



Chapter 5

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)

Born in Boston in 1706, Benjamin Franklin went to Philadelphia as a young man and began his career as a printer. Some of John Woolman's writings were among the first to issue from his press. Success came early to Franklin. By the time he was twenty-four, he was the sole owner of a successful printing shop and was editor and publisher of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. From 1732 to 1757, he wrote and published his famous *Poor Richard's Almanac*, an annual collection of proverbs. It soon became the most popular book of its kind, largely because of Franklin's shrewd humor, and first spread his reputation.

Business enterprise alone could hardly absorb Franklin's energies. While still a young man, he founded the Junto, a club for informal discussion of scientific, economic and political ideas. The club was also responsible for a number of practical civic improvements. In Philadelphia, Franklin established America's first circulating library. Later he founded the college that was to become the University of Pennsylvania.

Benjamin Franklin's scientific achievements won international acclaim, and he was elected to learned societies in England and France. His energy and versatility were remarkable. His many inventions, besides the lightning rod, included the Franklin stove, bifocal glasses, a miniature printing press, and even a strange musical instrument called an "armonica," which employed combinations of tuned glasses. He contributed to the theories of electricity and first applied the terms "positive" and "negative" to electrical charges. He was also one of the first men to study and map the Gulf Stream.

Successful in business, renowned in science, this most modern-spirited



man of early Americans also served his nation brilliantly. He developed and improved the postal system, making it run at a profit after years of losses. As a representative of the Colonies, he tried in vain to counsel the British toward policies that would let America grow and flourish in association with England. When this aim became hopeless, he supported the cause of independence, served in the Continental Congress, and aided Jefferson in writing the Declaration of Independence. He conducted the difficult negotiations with France that brought financial and military support for America in the war. In 1787 he was a delegate to the Convention that wrote the Constitution.

It is easy to forget, in the glory of his public achievements, that Franklin was one of the first major writers. If he had never been a scientist or a statesman, he would still command respect in the field of literature.

Franklin had a definite gift for writing. As an author he had power of expression, simplicity, and a subtle humor. He was also sarcastic. His best writing is found in his own *Autobiography*. This book is still very popular, and can be enjoyed today as much as it could at the time when it was written. *Poor Richard's Almanac* is well known, and is perhaps the most quoted of all his writings. It is only a simple piece of writing, however, and was intended to appeal to the common man of colonial America. Franklin also edited the first colonial magazine, which he called the *General Magazine*. His *Collected Works* contains writings from his periodical publications, odd essays and publications, together with his *Autobiography*.

When Franklin died in 1790, at the age of eighty-four, he was an honored figure, mourned by many nations. One of his fellow Americans said, "His shadow lies heavier than any other man's on this young nation."



The Autobiography

Part One (excerpt)

From a Child I was fond of Reading, and all the little Money that came into my Hands was ever laid out in Books. Pleas'd with the Pilgrim's Progress, my first Collection was of John Bunyan's¹ Works, in separate little Volumes. I afterwards sold them to enable me to buy R. Burton's² Historical Collections;

they were small Chapmen's Books³ and cheap, 40 or 50 in all. My Father's little Library consisted chiefly of Books in polemic Divinity, most of which I read, and have since often regretted, that at a time when I had such a Thirst for Knowledge, more proper Books had not fallen in my Way, since it was now resolv'd I should not be a Clergyman. Plutarch's Lives⁴ there was, in which I read abundantly, and I still think that time spent to great Advantage. There was also a Book of Defoe's⁵ called an Essay on Projects and another of Dr. Mather's⁶ call'd Essays to do Good, which perhaps gave me a Turn of Thinking that had an Influence on some of the principal future Events of my Life.

This Bookish Inclination at length determin'd my Father to make me a Printer, tho' he had already one Son, (James) of that Profession. In 1717 my Brother James return'd from England with a Press and Letters⁷ to set up his Business in Boston. I lik'd it much better than that of my Father, but still had a Hankering for the Sea. To prevent the apprehended Effect of such an Inclination, my Father was impatient to have me bound⁸ to my Brother. I stood out some time, but at last was persuaded and signed the Indentures⁹, when I was yet but 12 Years old. I was to serve as an Apprentice till I was 21 Years of Age, only I was to be allow'd Journeyman's Wages¹⁰ during the last Year. In a little time I made great Proficiency in the Business, and became a useful Hand to my Brother. I now had Access to better Books. An Acquaintance with the Apprentices of Booksellers, enabled me sometimes to borrow a small one, which I was careful to return soon and clean. Often I sat up in my Room reading the greatest Part of the Night, when the Book was borrow'd in the Evening and to be return'd early in the Morning lest it should be miss'd or wanted. And after some time an ingenious Tradesman¹¹ who had a pretty Collection of Books, and who frequented our Printing-House, took Notice of me, invited me to his Library, and very kindly lent me such Books as I chose to read. I now took a Fancy to Poetry, and made some little Pieces. My Brother, thinking it might turn to account encourag'd me, and put me on composing two occasional Ballads. One was called the *Light House Tragedy*, and contain'd an Account of the drowning of Capt. Worthilake with his Two Daughters; the other was a Sailor Song on the Taking of *Teach* or Blackbeard the Pirate.¹² They were wretched Stuff, in the Grubstreet Ballad Style¹³, and



when they were printed he sent me about the Town to sell them. The first sold wonderfully, the Event being recent, having made a great Noise. This flatter'd my Vanity. But my Father discourag'd me, by ridiculing my Performances, and telling me Verse-makers were generally Beggars; so I escap'd being a Poet, most probably a very bad one. But as Prose Writing has been of great Use to me in the Course of my Life, and was a principal Means of my Advancement, I shall tell you how in such a Situation I acquir'd what little Ability I have in that Way.

