

The Age of Wonder – How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty  
and Terror of Science by Richard Holmes.  
Harper Press 2008.

This is an extraordinary book, dealing with an extraordinary time, and bringing to vivid life the work and lives of some extraordinary men and women.

The Age of Wonder is the age of the ‘second scientific revolution’, a phrase coined by the poet Coleridge, in the latter years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the very earliest years of the 19<sup>th</sup>, when human knowledge and capability was immeasurably advanced by British genius.

The backbone of the Age of Wonder is Joseph Banks, the Harrow, Eton and Oxford-educated botanist who travelled to Tahiti with Captain Cook and finished his life as the hugely influential President of the Royal Society: radiating from him like innumerable bones and sinews are the great scientific luminaries of the period, whom Banks nurtured, promoted or inspired: individuals like the astronomer William Herschel and his redoubtable sister Caroline, the chemist and inventor Humphry Davy, the doomed explorer Mungo Park, the medics Dr Thomas Beddoes, John Abernethy and William Lawrence, and the next generation of John Herschel, and Charles Babbage.

Richard Holmes blends their personal stories together with that of their professional achievements, and especially brings to light the rivalry, jealousies and peccadilloes that motivated or affected most of them. Holmes has that rare gift of making the technical and scientific clear to those without the necessary expertise in these fields and the total package is a complete delight.

Whether it is the biographies or the science that interests you, The Age of Wonder is a superb read and eloquent testament to Richard Holmes deserved place as one of this country’s very best biographers.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh