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# The Autobiography & Other Writings by Benjamin Franklin



Edited and with an Introduction by  
Peter Shaw



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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND OTHER WRITINGS

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## Introduction by Peter Shaw

No autobiography was ever more eagerly awaited than Benjamin Franklin's. Contrary to all expectations, the vast, seemingly primitive, continent of North America had produced in him a genius whose accomplishments rivaled any in western history. Without formal training of any kind, this Philadelphia printer and businessman had one day turned his attention to the most recondite scientific puzzle of his age—the nature of electricity. After attending a demonstration of this new "fluid" by an Englishman traveling through Philadelphia, Franklin sent to London for some equipment and began trying to repeat the experiments.

In the next few years he revolutionized the new science, discovering positive and negative electricity and the identity of lightning and electricity. When he devised the lightning rod, he at once put the entire civilized world in his debt. A former newspaperman, Franklin was widely celebrated by the press, the eighteenth century's great, democratizing contribution to history. As a result his name was made known to more contemporaries than had probably been aware of the existence of Alexander the Great, Jesus Christ, or Charlemagne in their own times.

No wonder, then, that impatient readers eagerly bought a pirated French translation of the Autobiography when it appeared after Franklin's death, and that an English version based on the French also sold well. When, more than twenty-five years later, his grandson finally published a more genuine version, there proved to be no falling off of public interest. Since then the book has grown steadily in popularity and influence.

Yet the very popularity of the Autobiography eventually had

the effect of hurting its literary reputation, and of leading to an assault on Franklin's character. Although Franklin's fame had begun with the adulation of scientists and philosophers in England and France, in nineteenth-century America he came to be consulted by young men in search of a practical guide to getting ahead. Franklin was cited as having been a guide to success by Andrew Carnegie, the steel tycoon; by Thomas Mellon, the banker; and by other successful businessmen—all of them figures who were to be looked down on by a later age as robber barons.

In the meantime, for Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Mark Twain, Franklin came to represent the cruder, inartistic side of American culture. Reacting to the practical sayings in his *Almanac* as though Franklin were Poor Richard himself rather than his creator, D. H. Lawrence called him a "snuff-colored little man" and a stifling influence on personal freedom and creativity. To be sure, Franklin stressed the utility rather than the beauty of things; he treated love, sex, and marriage strictly from the points of view of physical health and convenience; and, of course, he countenanced penny-pinching, conformity, self-denial, and scheming to get ahead.

But in the eighteenth century all of these attitudes were not necessarily incompatible with a complex, even romantic character. In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald created a hero partly modeled on Franklin. Jay Gatsby, like Franklin a somewhat rough American sort, systematically pursued wealth but was also a worshipper of beauty and a dreamer. Above all, Gatsby did not really pursue success as an end in itself. Just so, as soon as Franklin had enough money to support himself he had retired to a life of study and public service. He did not attempt to patent and make money from the Franklin stove, the lightning rod, or any of his other useful inventions.

Ironically, what might be called the esthetic revulsion against Franklin failed not only to take his use of success into account but also rested in part on a *failure* of esthetic appreciation. The *Autobiography*, it needs to be remembered, was conceived in part as a primer of advice for young men. Franklin was asked repeatedly to outline his own life as an example of success for others, and he finally complied. The sanctimonious tone to which his critics object is almost exclusively a phenomenon of the second part of the *Autobiography*, where the narrative breaks off for a digression on the art of virtue.

Franklin had long planned to write an advice book on his own practice of the virtues. Then in 1783, in letters printed at the beginning of the second part of the *Autobiography*, his friends Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan urged him to resume his *Autobiography* in order to influence "the minds of youth" with his example. Franklin responded by incorporating a brief version of his planned work on virtue as part of the *Autobiography*. Some years later, in his third and fourth parts, he returned to the much less hortatory style of the first part.

The earlier style was the true source of his book's imaginative power. All of the later sections suffer to some degree from Franklin's attempts to be uplifting. Usually, the result is that a wise observation or well-chosen homily slows down the narrative. But in the rapid, circumstantial account of his early years, Franklin teaches the secret of success by conveying an impression of his vigor, his spunk, and his persistence. When he does slow down the narrative it is not to preach but to convey the famous image of himself entering Philadelphia with only a few coppers in his pocket. Out of this vivid picture there eventually grew up a whole literature of American boys rising from rags to riches.

