

The
Autobiography Of
**BENJAMIN
FRANKLIN**



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FRANKLIN

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ISBN: 0-8049-0071-X THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

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"A Commonwealth of a
Man"



INTRODUCTION

For the reader of Franklin's *Autobiography*, it may be pivotal to know that this work was one of the very first autobiographies published. This fact alone would justify its continued popularity with the general reading public and the devotees of Americana.

However, when the critical reader has turned the last page of this little document, he may with prudence lament that "The Memoirs," as Franklin titled the work, were written at a time when autobiography as a literary form was without parenthood.

The sensitive reader knows how important a literary tradition is for a writer. It is, in a very real sense, a reference file to which a writer may turn for guidance. Out of this study comes an appreciation of the historical and thematic development of the tradition. It provides, too, an understanding of its form and content which permits a writer to estimate their adequacy to project his particular vision. If, after analysis, he deems them satisfactory, they become sources of inspiration, knowledge, and sustainment; and, just as importantly, such study suggests boundaries to the method and range of transformation and redirection he may consider necessary. Additionally it grants opportunity to anticipate limits beyond which he may tread with danger to standards of taste, values, and attitudes. Obvious examples which come immediately to mind of writers who found creative sustainment within a specific tradition are, of course, the classic ones of Shakespeare in the drama and Milton in the epic.

Although a literary tradition is often helpful, it may for cer-

tain writers be a hindrance. For it must be admitted that there do appear, and fairly frequently, too, writers whose sensitivity and vision is so unique and passionate that the traditional forms and content are just not adequate to render the full range and depth of their experience. As was noted above, there are classic examples of writers for whom traditional forms were not only necessary, but also adequate; there are also examples, just as classic, of writers who, with justification, rejected traditional forms and content; they selected new content and fused it with new mediums, and, by so doing, offered the world a new way of looking at life and the self. Wordsworth's "Preface To Lyrical Ballads" is the classic statement of the need for literary revolution, and it served, too, as an articulation for the world of the quality and the commitment of the Romantic experience and vision.

In our time, a classic example of a literary revolutionist is Faulkner. He realized, as did Wordsworth, that the nature of his vision would demand a complete break with the structure of the traditional novel. If this Southern literary giant were to convey his understanding of the South, he must literally create a new artistic medium. For Faulkner saw the contemporary South as an organism spawned by an incestuous union with its past. So strong are the genetic forces of the past that its children have no real or significant consciousness of their present selfhood. A person is not a self, a "me," a personality; he is a broken continuum, half dead, half alive, literally a schizophrenic. If Faulkner were to successfully communicate his vision of the South as an offspring of a corrupt mating with its past, which refused actuality to the conscious self within the context of its own time and place, and thus paralyzed any possibility of commitment to the future—then he must create a style and structure that compelled the fusion of conventional time concepts into a pattern of simultaneity; he had to evolve a technique of recordation in which traditional notions of past, present, and future would be so submerged into a totality of an experienced "nowness" that they would willingly be suspended. By rendering his vision through the stream of this character's consciousness, in which psychic state alone is experienced the simultaneity of time, he could successfully communicate his vision of the past as a corruptive force in Southern culture.

Such an understanding of the role of literary tradition cannot but brighten our sensitivity to the uniqueness of the *Autobiography* both as a literary production and a historical statement.

Yet, however exciting it may be to participate, if only as a reader, in something unique—however we may applaud the creative effort and commend the energy that prompted the effort—it must be admitted that *the commitment to uniqueness is an acceptance of limitation*. For, even in nature uniqueness is always strange and sometimes even frightening; its marked difference isolates it not only from the general context of its environment, but prohibits it, when perceived, from being assimilated into the comprehensive context of previous perceptions. Indeed, is not a beholder's response always limited by his ability to relate the unique to the experience continuum that is his self?

So it is, too, in the creation and appreciation of a literary form and content. For the unique in literature, as in life itself, must of its very nature manifest a fragility of form and a confinement of content. Had the writing of autobiography in Franklin's day been the highly accepted and traditionalized form it is today, what might have been the quality and significance of Franklin's endeavor?

