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AMERICAN LITERARY ALMANAC

FROM 1608 TO THE PRESENT

Edited by Karen L. Rood

AN ORIGINAL COMPENDIUM
OF FACTS AND ANECDOTES ABOUT
LITERARY LIFE IN THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



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EDITED BY KAREN L. ROOD
A Bruccoli Clark Layman Book



Facts On File
New York • Oxford

AMERICAN LITERARY ALMANAC

American Literary Almanac

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AMERICAN LITERARY ALMANAC

For R. M. R. and J. M. R.

Foreword

This almanac for readers departs from the format of current almanacs—which are almost entirely given over to lists—and returns to the spirit of earlier American almanacs. The history of the genre that follows this foreword demonstrates that the colonial almanacs provided interesting reading matter as well as useful facts.

The *American Literary Almanac* presents an overview of our literature organized by topics. Dr. Johnson declared, “Sir, the biographical part of literature is what I love most.” Despite the efforts of schools of modern criticism to isolate the work from its creator, literary biography always multiplies the pleasures and rewards of literature. Literary history is literary biography. Accordingly, this almanac devotes most of its space to aspects of writers’ lives.

Written and compiled by literary specialists, the *American Literary Almanac* draws on more than 500 sources to bring together in one volume the most re-

liable information available: a few myths are shattered in these pages, but more than a few true stories arise in their place. The focus is on major writers, but—realizing that a knowledge of lesser literary figures adds color and texture to our understanding of great authors and their times—we have covered interesting minor writers as well. Though it puts a slightly greater emphasis on the twentieth century, this almanac does not neglect the beginnings of our literature in the seventeenth century, its maturation over the next two centuries into a unique expression of our national identity, and its growth in this century to truly international scope and stature. In striving to record the facts that lie behind the history of American literature we have endeavored to be instructive but not dull, entertaining but not trivial.

This volume will be updated, supplemented, and revised at suitable intervals.

—K.L.R.

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AMERICAN LITERARY ALMANAC

Introduction: The Origins of American Almanacs

by BENJAMIN FRANKLIN V

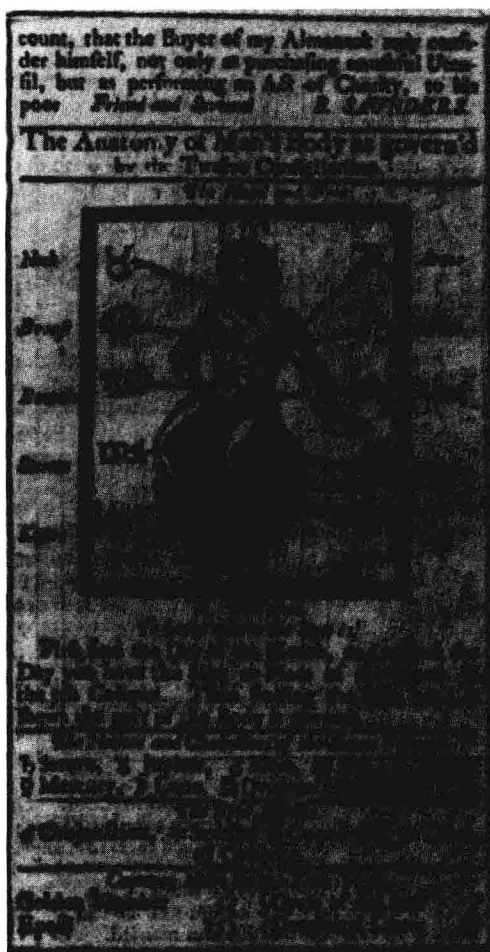
Etymologists have suggested that the word *almanac* evolved from one or more of these languages: Arabic, Greek, Dutch, German, Hebrew, Saxon. No one knows for certain the derivation of the word. What it means is decidedly less ambiguous, although its meaning has changed since Roger Bacon first used it in the thirteenth century. To him, it was a source of astronomical information, a concept that antedates him by millennia. In fact, his sense of the word might be used to argue that the Egyptian pyramids were among the first almanacs, since they served as gnomons, the vertical parts of sundials, and therefore permitted the ancients to tell time. Eventually an almanac became a publication that includes annual information; now the word means a book containing facts that are often, but not always, annual in nature. The *World Almanac*, the *Information Please Almanac*, the *Reader's Digest Almanac*, and other such tomes include data ranging from Academy Award winners to toll-free telephone numbers to the names and dates of famous people to notable athletic accomplishments. Astronomical information is still present, but the section devoted to it is no longer the most lengthy in an almanac. A recent *World Almanac*, for example, devotes 30 of approximately 1,000 pages to astronomical data, or three percent. Times have changed: people do not need to use almanacs for such information, as once they did.

