

# The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

With a  
New Introduction by  
Lewis Leary  
America's most  
versatile genius tells  
his own story, with  
his famous wit  
and complete  
candor



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**Benjamin Franklin**



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*LEWIS LEARY*

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## Introduction

IN ANY DISCUSSION of American origins, Benjamin Franklin is a good man to begin with. Years before the United States existed, he started things that his countrymen continue to be proud of—libraries, civic clubs, volunteer fire departments, effective street lighting, and efficient heating devices. He was solidly American, ingenious, practical, ambitious, and successful. His *Autobiography* testifies that his feet were firm on the ground, but that he did not stand still. No man of his time went so far, and few of any time have gone farther. But, because he not only started things, but also let it be known that he did, Franklin may sometimes be credited with more than he deserves. That is one reason why he stands confidently at the head of any native literary procession. Talking about himself, he produced his country's best masterpiece.

Like Walt Whitman and Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway, Franklin created a public image so attractive that it obscures the man who made it. Whatever influences of time or place or circumstance combined to produce the successful, whimsical and plain-spoken homespun favorite remembered as Ben Franklin, the projection of this character was a literary exploit of magnitude. "He knew what he was about, this sharp little man," said D. H. Lawrence. "He set up the first dummy American." Certainly Horatio Alger could not have done so well in celebrating the stereotype rise from rags to riches if Franklin had not invented it. It could have bothered neither man that, like almost all of Franklin's devices, the invention was mechanical. This was something never forgotten from his New England boyhood, that everything could be set in a row and counted.

When Thomas Carlyle called him the father of all Yankees, he meant something of that sort, and when Leigh Hunt explained that "Americans are Englishmen with the poetry and romance taken out of them," he meant much the same. Carl Van Doren has spoken of Franklin's mag-

nificent centrality and of the flexible equilibrium of his talents, because, too busy or too wise to become any one thing, Franklin managed all things, including himself, with casual efficiency: "Mind and will, talent and art, strength and ease, wit and grace met in him as if nature had been lavish and happy when he was shaped. Nothing seems to have been left out except a passionate desire, as in most men of genius, to be all ruler, all soldier, all saint, all poet, all scholar, all some one gift or merit or success."

Perhaps in colonial America more than in most places, versatility was a becoming achievement—combined with self-control, recognition of limits beyond which, as Hemingway later was to explain, no man could successfully venture. Franklin painstakingly defined himself as a man who kept within bounds, discovering such satisfaction in handling what was set before him that he seldom was tempted to stretch for more. Reality was what he could see or feel, even at the end of a kite string, and he was too sensible to suspect that gods of the sky might smite him down in anger. That was what Melville must have meant when he said that Franklin's mind was grave, but never serious.

Rightfully proud of the range of his experience, Franklin was pleased when other people mistook breadth for depth, but he never fooled himself, or let himself down. When something was to be said, he prepared it carefully, so that it could be said well, for Franklin recognized his deficiencies, especially when it came to conversation. He did not extemporize easily. Like Mark Twain, he was best in monologue, skilled at fitting tales to special situations and, if uninterrupted, could spin out a pretty compliment or an effective satire. In temperament a tranquil man, he is not known to have been disturbed by unpleasant dreams, though he had wit enough to invent nighttime fantasies for recitation in flirtatious badinage with appreciative ladies. It did not seem strange to him that French women preferred to be kissed on the neck rather than on cheek or lips where make-up might be disordered.

Contented with surfaces because surfaces served him well, Franklin probably would have understood Melville's admiration for men who dived deeply, even to inevitable failure, but he would not have shared it. Better safe, he might have said, than sorry. He would have been pleased at Melville's description of him as "printer, postmaster, almanac maker, essayist, chemist, orator, tinker, states-

man, humorist, philosopher, parlor man, political economist, professor of housewifery, ambassador, projector, maxim-monger, herb-doctor, wit:—Jack of all trades, master of each and mastered by none—the type and genius of his land.” He might have nodded in sage pretense of understanding when Melville went on to say, “Franklin was everything but a poet”; but surely he would have known exactly what Carl Van Doren meant when a century later he described Franklin as the best writer in America.