First, and perhaps foremost, such a tradition could have motivated Franklin to make a much greater effort to enrich and complete the "Memoirs" than in fact he did make. As a chronicle of his life, it records only the first fifty-one years of his life. He died in 1790, leaving an autobiographical void of thirty years, years of commitment and accomplishment equal to—perhaps superior to (when viewed from our contemporary vantage point) in seriousness of responsibility and quality of performance—the busy and controversial days he does record. In the very beginning of the *Autobiography* he admits he labors under a limitation. "Most people dislike vanity in others," he comments, and although he concedes, "it is often productive of good to the possessor," still it must have been, for a man whose whole life was devoted to persuasion through compromise for the sake of unity, a difficult, indeed even a tedious task to write about himself within the context of a struggle for empire—even with the best of motives—knowing that by so doing he could be accused of the most common of human frailties which, despite its commonness in all of us, is the one almost all of us find hardest to accept. Had there been an accepted autobiographical form—had there been a tradition for such a personal recordation to protect him from the threat of such accusation—had there been a public acceptance of the role of the "I" in the affairs of city, state, and national capitals, here and abroad—had

his public readers been as ready to accept the truly autobiographical as are modern readers, how much more breadth and depth would have characterized this Puritan Odyssey!

This void of tradition had necessarily, therefore, not only an inhibiting effect upon the potential fullness of the *Autobiography's* development, but more importantly, it restricted the expression of his Colonial and unrealized revolutionary vision and at the same time blunted the literary projection of it across oceanic shores. For certainly a man of Franklin's political experience and maturity must have recognized the revolutionary impact of his role in American and European affairs. But to claim such a role, to project himself from such a stage of national and international power without the sanction and protection of publicly accepted costumes and gesture, dialogue and setting, would have been, to his generation of readers who prided themselves on correctness of taste and impeccabilities of manners, the summit of ungentlemanliness, or at least, the boorishness of an Appalachian hill farmer. And this, Franklin was too much of an English Colonial gentleman to have ever welcomed as a characterization of his life and manners! "Having emerged from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred," Franklin confesses, he was too much the pragmatist to adopt a literary posture that would negate his "state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world." He would, as he always had, welcome the new, the unique, by accepting the responsibility of writing in a form and content which was without precedent, but he would not in the process of literary composition transgress the boundaries and standards of social and literary taste and behavior.

Such must, in fact, be the final evaluation of the *Autobiography*. For it is a kind of literary orphan, suffering the full impact of a unique birthing; indeed, to use the jargon of the modern sociologist, it is culturally deprived. If the reader accepts such an estimate of the work, he may justifiably ask, "Why read it?" Indeed he may go further and demand, "Why, in fact, does it continue in popularity?" A response to these two questions can be given by one answer. Simply that within the context of its writing (including the limitations imposed by its literary uniqueness) it is a candid and clear statement of the creative and comprehensive thrust of a wise giant upon the early American scene. As we read this simple classic, a slender volume on the Americana shelf, we must applaud this man as "the American hero." For he is, in the finest and fullest sense, the

incarnation of what American literary historians call the "Democratic Myth Hero."

A comprehensive itemization of the qualities of Franklin's character as revealed in the *Autobiography* must be resisted here; for to identify them as one turns each page will be half the fun of the reading. Yet it may be helpful, if only as a guide to appreciation, to suggest that there is an underlying basic characteristic to be found in Franklin's character which explains his many other qualities. And it is simply this—that Franklin looked at life critically, scientifically. He was simply not overwhelmed by the "isness" of life, nor did he accept the facts of his world as divinely ordained.

Rather, he saw life as a challenge, not to personal, social and political adjustment through acceptance, but as opportunity for reconstruction as suggested by scientific observation and the application of reason. Though separated by an ocean's breadth, he was in this approach a major contributor to the rationalistic dialogue of such men as Locke and Hume, Voltaire and Berkeley during that period called "The Age of Enlightenment." Nor was his dedication to improvement limited to the fulfillment of his own individual needs; rather, he saw them as similar to the needs of others. By informing others through letters and the popular press (in many instances, his own) of the universality of a problem, he was able to persuade the people of the community to fuse their efforts for the common good and by such combined efforts provide solutions in the form of new legislation or community agencies. This habit of identifying a particular need on the personal level and generalizing it in terms of the needs of other citizens was doubtless the essential quality of Franklin's character and likewise is the one quality that explains the societal thrust of his contributions in science (especially electricity) and agriculture, state, national, and international politics, war and peace, education and social welfare and reform. (It should be significant for the contemporary reader that in the later stage of his life he accepted the presidency of the first anti-slavery society in the United States.)