The opening part of the *Autobiography* also served the function of conveying to the rest of the world the image of America as a land of possibility. Though Franklin is caught in the toils of a legal contract to work for his brother, and though he is hampered by both poverty and lack of formal schooling, the impression conveyed by his tale is one of boundless opportunities. He is able to walk away from his brother and his family into an open, free society. If he is without resources, he is also relatively free of the restraints imposed by tradition and class. Though he is alone and insignificant as he walks into Philadelphia, its streets are not closed to him. There may be no one to help, but there is also no one to prevent his making something of himself here. It was this picture of challenge and possibility, and not the rumor that America's streets were lined with gold, that brought millions of other strivers to the new land in the century after Franklin's death.

The efforts of modern critics to defend Franklin have concentrated less on the interrupted, fragmentary nature of the *Autobiography* than on its artistic successes. The protagonist of the book, it has often been pointed out, is not precisely Franklin himself, but a persona, or invented self. By canny omissions and changes of emphasis, Franklin adjusted the details of his career

so as to produce an impression of moral probity and success through striving.

At the time he wrote, he was no longer anything like the abstemious, water-drinking vegetarian young man he described. In fact, his own "Dialogue between Franklin and the Gout" shows him to have become a great lover of food, wine, and various kinds of dissipation. Furthermore, he did not humbly wait for worldly recognition, as his account suggests, but actively sought out the patronage of influential men. Nor did he always act with the uninvolved objectivity he implied.

Thus he speaks in the Autobiography of having come to be known in London by virtue of someone happening to notice an asbestos purse he had brought with him as a curiosity. In actuality, though, he sought out the influential man in question, using the purse as a calling card. And where he speaks of holding himself above partisanship in Pennsylvania politics, and of never seeking office, the truth is that he plunged eagerly into political battles, campaigned for office, and experienced far more resentment toward political rivals than he admits.

The conundrum posed for modern readers by the two sides of Franklin—the self-seeking and the benevolent—did not trouble Franklin's contemporaries. For Franklin to say through Poor Richard that "honesty is the best policy" was simply to give good advice. Today, however, one has to ask what Franklin would have suggested in a case where it could be shown that not honesty but dishonesty would be the best policy. After all, without appeal to some higher ethic, practical advice such as Franklin's runs the risk of being abandoned in the face of adversity.

Franklin's answer to such objections was itself practical. Systems of religion and morality had not succeeded in making men better. Why not, then, try appealing to men's self-interest? Once again it is essential to recall Franklin's intention in writing—which was to offer advice, not to construct a metaphysic.

In the modern age of the antihero, Franklin's heroic achiever suffered in popularity. Beginning in the 1970s, however, American students began to demand courses with a more direct bearing on their vocational futures than the traditional liberal arts curriculum. Whether Franklin would have approved of this or not is open to question. He wrote that, "to an American, one schoolmaster is worth a dozen poets, and the invention of a machine or the improvement of an implement is of more importance than a masterpiece of Raphael." Yet he might have felt that by the last

quarter of the twentieth century, America would no longer need to emphasize the practical. In any case, the new practicality in education has renewed an appreciation for the work ethic laid out in his *Autobiography*.

Literary critics in recent years have extolled the *Autobiography* for its artistry, especially as evidenced in the complexity with which Franklin himself is depicted. They have shown particular interest in the divergences between Franklin's actual life and career and the way he depicted these in his book.

Not only was Franklin more self-indulgently worldly than the character he created in the *Autobiography*, but his motives for important actions also ran far deeper than at first appears. Chief among these motives was that of revenge. If one reads him carefully, it becomes apparent that Franklin deeply resented the famous difficulties from which he extricated himself as a youth. He rarely mentions personal animosity toward those who failed in their obligations to him or, like his brother, actively mistreated him. But if one follows his subsequent behavior toward such people a remarkable pattern emerges.

