

Both Sides of the Moon: Erasmus Darwin, Joseph Priestley and the West Midlands' Enlightenment

A Philosopher lecturing on the Orrery (1766), **Joseph Wright (1734-1797)**, Oil on Canvas, Derby Museum & Art Gallery.

Image: Wright's painting is a celebration of scientific knowledge and the interpreter of this knowledge, the philosopher. The latter dominates the picture and explains the working of the sun and planets via an orrery, a mechanical representation of the solar system. The audience is transfixed by the demonstration, which may be showing the causes of eclipses. Light floods the scene, illuminating the philosopher and the faces of the observers. Frequently, this famous picture is interpreted as a visual expression of the Enlightenment, which Wright portrayed in its Midlands context. The painting was composed in 1766 towards the start of Wright's career and contrasts with the less celebratory imagery of his later years.

Text: Professor Maurizio Valsania

Image captions: Malcolm Dick

Summary

Studies of Enlightenment thought have concentrated on the great European thinkers such as Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau and Goethe or the Scots including David Hume and Adam Smith. Less attention has been paid to the Enlightenment in the West Midlands, but in the late 18th century, Erasmus Darwin and Joseph Priestley were recognised as international figures contributing to new ways of thinking. The West Midlands was the powerhouse of scientific and technological innovation and industrial and commercial development. The intellectually curious could observe their environment, create theories and engage in experimentation. Darwin and Priestley were two such men. Professor Maurizio Valsania explores their ideas and notes that the popular perception of Enlightenment thinking as optimistic and based on conceptions of progress is an oversimplification. Darwin and Priestley were aware of the limitations of reason, the terrifying and unknowable nature of much of the natural world and the fragility of human achievement. The paper is linked to selections from Joseph Wright's paintings which reflect in visual form the ideas of the two men.

Sections:

1. Introduction: Between Enlightenment and Romanticism
2. The Philosophical Context: From Optimism to Realism
3. Priestley: Body, Matter and Death
4. Darwin, Priestley and Romantic Materialism
5. Conclusion: Classical Order versus Romantic Nature

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