Most books are read; almanacs are used, consulted to find the answer to a specific question—such as Greece's per

capita income. Once that information is located, the reader might often ignore the rest of the book, interesting and valuable though the other facts might be, although browsing invariably brings serendipitous delights. Almanacs are therefore the ultimate practical literature. And indeed, practicality is the reason why the Puritans in colonial America so valued them.

While almanacs did not originate in colonial America, from the beginning of printing in Cambridge, in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, almanacs have been of considerable importance in this country. In fact, the second item believed to have been produced by the Cambridge press, the first American press, was an almanac compiled by the mariner William Peirce. If so, an almanac came off the Puritans' press before their first religious publication, *The Whole Booke of Psalmes* (1640), better known as the *Bay Psalm Book*, the first full-length American book. This group of dedicated people, the Puritans, immigrated to the New World to worship as they pleased—religion was their major concern—but they also needed to survive in a new environment. The psalter assisted them with the one; the almanac, with the other. They needed both books.

The Peirce almanac (1639?), of which there are no known copies, was but the first of many seventeenth-century American almanacs. The earliest extant almanac is Samuel Danforth's, which the Cambridge press printed in 1646. And if it is typical of the few American almanacs that apparently preceded it, as



Page from Benjamin Franklin's
first almanac

seems likely, one may conclude that each page in the early almanacs contained information about one month (beginning with March and concluding with February, following the Julian calendar), began with the name of the month and the number of days in it ("The third month called *May* hath xxxi dayes"), told when the sun would rise and set on the first, tenth, and twentieth day of each month, allotted a separate line to each day with approximately every other day having an astrological sign and many days having an occasional comment, and concludes with part of a short essay on the history of calendars ("But wee under the New Testament acknowledge no holy-dayes, ex-

cept the first day of the week only"; 25 December therefore has no special notation). The daily comments in the Danforth almanac range from, in January, "Sun in Aquarius. Full moon the 10 day, 11 min. past 5 at night" to, on 6 May, "The Court of ELECTION at Boston. A Fair at Dorchester." In helping the Puritans with their farming and reminding them of significant community events, such publications were invaluable.

The almanac soon became more than just a reference book. The next year the 1647 Danforth almanac included a poem for each month of the year. The poem for March: "A Coal-white Bird appears this spring/That neither cares to sigh or sing./This when the merry Birds espy,/They take her for some enemy./Why so, when as she humbly stands/Only to shake you by your hands?" Other almanac makers began using verse. And as the century progressed, they began adding astronomical essays, lists of England's monarchs, full-page illustrations, advice to farmers, weather forecasts, medical advice, book advertisements, and other features that would appeal to a wide audience.

The 1700 Daniel Leeds almanac is typical of what the almanacs had become by the end of the century. It presents astronomical information, but it has poetry on the title page, a Leeds preface, and an advertisement (for pills "famous for the Cure of *Agues, Feavers, Scurvey, . . . Griping in the Guts, Worms* of all sorts"). Further, it has an essay on the two lunar eclipses of 1700, a two-page list of memorable events and dates, and a list of dates when courts will be held in "West-Jersey" and Pennsylvania.

Leeds's almanac does not contain the Man of Signs, a feature that first appeared in American almanacs in 1678 (in John Foster's almanac) and soon became popular. The Man of Signs is a naked man with astrological signs attached to or associated with various parts of his body. By consulting this figure and determining when the moon

would pass through a certain part of the sky, a reader could determine, ostensibly, which part of his body the moon would influence at a given time.

Almanacs became increasingly comprehensive during the eighteenth century. For example, the *Farmer's Almanac* for 1800 includes all of the categories of information present in the Danforth and Leeds almanacs, but it has an illustrated title page and lists of Friends' meetings, mail stages to and from Boston, and vacations at various colleges (Harvard, Dartmouth, Providence, and Williamstown). It also has two pages devoted to each month (with December as the last month), an expanded coverage of courts, and an agricultural essay ("Of the Plaster of Paris as a Manure"). Further, it includes a letter to the editor, postage rates, currency information, poems, receipts ("To Make Onion Sauce"), mileage from Boston to other towns, advertisements, and anecdotes. An example of the last: "An old lady beholding herself in a looking-glass, espying the wrinkles in her face, threw down the glass in a rage, saying, *it was strange to see the difference of glasses; for, says she, I have not looked in a true one these fifteen years.*" Clearly, almanac compilers wished to provide an abundance of useful and entertaining information, which their age required.