When oppressed by his brother James, or by his employer Keimer; when let down by his friends Collins and Ralph, or by his patron Governor Keith; when insulted by not being offered a dowry; and finally when treated unfairly by his business rival Bradford, Franklin said nothing. In a few of these cases, it is true, he betrays a degree of resentment when recalling them in the *Autobiography*. But he does not speak of planning revenge. Yet revenge—conscious or unconscious—is precisely what he eventually took.

Only once in the course of the *Autobiography* did Franklin even partially betray his compulsion. This was when, in the passage that made his political behavior appear more benevolent than it really was, he incidentally mentioned "reprisals." First he recalled telling a contemporary: "I shall never *ask*, never *refuse*, nor ever *resign* an office." Then he explained:

If they will have my office of clerk [of the Pennsylvania Assembly] to dispose of to another, they shall take it from me. I will not, by giving it up, lose my right of some time or another making reprisals on my adversaries.

The historian Richard Bushman first described Franklin's pattern of reprisals as typified first by a silent withdrawal in the face



of opposition or aggression from others. This was followed by a period of waiting, and, finally, by the act of revenge. Readers of Franklin's Autobiography, and even the victims themselves, did not easily make the connection between how Franklin had been treated and the eventual fate of those who crossed him. His brother was infuriated, yet unsure why, Franklin "insulted" him by coming to his shop from Philadelphia and proceeded to show off his success before the workmen. His friend Collins, whose drinking embarrassed Franklin and whose borrowing put him in financial distress, suddenly received his comeuppance when Franklin organized their fellow travelers in a rowboat to teach him a harsh lesson—apparently about failing to take his turn at the oars.

The other side of the revenge coin was Franklin's abiding sense of guilt for his own transgressions. The one "great erratum" of his life that he corrected was his neglect of Deborah Read when he had been away in England. He seems partially to have married her out of remorse—something that proved to be a heavy penance as he grew famous and began to avoid bringing this simple, peasantlike woman into society. Later, by helping his brother's son, "I made my brother ample amends for the service I had deprived him of by leaving him so early." Thus, the very modern, unreligious Franklin betrayed his Puritan background in his equally long memory for the sins of others and of himself.

The autobiography of Benjamin Franklin cannot be regarded as a unified work. It was written at four different times and in various places. In common with other seminal American books such as Cooper's *Leatherstocking* saga, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, the Autobiography is a work of shifting intentions. Like many other American works, it is held together by a character who seems to represent the youthfulness and vibrancy of America itself. And as in such works, too, the representative character proves to have a far greater complexity and psychological depth than at first appears. In Franklin's case, for all the attention his Autobiography has received, that character still waits to have his depths fully sounded.

## A Note on the Text

The Bantam text is based on the modernized transcription of Franklin's original manuscript made by John Bigelow, the American diplomat who located and purchased it in 1867. Corrections and the insertion of material in the notes as intended by Franklin have been made by comparison with the version prepared by Leonard W. Labaree and his fellow editors of the ongoing Yale edition of the *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, and with the scholar's genetic text edited by J. A. Leo Lemay with P. M. Zall. Franklin's spelling, hyphenation, and capitalizations have been modernized in those cases where there are modern equivalents for his usages. Obsolete forms have for the most part been left untouched and explained in the notes where necessary.

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# The Autobiography



## Part One

Twyford, *at the Bishop of St. Asaph's*, 1771.

Dear son:

I have ever had pleasure in obtaining any little anecdotes of my ancestors. You may remember the inquiries I made among the remains of my relations when you were with me in England, and the journey I undertook for that purpose. Imagining it may be equally agreeable to you to know the circumstances of my life, many of which you are yet unacquainted with, and expecting the enjoyment of a week's uninterrupted leisure in my present country retirement, I sit down to write them for you. To which I have besides some other inducements. Having emerged from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world, and having gone so far through life with a considerable share of felicity, the conducting means I made use of, which with the blessing of God so well succeeded, my posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own situations, and therefore fit to be imitated.

That felicity, when I reflected on it, has induced me sometimes to say, that were it offered to my choice, I should have no objection to a repetition of the same life from its beginning, only asking the advantages authors have in a second edition to correct some faults of the first. So I might, besides correcting the faults, change some sinister accidents and events of it for others more favorable. But though this were denied, I should still accept the offer. Since such a repetition is not to be expected, the next thing

most like living one's life over again seems to be a recollection of that life, and to make that recollection as durable as possible by putting it down in writing.

