Contents

Introduction: Dinner with Joseph Johnson 1

Part One: FIRE (1760–1770) 9
1 Authentic Narrative 13
2 Domestic Occurrences 21
3 The Enquirer 27
4 London 39

Part Two: RIOT (1770–1780) 45
5 Joineriana 49
6 Freethinker 56
7 Essays Medical and Experimental 65
8 Paint and Washes 75
9 The American War Lamented 93
10 Thoughts on the Devotional Taste 102

Part Three: REVOLT (1780–1789) 113
11 The Task 117
12 Trade Winds 135
13 Thoughts on the Education of Daughters 143
14 The Paper Age 161
15 Aphorisms on Man 174

Part Four: RUINS (1789–1791) 181
16 On Liberty 185
17 Original Stories 197
18 Views of the Ruins 216
Part Five: REFUGE (1791–1795) 235
19 Evenings at Home 239
20 Things as They Are 255
21 Things by their Right Names 270

Part Six: CAVE (1792–1799) 289
22 Paradise Lost 293
23 Vindication of the Rights of Woman 306
24 Original Poetry 327
25 A peep into the Cave of Jacobinism 339
26 The King Versus Joseph Johnson 354

Part Seven: HOUSE (1799–1809) 367
27 Idyllium. The Prison 371
28 Essays on Professional Education 383
29 Lycidas 403
30 Beachy Head 415

Afterword 429
Bibliography 435
List of Illustrations 453
Notes 455
Index 493
INTRODUCTION

Dinner with Joseph Johnson

Over the course of the eighteenth century a landscape of bookshops formed in the City of London, under the shadow of St Paul’s Cathedral. In Paternoster Row and St Paul’s Churchyard the booksellers congregated, dealing with customers from street-facing frontages, commissioning new titles and negotiating with printers and paper-makers in back offices and workshops, eating and sleeping in warrens of rooms above their businesses.

Upstairs in one of the houses in St Paul’s Churchyard there was a room with no right angles and no straight walls. Over the decades the appearance of this room altered and re-formed. For many years the most striking sight to catch the eye of visitors was a painting of a nightmare, featuring an incubus leering over a sleeping woman. The flesh-and-blood figure at the centre of the room formed an incongruous contrast to his backdrop. He was the bookseller Joseph Johnson, the proprietor of 72 St Paul’s Churchyard. Johnson was a small, bewigged man, with dark eyes. One woman who had reason to be grateful to him testified to the ‘tenderness’ of his ‘look’.1 Another acquaintance recalled that Johnson greeted visitors with ‘a good humoured face’, an outstretched hand and an open invitation on his lips. ‘How d’ye do Sir, I dine at three.’2

Once a week, between the early 1770s and the end of 1809, Joseph Johnson issued an invitation to dinner. Throughout the year he filled his dark, sloping dining room with the men and women who remade the literary landscape of the late eighteenth century. His guests did not come to dinner because of the quality of the food. Each week the fare consisted of roasted veal, boiled fish, boiled vegetables and rice pudding. There was wine to drink, although sometimes when Johnson’s shop staff joined the company they insisted on bringing their own beer – a ‘brutal’ practice, thought one more refined guest.3 Over the decades, Johnson entertained hundreds to
Introduction

dine under the eye of the incubus. And the lines of their lives – and ideas – overlapped as they crossed his path.

Let us imagine, for a moment, that the men and women who dined with Joseph Johnson are gathered around the table once again, according to their centrality to Johnson's story rather than the realities of time and place. Gradually, a picture of the community he created becomes visible beneath the painting of the nightmare. Seated at Johnson's right hand, monopolising the attention of the host, is the artist responsible for the image of incubus and sleeper, Henry Fuseli. Fuseli himself acknowledges that once he starts drinking he finds it hard to control his tongue. ‘A few glasses of wine cause his spirits to run away with him, and He always repents of his extravagance in conversation’, reports one witness to his table manners. Fuseli's chief sparring partner at dinner is a mathematician called John Bonnycastle. During working hours Bonnycastle teaches maths to trainee soldiers at the Woolwich Military Academy; during his leisure he writes books designed to reveal the beauties of mathematics to general readers. He is not an elegant eater. According to the testimony of one young guest he has an unfortunate tendency to ‘goggle’ over his plate, 'like a horse'. When he laughs his teeth are exposed at the sides, and in Fuseli’s presence he laughs and shouts in equal measure.

Sitting apart from the squabbles of Fuseli and Bonnycastle, in this imagined gathering, is Joseph Priestley. Priestley is at once a philosopher, chemist, theologian, teacher and more: there is barely an aspect of human existence to which he has not given some thought. At his own table Priestley has to be dissuaded from reading while he eats, but at Johnson’s house there is too much pleasure to be had in the company of others for Priestley to be distracted by books. Chief among his friends at the table are Benjamin Franklin, a fellow chemist increasingly concerned by the deterioration in relations between Britain and his native America; and the Unitarian minister Theophilus Lindsey, whose chapel at Essex Street, further down the Strand, is another gathering place for many of Johnson’s friends. Also clustered around Priestley are Richard Lovell Edgeworth and his brilliant novelist daughter, Maria; Erasmus Darwin, a doctor and poet whose girth is barely contained by his waistcoat; and from the younger generation, the quiet figure of another doctor, John Aikin, and John’s sister, the writer Anna Barbauld. Barbauld is usually accompanied on her visits to St Paul’s Churchyard by her husband, Rochemont, a Suffolk schoolmaster eclipsed by his brilliant wife. In letters to friends Barbauld writes of the
intensity of her pleasure in the conversation to be found at Johnson’s, although sometimes, like Fuseli, she writes the morning after dinner with wine-sodden wisdom of the perils of a late night on a tender head.

There are more men than there are women at dinner with Joseph Johnson, but Barbauld and Maria Edgeworth are by no means the only representatives in the dining room of their sex. Sometimes the company is joined by the white-capped figure of Sarah Trimmer, a children’s writer and devout Anglican who has little in common with Johnson’s more radical guests. Also present, when the boundaries of time and place are collapsed, is the poet Charlotte Smith, who finds refuge on Johnson’s list in the final years of her life. His nieces Elizabeth and Hester form part of the family unit at St Paul’s Churchyard, alongside their younger brother Rowland, a pupil at the Barbaulds’ school who will become first Johnson’s apprentice and later one of his heirs. But of all the women who gather for dinner it is the voice of Mary Wollstonecraft that can be heard most clearly across the table. It is the early opinion of another dinner guest, the philosopher William Godwin, that Wollstonecraft has a good deal too much to say for herself, but even Godwin’s attention is snagged by the clarity with which Wollstonecraft makes her views known. At this end of the table Godwin would prefer to hear from Thomas Paine, whose political writings have caused a stir in both America and Britain. He is to be disappointed since Paine, as Godwin will later acknowledge, ‘is no great talker.’ Another guest is also disappointed in Paine, although for different reasons. An aspiring poet called James Hurdis, who seriously over-estimates the extent of his own literary talent, finds Paine’s appearance as objectionable as his views. In a letter to a friend Hurdis complains that Paine’s face is red and ‘somewhat resembling in the inequality of its surface the coat of a Seville orange.’ Paine’s hair is as bad: thin, ‘carelessly frizzed’, and untidily held back with a slip of ribbon.

Jostling for space at the table alongside the men and women who come to dinner most regularly are other figures eager to make their voices heard. Amongst a group of young men trying to carve space in the conversation is the poet William Wordsworth, down on his luck after being forced by political crisis to leave France. Alongside Wordsworth in this outer group is his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Some of the older guests have nursed the hope that Coleridge might channel his genius with words as a minister in the Unitarian Church, but their wishes will not be fulfilled. Also anxious for a place at the table is another chemist, Humphry Davy, who, the gossips
Introduction

report, sometimes runs to dinner straight from his workshop without stopping to change his shirt, and William Hazlitt, a follower of Godwin who has turned his back on the religion of Johnson and Priestley. Hazlitt wants to paint Johnson, but he cannot persuade the bookseller to sit still long enough to have his likeness taken.

Johnson is more interested in listening to others than he is in his own image. As the candles flicker, illuminating both the animated faces round the table and the strange image on the wall, he remains still. When the wine glasses have been drained and the guests at this phantasm of a dinner disappear down the stairs and into the night he is left alone in the crooked dining room. There are servants to clear the dirty crockery, their presence barely registered in the historical record. There is work to be set in train for the morning, and manuscripts to be read. The business of making and selling books is unrelenting, and within a few hours of the candles guttering in the dining room the shutters protecting the shop front will be thrown back, and into 72 St Paul’s Churchyard will come once again the procession of authors, tradesmen and friends for whom dinner with Joseph Johnson offers the prospect of sustenance, conversation and safety.

*  
Joseph Johnson became a bookseller and a maker of books in an age when books appeared to have the potential to change the world. Between 1760 and 1809, the years of Johnson’s adulthood, Britain experienced a period of political, social, scientific, cultural and religious change during which nothing was certain and everything seemed possible. On paper Johnson’s dinner guests charted the evolution of Britain’s relationship first with America and then with Europe: several were intimately involved in the struggles that reformed the world order. They pioneered revolutions in medical treatment and scientific enquiry and they proclaimed the rights of women and children. All those whose presence was documented in the dining room were white. Most, but not all, were opponents of the global trade in enslaved people. Johnson’s guests lived in a clubbable century, during which multiple groups of people came together and adopted or were given names that signalled their allegiances. ‘Grub Street’ was one such name: so was ‘Scriblerians’, ‘Bluestockings’, ‘The Club of Honest Whigs’ and, towards the end of the century, ‘Anti-Jacobins’.

The men and women who gathered around Johnson had no communal name and they never moved as a single group. Some, like Wollstonecraft,
Introduction

Fuseli, Bonnycastle and Lindsey, frequented his shop and his dining room without waiting to be invited, treating his home as an extension of their own. Others, like Priestley and Barbauld, viewed St Paul’s Churchyard as their Pole Star: the beacon towards whose light they were drawn whenever they came to London. A few – Paine, Trimmer, Darwin – are harder to place, because they left fewer textual traces of their physical presence in Johnson’s house. One man, Johnson’s engraver William Blake, came to dinner only rarely. At St Paul’s Churchyard Blake was a tradesman, like Johnson. Few at the dining table saw him as either an author or artist: he was referred to by one of the guests simply as ‘Blake, the Engraver’.\textsuperscript{8} Also absent from dinner was the poet William Cowper. Cowper was one of Johnson’s bestselling authors and among his most significant correspondents, but he never visited London and never met the bookseller in person. Despite this he made his presence felt in the dining room just as surely as did those who came to Johnson’s shop and home.