While poetry had appeared early in American almanacs, it became a major feature in the eighteenth century. Not inhibited by a copyright, almanac compilers borrowed freely from the best available literature—that is to say, from the esteemed English writers. As a result, almanac readers had access to such recent or current authors as Pope, Dryden, and Addison, and to such earlier poets as Shakespeare and Milton. And since almanac compilers and publishers (often the two were the same person) wanted to sell as many copies of their books as possible, they included material that they thought would attract buyers. Such a strategy indicates that the

eighteenth-century American readers' literary tastes were of a high order.

But not all of the almanac verse was of superior quality, nor was all of it imported. Much of it was native. Unfortunately, prerevolutionary America had no bards, although it had an abundance of Pope-inspired poetasters. And aside from Philip Freneau, some of the Connecticut Wits, and possibly one or two others, late-eighteenth-century American poets were also mediocre, at best. These hacks' doggerel appears in the almanacs as frequently as does the good and often great verse. Typical are the opening lines of "An Essay upon the Microscope" in Nathanael Ames's 1741 *Astronomical Diary, or an Almanack*: "Artificer go make a Watch,/In which no seeming imperfection lurks/Whose Wheels with Time exact do onward roll,/And one small Spring maintains the Motion of the whole," 'Tis all an Artless homely Botch/Compared with the least of Natures Works." Too much should therefore not be made of the readers' erudition, although they apparently enjoyed reading poetry.

The Peirce and Danforth almanacs are important because of when they were published. Other early American almanacs are significant for more substantial reasons. The most popular eighteenth-century almanac was—and is—Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*, published from 1732, when Franklin was twenty-six, until 1758. As many commentators have noted, Franklin was not a great almanac innovator. Many of his famous aphorisms were borrowed. But one creation accounts for his almanac's immediate and lasting success. In using as his spokesman the unsophisticated yet wise Richard Saunders, Franklin was able to impart his own ideas through a character—a persona—who was one with the readers. Never is there a sense of Franklin preaching to the multitudes, since he is not present in his own voice. His feeling for the common man was as sensitive and accurate as Samuel Clemens's a century and a

half later. Both of these authors knew that the vernacular plus basic values plus humor equals literary success. Richard Saunders speaks to the ages, as compilers of literary anthologies regularly attest.

Poor Richard was not the only popular eighteenth-century American almanac. The almanacs created by the two Nathaniel Ames (the *Astronomical Diary*) were in some ways the equal of Franklin's. Other significant almanacs include those by Benjamin West, in Providence and, as Isaac Bickerstaff, in Boston; Benjamin Banneker, in Philadelphia; and Daniel, Titan, and Felix Leeds, in Philadelphia. Isaiah Thomas, leading publisher and bibliophile, printed and published an almanac in Worcester, Massachusetts, and Boston from 1772 until 1803.

Almanacs have always been and will likely always be a significant genre in

America's literature. Those published during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, immensely popular reading material that they were, provide substantial information about the nature of the people who compiled and used them, namely their interests and tastes. But one of these almanacs has a special significance. In 1792, during Washington's first term as president, Robert B. Thomas had published, in Boston, the *Farmer's Almanac* for the year 1793. It is still being published as the *Old Farmer's Almanac*, as Thomas retitled it in 1832. Therefore, an almanac is not only probably the second publication in what is now the United States (Peirce's almanac), but another one, Robert Thomas's, is, in all likelihood, the longest-running publication in our history. These facts alone suggest the importance of the almanac in our culture.

First Things First: Milestones in American Literary Culture

by KAREN L. ROOD

1638: FIRST AMERICAN PRESS

The first printing press in the English colonies in North America was established in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1638, in one of two houses belonging to Elizabeth Harris Glover, the widow of the Rev. Jose Glover, a dissenting preacher who had died on the voyage from England. Though this first press belonged to Mrs. Glover, the actual running of the press was left to Steven Day, whom the Reverend Glover had hired in England.

The first document printed on this press was the *Oath of a Free-man* (1639), required of all men over twenty who had been householders for at least six months.

Until recently no one believed that any printed copies of this one-page oath existed (the original draft, in the handwriting of John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, is at the Boston Public Library). On 2 November 1985 the *New York Times* announced that Mark Hofmann, a rare-manuscript dealer in Salt Lake City, believed that he had bought—for a few dollars in a New York bookshop—one of the copies of the oath printed on Day's press. Although the Library of Congress "found nothing inconsistent with a mid-17th-century attribution" and the American Antiquarian Society agreed that there were "no anomalies," both institutions refused to authenticate the document until they saw the results of tests that would analyze the ink and

provide a computer comparison of the type to that in other documents from the Day press. According to David Hewett, in a two-part article for *Maine Antique Digest* (June-July 1986), Hofmann also claimed to have found a second copy of the oath "in much better shape than the first," but Hewett also reported the statements of expert documents examiners who testified that Hofmann had counterfeited various other documents that he had sold as rare originals. In January 1987 Hofmann pleaded guilty to murder and forgery in connection with the sale of what he had claimed were two rare Mormon church documents.

