

Inspiring Lunatics: Biographical Portraits of the Lunar Society's Erasmus Darwin, Thomas Day, and Joseph Priestley.

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Sandra J. Burr

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REVIEW

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Review Essay

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Desmond King-Hele. *Erasmus Darwin: A Life of Unequalled Achievement.* London: Giles de la Mare, 1999. Pp. x + 422. \$40.00. ISBN 1-900357-08-9

Peter Rowland. *The Life and Times of Thomas Day, 1748-1789: English Philanthropist and Author: Virtue Almost Personified.* Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996. Pp. xiv + 454. \$109.95. ISBN 0-7734-8844-8

Robert E. Schofield. *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1733-1773.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997. Pp. xii + 305. \$45.00. ISBN 0-271-01662-0

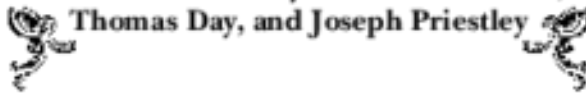
Say "Lunar Society of Birmingham" and most academics will stare blankly, despite the society's celebrity during the late eighteenth century as a free-thinking group of manufacturers and natural philosophers, situated in England's Midlands, who were the most important scientific and entrepreneurial force outside London. Founded on a fierce interest in experimentation and invention and composed primarily of Fellows of the Royal Society, the group embraced core members and visiting associates alike. Core members included Soho Works founder Matthew Boulton (1728-1809), Scottish inventor James Watt (1736-1819), Unitarian minister and chemist Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), physician and philosophical tour de force Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), Scottish physician and naturalist William Small (1734-75), engineer and educator Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744-1817), poet and children's author Thomas Day (1748-89), Scottish chemist James Keir (1735-1820), clockmaker and founder of modern geology John Whitehurst (1713-88), physician Jonathan Stokes (1755-1831), minister Robert Augustus Johnson (1745-99), Quaker arms manufacturer Samuel Galton (1753-1832), and physician and botanist William Withering (1741-99). These regulars often entertained guests such as master ceramics designer and manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood (1730-95), botanist Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1830), and many others.¹ Although a loose consortium of firm friends and kindred spirits, by December 1775 the society eventually met once a month at the light of the full moon (Schofield, pp. 141-42)—hence its name and its nickname "Lunatics," which Galton's butler coined and the Lunatics themselves embraced.² They engaged in voluminous correspondence with the leading lights of philosophy and literature across Britain, North America, and Western Europe; and their ideas and inventions [End Page 111] transformed the cultural landscape of the western world: Boulton and Watt improved the steam engine and thereby stoked the Industrial Revolution; Darwin formulated what we now call biological evolution, which his grandson Charles (1809-82) extended and systematized; Priestley discovered enough important elements, including oxygen, nitrogen, sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, and ammonia, to reconstitute chemistry; and Wedgwood, with partner Thomas Bentley (1731-80), pioneered clever marketing techniques, still used today, that touted mass-produced queen's ware and jasper ware as capstones of taste among the middle and upper classes, a lively cultural perception that crossed the Atlantic and has yet to cease.

Given these lasting cultural influences, more people should recognize the Lunatics and their achievements. To combat this general ignominy, Desmond King-Hele, Peter Rowland, and Robert E. Schofield penned biographies of three of the most eclectic of them—Darwin, Day, and Priestley, respectively—and in doing so had to confront the misinformation that haunts the earlier, strangely myopic biographical scholarship concerning them.

King-Hele's *Erasmus Darwin: A Life of Unequalled Achievement* is his third attempt to capture the enterprising life and times of Darwin. His two previous biographies—*Erasmus Darwin: Grandfather of Charles Darwin* (Scribner's, 1963) and *Doctor of Revolution: The Life and Genius of Erasmus Darwin* (Faber & Faber, 1977)—analyze Darwin the man, the poet, and the philosopher, but lack a great deal of personal information about Darwin's home, friends, and family. King-Hele had recourse to Darwin's letters for the 1977 biography, which fleshes out the spindly Darwin inhabiting the 1963 text; and the 1977 biography also delves more deeply into...

— Review Essay —

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