PIONEERS OF PROGRESS.
MEN OF SCIENCE.
JOSEPH PRIESTLEY

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D. H. PEACOCK & S. CHAPMAN

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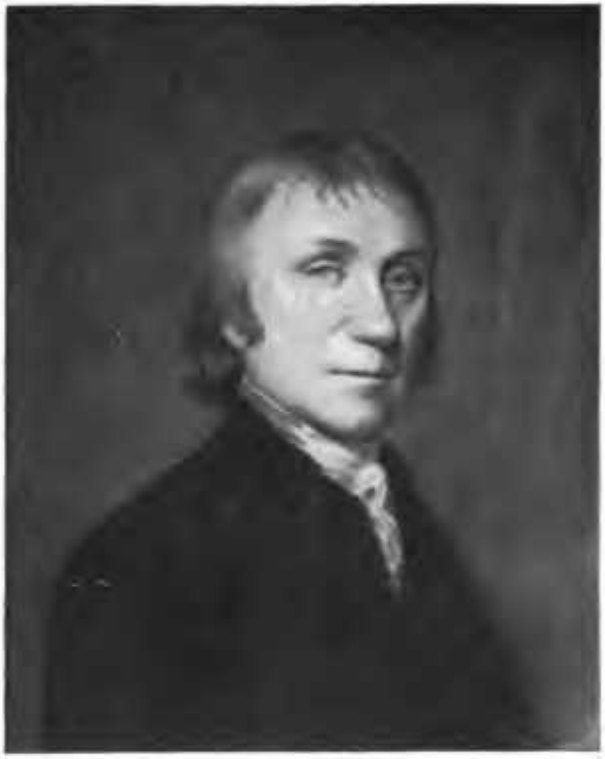

JOSEPH PRIESTLEY

FROM A DRAWING IN PASTELS BY JAMES SHARPLES IN THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

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MEN OF SCIENCE

EDITED BY S. CHAPMAN, M.A., D.Sc.

JOSEPH PRIESTLEY

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CHAPTER I.

PARENTAGE—HOME LIFE—EARLY EDUCATION.

JOSEPH PRIESTLEY is probably one of the most interesting of the notable men of the eighteenth century. To his age he was perhaps most famous as a dauntless controversialist in politics and religion; he himself regarded the study of Christian Religion and Theology as his life-work, while to-day his chief title to fame rests on his scientific work.

Joseph Priestley was born at Fieldhead, a hamlet included in the parish of Birstall, which lies about six miles south-west of Leeds; the district is now closely dotted with the manufacturing towns which give the West Riding of Yorkshire its wealth and fame and unfortunately also its grime and murk. Leeds, Halifax, Wakefield, Huddersfield, Bradford, are all within a comparatively short distance of Birstall. Nevertheless in Priestley's day the district must have been a charming one; it is a gently undulating region, sufficiently far from the bleak moorlands of the Central Pennine Chain to be free from the grimness which so deeply influenced the lives and characters of the Brontë family, but yet sufficiently hilly to develop that sturdiness of character usually assumed to be lacking from the dwellers in flatter regions. Priestley was born on 13th March, 1733, the eldest child of Jonas and Mary Priestley, and was

named after his grandfather, Joseph Priestley, a maker and dresser of woollen cloth, or after his maternal grandfather, Joseph Swift, a farmer and maltster of Shafton, a village situated about six miles south-east of Wakefield. Jonas Priestley, his father, was also a weaver and dresser of cloth; this occupation was of course carried on at home according to the custom of the period, and in the district may still be seen many old houses possessing the numerous small windows necessary to give light to the looms. The Priestleys were a sturdy, long-lived stock with the evenness of temperament that comes from generations of healthy ancestors.

Priestley's mother died in 1740, soon after the birth of her youngest son. She had, in all, four sons and two daughters, and owing to the difficulty of looking after such a numerous and young family, Joseph and his brother Timothy were early committed to the care of their grandfather, Joseph Swift, with whom they remained almost uninterruptedly till their mother's death. Of his mother Priestley says: "It is but little that I can recollect of my mother. I remember, however, that she was careful to teach me the Assembly's Catechism, and to give me the best instructions the little time I was at home. Once in particular, when I was playing with a pin, she asked me where I got it; and on telling her that I found it at my uncle's who lived very near to my father, and where I had been playing with my cousins, she made me carry it back again—no doubt to impress my mind, as it could not fail to do, with a clear idea of the distinction of property and the importance of attending to it." As to his home life Priestley tells us: "My mother was a woman of exemplary piety, and my father also had a strong sense of