Even when the *Autobiography* is placed to one side, Franklin’s place among native men of letters seems secure. In the Dogood Papers, submitted while still in his teens to his brother’s *New England Courant*, he produced his country’s first series of periodical essays. His “Speech of Polly Baker” some twenty years later applies for place as America’s first successful short story. As a satirist in such essays as “Rules for Reducing a Great Empire to a Small One” and “An Edict of the King of Prussia,” he has been compared to Swift and Voltaire. The “bagatelles” which he produced as an elderly man’s avocation during his residence in France are written in such gracious but plain-spoken prose that they alone could insure his reputation as a stylist. As a letter writer, he was superb—witty, wise, informative, and ingratiating.

The maxims which Franklin imported from abroad and reshaped to native idiom for *Poor Richard’s Almanac* have been familiarly repeated by many generations. Father Abraham’s brief treatise on “The Way to Wealth” became even in Franklin’s lifetime cherished as a minor classic, often reprinted, widely translated. His “Advice to a Young Man on the Choice of a Mistress” gave local habitation to an ancient smoking-room axiom, retold with mock solemnity. Franklin spoke seriously about education, economics, politics, and science; but he liked also to recount whoppers about American sheep with tails so heavy that carts had to be provided to support them. He wrote drinking songs and funeral elegies, and made verses in praise of his “plain country Joan” (“Blest the day that I made her my own”).

As a young man, Franklin composed *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*, and through many of his later years planned an erudite treatise on “The Art of Virtue” which he never got around to putting on paper. Instead, he wrote the *Autobiography*, in which he presented the image of the personage remembered as Ben

Franklin. To most people this personage is an amalgam of Poor Richard, Father Abraham, the young man who caught electricity with a kite, the sagacious old man in spectacles and fur cap who charmed all Europe, and the boy who was born, it is often said, in Philadelphia at the age of seventeen, trudging its dusty streets with giant loaves of bread under each arm, laughed at then, but probably for the last time—these, and much more: satirist, humorist, storyteller, essayist, letter writer, jokester, precisionist, and punster. What Benjamin Franklin really was is concealed behind a fabric so adroitly woven that no biographer has penetrated it, and so attractively designed that hundreds have been tempted to try. But what remains is still only what he cared to show of himself, a masked figure playing a part so well that, like Whitman or Mark Twain, he must himself have had difficulty at times in distinguishing the poser from the pose.

His *Autobiography* thus becomes the first American book to belong permanently to literature. It created a man. The first part written as a moral guide to show his son the way to success, and ensuing parts as a substitute for the treatise on virtue, it offered efficient and firsthand testimony "that man is not even at present a vicious and detestable animal, and still more . . . that good management may greatly amend him." As much as Rousseau's *Confessions*, the Declaration of Independence, or Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, it announced the emergence of a view of man as good and capable of becoming better. To think of Franklin as a Romantic, however, is to stretch the limits of that term, for he combined with his confidence in what Emerson later, more enthusiastically, called "the infinitude of the private man," a sense like that of Marcus Aurelius or Hemingway of limits beyond which man may not explore. Taking what was needed wherever he found it, he was an eighteenth-century man who sifted carefully to discover what was practical and useful and, therefore, best; he made a patchwork of ideas which served him well.

For virtue was not a thing apart, pursued for its own sake: it was a gateway to success. "Almost every Man has a strong Desire of being valu'd and esteem'd by the rest of his Species, but I am concern'd and griev'd," said Franklin, "to see how few fall into the Right and only infallible Method of becoming so." Thereupon, he set up his own chart of virtues, and methodically drilled himself in them, one after another. This week he would be temperate:

"Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation." The next week he would avoid trifling conversation, the next he would be orderly, then resolute, then frugal, industrious, sincere, and so on down the list, through justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, to chastity: "Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation." At first, he wrote down an even dozen, but when a Quaker friend told him that he was generally thought proud, he added another, humility, and had more trouble with it than all the rest. "I cannot boast of much success in acquiring the reality of this virtue," he confessed, "but I had a good deal with regard to the appearance of it."

For, after all, appearance does count. People who dislike Franklin refer to this attitude as cynical. To William Carlos Williams, he is "our wise prophet of chicanery," a man of voluptuous energy, but sly and covert. To some of his contemporaries, Franklin seemed a vulgar man who despoiled life of richness and literature of charm: his effect on language was to coarsen it with colloquialism offensive to good taste or refined feelings. Others have found him not in the best sense a dedicated man, because his principal commitment was to himself, whatever he wrote was for a purpose, and words were instruments used to manipulate other men in ways advantageous to the writer.