Many of those who came to dinner understood that the weekly gatherings at St Paul’s Churchyard were emblematic of a broader interwoven community, and that to dine with Johnson was to acknowledge one’s allegiance both to the bookseller and the network he enabled. As the years went on some among Johnson’s guests came to resent the way in which they were identified outside the walls via their presence in his house. All those who dined were connected by a web that spun outwards from Johnson’s house through the medium of paper, as conversations begun within the privacy of the dining room stretched out – often in public view – across the country and over the decades. Johnson turned his home into a writers’ house in the most capacious sense of the phrase: a place where writers of contrasting politics and personalities could come together. Some of his guests took shelter under his roof for weeks on end; others called only occasionally. A few, through either choice or necessity, sent proxies in place of themselves. The dining room provided space for thinking and talking but it also symbolised and served as a sanctuary at times of crisis. Johnson’s guests had to contend with events that threatened their physical security as well as their intellectual liberty. In the tumultuous years either side of the French Revolution they faced riots, fire, exile and prison, alongside the more quotidian but no less serious threats of homelessness, mental collapse, poverty and the exigencies of childbirth. Johnson’s house provided a refuge throughout, and his labours allowed his visitors to make their voices heard even when external forces conspired to silence them.

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Introduction

If 72 St Paul's Churchyard offered both the reality and the possibility of shelter, Johnson himself embodied a way of being in the world that many of those who sought out his company described as a kind of gift. In the historical record Johnson’s voice is quieter than those of many of his guests. As a result his own story is less audible than those of his authors, through which he forms the connecting line. But although his voice is sometimes difficult to hear he remains visible through the decisions he made. He worked hard in order to make money and he died a rich man. But his professional and personal lives were characterised by generosity, and by the belief that acts of kindness contained within them a political and ethical significance that could not be gainsaid by reactionary State power. He threw open his dining room to all comers because he enjoyed the company of others and because it served his business interests, but also because the ethics of so doing underpinned every decision he took.

At St Paul’s Churchyard Johnson made little distinction between public and private, or work and home. He lived according to a set of principles about the responsibilities of an individual to his friends, and those principles offered their own kind of sanctuary to the men and women who sought out his company. In Johnson’s house family was not a concept bounded by claims of blood, and a friend could be someone who never crossed the threshold just as surely as someone who visited daily. His relationships with the men and women to whom he was closest were sometimes unconventional, but in all cases they demonstrated the strength of his belief in the political power of friendship. Friendship and its unknowability stand at the centre of Johnson’s story, and at the centre of the communal story of the men and women who made their way to St Paul’s Churchyard.

In the image of the nightmare hanging on Johnson’s wall creatures lurk in the gloaming, exuding a force both potent and frightening. In the crooked dining room Johnson risks being lost in the shadows, while his guests appear in colour and light. In the one image of him that survives he looks away from the viewer, eluding discovery. Yet although Johnson has sometimes been obscured by the personalities gathered around his table he stands at the heart of the group, uniting them, giving them space and focus. In so doing he gives us a literature religious, revolutionary and Romantic. He championed the supremacy of the untrammelled creative imagination, for which Fuseli’s painting stood as a symbol, but he did so alongside a commitment towards the imaginative and intellectual potential inherent in the collegiate conversations enabled at his table. In the strength of his allegiance...
Introduction

to both shadowy nightmare and candlelit reality he was a maker of books who was also a maker of dreams. Chiselled throughout the strata of his story and the story of the dinners he held are the stories of the people, the books and the dreams he made.
Index

Abercrombie, John: Every Man his own Gardener 100
Act of Uniformity (1662) 13–14
Acton, Samuel 41
Adams, John, President 343
Aikin, Anna see Barbauld, Anna
Aikin, Arthur 87
Aikin, Charles see Barbauld, Charles
Aikin, George 87
Aikin, John (father) 28, 81, 85, 106
Aikin, Dr John (son) 36; on Johnson's friends 49; at Johnson's dinner table 2, 111, 237; his Thoughts on Hospitals published by Johnson 67; commissioned by Johnson to translate Baume's Manual of Chemistry 72; persuades him to publish his Essays on Song-Writing 80, 81; agrees to let Anna Barbauld bring up his son 87–8; in Norfolk 99; and William Beloe 143; as one of Johnson's reviewers 168; and the French Revolution 183; and defeat of Repeal motion 194; and Iolo Morganwg 249; becomes an 'antisaccharist' 282; as editor of Monthly Magazine 328; supports Johnson at his trial 359, 360, 363, 365; helps Howard edit The State of Prisons 374;

Anna Barbauld takes refuge with 420; writes Johnson's obituary 423–4; in his will 426;
Anna Barbauld's letters to 86, 87, 89, 90, 162, 164

Works
An Address to the Dissidents of England . . . 194(n25)
Essays on Song-Writing 80, 81
Evenings at Home see under Barbauld, Anna
Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose see under Barbauld, Anna
Thoughts on Hospitals 67(n4), 68(n6)
A View of the Character and Public Services of the Late John Howard 374
Aikin, Lucy 71–2, 86, 90
Aikin, Martha 87
Aliens Act (1793) 262, 361, 380
America: relations with Britain 2, 4, 34, 39; and Stamp Act 33–4, 35; and Dissenters 58, 61–3; and France 94, 106, 343–4; booksellers and printers 391, 395–6, 399; see also Franklin, Benjamin; Washington, George; and below
American War of Independence/Revolutionary War 47, 62, 93–7, 98, 100, 102, 106, 192, 194, 195, 201, 221, 222, 223, 311
Amiens, Treaty of (1802) 388, 397
Anderson, George 156, 243, 251
‘Loves of the Triangles’ 349
Appeal to the Men of Great Britain, An (anon.) 347–8
Arch, J. and A. 333
Arianism 28
Aristotle
Ethics 376
Politics 376
Ashhurst, Sir William Henry 378
Austen, Lady Ann 126
Austin, William 406
‘Dinner at Johnson’s’ 26(n14)
Letters from London 406–7
Bacon, Francis 127
Bank of England 103
Baptists 13, 15, 18, 31
Barbauld, Anna Letitia (née Aikin):
and the Priestleys 28, 29, 37, 38, 342; her rise to fame 80; sends Johnson A New Map of the Land of Matrimony 84, 85; marriage 85–6; meets Johnson 38, 86; at his dinners 2–3, 5, 47, 86, 111, 143, 161; runs successful school in Suffolk 86–7, 99, 150; adopts her brother’s son 87–90; publishes Lessons for Children . . . (see below) 88; accepts Rowland Hunter into her school 136; relationship with Johnson 86–7, 136, 141, 144, 151; and Sarah Trimmer 144, 145; and Mary Wollstonecraft 157; moves to London 162, 237; meets Thomas Christie 168; becomes a reviewer for Analytical Review 168; and the French Revolution 183, 185, 187; immortalised by George Dyer 186; and defeat of the Repeal motion 194–6; and Priestley’s sermon at 222; and Iolo Morganwg 249; and Gilbert Wakefield’s Enquiry . . . 258, 259, 260; and Helen Maria Williams 310; looks after Priestley’s grandchild 343; and William Hayley’s Life of Cowper 385; and peace with France 388; sceptical about Maria Edgeworth’s proposed journal for literary ladies 419; and Priestley’s exile 419–20; her popularity continues 420; attacked by her husband 420; in Johnson’s will 426; her legacy 427–8; her letters to her brother see under Aikin, Dr John

Index

Works
An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts 194–6
Devotional Pieces 106–8; ‘Thoughts on the Devotional Taste’ 106–8
Essays on Song-Writing (with John Aikin) 80, 81
Evenings at Home (with John Aikin) 241–2, 247, 253, 270, 271, 286, 351
‘Fashion: A Vision’ 90–91
A Legacy for Young Ladies 90–91
Index

Lessons for Children from Two to Three Years Old 88–90, 270, 348, 351, 420

Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose (with John Aikin) 83–4, 99(n17); ‘On Romances’ 83–4

Poems 36–8, 80, 81, 82, 83, 85
‘Corsica’ 37–8, 80
‘The Groans of the Tankard’ 80–81, 82
‘The Mouse’s Petition’ 81
‘To Mrs Priestley . . . ’ 29
‘Washing Day’ 36–7

Sins of the Government (pamphlet) 273–4

Barbauld, Charles 87–9, 90, 270–71, 420

Barbauld, Rochemont 3, 85–6, 87, 88, 99, 136, 141, 162, 227, 249, 319, 420

Barlow, Joel 237, 244, 246, 272, 274, 279, 407–8, 411–12

Advice to the Privileged Orders 267, 272

The Conspiracy of Kings 272

Barlow, Ruth 237, 244, 246, 276

Joel Barlow to 407, 408, 411–12

Bartolozzi, Francesco 284, 295

Barton, Benjamin Smith: Johnson to 395–6(n48)

Elements of Botany 395–6

Basiere, James 108

Bastille, Storming of the (1789) 178–9, 186, 187, 226, 244

Beachgrove Hall, nr Birmingham 241–2

Beaufort, Frances see Edgeworth, Frances

Beaumé, Antoine: Manual of Chemistry 72

Beaumont, Lady: Dorothy Wordsworth to 394(n39)

Becket and De Hondt (booksellers) 27

Beddoes, Thomas 280, 396

Considerations on the Medicinal Use . . . 280

Beloe, William 143, 144, 145–6

Poems and Translations 143

Sexagenarian . . . 143(n1), 145(n3)

Belsham, Miss: Maria Barbauld to 419–20(n11)

Belsham, Thomas 360, 391; Mary Priestley to 252(n33); Theophilus Lindsey to 360; Priestley to 341, 343, 389(n20), 390(nn22–4), 391

A Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. Theophilus Lindsey 421

Birmingham 140; Priestley’s move to 135, 163, 191, 193, see also Fair Hill; and slave trade 164; Dissenters 135–6, 163, 193, 218–19, 221, 227, 228–30, 231, 232–3, 239, 259; riots 227–32, 233–4, 243, 252–3, 329, 342; see also Lunar Society

Bishop, Eliza/Bess (née Wollstonecraft) 1(n1), 147, 149, 152, 154, 155, 158, 244, 307, 311–12, 313, 344; Mary Wollstonecraft to 197–8

‘Black Bartholomew’s Day’ (August 24th 1662) 14, 28, 57, 232

Blake, Robert 198

Blake, William: his apprenticeship 108; enrols at Royal Academy 108; employed by Johnson 5, 108–9, 110, 140, 161, 197, 200, 201–2, 237, 386–7; and Henry Fuseli 21, 140, 183, 200, 294, 387–8; influenced by Alexander Geddes 168–9; illustrates Lavater’s Aphorisms on Man 174–5, 175, 176; and the French Revolution 185, 200–1; invents new engraving method 198–9, 214;
Index

Blake (continued)
illustrates Wollstonecraft's
Original Stories 113, 157, 200,
and Salzmann's Elements of
Morality 181, 202–3; and Dar-
win's Botanic Garden 206; and
Cowper 207; purportedly warns
Paine of danger 258; illustrates
Gabriel Stedman's Narrative . . .
284, 285; works on Johnson's
'Milton project' 294, 295; loses
commission to design Edward
Young's Night Thoughts 385–6;
rescued by William Hayley 385,
386–7; reputation waxes 428;
biography 51, 258
Works
All Religions are One 198
For Children: The Gates of Paradise
201
The French Revolution 200–1
‘Prospectus’ 199(n3)
Songs of Experience 387
Songs of Innocence 198–9, 200
There is No Natural Religion 198
Blood, Fanny see Skeys, Fanny
Blood, George: Mary Wollstonecraft
to 156(n26), 177
Bonnycastle, Bridget (née Johnstone)
168
Bonnycastle, John 2; at Johnson's din-
ers 2, 5, 109, 111, 161, 213,
243, 291, 348, 396, 406, 407,
408, 409, 410, 426; popularity
of his books 109–10; and
Fuseli 2, 110, 111, 178, 250,
256, 396, 408, 409, 426, 427;
and Mary Wollstonecraft 156;
teaches her brother 158; meets
Thomas Christie 168; marriage
168; and George Anderson
243, 251; opposed to Johnson
publishing Paine's Rights of
Man 256; his works published
by Johnson 280; and Lord
Erskine's meeting with Johnson
357; dines with Johnson in
prison 375; at his funeral 424;
and Johnson's will 425, 426
Works
Introduction to Algebra 137
An Introduction to Astronomy
109(nn16,17)
Scholar's Guide to Arithmetic 109
Booth, David 395; Godwin to
394(n44); Johnson to 395
Boreman, Thomas: Gigantick
Histories 89
‘Boston Tea Party’ (1773) 62
Boswell, James 37
Account of Corsica 36
Boulton, Matthew 135
Boydell, John 213, 214, 293, 295, 303
Bretland, Joseph: Priestley to 135(n1)
Brooke, John 227–8
Brown, Thomas: Darwin to 349(n26)
Burke, Edmund 52, 55, 192, 193, 194,
230–31, 272, 274, 353, 358;
Rockingham to 52; and Paine’s
attack 222–4
Works
An Enquiry into the Sublime and the
Beautiful 52
Reflections on the Revolution in
France . . . 216–21, 222
Burney, Frances Lock to
178(n9)
Butts, Thomas: Blake to 386(nn9,11)

Cadell, Thomas 71
Canning, George 339
Canton, John 32, 33
Carles, Joseph 227
Carlisle, Thomas 324
Carr, Mrs: Maria Barbauld to
387(n15)

For general queries, contact webmaster@press.princeton.edu
Index

Catholics/Catholicism: and Gordon Riots 102–5; and Relief Acts 102, 103, 106, 168, 169; Emancipation 363, 427
Chapman, Thomas 256
Chapter Coffee House 20
Charles I 13
Charles II 13–14
Chartist movement 427
Chatterton, Thomas 248
Christie, Adam: Johnson to 421(n18)
Clery, E. J. 211, 320
Coleridge, Hartley 328, 332, 334
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor 291, 328, 331; plans Pantisocracy with Southey 331–2; moves to Nether Stowey 332; meets Wordsworth 331; stays with the Wordsworths 332; collaborates on Lyrical Ballads (see below) 328–9; at Johnson's dinners 3, 291, 329, 334–5; relationship with Johnson 335; and publication of his poems 334, 335; given Malthus's Essay ... on Population by Johnson 348; travels to Germany 334, 335; and Hazlitt 397; and Henry Fuseli 413–14; meets Charlotte Smith 415
Works
Biographia Literaria 331(n10)
‘Fears in Solitude’/Fears in Solitude 334, 335–7, 338, 362, 376, 394
‘France: An Ode’ 334
‘Frost at Midnight’ 334, 338
Lyrical Ballads (with Wordsworth) 328–9, 332–3, 337, 376, 399
Coleridge, Sara (née Fricker) 328, 331–2, 334; Coleridge to 334–5
Collins, John: Case of the Sugar Colonies 282–3
Colman, George: Cowper to 131(43)
Constable, Archibald: Alexander Hunter to 407
Cook, Captain James 57, 100, 171, 172
Cooper, Thomas: John Scott to 225(n29)
copyrights 17–18, 52, 121, 208, 221, 253, 256, 300, 302, 332, 350, 399
Corsica/Corsicans 36–8, 39
Cottle, Joseph 331, 332–3, 399; Johnson to 399; Wordsworth to 333(n13)
Cotton, Dr Nathaniel 118
Coutts, James 22, 42
Cowper, Ashley 118
Cowper, General: William Cowper to 165(n10)
Cowper, William: as a young man 118; suicide attempts 118; his Evangelical awakening 117, 118; and Mary Unwin 117, 118–19; attacks his cousin in Antithelyphthora 117, 119–20; and John Newton 117, 118, 120, 121, 122–5; and Johnson 5, 115, 118, 120–21, 122–3, 134, 208, 209–10, 302, 384; correspondence with Johnson 120, 121, 130, 132, 133, 293–4, 295–6, 298, 299, 300, 302; accepts challenge to write poem 126, 130, see The Task below; and William Unwin 121, 126, 129; decides to publish Homer translations (see below) 130–33; and Lady Hesketh see Hesketh, Lady Harriet; moves to Weston

497
Cowper (continued)
Underwood 132, 183; features in Mary Wollstonecraft's Female Reader 157; his abolition poetry 165–6; persuaded to be a reviewer for Analytical Review 168, 178; and the importance of money 197, 208, 209; and Darwin's Botanic Garden 206, 329; angry over terms for Homer translation 209–10; and Paine's Rights of Man 225; appalled by Birmingham riots 230; and Johnson's 'Milton project' 293–7, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302–3, 304–5; devastated by Mary Unwin's stroke 296–7, 299; and William Hayley 296, 297–8, 300, 301, 302–3; and Charlotte Smith 300, 415; and Johnson's proposal to reissue his poems 300–1; and Fuseli's review of his Homer translations 302; and Mary Unwin's death 305; his death 305; and attempts to pirate his poetry 350; Hayley's Life 385, 386; his poetry reprinted by Cottle 399; popularity wanes 428

Works
‘Adelphi’ 118(nn1,2)
Antithelyphthora 119–20, 121
Homer translations 130–33, 206–7, 208–10, 249–50, 301-2
Olney Hymns (with Newton) 398
Poems 123–6, 150
‘The Modern Patriot’ 125
‘The Negro's Complaint’ 165–6
‘The Progress of Error’ 125
The Task 126–30, 134, 207, 297, 298, 230, 385

Cristall, Joshua: Mary Wollstonecraft to 177(n4)

Critical Review 82, 98–9, 126, 130, 169, 257, 276
Crosby, Benjamin 255
Cumberland, George: Blake to 385–6(n8)
Cuthell, John 354, 357, 359, 364, 379

Dale, William 356, 359, 360, 364, 381
Darwin, Charles 280, 427
Darwin, Elizabeth (formerly Pole) 138, 393

Darwin, Erasmus 138; appearance 137–8; on Unitarianism 31–2(n10); a member of the Lunar Society 137; meets Priestley 135; marriage and move to Derby 138; at Johnson's dinners 2, 5, 115, 140, 183, 353; meets Henry Fuseli 138, 139; writes Loves of the Plants (see below) 138–9; and slavery 164, 165; meets Thomas Christie 168; pessimistic about political situation 173; optimistic about technological prowess of friends 183; influences Barbauld 195; and Blake 197, 203; sells Johnson the copyright to Botanic Garden 203; his Economy of Vegetation published by Johnson 203–5; sends manuscript to Richard Lovell Edgeworth 205–6; and Cowper 206, 208–9; and the Birmingham riots 230, 237; his Zoonomia (see below) published by Johnson 280; attacked by the Anti-Jacobin Review 349; and Richard Edgeworth 351, 352; prepares Phytologia and The Temple of Nature 392–3; death 393; and Charlotte Smith's 'Beachy Head' 418; and Charles Darwin 427

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Index

Works
The Botanic Garden 139–40, 142, 178, 203, 206, 298, 329, 380; The Economy of Vegetation 142(n20), 203–6; Loves of the Plants 138–9, 164, 103, 209
‘Idyllium. The Prison’ 375
Phytologia 392
Zoonomia 280–81, 349, 380–81, 392
Darwin, Robert: Erasmus Darwin to 281(n29)
Davenport, Benjamin 19, 27, 65
Daventry Academy 28
Davy, Humphry 3–4, 369, 396, 424
Elements of Chemical Philosophy 422
Researches, Chemical and Philosophical 396
Debtor and Creditor’s Assistant, The (anon.) 372–3
Declaration of the Rights of Man . . . 188–9, 190
Dennys, Nicholas: Johnson to 394(n42)
Dissenters 13, 15–16, 28, 37, 38, 80, 107; legislation against 13–14, 31, 35, 58, 60; Academies 28, 29, 30, 86, 99, 226; and American colonists 62–3, 96; women 75, 76, 78, 80; and Catholicism 105; in Birmingham 135–6, 163, 193, 218–19, 221, 227, 228–30, 231, 232–3, 239, 259; Johnson and friends in fight against repression 161, 162, 163, 170, 173, 183, 191, 283; George Dyer 185–6; and connection with French Revolution 191, 192; and defeat of Repeal motion 192–5, 196; and government agents 225; and concept of ‘home’ 242; and Gilbert Wakefield’s attack 258–60; and ‘Pitt’s Terror’ 261–8; against wartime fast-days 273; and ‘Gagging Acts’ 286–7; see also Unitarians/Unitarianism
Dixon, Miss: Anna Barbauld to 187, 222(n18)
Dixon, Richard: Erasmus Darwin to 262(n15), 280
Dobson, Thomas: Johnson to 381
Dodsley, James 216, 417
Donaldson v. Becket 52
Douce, Francis: Richard Twiss to 200(n6)
Duncombe, John 79
The Feminead 76
Dungannon House, Fulham see Purser’s Cross
Dyer, George 185–6, 248, 249, 260, 265, 331
Inquiry into Clerical Subscription 186
‘On Liberty’ 186–7
Eartham, Sussex 297, 298–300, 301, 415
East India Company 282, 332, 397
Eaton, Daniel Isaac: Johnson to 421
Edgeworth, Charles Sneyd 413; Maria Edgeworth to 393
Edgeworth, Charlotte 408
Edgeworth, Elizabeth 352
Edgeworth, Emmaline see King, Emmaline
Edgeworth, Frances (née Beaufort) 352
A Memoir of Maria Edgeworth 353, 379–80
Edgeworth, Maria 246–7; drafts Letters for Literary Ladies 247–8; at Johnson’s dinners 2, 3, 253, 291, 393; on Darwin’s Economy of Vegetation 205–6; and abolition campaign 282; and the publication of The Parent’s Assistant 351–2; visits Johnson

