

Gunpowder Joe

Image: Political Portraiture no 3 Political Gunpowder

Image from: Birmingham City Archives, Priestley Collection by Samuel Timmins

Priestley first earned the nickname “Gunpowder Joe” in 1787, when an earlier work of his, *Reflections on the Present State of Free Inquiry in this Country*, was deliberately misquoted and taken out of context. The misquoted phrase, however, was ill advised in the extreme, especially as it was associated with the Gunpowder Plot on November 5th 1605. Priestley had been advised against including it by his great friend and editor, John Towill Rutt, but showed his usual stubbornness and independence of mind by insisting on its inclusion.

We are, as it were, laying gunpowder, grain by grain, under the old building of error and superstition, which a single spark may hereafter inflame, so as to produce an instantaneous explosion: in consequence of which, that edifice, the erection of which has been the work of ages, may be overturned in a moment, and so effectually that the same foundation can never be built upon again.

One could argue that the analogy could be employed against Priestley because of his numerous, deliberately inflammatory remarks. He seemed to delight in repeating the gunpowder analogy. In a letter to William Pitt, the young Prime Minister, he explained:

The gunpowder we are so assiduously laying grain by grain under the old building of error and superstition, in the highest regions of which they inhabit, is not composed of saltpeter, charcoal and sulphur, but consists of arguments; and if we lay mines with such materials as these, let them countermine in the same way.

Despite his protestations of peaceful intentions and methods, it was too late; the damage had already been done.

³⁵ Clark, op cit, p 154-5

³⁶ Quoted in *Ibid*

³⁷ Quoted in *Ibid*