There is little glitter to Franklin. "All ideal is lacking in this healthy, upright, able, frugal, laborious nature of Franklin," said Sainte-Beuve. There is in him no "fine flower of enthusiasm, tenderness, sacrifice. . . . He brings everything down to arithmetic and strict reality, assigning no part to human imagination." When D. H. Lawrence dismissed Franklin as a "snuff-colored little man" who set up an "unlovely, snuff-colored ideal," he went on to say that "this pattern-American, this dry, moral, utilitarian little democrat has done more to ruin old Europe than any Russian nihilist." Lawrence must have meant much what Melville meant when he said that Franklin was everything but a poet, or what someone else meant when he said that Franklin was interested in all things about man except his spirit. The Europe which Franklin ruined was the Europe whose perceptions of levels of excellence had hardened to ritual within which men and manners and morals and matters of taste were rigidly enclosed. It was also the Europe of loveliness, enthusiasm, tenderness, and grace

grounded in tradition which years later, first Cooper, then Henry James attempted to reveal to their countrymen.

As a self-made writer, Franklin exhibited almost all the tendencies and attitudes discoverable in succeeding American writers of his kind, and he also shared opinions with others who were in most respects different. When Thoreau in *Walden* spoke of the cost of anything being the amount of life which must be exchanged for it, he extended what Franklin had said about self-denial in avoiding any action inconsistent with health or fortune "because 'twould cost more than 'twas worth." Emerson, in asking native writers to turn attention to common things, the meal in the firkin, the milk in the pan, and the song in the street, emphasized in precept what Franklin had established in practice. As much as Whittier or Whitman or Harriet Beecher Stowe, Franklin aimed at an audience of simple people, and his language, more than theirs, reached the workingman, the man of business who did his reading on the run and left literature to ladies.

Composed at various times and in varying moods, the *Autobiography* is not a well-made book. Franklin was sixty-five when he began it in 1771 on a fortnight holiday in Twyford, England; at this time he brought the story of his life through some eighty pages down to 1730. More than ten years passed until, in France in 1784, he puttered over new pages which set forth his early, methodical plans for "arriving at moral perfection." After he returned to America, he took up the task again in 1788, picking up the narrative in 1731 and carrying it industriously forward to 1757. Sometime before his death in the spring of 1790, Franklin added a brief fourth part which ended with events of 1759. In style, the first part is best, written as a letter to his son, in leisurely, reminiscent affection for the boy whose adventures it told. By the time he began the second part, Franklin had been convinced by friends that the memoirs should be made public, addressed to young men everywhere. As a result, pictorial narrative is replaced by moral suasion as the industrious but bumbling boy becomes for many pages something of a prig, so intent on self-improvement that he caricatures himself. The third part, still burdened with morality, presses doggedly on, and the brief fourth part breaks off abruptly, as if the narrative might have gone on and on, except for the accident that he then stopped writing.

As in *Walden*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Adventures of*

*Huckleberry Finn*, the story is unfinished; the hero is off to fresh adventures which an imaginative reader can infer. Without art, except in saying plain things plainly, Franklin thus adventitiously fathered a native literary form and a way of looking at the world which pays less attention to what a person is than to what he becomes or may become. The new world of America was a land of opportunities, and Franklin demonstrated in his life story how they might be met through diligence and wise management. If what he said of youthful escapades and young triumphs cannot in every instance be proved true, neither can they be thought false to the legend which his life and his memory of it created. Making drama out of drudgery and a liturgy of service, Franklin authenticated the democratic presumption that the least of men might rise, and, rising, lift his fellows. "I have always thought," he said, "that one man of tolerable abilities will work great changes and accomplish great affairs among mankind." And the lengthening shadow of Ben Franklin is spread over one after another of the institutions he fathered—the fire companies, the city watch, schemes as varied as a plan for keeping streets clean, for practical education, for a literature of purpose, for justice to the Negro and Indian, for developing a postal system, and helping young men save money for learning to shave themselves.