499
Edgeworth (continued) in prison 379–80; in France 388; critical of Johnson 408; her proposed journal rejected by Anna Barbauld 419; and Johnson’s last days 422–3; and his death 424–5; in his will 426; her legacy 427

Edgeworth, Richard Lovell 246–7; and Darwin’s Economy of Vegetation 205–6; friendship with Johnson 247; at Johnson’s dinners 2, 291; and Thomas Beddoes 280; gives up sugar 282; publishes Practical Education with Maria 351–2, 376, 380; remarriage and children 353; survives Irish rebellion 352–3; visits Johnson in prison 379–80; accuses him of laziness 380; writes poem in praise of Johnson 383–4; brings out Essays on Professional Education 384; in France 388; and Darwin’s last letter 392–3; and Johnson 372(n2), 379, 393, 387–8, 406, 408, 413–14, 421–2

Edgeworthstown, Ireland 247, 351, 352–3

Education Act (1870) 428

Edwards, James 382; Johnson to 389(n17)

Edwards, Richard 385

Elizabeth I 78

Elliot, John: Medical Pocket-Book 279–80

Enfield, William, 28, 31, 98, 141; John Murray to 54

Works

Biographical Sermons 99
‘The Enquirer’ 27–8, 29(n3)
The Speaker 108, 144, 157
Epistle to Thomas Paine (anon.) 257
Equiano, Olaudah: Interesting Narrative 166–8

Erskine, Thomas Erskine, 1st Baron 266, 268, 357, 358–60, 361–2, 362, 364, 365, 371, 378

Essays Commercial and Political . . . (anon.) 97


Examiner, The 427

Eyre, Chief Justice Sir James 266, 267

Fabius, Dr Daniel 13

Fair Hill (Priestley’s house), near Birmingham 135, 136, 178, 227, 228, 229, 240–41

Farington, Joseph 2(n5), 200, 318–19, 345, 353, 361, 376, 379, 387–8, 406, 408, 413–14, 421–2

Feathers Tavern Petition (1772) 56–7, 59

Fenwick, Eliza 324

Fielding, Sir John 103

Finch, Sarah (née Priestley) 29, 192–3, 229, 230, 239, 343, 251, 343

Fordyce, Dr George 68–9, 86, 99, 111, 156, 197, 319, 323–4, 359, 360, 363, 365

Elements of the Practice of Physic 68

Fox, Charles 164, 191, 231, 262, 379

France: relations with Britain 3, 36, 94, 106; and American War of Independence 106; at war with Britain 261–2, 272–3; and abolition 281–2; victorious under Napoleon 327; at war with America 343–4, and Britain 354, 360; under Napoleon 388–9; peace and further war 388–9; see also French Revolution

Franklin, Benjamin 33–4, 35, 70; friendship with Priestley 32, 33, 38, 63, 64, 251; and Johnson 2, 33, 34; supports
Index

Lindsey’s Essex Street chapel 60, 61, 62; publishes his ‘Act to Enforce Obedience’ in New England 62; dreads war with England 62; his collected works published by Johnson 64; sets sail for America 64, 93; and Thomas Paine 222

French Revolution 5, 143, 144, 178–9, 183, 185, 186, 187–91, 192, 193, 194, 195–6, 197, 200–1, 226–7, 261, 308, 355, 388; and Burke 216–20, 221; and Paine 222–3; and Mary Wollstonecraft 306, 308, 309–11, 312

Frend, William 186, 188; Lindsey to 179(n11), 188(nn9,10)

Fuseli, Henry: birth 21; friendship with Lavater 21; forced to leave Switzerland 21–2; arrives in London 22, 52; character and personality 2, 3, 22, 178, 250, 406–7; lodges with Johnson 23, 25–6; works for him 23–4; their relationship see under Johnson, Joseph: relationships; begins painting 23, 50; his Remarks on ... Rousseau published by Johnson 23–5, 26; meets Johnson’s family 26; his losses in the fire at Paternoster Row 41–2; travels in Italy 42, 54; at Johnson’s dinners 2, 5, 161, 183; and John Bonny castle 2, 110, 111, 178, 250, 256, 408, 409; disgusted by Sterne 413; advises on Cowper’s Homer translations 131–2, 206–7, 249–50, 302; and Erasmus Darwin 138–9, 140; paints The Nightmare 138, see below; and Mary Wollstonecraft see under Wollstonecraft, Mary; appointed reviewer for Analytical Review 168; clashes with Alexander Geddes 169, 249–50; his translation of Lavater’s Aphorisms on Man published by Johnson 174–6; and the French Revolution 185, 197; admires William Blake 200; on a seaside holiday with Johnson 213; produces paintings for Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery 213–14; reports on Paine’s flight with Johnson 257; threatened by Aliens Act 262, 361; and Johnson’s ‘Milton project’ 293, 294–5, 303–5; hears of Wollstonecraft’s marriage 321; and Wordsworth 329; dismissive of Coleridge 413–14; criticised by Godwin in his Memoirs 345; Joseph Farington’s view of 353; angry at Lord Erskine’s conduct 357, 360; and Johnson’s imprisonment 371, 380; takes him to Liverpool 382, 383; gossips with Farington 387–8; and war with the French 388; illustrates Darwin’s Temple of Nature 392; meets Humphry Davy 396; rebuked by Edward Jenner 403–4; and failure of Milton Gallery exhibition 405–6; elected Professor of Painting at Royal Academy 406; arranges ‘Venison Party’ 411; and Joseph Johnson the Younger 412; convalesces with Johnson after accident 412–13; praised by Haydon 422; and Johnson’s death 423, 424; and Johnson’s will 425, 426; his reputation wanes 428
Index

Fuseli (continued)
  Works
  Complaints 22
  Joseph Interpreting the Dreams of the Pharaoh's Baker and Butler 23
  Lycidas (picture) 367, 403–4, 405–6
  The Nightmare 1, 2, 6, 138–9, 239, 291, 340, 428
  portraits: Hester Newnum 243, 412; Priestley 239, 425
  Remarks on the Writings and Conduct of J. J. Rousseau 23–5, 24, 26
  translation of Lavater's Aphorisms on Man 174
  Fuseli, Sophia (née Rawlins) 177, 213, 307, 308, 412, 413
  Füssli, Anna Elizabeth (née Waser) 21
  Füssli, Johann Caspar 21
  Füssli, Heinrich: Fuseli to 158(n32)

  ‘Gagging Acts (1795) 286–7
  Galton, Samuel: Priestley to 389(n19), 392(n34)
  Garrow, William 267
  Geddes, Alexander 168, 169, 170, 249–50
  An Apology for Slavery 282
  Prospectus of a New Translation of the Holy Bible 169
  General Evening Post 39–40, 41
  Genoa/Genoese 36
  Gentleman's Magazine 169, 423
  George III 94, 162, 164, 173, 174, 191–2, 272–3
  George IV: as Prince of Wales/Prince Regent 95, 164, 266
  Gibbs, Phoebe 400
  Elfrida 400
  Gifford, John 339
  Gilchrist, Alexander; The Life of William Blake 51, 258
  Gill, John 15, 31, 43
  Gillray, James
    ‘Erskine as Councillor EGO’ 361–2, 362
    ‘A peep into the Cave of Jacobinism’ 289, 339, 340
  Girondins 310–11
  Glasse, Hannah: Art of Cookery 100
  Glorious Revolution (1688) 14, 163, 164
  Godwin, Mary see Wollstonecraft, Mary
  Godwin, Mary (daughter) 323–4, 325, 348, 420
  Godwin, Mary Jane (formerly Vial) 409
  Godwin, William 245; at Richard Price's funeral 222; and Johnson 245; and repeal of Test and Corporation Acts 191; early meetings with Mary Wollstonecraft 3, 245–6, 276; at Revolution Society dinner 227; works on his Enquiry into Political Justice 245; keen to talk to Thomas Paine 237, 245–6, 271; and Mary Hays 260, 272, 278–9, 315, 325, 346; and William Hazlitt 4, 396; and Helen Maria Williams 310; renews relationship with Wollstonecraft 315–18; and her pregnancy 319; marriage 320–21, 322; has ‘altercation’ with Johnson 321–2; tours the Midlands 322; and Wollstonecraft’s death and funeral 323, 324–6; begins Memoirs ... (see below) 325; meets Wordsworth 331; works on Wollstonecraft’s Wrongs of Woman 344; dealings with Johnson 344, 345–6; debates with Thomas Malthus
Index

291, 348–9, 361; continues to go to Johnson’s 353, and visits him in prison 375, 380; at the first post-prison dinner 383; recommends Johnson for a dictionary project 394; meets Humphry Davy 396; persuades Johnson to publish Hazlitt’s Essay on the Principles of Human Action 397, 398; his financial dependence on Johnson 409, 410–11, 413, 421; remarries 409; his children 409–10; proposes a Juvenile Library 410; and Johnson’s death 422, 423, 424; continues the habit of dining at St Paul’s Churchyard 425; in Johnson’s will 426

Works
‘Cursory Strictures’ 266(n20)
An Enquiry into Political Justice 245, 271–2
Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman 177, 178, 246(n15), 306–7, 309(n6), 313, 315, 324(n52), 325, 344–5, 346–7
Things as they Are: or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams: ‘Preface’ 255