Hereby, too, I shall indulge the inclination so natural in old men, to be talking of themselves and their own past actions; and I shall indulge it without being tiresome to others, who, through respect to age, might conceive themselves obliged to give me a hearing, since this may be read or not as any one pleases. And, lastly (I may as well confess it, since my denial of it will be believed by nobody), perhaps I shall a good deal gratify my own vanity. Indeed, I scarce ever heard or saw the introductory words, *Without vanity I may say*, etc., but some vain thing immediately followed. Most people dislike vanity in others, whatever share they have of it themselves; but I give it fair quarter wherever I meet with it, being persuaded that it is often productive of good to the possessor, and to others that are within his sphere of action; and therefore, in many cases, it would not be altogether absurd if a man were to thank God for his vanity among the other comforts of life.

And now I speak of thanking God, I desire with all humility to acknowledge that I owe the mentioned happiness of my past life to His kind providence, which lead me to the means I used and gave them success. My belief of this induces me to *hope*, though I must not *presume*, that the same goodness will still be exercised toward me, in continuing that happiness, or enabling me to bear a fatal reverse, which I may experience as others have done; the complexion of my future fortune being known to Him only in whose power it is to bless to us even our afflictions.

The notes of one of my uncles (who had the same kind of curiosity in collecting family anecdotes) once put into my hands furnished me with several particulars relating to our ancestors. From these notes I learned that the family had lived in the same village, Ecton, in Northamptonshire, for three hundred years, and how much longer he knew not (perhaps from the time when the name of Franklin, that before was the name of an order of people, was assumed by them as a surname when others took surnames all over the kingdom),\* on a freehold of about thirty

\*As a proof that Franklin was anciently the common name of an order or rank in England, see Judge Fortescue, *De Laudibus Legum Angliae*, written about the year 1412, in which is the following passage, to show that good juries might easily be formed in any part of England: "Moreover, the same country is so filled and replenished with landed menne, that therein so small a thorp cannot be found wherein dweleth not a



acres, aided by the smith's business, which had continued in the family till his time, the eldest son being always bred to that business, a custom which he and my father followed as to their eldest sons. When I searched the registers at Ecton, I found an account of their births, marriages, and burials, from the year 1555 only, there being no registers kept in that parish at any time preceding. By that register, I perceived that I was the youngest son of the youngest son for five generations back. My grandfather Thomas, who was born in 1598, lived at Ecton till he grew too old to follow business longer, when he went to live with his son John, a dyer at Banbury, in Oxfordshire, with whom my father served an apprenticeship. There my grandfather died and lies buried. We saw his gravestone in 1758. His eldest son Thomas lived in the house at Ecton, and left it with the land to his only child, a daughter, who, with her husband, one Richard Fisher, of Wellingborough, sold it to Mr. Isted, now lord of the manor there. My grandfather had four sons that grew up, viz.: Thomas, John, Benjamin, and Josiah. I will give you what account I can of them at this distance from my papers, and if these are not lost in my absence, you will among them find many more particulars.

Thomas was bred a smith under his father, but being ingenious, and encouraged in learning (as all my brothers were) by an Esquire Palmer, then the principal gentleman in that parish, he qualified himself for the business of scrivener,\* became a considerable man in the county, was a chief mover of all public-spirited undertakings for the county or town of Northampton, and his own village, of which many instances were related of him, and much taken notice of and patronized by the then Lord

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knight, an esquire, or such a householder, as is there commonly called a Franklin, enriched with great possessions, and also other freeholders and many yeomen able for their livelihoods to make a jury in form aforementioned."

Chaucer, too, calls his country gentleman a Franklin, and, after describing his good housekeeping, thus characterizes him:

This worthy Franklin has a purse of silk,  
Fixed to his girdle, white as morning milk.  
Knight of the Shire, first Justice at the Assize,  
To help the poor, the doubtful to advise.  
In all employments, generous, just, he proved,  
Renowned for courtesy, by all beloved.

[Franklin's note.]

\*A notary (that is, an official who certifies signatures on documents) and copyist.