Ultimately, however, it was that one man, a single and separate person who must make his way—and Franklin sat for and painted his portrait. As America's first literary masterwork, the *Autobiography* may seem to make a shoddy, poor-relation appearance beside more ambitious and better planned books which follow it. But it holds its own. Badly organized, with hardly a metaphor in all its matter-of-fact pages, but enriched with the power of words as they are really spoken, it presents one character, distinctively, even disruptively American, whom many have attempted to sketch again, but none has done so well. Looking back over his life, much as Mark Twain was later to look back over his, Franklin created an image of an American boy, a more seriously engaged, city-bred Tom Sawyer, who meant well and who did well by looking out for himself. He learned, perhaps more than Huck Finn, to know the venality of man; but after a few tentative experiments, he was too alert and ambitious to let that bother him, even when discovered in himself. Ben Franklin had his eyes open. He knew that men and institutions

were often corrupt, but he was confident that they might be improved. Knowing his limitations—that he was not a poet, but only a very practical fellow, clever and sufficiently quick—he was nonetheless sure that by proper manipulation of the talents he had, he could move triumphantly ahead, and he did.

Lewis Leary  
Columbia University

## FRANKLIN'S NOTES\*

My writing. Mrs Dogood's letters. Differences arise between my Brother and me (his temper and mine); their cause in general. His Newspaper. The Prosecution he suffered. My Examination. Vote of Assembly. His manner of evading it. Whereby I became free. My attempt to get employ with other Printers. He prevents me. Our frequent pleadings before our Father. The final Breach. My inducements to quit Boston. Manner of coming to a Resolution. My leaving him and going to New York (return to eating flesh); thence to Pennsylvania. The journey, and its events on the Bay, at Amboy. The road. Meet with Dr Brown. His character. His great work. At Burlington. The Good Woman. On the River. My arrival at Philadelphia. First Meal and first Sleep. Money left. Employment. Lodging. First acquaintance with my afterward Wife. With J. Ralph. With Keimer. Their characters. Osborne. Watson. The Governor takes notice of me. The Occasion and Manner. His character. Offers to set me up. My return to Boston. Voyage and accidents. Reception. My Father dislikes the proposal. I return to New York and Philadelphia. Governor Burnet. J. Collins. The Money for Vernon. The Governor's Deceit. Collins not finding employment goes to Barbados much in my Debt. Ralph and I go to England. Disappointment of Governor's Letters. Colonel French his Friend. Cornwallis's Letters. Cabbin. Denham. Hamilton. Arrival in England. Get employment. Ralph not. He is an expense to me. Adventures in England. Write a Pamphlet and print 100. Schemes. Lyons. Dr Pemberton. My diligence, and yet poor through Ralph. My Landlady. Her character. Wygate. Wilkes. Cibber. Plays. Books I borrowed. Preachers I heard. Redmayne. At Watts's. Temperance. Ghost. Conduct and Influence among the Men. Persuaded by Mr Denham to return with him to Philadelphia and be his clerk. Our voyage and arrival. My resolutions in Writing. My Sickness. His Death. Found D. R. married. Go to work again with Keimer. Terms. His ill-usage of me.

\* These notes served as Franklin's working outline.