Good, John Mason: Memoirs of . . . Reverend Alexander Geddes 250
Gordon, Lord George 102, 104
Gordon, Lyndall: Mary Wollstonecraft . . . 211
Gordon Riots (1780) 102–6, 117, 125, 219
Grafton, August Fitzroy, 3rd Duke of 35, 36, 39, 128
‘Great Ejection, The’ see ‘Black Bartholomew’s Day
Grierson, Constantia 77, 78
Guilford, Susan North, Countess of 406
Hackney: New College/Academy 226, 231, 259, 260, 349, 396; Gravel Pit Meeting 239
Hamilton, Elizabeth 419
Hamilton, Sir William 203–4
Hancock, John 354, 356, 357, 358, 379
Hanger, George: Life and Opinions 373–4
Hardy, Thomas (shoemaker) 262, 264, 265–6, 267–8
‘Harrison, R.’: The Catholic Protestant 105–6
Hartley, David 73
Haughton, Moses 424
Hawkes, Thomas 228
Hawkesworth, John: New Discoveries . . . 100
Haydon, Benjamin 422
Hayley, William 295, 296, 297, 298–300, 302–3, 385, 386; correspondence with Cowper 296, 297, 298, 300, 301(n33), 302(n40), 303; his Life of Cowper 385–7
Hays, Mary: publishes her reply to Gilbert Wakefield 259–60, 278; meets Johnson and Lindsey 260; sends her Letters and Essays to Lindsey 277; at Johnson’s dinners 237, 419; and William Godwin 260, 272, 278–9, 318; and Mary Wollstonecraft 260, 276–8, 279, 315, 317, 318, 319; excluded from Wollstonecraft’s deathbed 324, 325; clashes with Godwin over rights to Wollstonecraft’s papers 346; writes her obituary and ‘Memoirs’ 346; pilloried by Richard Polwhele 347, 415; visits Johnson in prison 380; critical of him 394

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Index

Hays (continued)

Works

An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain 347–8
Cursory Remarks on an Enquiry into the Expediency and Propriety of Public or Social Worship 259–60
Female Biography 415
Letters and Essays 277–8
Memoirs of Emma Courtney 278–9
Hazlitt, William, the Elder 32, 396, 397
Sermon on Human Mortality 32
Hazlitt, William, the Younger 4, 31, 369, 396–7; Charles Lamb to 397–8
abridgement of Tucker’s The Light of Nature Pursued 397, 398
Essays on the Principles of Human Action 397
‘The late Dr. Priestley’ 27n1, 31(n9)
My First Acquaintance with Poets 397
Heath, James: Fuseli to 411(n20)
Henry, William 422; Johnson to 421(n17), 422
Elements of Experimental Chemistry 422
Hesketh, Lady Harriet 131, 166, 207, 385, 386; Cowper’s letters to 131(n42), 132, 133, 166, 207, 208, 209, 225(n31), 296(n12), 297, 299(n24), 302, 384(n4)
Hess, Felix 21–2
Hewlett, John 148, 149, 156, 359, 360, 396
Sermons on Different Subjects 148(n10), 150
Hewson, Polly (née Stevenson) 70, 71
Hewson, William 70, 71
Experimental Inquiries 70–71
Hill, Joseph 209; Cowper to 126(n24), 210
Hogarth, William: Gin Lane 9, 16

Holcroft, Thomas 175, 235, 246, 266
A Plain and Succinct Narrative 103–4
Holloway, Thomas 295, 382; Johnson to 382
Howard, John 374–5
The State of the Prisons in England and Wales 374–5
Howard League for Penal Reform 374
Hume, David 24
Humphries, George 240
Hunt, Leigh 426, 427
Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries 2(n5), 109(n18), 110(n20), 426–7
Hunt, Marianne 426
Hunter, Alexander Gibson 1(n3), 407
Hunter, Andrew: Advice from a Father to a Son . . . 95
Hunter, Elizabeth (Rowland Hunter’s wife) 15, 26
Hunter, Elizabeth (Johnson’s step-niece) 3, 136, 151–2, 425
Hunter, Henry: translation of Lavater’s Essays on Physiognomy 175, 176
Hunter, Hester see Newnum, Hester
Hunter, John 69
The Natural History of Human Teeth 69, 70, 121
Hunter, Roger 425
Hunter, Rowland (Johnson’s brother-in-law) 15, 26, 51
Hunter, Rowland (Johnson’s step-nephew): under Johnson’s care 136; educated by the Barbaulds 3, 136, 141; apprenticed to Johnson 141–2, 151, 350; takes on more responsibilities 243, 253, 291; at Johnson’s dinners 369, 408; and Johnson’s imprisonment 371, 375, 381, 382; impresses Joel Barlow 411–12; and his sister’s death 412; takes over at
St Paul's Churchyard 413; and Johnson's will 425, 426; marries and moves away 426
Hunter, Sarah (née Johnson) 13, 15, 26
Hunter, Dr William 69
Hurdis, James 1(n2), 3, 301–2; to Cowper 3(n7), 350–51(n31)
Hutton, William 229, 240
Hyde, Lord Justice John 103

Imlay, Françoise (Fanny) 312, 313, 314, 317, 318, 321, 322, 325, 345, 409–10, 411, 420, 426
Imlay, Gilbert 310, 311–15, 321, 322, 345; Mary Wollstonecraft to 311, 312, 313–14
‘Intolerable Acts’ (1774) 62

Jacobins/Jacobinism 261, 265, 310, 311, 339, 406; see also Anti-Jacobin Review
Jebb, John: Lindsey to 60(n9), 61(n10)
Jenner, Edward 403–4

Johnson, John (Cowper's cousin) 297, 298, 299, 300, 305; Cowper to 296(n11), 301, 302(n38), 303
Johnson, John (Joseph's father) 13, 15
Johnson, John (Joseph’s brother) 15, 26, 51, 243, 350, 361, 411
Johnson, Joseph: birth 13; childhood 13, 14; apprenticeship 15–18, 39, 196; first years bookselling 18–19; first shop 18; first best-seller 18–19; in partnership in Paternoster Row 19–20, 22–3, 39; appearance 1, 7; character and personality 1, 4, 39, 40, 55, 68, 110, 111, 136–7, 250, 286, 350, 383–4, 407–8, 409, 417, 423–4, 428; religious faith 31–2, 43, 56, 63–4, 325, 423; his asthma 243, 286, 363, 365, 398, 405, 412, 421, 422, 423, 424; advertises his ‘complete pocket-book’ 39–40; his shop destroyed by fire 40–43, 49; leases new premises 49, see St Paul's Churchyard (No. 72); lobbies Rockingham with Burke 52; suffers from venereal disease 54–5; and publication of Priestley's books 58, 59; opposes his working for Shelburne 58–9; fights for licence for new Dissenters' chapel 60–61; publishes Priestley's Address to the Protestant Dissenters 62–3; begins to worship at chapel 63–4; and publication of medical and other scientific books 65, 66–7, 68–73, 74; and women readers 75; publishes women writers 75–6, 78, 83, 91–2, 95, 100, see Barbauld, Anna, Scott, Mary, Wollstonecraft, Mary; and John Aikin's Essays on Song-Writing 80, 81; his ‘chosen knot of lettered equals’ 86; begins his weekly dinners 86; and American War of Independence 93, 95, 96, 97, 99; and abolitionist works 98; miscellaneous books published 99–101; and Gordon Riots 105–6; publishes pamphlet in defence of Catholic Relief Act 106; and Cowper's Homer translations 130, 131–2, 133, 134; and his nieces and nephews 136, 151–2; and Priestley 136–7; publishes Darwin's Loves of the Plants 140;
Unable to meet commitments 141; takes on Rowland Hunter 141–2; at Dissenters’ committee meetings 162; founds Analytical Review 161, 168–73; joins London Revolution Society 163, 217; sells Equiano’s Interesting Narrative 167; and Lavater 174–6; administers competition for scientists 178; admires Frances Burney 178; and the French Revolution 191, 197, 185, 201; and George Dyer 185–6; illness 197–8; and Darwin’s Economy of Vegetation 203, 204, 206; and Cowper–Fuseli relationship 207; joins Society for Constitutional Information 217, 262; responds to Edmund Burke 220, 221, 224; and publication of Paine’s Rights of Man 222, 223–4, 225, 255–6; becomes of interest to government agents 225; prints Priestley’s sermon 226; and Birmingham riots 230, 231–2, 233–4, 243; publishes Evenings at Home (Aikin and Barbauld) 242; and visits from his family 243, 245; further illness 243; extremely busy ‘at work among his papers’ 253; supports Paine 257–8; and Mary Hays 259, 260, 277, 278; publishes Wordsworth’s poems 260; gives evidence at the Treason Trials 267, 269, 272; will not invest in land with Priestley 268–9, 286; and outbreak of war 271; fosters conversation between Godwin and Paine 271; and publication of Joel Barlow’s Advice to the Privileged Orders 272; publishes Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman 276; continues to publish medical works 279–80; and abolition campaign 282, 283; and publication of Stedman’s Narrative 283–6, 394; and the ‘Gagging Acts’ 287, 291; and his ‘Milton project’ 293–4, 295–6, 297, 298, 299, 300–1, 302–5; his trip to France with Wollstonecraft and the Fuselis aborted 307–8; rumoured to have married Wollstonecraft 308; publishes her Letters 315; his financial arrangements with Wollstonecraft 319–20, 321; and her marriage to Godwin 321, 322–3; and her death 324–5; co-publishes Monthly Magazine 328; and Wordsworth and Coleridge 329, 331, 332–4, 338; publishes Coleridge’s Fears in Solitude 334–5, 362; attacked by Anti-Jacobin Review 340–41, 349; his boxes of books a lifeline to Priestley 341, 353; critical of Godwin 344–5, 348; and Wollstonecraft’s financial affairs 345–6; publishes An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain 347–8; and Malthus 348; cautious about taking on new authors 349; takes on new apprentice 350; relationship with his workforce 350; publishes Maria Edgeworth’s children’s stories 351; believed to be a Jacobin plotter 353; and Wakefield’s Reply to . . . the Bishop of Llandaff . . . 354, 356; indicted by the government 356–7; trial
and imprisonment 357, 358–61, 362, 363–6, 371–4, 375–8, 379–80; financial problems 381; destroys his papers 381–2; aged by his imprisonment 382; released 383; and family 382, 384, 411–12; and Cowper's The Task 385, 386, 387; and war 388–9; breaks with Priestley 389–92; publishes Darwin's Temple of Nature 392, 393; and Darwin's death 393; and loss of Wordsworth's poems 393–4; and thoughts of retirement 394–5; on American readers 395; committed to accessible forms of publication 395–6; and Humphry Davy 396; and William Hazlitt 396, 397, 398; has a second fire 398; concerned with late payments 399; and American booksellers 399; and Cottle 399; helps Phoebe Gibbs and Grace Parman 400; his status and power 400–2; rents house in Fulham 405, 412; and brother's death 411; his generosity to his nephew 411; and Charlotte Smith 415–18, 419; continues to feature writing by women 419; as founder member of London Institution 422; his last years 421–2; death and burial 422–3, 424; his will 424–6

