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Coleridge and the Lunaticks

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In the West of England … there has been a succession of authors, who … have fancied that they were born to effect some mighty revolution in the different departments to which they applied themselves. We need only run over the names of Darwin, Day, Beddoes, Southey, Coleridge, and Priestley to make ourselves perfectly intelligible.

Francis Jeffrey, ‘Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley’

On 28 February 1794, the Reverend George Coleridge, master at Mr Newcome’s Academy in Hackney received a letter from his younger brother, Private Silas Tomkyn Comberbache, which described his lodgings in the Henley Workhouse and his duties to a companion suffering from the smallpox, and listed some bills for settlement (CL, i, 69). On the same day, at the nearby Gravel Pit Meeting House in Hackney, the beleaguered radical, Dr Joseph Priestley, in a sermon on The present State of Europe compared with Antient Prophecies, looked around at the social and political turmoil in Britain, and warned his congregation that the end of the world was approaching. Five weeks later, as young ‘Comberbache’ was discharged from the King’s Dragoons and set off for Cambridge to resume his undergraduate career, Priestley and his family left England for permanent exile in Pennsylvania.

Experimental scientist, radical politician, and heterodox theologian, Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) was one of a number of celebrated scientific men who lived around Birmingham in the latter half of the eighteenth century and met regularly in a society ‘at the full moon’ to discuss their work and contemporary affairs. Members of the so-called Lunar Society had no formal membership, no constitution, nor did they record or publish their deliberations. It is often claimed today that this society had more influence on eighteenth-century science than the Royal Society.