My Resentment. Saying of Decow. My Friends at Burlington. Agreement with H. Meredith to set up in Partnership. Do so. Success with the Assembly. Hamilton's Friendship. Sewell's History. Gazette. Paper Money. Webb. Writing Busy Body. Breintnal. Godfrey. His character. Suit against us. Offer of my Friends, Coleman and Grace. Continue the Business, and M. goes to Carolina. Pamphlet on Paper Money. Gazette from Keimer. Junto credit; its plan. Marry. Library erected. Manner of conducting the project. Its plan and utility. Children. Almanac. The use I made of it. Great industry. Constant study. Father's Remark and Advice upon Diligence. Carolina Partnership. Learn French and German. Journey to Boston after ten years. Affection of my Brother. His Death, and leaving me his Son. Art of Virtue. Occasion. City Watch amended. Post-office. Spotswood. Bradford's Behavior. Clerk of Assembly. Lose one of my Sons. Project of subordinate Juntos. Write occasionally in the papers. Success in Business. Fire companies. Engines. Go again to Boston in 1743. See Dr Spence. Whitefield. My connection with him. His generosity to me. My returns. Church Differences. My part in them. Propose a College. Not then prosecuted. Propose and establish a Philosophical Society. War. Electricity. My first knowledge of it. Partnership with D. Hall, etc. Dispute in Assembly upon Defence. Project for it. Plain Truth. Its success. Ten thousand Men raised and disciplined. Lotteries. Battery built. New Castle. My influence in the Council. Colors, Devices, and Mottos. Ladies' Military Watch. Quakers chosen of the Common Council. Put in the commission of the peace. Logan fond of me. His Library. Appointed Postmaster-General. Chosen Assemblyman. Commissioner to treat with Indians at Carlisle and at Easton. Project and established Academy. Pamphlet on it. Journey to Boston. At Albany. Plan of union of the colonies. Copy of it. Remarks upon it. It fails, and how. Journey to Boston in 1754. Disputes about it in our Assembly. My part in them. New Governor. Disputes with him. His character and sayings to me. Chosen Alderman. Project of Hospital. My share in it. Its success. Boxes. Made a Commissioner of the Treasury. My commission to defend the frontier counties. Raise Men and build Forts. Militia Law of my drawing. Made Colonel. Parade of my Officers. Offence to Proprietor. Assistance to Boston Ambassadors. Journey with Shirley, etc. Meet with Braddock. Assistance to him. To the Officers of his Army.

Furnish him with Forage. His concessions to me and character of me. Success of my Electrical Experiments. Medal sent me. Present Royal Society, and Speech of President. Denny's Arrival and Courtship to me. His character. My service to the Army in the affair of Quarters. Disputes about the Proprietor's Taxes continued. Project for paving the City. I am sent to England. Negotiation there. *Canada delenda est*. My Pamphlet. Its reception and effect. Projects drawn from me concerning the Conquest. Acquaintance made and their services to me—Mrs S. M. Small, Sir John P., Mr Wood, Sargent Strahan, and others. Their characters. Doctorate from Edinburgh, St. Andrew's. Doctorate from Oxford. Journey to Scotland. Lord Leicester. Mr. Prat. De Grey. Jackson. State of Affairs in England. Delays. Eventful Journey into Holland and Flanders. Agency from Maryland. Son's appointment. My Return. Allowance and thanks. Journey to Boston. John Penn, Governor. My conduct toward him. The Paxton Murders. My Pamphlet. Rioters march to Philadelphia. Governor retires to my House. My conduct. Sent out to the Insurgents. Turn them back. Little thanks. Disputes revived. Resolutions against continuing under Proprietary Government. Another Pamphlet. Cool thoughts. Sent again to England with Petition. Negotiation there. Lord H. His character. Agencies from New Jersey, Georgia, Massachusetts. Journey into Germany, 1766. Civilities received there. Göttingen Observations. Ditto into France in 1767. Ditto in 1769. Entertainment there at the Academy. Introduced to the King and the Mesdames, Mad. Victoria and Mrs Lamignon. Duc de Chaulnes, M. Beaumont, Le Roy, D'Alibard, Nollet. See Journals. Holland. Reprint my papers and add many. Books presented to me from many authors. My Book translated into French. Lightning Kite. Various Discoveries. My manner of prosecuting that Study. King of Denmark invites me to dinner. Recollect my Father's Proverb. Stamp Act. My opposition to it. Recommendation of J. Hughes. Amendment of it. Examination in Parliament. Reputation it gave me. Caressed by Ministry. Charles Townsend's Act. Opposition to it. Stoves and chimney-plates. Armonica. Acquaintance with Ambassadors. Russian Intimation. Writing in newspapers. Glasses from Germany. Grant of Land in Nova Scotia. Sickneses. Letters to America returned hither. The consequences. Insurance Office. My character. Costs me nothing to be civil to inferiors; a good deal to be submissive to

superiors, etc., etc. Farce of Perpetual Motion. Writing for Jersey Assembly. Hutchinson's Letters. Temple. Suit in Chancery. Abuse before the Privy Council. Lord Hillsborough's character and conduct. Lord Dartmouth. Negotiation to prevent the War. Return to America. Bishop of St Asaph. Congress. Assembly. Committee of Safety. Chevaux-de-frise. Sent to Boston, to the Camp. To Canada, to Lord Howe. To France. Treaty, etc.

## THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

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 them-