relationships 6, 49, 50–51, 115; Anna Aikin/Barbauld 38, 86–7, 136, 141, 151; Joel Barlow 246; William Beloe 143; William Blake 108–9, 110, 176, 200, 201–2, 203, 385–6; John Bonnycastle 109; Coleridge 335; William Cowper 118, 120–21, 122–3, 124–5, 129–30, 132, 134, 207, 208–9, 298, 302; Erasmus Darwin 140, 349; Richard Lovell Edgeworth 247; George Fordeyce 68; Benjamin Franklin 33; Henry Fuseli 22, 23, 26, 39, 110, 115, 131, 176, 177, 212, 213, 214–15, 243, 291, 348, 409, 410, 412, 413–14, 421–2; William Godwin 245, 325, 344–5, 348, 349, 409–11, 413; Theophilus Lindsey 47, 56, 60, 64, 136, 350; Iolo Morganwg (Edward Williams) 248, 249; John Murray 54; John Newton 39; Samuel Paterson 53; Joseph Priestley 26, 27, 31, 34–5, 38, 39, 51, 72, 99, 136–7, 151, 252–3, 389–91; William Roscoe 98; Sarah Trimmer 144–5, 286; Mary Wollstonecraft 115, 147, 150, 151–5, 156, 158–9, 176, 177–8, 197–8, 211–12, 244, 278, 308, 309, 310, 312, 326, 410–11

Johnson, Joseph (Johnson's nephew) 361, 411, 412, 425, 426; Fuseli to 412

Johnson, Mary 411

Johnson, Rebecca 13

Johnson, Sarah (née Hunter) 15, 136

Johnston, Kenneth: Unusual Suspects 264–5

Jones, Hugh: Iolo Morganwg to 264(n17)


Keane, John: Tom Paine: A Political Life 223, 255(n2)

Keenan, John: Mary Wollstonecraft 159–60, 160
Index

Keir, James 135
Keith, George 15–16, 17, 43, 196, 423
Keith, Mary (née Gill) 15
Kenrick, Samuel 379
Kenyon, Lloyd Kenyon, 1st Baron 357–8, 360, 365, 366
King, Edward 404
King, Emmaline 408; Charlotte Edgeworth to 408
King, John 408
King’s Bench Prison 366, 371, 372–4, 376, 377, 378 380
King’s Head Tavern, the Poultry 162
Kingsborough, Caroline 150, 157
Kingsborough, Lord and Lady (Robert and Caroline) 149, 150, 151, 152
Kingsborough, Margaret 150
Kingsborough, Mary 150, 157
Kippis, Andrew: Life of Captain Cook 171, 172
Knott, Thomas 260, 278
Knowles, John 22, 424, 426
The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli 110(n19), 177, 210, 244–5, 250(n26), 258, 308, 367(n10), 360, 380, 383, 403–4, 406, 409, 412, 423, 424
Lady’s Magazine 157
Lafayette, General Marquis de 223
Lamb, Charles 186(n2), 332, 397–8
Langdale, Mr (distiller) 103
Lavater, Johann Casper 21, 22, 23, 407; Fuseli to 41–2(nn4–8)
Aphorisms on Man 174, 175, 176, 179
Essays on Physiognomy 174–6
Lavoisier, Antoine 72, 142
Essays Physical and Chemical 72
Lawrence, Thomas: Sketch of Godwin and Holcroft at the Treason Trials 235, 266
Laws Respecting Women, The (anon.) 91–2, 400
LCS see London Corresponding Society
Le Breton, Anna: Memories of Seventy Years 202–3
Lee, John 61; Lindsey to 94(n6)
Lindsey, Hannah: arrival in London 56, 57; at Lindsey’s first sermon at Essex Street 61; friendship with Johnson 64; a hard worker 99; and Gordon Riots 104; redrafts an Introduction to the Reading of the Bible 137; stays at Priestley’s home 178; prepares for her husband’s retirement 243; helps Johnson when ill 243; sends her spectacles to Thomas Palmer 263; dislikes Mary Hays’ Memoirs of Emma Courtney 279; illness 343; visits Johnson in prison 375; and husband’s stroke 408; refuses to give in to illness 409; and Lindsey’s death 420–21; and Johnson’s death 425
Lindsey, Theophilus: arrival in London 56, 57; collects signatures for the Feathers Tavern Petition 56–7; his Apology published by Johnson 57–8; friendship with Johnson 5, 47, 56, 64, 86, 350; and Priestley 56, 58, 136, 137, 142, 178, 220–21, 224, 225, 226, 229, 231, 239, 251–2, see also Priestley’s letters to (below); opens new church in Essex Street 2, 59–62, 63; his sermon published by Johnson 61; and American War of Independence 93, 94; expands his Essex Street chapel 99; and Gordon...
Riots 104, 105; at Johnson’s dinners 111, 161; and Barbauld 111; worried by Johnson’s agreement to publish Priestley’s History of Early Opinion 136–7; his idea of happiness 142; with Priestley in the House of Commons 162; and Priestley’s sermon on the slave trade 165; stays with him at Fair Hill 178; and the French Revolution 179, 183, 185, 188, 189, 226, 227; immortalised by George Dyer 186; and Richard Price 191; mobilises against legislation 191–2; caricatured as lackey of the Devil 192; at Revolution Society meeting 219; and publication of Paine’s Rights of Man 224, 258; supports the opening of New College, Hackney 226; and attacks on Priestley 226, 229, 230; at Revolution dinner 227; with Johnson 237, 243, 253; retires from his Essex Street ministry 243; and Priestley’s emigration 251; and William Godwin 260, 271–2; finds himself short of theological reading material 260; and transportation of Thomas Fyshe Palmer 263; approves of Hays’ Letters and Essays 277, 279; and Coleridge 291, 328, 334; and Mary Wollstonecraft 313; and Wakefield’s pamphlet 356; and Johnson’s trial 360; his status as martyr 363; visits Johnson in prison 375–6; on Christopher Wyvill 377; defends Johnson against Priestley 390; suffers a stroke 408–9; death 420–21; and Repeal of Test and Corporation Acts (1828) 427; Priestley’s letters to 74, 179(n12), 187(n8), 191, 192–3, 221, 224(n24), 225(n30), 226(n32), 227(n34), 251, 252, 341–2, 343, 344, 361, 378, 389–90, 391–2

The Apology . . . on resigning the vicarage of Catterick . . . 56, 57–8

Farewell Address to the people of Catterick 421

A Sermon preached at the opening of the chapel . . . 61(n12), 62

Vindiciæ Priestleianæ 163

Linnaeus, Carl 139

Liverpool 15, 16, 26, 31, 97, 98, 99, 110, 153, 389, 397;

Baptists 15, 18, 423; Benn’s Garden Chapel 28, 98

Livery Companies 15, 16

Llandaff, Bishop of see Watson, Richard

Lock, Frederica 178

Lock Hospital, London 117

Locke, John 89

London Corresponding Society (LCS) 262–3, 264, 265, 268, 363

London Evening Post 41

London Institution 422

London Magazine 251

Longman, Thomas Norton 52; Johnson to 401–2

Louis XVI, of France 179, 187, 190, 216, 226, 261, 262, 309–10

Lovell, Nancy 381, 426

Lowhill, Everton 13

Lunar Society, Birmingham 135, 137, 138, 205, 240, 251, 392

Macaulay, Catharine 78

McCarthy, William: Anna Letitia Barbauld 83
Index

Macpherson, James: Ossian poems 407
Madan, Martin 119, 125
Thelyphthora 117, 119, 120
Madison, James 399
Malthus, Thomas 291, 348–9, 361, 396
Manchester 80, 193, 223, 225; Academy 28
Mansfield, William Murray, 1st Earl of 60, 103, 125
Declaration (1772) 168
Marie Antoinette, Queen 179, 216, 226
Markham, William, Archbishop of York 102
Marshall, James 420
Mary of Orange, Queen 14, 163
Matthews, William: Wordsworth to 260(n13), 331
Mayne, Lady Frances: Introduction to the Reading of the Holy Bible 137
Middlesex Journal 41
Miles, John 350, 381, 382, 396, 411, 422, 424, 425, 426
Miles, Mary 425, 426
Millar, Andrew 22, 52
Millar, John: Discourse on the Duty of Physicians 66
Millar, Robert: Hannah Lindsey to 420–21(n15), 425(n35); Theophilus Lindsey to 252(n31)
Miller, Samuel 401; Johnson to 395(n47), 400–1
Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century 401
Milton, John: Lycidas 403, 404–5, 414
Mitchell, Sir Andrew 22
Montagu, Basil 328, 334
Montagu, Basil (son) 328, 331, 332
Montagu, Elizabeth 75, 86
Monthly Magazine, The 328, 346, 375
‘The Enquirer’ (Enfield) 27–8
‘Idyllium. The Prison’ (Darwin) 375
Monthly Review, The 79–80, 82, 98–9, 126, 130, 169
Moor, Edward: Johnson to 251(n28)
Moore, Dr James Carrick 403, 423
Moore, Dr John 403
More, Hannah 419; Sarah Trimmer to 145
Morganwg, Iolo (Edward Williams) 237, 248–9, 264, 265
Poems, Lyric and Pastoral 249
Morning Chronicle 111(n21), 266
Muir, Thomas 263
Murdock, Patrick 22(n4)
Murray, John 54–5, 141, 175–6
Murray & Cochrane: Johnson to 421(n20)
Musicians, Worshipful Company of 15, 18
Napoleon Bonaparte 327, 388
Necker, Jacques 179
Nembhard, Ballard Beckford: Johnson to 381(n28)
Nether Stowey, Somerset 328, 331, 332, 334, 397
Newbery, John: Pretty Pocket-Book 89
Newington Academy 28
Newington Green, near London 147–8, 149–50, 158
Newnum, Henry 136, 243, 375, 380, 412, 425
Newnum, Hester (née Hunter) 3, 136, 243, 245, 383, 412
Newton, John 18–19, 39, 117, 120, 122, 125, 131, 165; Cowper’s letters to 119(nn3,4), 120(nn5,6), 121(n9), 123(n12), 124–5, 129, 130, 131(n41), 230, 305
Works
An Authentic Narrative 18, 19, 21, 27, 118
Olney Hymns (with Cowper) 398
Preface to Cowper’s Poems 123–4
Index