The next product of Day's press is reported to have been an almanac for 1639 by Capt. William Peirce (or Pierce; in typical seventeenth-century fashion, no one, including the captain himself, worried about consistency in spelling). Though there are no known copies of this almanac, various scholars have estimated its length at anywhere from one to sixteen pages. There has even been some speculation that the almanac contained just maritime calculations, rather than those that would have been useful to farmers.

The first *full-length* book printed in what is now the United States is *The Whole Booke of Psalmes Faithfully Translated into English Metre* (usually called the *Bay Psalm Book*), printed in 1640. Since type had to be made to print the few words of Hebrew in the preface, the *Bay Psalm Book* is also the first book

PSALM xxv, xxviii.

- 25 Concerning thee shall be my praise
in the great assembly:
before them that him reverence
performe my vowes will I.
- 25 The meek shall ear & be full of life:
Iehovah praye shall they
that doe him seeke: your heart shall liue
unto perpetuall aye.
- 27 All ends of the earth remember shall
and turne unto the Lord:
and shal all heathen-families
to worship shall accord.
- 28 Because unto Iehovah doth
the kingdome appertaine:
and he among the nations
is ruler Sovereigne.
- 29 Earths-far-ones ear & worship shall
all who to dust descend,
(though none can make alive his soule)
before his face shall bend.
- 30 With service a posterity
him shall attend upon;
to God it shall accounted bee
a generation.
- 31 Come shall they, & his righteousness
by them declar'd shall bee,
unto a people yet unbornes,
that doe this thing hath bee.
- 31 A Psalm of David.
The Lord to mee a shepherd is,
wherefore shall not I.

PSALME xxviii, xxviii.

- 2 Hee in the folds of tender-grasse,
doth cause mee downe to lye:
To waters calme me gently leads
- 3 Restore my soule doth hee:
he doth in paths of righteousness
for his names sake lead me.
- 4 Yea though in valley of deaths shade:
I walke, none all I feare,
because thou art with mee, thy rod,
and staffe my comfort are.
- 5 For mee a table thou hast spread,
in presence of my foes:
thou dost annoynt my head with oyle,
my cup it over-flowes.
- 6 Goodnes & mercy surely shall
all my dayes follow mee:
and in the Lords house I shall dwell
so long as dayes shall bee.
- Psalm 24
A psalm of david.
The earth Iehovahs is,
and the fulnesse of it:
the habitable world, & they
that there upon doe sit.
- 2 Because upon the seas,
hee hath it firmly layd:
and upon the water-floods
moft solidly hath stayd.
- 3 The mountaine of the Lord,
who shall thereto ascend
and in his place of holynes,
E 1

Pages from the
Bay Psalm Book

2 Hee

w'10

printed in part from American-made type. It was also the first printed in what is now the United States to include words in a language other than English.

That the first major publishing project the Puritans undertook in the New World was a book of psalms to be sung in church (the near equivalent of a modern hymnbook without the music) seems somewhat surprising. Orthodox Puritans frowned on music in general, and instrumental music was banned from religious services because no justification for such practice could be found in the scriptures. Much of the book's preface (probably written by John Cotton) is devoted to establishing a scriptural basis for the singing of psalms. Recognizing the value of including the congregation in the service through their singing, the Puritan fathers disapproved, however, of the psalter then in general use by the Anglican church because its versions of the psalms were too loosely based on the original Hebrew. Thus, Thomas Welde, John Eliot, and Richard Mather—with the help of such other eminent Puritan divines as John Cotton, Nathaniel Ward, Peter Bulkley, Thomas Shepard, John Norton, and perhaps English poet Francis Quarles—set out to produce

their own translation, as close to the Hebrew as they could make it.

As Cotton explained in the preface, "God's altar need not our pollishings." Thus, he added, "wee have respected rather a plaine translation, then to smooth our verses with the sweetness of any paraphrase, and soe have attended Conscience rather than Elegance, fidelity rather than poetry." Modern readers are almost unanimous in agreeing that in their Puritan zeal for accuracy the translators were able to avoid all traces of poetry; though Zoltán Haraszti, whose *The Enigma of the Bay Psalm Book* (1956) is the most comprehensive source of information about our first book, is a strong dissenting voice—arguing that the Puritans' translations in general are not less poetic than those in other seventeenth-century psalters and are sometimes more felicitous.

Whatever its literary merits, the *Bay Psalm Book* was immensely popular, and in various revised and enlarged versions it went through some twenty-five editions (editions published after 1651 are generally called the *New England Psalm Book*). By the mid-eighteenth century the Puritans' psalm book had largely been replaced by the hymnbook of