

WILLIAM PRIESTLEY (1771-1838, 2nd son of Rev. Dr. Joseph Priestley)

By Tony Rail

At college, Joseph Priestley shared a room with the talented linguist John Alexander (1736-65), Alexander had realized, what others hadn't, that a word or phrase written in first-century Greek, might have a different gist and meaning to the same phrase written three centuries later. Words do not stand still. In Tudor England, traitors plotting the Queen's death were called *naughty*; nowadays, *naughty* is when four-year-old Sally walks indoors with muddy boots. In Dr Priestley's day, works of God—the fiery sunsets from the Laki volcano, inspired *awe*; nowadays, *awesome* might refer to a sandwich filling. When Dr Priestley described his wife's generous *temper*, he wasn't accusing her of being a crosspatch; and when he wrote that his middle son's *temper* would hardly suit trade, he simply meant that William's *disposition* was not inclined towards a career in business. He was not suggesting, as some modern historians have mistakenly supposed, that William had a short fuse, and was disposed to outbursts of violent anger.

In fact, William Priestley was placid, softly-spoken, and shy: he lived in dread of being stopped and questioned about his father's writings. He was a talented flautist, and a craftsman who carved wooden chessmen, and built architectural models: his grandson became an architect.¹ He was a scholar who studied Greek, Norse, and Anglo-Saxon; who read Chaucer, and the early-modern English of Malory, Tyndale and Shakespeare. William was passionate about nature; he was not cut out for commerce, but he had to earn a living.

So, William toiled in the accounts office at William Wilkinson's ironworks at Basse-Indre, France. However, whilst his elder brother, Joseph, had thrived on stock tallying, double-entry book-keeping, and reading business letters, William would rather have been plotting poetry, playing his flute, or reading Voltaire and Wieland in their native tongues. William quit, and came to America in 1793. He studied farming with William Wells at Brattleboro VT,² before joining his parents and brothers at Point Township, early in 1795. As his brother Harry was finding it difficult to clear his land of trees, William bought a share in Harry's farm so they could work together. Their father hoped that the boys' farm would soon provide all their food. However, the newly-turned soil was poor: some neighbouring farmers were selling up. William and Harry soldiered on, tending their lime kilns twenty-four hours a day to make lime to sweeten the soil; until young Harry died.³

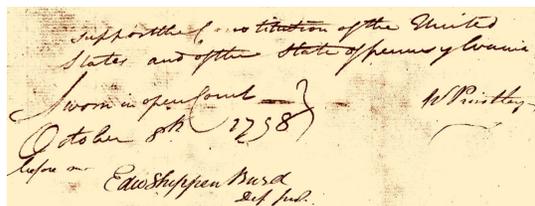
William's mother, Mary, who was already unwell, never recovered from the shock of Harry's death. When William married Margaret (Peggy) Foulke, February 3, 1796, his new wife, moved in to the old Priestley home to nurse her mother-in-law. Peggy took over the running of the household, and managed Dr. Priestley's dietary care—he suffered a life-long bowel condition, with extensive periods of continuous diarrhoea. She introduced the doctor to the benefits of American cornmeal as a substitute for European wheat flour. Despite Peggy's care (she even brought in her sister so that between the two of them they could tend Mrs Priestley twenty-four hours a day) Mary Priestley died Saturday September 17, 1796. Dr. Priestley moved in with his elder son, Joseph Jr, whose family included his wife Elizabeth Ryland Priestley, two children, and nine-year-old Tom Cooper, son of Joseph Jr's friend Thomas Cooper. This arrangement continued when the new Priestley House was finished in 1797.

These were troublesome times. During 1797, '98, Dr. Priestley was hounded by the Federalist press who'd heard of his plans for visiting France.⁴ Then, in December 1798, Joseph Jr travelled to England, being away for eighteen months. In his absence, Thomas Cooper became a more frequent visitor, often staying over rather than taking the ferry back to Sunbury. Cooper and Elizabeth Priestley collaborated in writing political essays, published in the *Sunbury and Northumberland Gazette*. More damagingly, they combined in inveigling Dr. Priestley into becoming active in political agitation. Things came to a head in September 1799, when

Thomas Cooper printed a seditious handbill that accused President Adams of undermining the Constitution, by seeking ‘to increase the authority and prerogative of the executive, and to reduce by degrees to a mere name, the influence of the people.’ Dr. Priestley helped distribute this handbill around Point Township. An anti-Priestleian newspaper accused Priestley of sedition, and challenged the doctor to clear his name or face prosecution.⁵ Dr. Priestley responded by publishing his controversial two-volumes of *Letters to the inhabitants of Northumberland*, November and December 1799. This embarrassed Priestley’s friends, particularly John Vaughan,⁶ who blamed the adverse influences of Thomas Cooper and Elizabeth Priestley. It made life unbearable for the shy William, who, a few months before, had decided to give up the farm, and seek a career elsewhere. William, who had rented a room in Philadelphia, to better explore new career options, found it impossible to cross the street without being accosted and interrogated about his father’s activities.

William visited Priestley House, Tuesday, April 8, 1800, to discuss his plans, which now leant towards starting a school. To help him, Dr. Priestley had been trying to raise money to buy William’s share in Harry’s farm, which he wanted to keep in the family. There were other matters too: his father’s involvement in political controversy, the collaboration between Cooper and Elizabeth, and their excessive influence over his father. Father and son argued, ending with the doctor accusing his son of stubbornness (‘dares thus the kettle say the pot is black!’). William also had a commission from Peggy to discover if Elizabeth had reverted to using wheat flour for the doctor’s meals. William went into the kitchen to question the kitchen-maid, and examine the flour boxes for himself. Elizabeth, already seething from William’s other criticisms, might have felt that William was suggesting that her cooking was harmful to his father. Thus, when, six days later, the entire family, except for young Tom Cooper, fell ill with symptoms of food poisoning, Elizabeth retaliated with the spiteful allegation that William must have poisoned them, that he must have put arsenic in the flour. Of course he hadn’t.⁷ Nonetheless, some modern historians, those who misunderstood Dr. Priestley’s use of the word *temper*, have repeated the ridiculous notion.

For nine months, William explored the banks of the Ohio and Mississippi, trying to find somewhere to settle. In the end, William, with a crate of schoolbooks and equipment, settled his family, which now included a son and a daughter, in French-owned Pointe Coupee parish, LA. Subsequently, perhaps about 1807, he was seduced into buying a profitable sugar farm on fertile lands on the Mississippi flood plain. ⁸



... support the Constitution of the United States and of the State of Pennsylvania.

W Priestley

Sworn in open court October 8th 1798 before me Edw Shippin Burd, Dep Jud.

Portion of the petition of William Priestley for US citizenship (copy left, text on right).

¹ Henry Hobson Richardson, 1838-86.

² Rev William Wells (1744-1827), had been a farmer and Unitarian minister at Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, England.

³ Henry Priestley died Dec 11, 1795, aged 18 years.

⁴ The doctor’s motive in planning a trip to France was solely to recover monies which had been invested in French government funds.

⁵ *Porcupine’s Gazette* (Bustleton, PA), Sep 20, 1799, edited by William Cobbett.

⁶ John Vaughan (1756-1841) was Treasurer and Librarian of the American Philosophical Society.

⁷ William hadn’t been near the house since the day of the argument; the family had suffered no ill effects in the meantime.

⁸ More can be found on William Priestley in Tony Rail, ‘William Priestley vindicated,’ *Enlightenment and Dissent* No.28 (2012), 150-195 [http://www.english.qmul.ac.uk/drwilliams/journal/intro.html].