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## CURRENT SCIENCE—50 YEARS AGO

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[From *Current Science*, Vol. 1, August 1933, p. 44]

### JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, 1733-1804

**T**HE bicentenary of Priestley's birth on 13th March, 1733, received special recognition by the Chemical Society at its meeting on 6th April, 1933, when addresses on his life and work were delivered by Professor A. N. Meldrum, Sir Philip Hartog and Sir Harold Hartley. These emphasized his remarkable personality, his nobility of character and the novel contribution to chemical practice arising from his facility in handling gases.

The life of Priestley merits attentive study by all students of science, old and young. He was a genuine philosopher in as much as he loved wisdom in all the branches then accessible, and his command of languages was extraordinary. His piety and rectitude were so pronounced and so commingled with curiosity regarding natural phenomena that they invited the persecution of an intolerant age; and it is one of life's ironies that he narrowly escaped destruction on account of his revolutionary sympathies when Lavoisier was beheaded for his counter-revolutionary proclivities. Probably the only years of peace he knew were the concluding decade of his life, spent with his family in Pennsylvania.

Scientific experiments were for him a hobby early adopted and faithfully pursued. His admission that he was "not a practical chemist" in part explains his outstanding success, because, as we are reminded by Dr. Meldrum, he declared that "if I had been accus-

tomed to the usual chemical processes, I should not so easily have thought of any other; and without new modes of operation I should hardly have discovered anything new." His work on gases began in 1767, but he was nearly forty before the experiments with air, and the exact date of his discovering oxygen remains obscure: in fact, the careful survey of correspondence submitted by Sir Philip Hartog to *Nature* (1st July, 1933, p. 25) indicates "before the month of November, 1771" as being probable, the experiments of 1st August, 1774, in Wiltshire and of 1st March 1775, in London, being confirmatory and extensory.

In referring to his outstanding discovery Priestley has modestly recorded a reflection often recurring in the minds and writings of those interested in the relation of cause to effect when he says, "it provides a striking illustration of a remark I have more than once made in my philosophical writings and which can hardly be too often repeated, namely, that more is owing to what we call chance than to any proper design or preconceived theory in this business". That reflection remains legitimate, but must be accepted only in conjunction with Pasteur's dictum that "in the field of observation chance favours only those who are prepared".

M.O.F.

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## ANNOUNCEMENT

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### SECOND RAMESHWARDAS BIRLA SMARAK KOSH AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING BASIC OR CLINICAL CONTRIBUTION IN ONCOLOGY

Rameshwardas Birla Smarak Kosh, Bombay (India) has invited nominations for its Second Triennial International Award of half a million rupees (equal approximately to 52,500/- U.S. Dollars at Current Exchange rates) for "Outstanding basic or clinical contribution in Oncology". The Award is

given to an individual, or jointly to two in exceptional cases. Nominations may be sent to: Director, Rameshwardas Birla Smarak Kosh, Medical Research Centre, Hospital Avenue, Bombay 400 020, so as to reach before 31st March 1984.