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Electrical Enlightenment: Joseph Priestley's Historical and Experimental Studies of Electricity

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Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) was one of the most controversial public figures of the eighteenth century. A true Enlightenment polymath, he wrote more than two hundred books, pamphlets, sermons, and essays on subjects ranging from science to politics and from metaphysics to theology. He was a religious dissenter, political radical, vocal supporter of the French Revolution, and lifelong defender of the losing side in the Chemical Revolution. Priestley is best known for having “discovered” oxygen in the 1770s and for his lasting contributions to pneumatic chemistry. Yet his first scientific fascination, while teaching at Warrington Academy, was electricity—one of the greatest scientific fads of the Enlightenment. Priestley's work on electricity, both historical and experimental, culminated in his *History and Present State of Electricity* (1767), which became a standard textbook on the subject for nearly a century, and went through numerous editions and translations. Situating Priestley's electrical investigations against the background of eighteenth-century ideals of scientific theory and practice, especially concerning physics, experimental philosophy, and natural history, illuminates the relations between science, society, and epistemology in the Enlightenment.