Norfolk, Edward Howard, 9th Duke of 61
North, Frederick North, Lord 93

O'Connor, Arthur 379
   The State of Ireland 362, 363, 365
Olney, Buckinghamshire 117, 122, 126, 127, 129, 130, 131, 132, 134
Opie, John 159, 388
   Joseph Priestley 239, 425
   Mary Wollstonecraft 159, 326
Owenson, Sydney: Johnson to 395(n45)
Oxenham & Co.: Johnson to 398–9(55)

Paine, Thomas 3, 5, 183, 222; immortalised by Dyer 186; brings his Rights of Man to Johnson 222–3; Johnson withdraws from its publication 223–5; published by Jordan 223–4; and Joel Barlow 244; and Godwin 3, 237, 245–6, 271; has difficulties getting Part 2 of Rights of Man published 255–6; defended by Thomas Erskine 266; forced to flee to France 256–8, 263; his influence 272, 279, 283; as technical advisor for Johnson’s ‘Milton project’ 294; and Cowper 297; meets with Mary Wollstonecraft in Paris 310; and the Chartists 427
   Works
      Common Sense 222
      The Rights of Man 222–5, 255–7, 258, 267, 271, 354, 358
Palgrave, Suffolk: school 86, 99, 136, 140–41, 162
Palmer, Thomas Fyshe 263–4
Paoli, Pasquale 36, 37
   paper 1, 11, 17, 33, 51, 89, 122, 136, 198, 253–4, 343, 385, 391, 392, 398–9
Paris, John Ayrton: The Life of Sir Humphry Davy 396
Parman, Grace 400
Parr, Queen Catherine 78
Paternoster Row, London 1, 39, 45, 49–50, 52; No. 8 19–20, 22–3, 39; fire 40–43
Paterson, Samuel 52, 55, 60, 68, 400
   Joineriana 52–4, 60, 75, 79, 172; ‘Paint and Washes’ 75, 91
Payne, John 19–20, 23, 42–3
Percival, Thomas 65–6
   Essays Medical and Experimental 65, 66
   Peregrinations of the Mind . . . (anon.) 79
Phillips, Richard 328, 385, 387, 390, 391, 415, 420
   Annual Necrology 346
   Public Characters of 1800–1801 415
Pitt, William, the Elder 35, 128
Pitt, William, the Younger 272; and Dissenters’ campaign 162; excoriated by Priestley 162–3; clashes with Foxite Whigs 164; his government and law officers 193, 237, 255, 257, 261, 263, 265, 281; and ‘Pitt’s Terror’ 261, 264, 280, 293, 331; joined by Whigs in coalition 262; and introduction of ‘Gagging Acts’ 286–7; sanctions Anti-Jacobin Review 339; attacked in print by Gilbert Wakefield 354–6; and Johnson’s indictment and trial 356–66; see also Treason Trials
Polwhele, Richard: The Unsex’d Females 347, 348, 415
Poole, Thomas 331, 332
Pope, Alexander
Essay on Man 95–6
translation of Homer 130–31, 132, 249

Porter, Roy: *Flesh in the Age of Reason* 73

Price, Richard 32, 259; and Priestley 32–3, 56, 58, 136, 137, 142, 178, 220–21, 224, 225, 226, 229, 231, 251–2; at Johnson’s 143; friendship with Mary Wollstonecraft 147–8; delivers sermon (*Discourse*) to Revolution Society 190–91; attacked by Burke 218–19, 220; defended by Wollstonecraft 219–2; death and funeral 221–2, 226; his place as minister taken by Priestley 239

*Works*
*A Discourse on the Love of our Country* 190–91, 192, 218
*Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* 96–7, 148

Priestley, Elizabeth 342

Priestley, Harry 228, 251, 341, 342

Priestley, Joseph: birth 28; appearance 27, 29; exemplifies the spirit of enquiry 27–8, 38; religious beliefs 4, 28, 31, 32, 56, 57, 73–4; as teacher 28, 29–30, 32, 38, and minister 28–9, 37; marriage and children 29; at Johnson’s dinners 2, 5, 26, 47; his *Essay on . . . Liberal Education* (*see below*) published by Johnson 29; friendship with Johnson see under Johnson, Joseph: relationships; in need of books for his *History on Electricity* (*see below*) 32–3; relationship with Benjamin Franklin 33, 34, 62, 63, 64, 93; Johnson publishes his *Essay on . . . Government* 35–6; and Maria Aikin (Barbauld) 37, 38, 81, 84, 86, 141, 342, 419–20; foresees muzzling of the press 38; on Freethinkers 53; and John Murray 54; relations with Lindsey see under Lindsey, Theophilus; accepts position with Earl of Shelburne 58–9, 73, 74, 99; begins experiments on air 59, 161, 427; works on liturgy with Johnson and Lindsey 60; at Lindsey’s first sermon at Essex Street 61; his *Address to the Protestant Dissenters* published 62–3; and Lavoisier 72, 142; works published in the 1770s 73–4; develops system of shorthand 74; and American War of Independence 93, 94; and Gordon Riots 105, 226; challenged by Barbauld 106–8, 111; leaves Shelburne’s employment and moves to Birmingham 135; appointed minister at the New Meeting 135–6; and William Beloe 143; excoriates Pitt over Bill of Repeal 162–3; becomes the bogeyman of the Church 163; defended by Lindsey 163; meets Thomas Christie 168; and the French Revolution 183, 185, 187, 188, 226–7; immortalised by George Dyer 186; and Richard Price 190, 191, 221–2, 231; and Edmund Burke 192, 193–4, 217, 218–19, 220–21; caricatured as ‘Gunpowder Joe’ 192; confronts his Birmingham parishioners 193; conscious of social distinctions between authors and tradesmen 208;
Index

and the burning of the New Meeting and his home, Fair Hill 227–8, 229, 239, 363; escapes to London 229–30, 233, 237; and William Russell 230, 231, 234; dines with Sheridan 231; his account of the Birmingham riots published by Johnson 231–3; has his portrait painted by Opie 239; elected to fill Price’s place as minister 239; rents house in Clapton 239–40, 241; private papers salvaged from Fair Hill 240–41; and the Lunar Society 240, 251; emigrates to America 251–3; and Wakefield’s Enquiry into . . . Worship 258, 259; Johnson rejects his invitation to invest in farm and college 268–9, 286; and Wordsworth 329, 331; attacked by the Anti-Jacobin Review 340, 341, 349; and George Washington 341, 342–3; dependent on news and books from England 341, 343, 353, 416; and death of his son and wife 341–2; and war with France 343–4; young Dissenters turn from 349; and Johnson’s sentence 360–61; final break with Johnson 389–92; death 392

Works

Address to the Protestant Dissenters 62–3
An Appeal to the Public on the Subject of the Riots at Birmingham 231–3, 241
Disquisitions relating to matter and spirit 73, 73(n14)
Essay on a Course of Liberal Education 27, 29–31

Essay on the First Principles of Government 35–6
Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air 73, 74
Familiar Letters to the Inhabitants of Birmingham 193
History and Present State of Electricity 33, 34–5, 37
History of Early Opinion 136–7
History of Vision 351
Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion 58
Letter to the Right Hon. William Pitt 162–3
Letters to the Right Hon. Edmund Burke 221
The Present State of Europe . . . : ‘Preface’ 240(n50)
‘Sermon on the Death of the Reverend R. Robinson’ 38(n24)
A Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade 164–5 see also Theological Repository

Priestley, Joseph (son) 228, 251, 342, 435
Priestley, Mary (née Wilkinson) 29, 37, 59, 80, 228, 229, 230, 251, 252–3, 341–2, 389
Priestley, Sarah see Finch, Sarah
Priestley, William 187–8, 228, 251, 342
Protestants/Protestantism 13, 14, 62, 76, 78, 84, 102, 221
Pughe, William Owen: Iolo Morganwg to 265(n19)

Purser’s Cross, Fulham 405, 412–13, 421, 425

Quakers 15

Rackett, Thomas: Humphry Davy to 424(n31)
Ramsgate, Kent 213
**Index**

Randolph, Thomas: *A Vindication of the Worship of the Son... against... Lindsey* 61(n11)

Raven, James: *The Business of Books* 17

Revere, Paul 93

Revolution Society, London 163–4, 190, 217–19, 227, 245

Reynolds, Sir Joshua 42, 127

Richardson, Samuel: *Life (Barbauld)* 420

Richmond, Charles Lennox, 3rd Duke of 61, 94

Rickards, Lydia: Anna Barbauld to 385(n7)

Rickman, Clio 297

*Life of Thomas Paine* 225

Rigby, Dr Edward 67–8

*Essay on the Uterine Haemorrhage* 67, 68

Robespierre, Maximilien 261, 310

Robinson, G. G. & J. (publishers) 345

Robinson, George 278

*New Annual Register* 245

Robinson, Henry Crabb 380

Robinson, Mary 95

*Elegiac Verses to a Young Lady* 95–6

Rockingham, Charles Watson-Wentworth, 2nd Marquis of 52, 55

Romney, George 299, 300

Roscoe, Jane 212

William Roscoe to 212–13, 249


Rose, Samuel 299, 415; William Cowper to 165(n11), 178, 208, 295, 300(n25), 302, 303

Rose, Sarah: Charlotte Smith to 416, 417(n5)

Rotheram, Rev. Caleb: Priestley to 32(n12)

Rousseau, Jean Jacques 23–5, 36

*Julie; ou, La Nouvelle Héloïse* 315–16

Rowe, John: Lindsey to 279(n23), 328, 334

Royal Academy 108, 110, 138, 213, 413

Royal Society 108

Russell, Martha 229, 252

Russell, William 228, 229, 230, 231, 252; Johnson to 286(n46), 349; Priestley to 231, 234

Ruxton, Mrs: Maria Edgeworth to 247(n18), 352, 424

Ruxton, Sophy: Maria Edgeworth to 247, 282, 351, 353, 408

Ryland, John 228

St Paul’s Cathedral 1, 41, 49, 50, 63–4, 169, 299


Scheele, Carl Wilhelm 72

Schofield, Robert: *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley* 227–8