This ability to view reality simultaneously as a person and as a citizen—the perception that he is part of a whole as the whole is part of him—the recognition that we are all brothers under the Fatherhood of God was, I believe, the dominant quality of Franklin's vision. He expresses this concept of the body politic (not unlike in spirit and tone to the same image of the mystical body described by St. Paul) when, after the publication of a

paper on the nature of his famous stove, he was offered a patent on it by the royal governor, he affirmed his reasons for refusing it by saying, "That, as we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others, we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by any invention of ours; and this we should do freely and generously." Such a commitment reveals his deep moral sense. For him, perfection was not to be found in the exhortations of "God's ministers" but rather in "a little Liturgy" he had composed over the years which compelled him to acknowledge the supremacy in the moral order of service rather than satisfaction.

Such a philosophy, not only explicitly stated but also in so many ways lived by, ought to minimize the effect of those critics of this Yankee printer who see in the *Autobiography* little else than a Puritan document—a religious tract—for the justification of thrift and other Puritan qualities. There can be no doubt that there is a good deal of Boston religiosity to be found in this book. Franklin tells us in the *Autobiography*, which ends with his London arrival on July 27, 1757, that he kept a diary—"a little book," he called it—in which was catalogued his spiritual struggle for an ordered and directed moral life. The result of this exercise of self-evaluation was his surprise, "to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined." But if the whole life of the man is viewed as he himself viewed life itself—as a continuum—a total and complete unity—then there is little justification for the critical evaluation of the *Autobiography* as only a Puritan testimony. Franklin, it must be admitted, was too much the publisher and successful capitalist not to have transferred the highly successful journalistic spirit and content of *Poor Richard's Almanac* (which netted him, he says, 10,000 a year) to whatever he wrote for public circulation. But to allow this cultural characteristic to dominate our critical judgment is to miss the forest for the trees. There is doubtless much of the "Poor Richard" in Franklin, but there is likewise much in him that justifies his characterization as "A Commonwealth of a Man."

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原书缺页

原书缺页

Chapter I

*To William Franklin Esq.
Governor of
New Jersey*

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 learn the circumstances of *my* life, many of which you are unacquainted with, and expecting the enjoyment of a few weeks' uninterrupted leisure, I sit down to write them. Besides, there are some other inducements that excite me to this undertaking. From the poverty and obscurity in which I was born, and in which I passed my earliest years, I have raised myself to a state of affluence and some degree of celebrity in the world. As constant good fortune has accompanied me even to an advanced period of life, my posterity will perhaps be desirous of learning the means which I employed, and which, thanks to Providence, so well succeeded with me. They may also deem them fit to be imitated, should any of them find themselves in similar circumstances.

* Twyford was the country residence of Dr. Shipley, Bishop of St. Asaph's. Dr. Franklin was in the habit of calling Dr. Shipley "The Good Bishop." He became introduced to him while in Europe, as agent for several of the colonies, and in this year, 1771, paid two visits to Twyford. Dr. Shipley was one of the few in the House of Lords who opposed from the first the course pursued by the British government in relation to North America. He published some poems and sermons, and some writings in reference to the colonial dispute. He died in 1788; and Dr. Franklin, in a letter of condolence to his daughter, writes: "His departure is a loss, not to his family and friends only, but to his nation and to the world; for he was intent on doing good, had wisdom to devise the means, and talents to promote them. His sermon before the Society for Propagating the Gospel, and '*his Speech intended to be Spoken*,' are proofs of his ability as well as his humanity. Had his counsels in those pieces been attended to by the ministers, how much bloodshed might have been prevented, and how much expense and disgrace to the nation avoided!"

This good fortune, when I reflect on it, which is frequently the case, has induced me sometimes to say, that if it were left to my choice, I should have no objection to go over the same life from its beginning to the end: requesting only the advantage authors have, of correcting in a second edition the faults of the first. So would I also wish to change some incidents of it for others more favorable. Notwithstanding, if this condition was denied, I should still accept the offer of recommencing the same life. But as this repetition is not to be expected, that which resembles most living one's life over again, seems to be to recall all the circumstances of it; and, to render this remembrance more durable, to record them in writing.

In thus employing myself, I shall yield to the inclination so natural to old men, of talking of themselves and their own actions; and I shall indulge it without being tiresome to those who, from respect to my age, might conceive themselves obliged to listen to me, since they will be always free to read me or not. And, lastly (I may as well confess it, as the denial of it would be believed by nobody), I shall perhaps not a little gratify my own *vanity*. Indeed, I never heard or saw the introductory words "*Without vanity* I may say," &c., 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 who 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 attribute the mentioned happiness of my past life to his divine providence, which led me to the means I used and gave the 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 us, even in our afflictions.

Some notes which one of my uncles (who had the same curiosity in collecting family anecdotes) once put into my hands, furnished me with several particulars relative to our

ancestors. From these notes I learned that they lived in the same village, Ecton, in Northamptonshire, on a freehold of about thirty acres, for at least three hundred years, and how much longer could not be ascertained.*

This small estate would not have sufficed for their maintenance without the business of a smith, which had continued in the family down to my uncle's time, the eldest son being always brought up to that employment; a custom which he and my father followed with regard to their eldest sons. When I searched the registers at *Ecton*, I found an account of their marriages and burials from the year 1555 only, as the registers kept did not commence previous thereto. I, however, learned from *it* 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 was too old to continue his business, when he retired to Banbury, in Oxfordshire, to the house of his son John, with whom my father served an apprenticeship. There my uncle 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 daughter, who, with her husband, one Fisher, of Wellingborough, sold it to Mr. Isted, now lord of the manor there. My grandfather had four sons, who grew up: viz., Thomas, John, Benjamin, and Josiah. Being at a distance from my papers, I will give you what account I can of them from memory: and if my papers are not lost in my absence, you will find among them many more particulars.†

Thomas, my eldest uncle, was bred a smith under his

* Sir John Fortescue, chief justice of the King's Bench in the time of Henry VI., in his famous work, "*De Laudibus Legum Angliæ*," written in 1412, speaks of wealthy freeholders as commonly called *Franklins*. Chaucer and Spencer both speak of the country gentleman as a *Franklin*; and the name was probably assumed as a surname when the fashion of surnames came up. The name *Francquelin* or *Franqueln* is found in France, and may be traced back as far as 1521, and even to the century before.

† Among Dr. Franklin's papers was found a letter from his father, dated Boston, May 25th, 1739: "As to the original of our name there is various opinions; some say that it came from a sort of title of which a book, that you bought when here, gives a lively account. Some think we are of a French extract, which was formerly called *Franks*; some of a free line, a line free from that vassalage which was common to subjects in days of old; some from a bird of long red legs."

father; but, being ingenious, and encouraged in learning (as all my brothers were) by an Esquire Palmer, then the principal inhabitant of that parish, he qualified himself for the bar, and became a considerable man in the county; was chief mover of all public-spirited enterprises for the county or town of Northampton, as well as of his own village, of which many instances were related of him; and he was much taken notice of and patronized by Lord Halifax. He died in 1702, on the 6th of January, four years to a day before I was born. The recital which some elderly persons made to us of his character, I remember, struck you as something extraordinary, from its similarity with what you knew of me. "Had he died," said you, "four years later, on the same day, one might have supposed a transmigration."

John, my next uncle, was bred a dyer, I believe of wool. Benjamin was bred a silk dyer, serving an apprenticeship in London. He was an ingenious man. I remember, when I was a boy, he came to my father's in Boston, and resided in the house with us for several years. There was always a particular affection between my father and him, and I was his godson. He lived to a great age. He left behind him two quarto volumes of manuscript, of his own poetry, consisting of fugitive pieces addressed to his friends.* He had invented a short-hand of his own, which he taught me, but, not having practiced it, I have now forgotten it. He was very pious, and an assiduous attendant at the sermons of the best preachers, which he reduced to writing according to his

* These volumes are now in the possession of Mrs. Samuel Emmons, of Boston, great-granddaughter of their author. The thoughts of the writer run chiefly on moral and religious subjects; and the pieces embrace many acrostics, as the names of his friends and connections, and other pieces addressed to them on various occasions. The following lines were sent to his *namesake*, and were probably elicited by some juvenile performance of the future philosopher. They were prophetic.

" 'Tis time for me to throw aside my pen
When hanging sleeves read, write, and rhyme like men.
This forward Spring fortells a plenteous crop;
For, if the bud bear grain, what will the top!
If plenty in the verdant blade appear,
What may we not soon hope for in the ear!
When flowers are beautiful before they're blown,
What rarities will afterward be shown!
If trees good fruit un'noculated bear,
You may be sure 'twill afterward be rare.

method, and had thus collected several volumes of them. He was also a good deal of a politician; too much so, perhaps, for his station. There fell lately into my hands, in London, a collection he made of all the principal political pamphlets relating to public affairs, from the year 1641 to 1717; many of the volumes are wanting, as appears by their numbering, but there still remain eight volumes in folio, and twenty in quarto and in octavo. A dealer in old books had met with them, and knowing me by name, having bought books of him he brought them to me. It would appear that my uncle must have left them here when he went to America, which was about fifty years ago. I found several of his notes in the margins. His grandson, Samuel Franklin, is still living in Boston.

Our humble family early embraced the Reformed religion. Our forefathers continued Protestants through the reign of Mary, when they were sometimes in danger of persecution on account of their zeal against popery. They had an English Bible, and to conceal it, and place it in safety, it was fastened open with tapes under and within the cover of a joint-stool. When my great-grandfather wished to read it to his family, he placed the joint-stool on his knees, and then turned over the leaves under the tapes. One of the children stood at the door to give notice if he saw the apparitor coming, who was an officer of the spiritual court. In that case the stool was turned down again upon its feet, when the

If fruits are sweet before they've time to yellow,
 How luscious will they be when they are mellow!
 If first years' shoots such noble clusters send,
 What laden boughs, Engedi-like, may we expect in the end!"

Benjamin Franklin, the philosopher's uncle, died in Boston in 1728, leaving one son, Samuel, the only survivor of ten children. This son had an only child, a son, referred to in the text, as living in 1771. He died in 1775, leaving four daughters. It may be here remarked, that there is not now a male descendant of Dr. Franklin's grandfather living who bears the name of Franklin. Dr. Franklin's eldest son, to whom this autobiography was addressed, left one son, William Temple Franklin, who died without issue. His second son, Francis Folger, died in childhood. His daughter, Sarah, married Richard Bache in 1767, and their descendants are numerous, six out of seven marrying: viz., Benjamin Franklin Bache, who married Margaret Marcoe; William, who married Catharine Wistar; Deborah, William J. Duane; Richard, a daughter of Alexander J. Dallas; Sarah, Thomas Sergeant.

Bible remained concealed under it as before. This anecdote I had from Uncle Benjamin. The family continued all of the Church of England till about the end of Charles the Second's reign, when some of the ministers that had been outed for their non-conformity holding conventicles in Northamptonshire, my Uncle Benjamin and Father Josiah adhered to them, and so continued all their lives: the rest of the family remained with the Episcopal Church.

My father married young, and carried his wife with three children to New England, about 1685. The conventicles being at that time forbidden by law, and frequently disturbed in their meetings, some considerable men of his acquaintance determined to go to that country, and he was prevailed with to accompany them thither, where they expected to enjoy the exercise of their religion with freedom. By the same wife my father had four children more born there, and by a second wife ten others, in all seventeen; of whom I remember to have seen thirteen sitting together at his table, who all grew up to years of maturity, and were married; I was the youngest son, and the youngest of all the children except two daughters. I was born in Boston, in New England.* My mother, the second wife of my father, was Abiah Folger, daughter of Peter Folger, one of the first settlers of New England, of whom honorable mention is made by Cotton Mather, in his ecclesiastical history of that country, entitled *Magnalia Christi Americana*, as "a godly and learned Englishman," if I remember the words rightly. I was informed he wrote several small occasional works, but only one of them was printed, which I remember to have seen several years since. It was written in 1675. It was in familiar verse, according to the taste of the times and people, and addressed to the government there. It asserts the liberty of conscience in behalf of the Anabaptists, the Quakers, and other sectaries that had been persecuted. He attributes to this persecution the Indian wars, and other calamities that had befallen the country, regarding them as

* The public Register of Births in Boston, still preserved, dates Dr. Franklin's with January 6th, 1706. This is Old Style, and, according to our present calendar, is the same as January 17th. It appears by the record of the Old South Church, opposite which building his father then lived, that he was baptized the same day. The early years of Franklin were spent in a house corner of Hanover and Union streets, to which his father removed shortly after his birth.