variety of genres and a broad spectrum of opinions on important issues. Johnson is best known for publishing the works of radical thinkers and religious dissenters such as Joseph Priestley.

Johnson was born in Everton, Liverpool. At the age of fifteen, he was apprenticed to a London bookseller who specialized in publishing religious tracts. After this apprenticeship Johnson opened his own business focused primarily on religious works. In his late twenties, Johnson formed friendships with Joseph Priestley and Henry Fuseli that were to shape the rest of his life. Johnson commissioned a portrait of his close friend Priestley from his other close friend Henry Fuseli around 1783. Johnson’s friendship with Priestley led him to discard the Baptist faith of his youth and to adopt Unitarianism, as well as to pursue forms of political dissent. Johnson’s success as a publisher can be explained in large part through his association with Priestley. Through Priestley’s recommendation, Johnson was able to issue the works of many Dissenters, especially those from Warrington Academy: the poet, essayist, and children’s author Anna Laetitia Barbauld; her brother, the physician and writer, John Aikin; the naturalist and the political economist Thomas Malthus. By printing the works of Priestley and other of the Warrington tutors, Johnson also made himself known to an even larger network of Dissenting intellectuals, including those in the Lunar Society, which expanded his business further.



Joseph Johnson



Henry Fuseli



**Fuseli’s painting of Priestley
commissioned by J. Johnson**

Johnson published over 130 titles by Priestley; the majority of Priestley’s theological works, but also his scientific works, such as *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air* (1774–77) in which Priestley announced his discovery of dephlogisticated air (oxygen). Johnson also published the works of Carl Wilhelm Scheele and Antoine Lavoisier, both made claims of having discovered oxygen. When Lavoisier began to publish works in France on the “new chemistry”, Johnson had these translated and printed, despite his association with Priestley who argued strenuously against Lavoisier’s new system.

As Johnson became successful and his reputation grew, other publishers began including him in syndicates that spread the risk of publishing a costly or inflammatory book among several firms. In the 1770s and 1780s, Johnson expanded his business, publishing important works in medicine and children’s literature as well as the popular poetry of William Cowper and Erasmus Darwin.

Throughout his career, Johnson helped shape the thought of his era not only through his publications, but support of innovative writers and thinkers. He fostered the open discussion of new ideas at his famous Tuesday night dinners, the regular attendees of which became known as the "Johnson Circle". Although usually separated by geography, such thinkers would meet and debate with one another at Johnson's house in London. This network not only brought authors into contact with each other, it also brought new writers to Johnson's business. For example, Priestley introduced John Newton a former slave-ship captain to Johnson and Johnson published Newton's *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* (1788). Johnson also befriended Mary Wollstonecraft and published her, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which argues that well-educated women will be good wives and mothers and ultimately contribute positively to the nation. With this broad network of acquaintances and reputation for free-thinking publications, Johnson became the favorite publisher of a generation of writers and thinkers.

Johnson's publications were rarely luxury goods: he priced his merchandise competitively, but always within the reach of the middle class, the audience he most wanted to serve. One way that he reduced costs was by printing texts in the provinces and then importing them to London; many of Priestley's works, for example, were printed locally in Birmingham.

In 1788, Johnson and Thomas Christie founded the *Analytical Review* to which Priestley frequently contributed. It was a gadfly publication, which offered readers a summary and analysis of the flood of new publications issuing from the presses at the end of the 18th century and provided a forum for radical political and religious ideas. Although it aimed at impartiality, its articles were often supportive of the French revolutionaries.

In the 1790s, Johnson aligned himself with the supporters of the French Revolution, and published an increasing number of political pamphlets. In 1799, he was indicted on charges of seditious libel and spent six months in prison, under relatively comfortable conditions. In 1794 Johnson considered emigrating to America with Priestley to escape the increasing pressure from the government.

Johnson published more books in more fields than any other publisher of his time. Every well known writer of the second half of the eighteenth century in medicine, science, religion, political thought, philosophy, education, and poetry published at least one work with him. His publications helped to "demystify medicine" to the general public and were integral to the scientific revolution.

After Priestley's death in 1804 Johnson published in two volumes: *Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley to the Year 1795 written by Himself with a Continuation to the time of his death by his son Joseph Priestley and observations of his writings by Thomas Cooper and William Christie to which are added four Posthumous Discourses*. And later accepted for sale in England 100 sets of Priestley last work *Notes on all Books of Scripture* published privately in Northumberland, PA.

For 200 years, it was assumed that all of Johnson's business records and correspondence had been destroyed, but in the early 1990s, one of his "letter books" was discovered in an old desk by a family member who recognized their importance. It contained copies of letters written from 1795 to 1809 to business associates as well as friends including Priestley.

Sources

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Wikipedia, "Joseph Jonson (Publisher)" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Johnson_\(publisher\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Johnson_(publisher))