SCI see Society for Constitutional Information

Scott, John, Attorney General 225, 356, 357, 359, 362, 364, 365–6, 376, 378

Scott, Mary 76, 79

*The Female Advocate* 76–7, 78–9, 80, 92, 151, 274, 400
Index

Scott, Russell: Hannah Lindsey to
243(n10), 375(n10); Theophilus
Lindsey to 224(n25), 260, 356
Scott, Sarah 75
Seagrave, Joseph 385
Seward, Anna 76
Memoirs of the Life of Dr Darwin 137–8
Shakespeare Gallery, London 213,
214, 293, 295
Sharp, Richard 294, 295; Johnson to
410(n19)
Shelburne, William Petty, 2nd Earl of
58–9, 73, 74, 128, 135
Shepherd, William 379
Sheridan, Richard Brinsley 231
Shore, Samuel: Lindsey to 239(n1)
Skeys, Fanny (née Blood) 147, 344
Skeys, Hugh 344; Godwin to 344–5
slavery and slave trade 19, 97–9, 161,
164–8, 281–2
Smith, Benjamin 299
Smith, Charlotte 3, 299–300, 415,
419; Johnson to 415–16
Works
Beachy Head: with Other Poems 417;
‘Beachy Head’ 417–18
Conversations Introducing Poetry 416
Elegiac Sonnets 415
Emmeline 171
Smith, Elihu Hubbard: Darwin to
392(n35)
Smith, Robert: Cowper to 133(n52)
Society for the Abolition of the Slave
Trade 98
Society for Constitutional Information
(SCI) 217, 225, 262, 263, 268
Society for the Reformation of Manners
16
Society of Antiquaries 108
Southey, Edith (née Fricker) 331–2
Southey, Robert 331; Coleridge to 394
Spectator, The 420
Spence, James 69
Spencer, Benjamin 227
Stamp Act (1765) 33–4, 35
Stationers’ Company 18
Stedman, Adriana: Johnson to 394
Stedman, Gabriel 283–5, 286, 394
Narrative of a Five Years Expedition
against the Revolted Negroes of
Surinam 284–6, 394
Stedman, Joanna 283
Stedman, Johnny 283
Sterne, Laurence 413
Stevenson, Margaret 70
Stothard, Thomas 108
Sulzer, Johann Georg 22
General Theory of the Fine Arts 22
Swords, T. and J.: Johnson to
389(n16), 399
Talleyrand, Charles-Maurice de 274
Tatler 420
Tayleur, William: Lindsey to 99(nn18,
19), 99, 104(n3), 105(n5),
137(nn5–7), 141(n21), 142,
191–2(n20), 222(n19), 223,
224(n26), 226(n33), 230(n38),
231–2(n42), 258(n9), 313(n18)
Taylor, Anne: Wordsworth to
393(n38)
Teedon, Samuel: Cowper to 297(n13),
297, 299, 300(n27), 301(n32)
Test and Corporation Acts 14, 28, 35,
62, 162, 172, 191, 192, 427
Thanet, Sackville Tufton, 9th Earl of
379
Thelwall, John 264, 268, 327–8, 332
Theological Repository (journal) 32, 58,
136
Thomson, William 284
Times, The 231, 357–8, 378
Tobin, James Webbe: Humphry Davy
to 396
Tomalin, Claire: The Life and Death of
Mary Wollstonecraft 23
Index

Tooke, John Horne 219, 250, 264, 267, 268
Tooke, William: Mary Hays to 394(n43)
Toulmin, Joshua: The American War Lamented 96
Treason Trials (1794) 235, 265–8, 269, 272, 327, 357
Trimmer, Annabella 144
Trimmer, Sarah 3, 5, 115, 143–6, 151, 157, 202, 286, 428; and Mary Wollstonecraft 146–7
Works
An Easy Introduction to the Knowledge of Nature . . . 145(n4)
Fabulous Histories 145, 157
Guardian of Education 286(n45)
The Oeconomy of Charity 146(n6)
Sacred History 144
Tucker, Abraham: The Light of Nature Pursued 397
Turner, William: Lindsey to 57(nn1,2), 86(n17), 93 (nn1–2), 94(nn3–5), 350(n29), 376, 377(nn15); Priestley to 64(n16)
Twiss, Richard 200

Uglow, Jenny: The Lunar Men 135
Underhill, John 49
Unwin, Mary 117, 118–20, 126, 127, 132, 133, 296–7, 298, 299, 300, 305
Unwin, Susannah 117, 118
Unwin, William 121, 126, 129, 131, 132–3; Cowper to 121, 122(nn10,11), 123(nn13, 15), 124, 129–30, 132; Cowper’s poems addressed to 125
Vallon, Annette 260, 261, 330
Vaughan, Benjamin 64
Versailles, Treaty of (1783) 94
Views of the Ruins of the Principal Houses Destroyed During the Riots at Birmingham (anon.) 233–4
Voltaire 24, 24, 25, 36, 245, 246
Wakefield, Gilbert 258–60, 277, 278, 358–9, 362–3, 364–5, 378–9
Enquiry into the Expediency and Propriety of Public or Social Worship 259, 260
A Reply to Some Parts of the Bishop of Llandaff’s Address to the People of Great Britain 354–6, 358, 359, 360, 376, 377, 378
Walker, George: On the Doctrine of the Spheres 71, 84
Walpole, Horace 86
Walsh, James 327–8
Washington, George 94, 223, 341, 342–3
Watchman (journal) 332
Watson, Richard, Bishop of Llandaff 260–61, 354, 364
Watt, James 135, 203, 205; Darwin to 203(n11), 349
Wedgwood, Josiah 83, 135, 214, 322; Erasmus Darwin to 164, 204(nn13), 230
copy of Portland Vase 203–5, 205
Wedgwood, Tom 334
West, William 250
‘Letter to my Son in Rome’ 50–51(nn4,6)
Weston Underwood, Buckinghamshire 132
Wheatley, Phillis 77, 78
Wilberforce, William 19, 281
Wilkes, John, MP 35
Wilkie, Thomas: Johnson to 399(n56)
Wilkinson, John 135
William of Orange 14, 163
Williams, Edward see Morganwg, Iolo
Williams, Helen Maria 310, 311
Letters from France 310
Williams, Peggy 248; Iolo Morganwg to 248–9, 264
Withering, Dr William 135; Priestley to 240(n7)
Wollstonecraft, Charles 156, 158, 244; Johnson to 320, 323
Wollstonecraft, Eliza see Bishop, Eliza
Wollstonecraft, Everina 147(n), 149, 152, 154, 155, 158, 244, 309, 311, 319, 344; Eliza Bishop to 158(n31), 244, 311–12; Johnson to 158(n33); Mary Wollstonecraft to 152, 153(n18), 155–6, 244(n11), 276, 307, 309, 310(n9), 319(n38)
Wollstonecraft, James 158
Wollstonecraft, Mary: girlhood 147; and her sisters 147, 154, 155–6, 158; sets up a school 147, 148, 149; friendship with Richard Price 147–8, 190, and John Hewlett 148; writes Thoughts on the Education of Daughters (see below) 148–9; meets Johnson 148, 150; correspondence with Johnson 150, 151, 154–5, 156, 158, 159, 171, 210, 211–12, 308, 310; works as a governess for the Kingsboroughs 149, 150–51; offered a room by Johnson 151–2; found a house by him 152–4, 155; at Johnson's dinners 3, 4–5, 115, 156, 161, 183, 186; relationship with Johnson see under Johnson, Joseph: relationships; and Sarah Trimmer 144, 146–7, 157, 196; works as translator for Johnson (see translations below) 156–7; her Original Stories published by Johnson 157–8; portraits 159–60, 160; appointed reviewer for Analytical Review 168, 171, 319; relationship with Henri Fuseli 156, 158, 177–8, 210–11, 212, 244, 249, 294–5, 306, 307–9, 315, 321, 324–5, 345, 425; and the French Revolution 183, 185, 196, 307–8, 309–10; worried by Johnson's health 197–8; 'sick with vexation' 210–12; her Vindication of the Rights of Men published by Johnson 219–20; family problems 244–5; and William Godwin 3, 237, 245–6, 276, 291, 306–7; and Mary Hays 260, 276–8, 279, 315; correspondence with William Roscoe 274, 276, 294, 295, 308; begins A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (see below) 274; her affair with Gilbert Imlay and daughter's birth (see Imlay, Françoise (Fanny)) 310–11, 312–13; and Imlay's infidelity 313–14; suicide attempts 313, 314, 346; breaks with Imlay 314–15; renews relationship with Godwin 315–18, 319, see also Godwin's Memoirs under Godwin, William; second pregnancy 319, 322; financial arrangements with Johnson 319–20, 345–6; marries Godwin 320–22, 323,
Index

Wollstonecraft (continued)
  397; dies in childbirth 323–4; funeral 324–5; pilloried by Richard Polwhele 347–8; her vision and legacy 419, 428

Works
  The Cave of Fancy 157
  The Female Reader 157
  An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution 311, 312, 313

Lessons 318
  Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark 315

Mary: A Fiction 152, 157
  Original Stories 113, 157–8, 200, 202

Thoughts on the Education of Daughters 148–50(nn9,11–13), 151, 157, 351
  translations 156–7, 174, 175, 176, 181, 202–3

A Vindication of the Rights of Men 219–20, 246

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman 147, 274–6, 277, 278, 306, 315, 326

The Wrongs of Woman 316, 326, 344

Woodfall, William 82

Woodrow, James: Samuel Kenrick to 379

Woolwich Military Academy 2

Wordsworth, Caroline 260, 261, 330

Wordsworth, Dorothy 328, 330–31, 332, 334, 394, 397

Wordsworth, Richard: William Wordsworth to 333(n12)

Wordsworth, William: in love in France 260, 261; and birth of daughter 260; takes poems to Johnson to be published 260, 329–30, 331; writes polemic see Letter . . . (below); and French Revolution 260, 261; at Johnson’s dinners 3, 237, 329, 331; family life 328, 330, 331; meets Coleridge 331; collaborates on Lyrical Ballads (see below) 328–9; sees his future with Johnson 334; travels with Coleridge to Germany 334; meets Hazlitt 397

Works
  Descriptive Sketches 260, 329–30, 331, 393–4
  An Evening Walk 260, 329–30, 331, 393–4
  Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff 260–61, 329
  Lyrical Ballads (with Coleridge) 291, 328–9, 332–3, 337, 376, 399
  The Prelude 185

Wright, James 339

Wu, Duncan: William Hazlitt . . . 398

Wyvill, Christopher 377; Johnson to 377

Young, Edward: Night Thoughts 385