There was another Bookish Lad in the Town, John Collins by Name, with whom I was intimately acquainted. We sometimes disputed, and very fond we were of Argument, and very desirous of confuting one another. Which disputatious Turn, by the way, is apt to become a very bad Habit, making People often extremely disagreeable in Company, by the Contradiction that is necessary to bring it into Practice, and thence, besides souring and spoiling the Conversation, is productive of Disgusts and perhaps Enmities where you may have occasion for Friendship. I had caught it by reading my Father's Books of Dispute about Religion. Persons of good Sense, I have since observ'd, seldom fall into it, except Lawyers, University Men, and Men of all Sorts that have been bred at Edinburgh¹⁴. A Question was once somehow or other started between Collins and me, of the Propriety of educating the Female Sex in Learning, and their Abilities for Study. He was of Opinion that it was improper; and that they were naturally unequal to it. I took the contrary Side, perhaps a little for Dispute sake. He was naturally more eloquent, had a ready Plenty of Words, and sometimes as I thought bore me down more by his Fluency than by the Strength of his Reasons. As we parted without settling the Point, and were not to see one another again for some time, I sat down to put my Arguments in Writing, which I copied fair and sent to him. He answer'd and I replied. Three or four Letters of a Side had pass'd, when my Father happen'd to find my Papers, and read them. Without entering into the Discussion, he took occasion to talk to me about the Manner of my Writing, observ'd that tho' I had the Advantage of my Antagonist in correct Spelling and pointing (which I ow'd to the Printing-House) I fell far short in elegance of Expression, in Method and in Perspicuity, of which he convinc'd

me by several Instances. I saw the Justice of his Remarks, and thence grew more attentive to the *Manner* in Writing, and determin'd to endeavour at Improvement.

Part Three (excerpt)

I had begun in 1733 to study Languages. I soon made myself so much a Master of the French as to be able to read the Books with Ease. I then undertook the Italian. An Acquaintance who was also learning it, us'd often to tempt me to play Chess with him. Finding this took up too much of the Time I had to spare for Study, I at length refus'd to play any more unless on this Condition, that the Victor in every Game, should have a Right to impose a Task, either in Parts of the Grammar to be got by heart, or in Translation, etc., which Tasks the Vanquish'd was to perform upon Honour before our next Meeting. As we play'd pretty equally we thus beat one another into that Language. I afterwards with a little Pains-taking acquir'd as much of the Spanish as to read their Books also.

I have already mention'd that I had only one Year's Instruction in a Latin School, and that when very young, after which I neglected that Language entirely.—But when I had attained an Acquaintance with the French, Italian and Spanish, I was surpris'd to find, on looking over a Latin Testament¹⁵, that I understood so much more of that Language than I had imagined; which encouraged me to apply myself again to the Study of it, and I met with the more Success, as those preceding Languages had greatly smooth'd my Way. From these Circumstances I have thought, that there is some Inconsistency in our common Mode of Teaching Languages. We are told that it is proper to begin first with the Latin, and having acquir'd that it will be more easy to attain those modern Languages which are deriv'd from it; and yet we do not begin with the Greek in order more easily to acquire the Latin. It is true, that if you can clamber¹⁶ and get to the Top of a Staircase without using the Steps, you will more easily gain them in descending; but certainly if you begin with the lowest you will with more Ease ascend to the Top. And I would therefore offer it to the Consideration of those who superintend the Educating of our Youth, whether, since many of those who begin with the Latin, quit the same



after spending some Years, without having made any great Proficiency, and what they have learnt becomes almost useless, so that their time has been lost, it would not have been better to have begun them with the French, proceeding to the Italian, etc., for tho' after spending the same time they should quit the Study of Languages, and never arrive at the Latin, they would however have acquir'd another Tongue or two that being in modern Use might be serviceable to them in common Life.

After ten Years' Absence from Boston, and having become more easy in my Circumstances, I made a Journey thither to visit my Relations, which I could not sooner well afford. In returning I call'd at Newport, to see my Brother then settled there with his Printing-House. Our former Differences were forgotten, and our Meeting was very cordial and affectionate. He was fast declining in his Health, and requested of me that in case of his Death which he apprehended not far distant, I would take home his Son, then but 10 Years of Age, and bring him up to the Printing Business. This I accordingly perform'd, sending him a few Years to School before I took him into the Office. His Mother carry'd on the Business till he was grown up, when I assisted him with an Assortment of new Types, those of his Father being in a Manner worn out.—Thus it was that I made my Brother ample Amends for the Service I had depriv'd him of by leaving him so early.

In 1736 I lost one of my Sons¹⁷, a fine Boy of 4 Years old, by the Smallpox taken in the common way, I long regretted bitterly and still regret that I had not given it to him by Inoculation. This I mention for the Sake of Parents, who omit that Operation on the Supposition that they should never forgive themselves if a Child died under it; my Example showing that the Regret may be the same either way, and that therefore the safer should be chosen.

Our Club, the Junto, was found so useful, and afforded such Satisfaction to the Members, that several were desirous of introducing their Friends, which could not well be done without exceeding what we had settled as a convenient Number, viz., Twelve. We had from the Beginning made it a Rule to keep our Institution a Secret, which was pretty well observ'd. The Intention was, to avoid Applications of improper Persons for Admittance, some of whom perhaps we might find it difficult to refuse. I was one of

those who were against any Addition to our Number, but instead of it made in Writing a Proposal, that every Member separately should endeavour to form a subordinate Club, with the same Rules respecting Queries¹⁸, etc., and without informing them of the Connection with the Junto. The Advantages propos'd were the Improvement of so many more young Citizens by the Use of our Institutions; our better Acquaintance with the general Sentiments of the Inhabitants on any Occasion, as the Junto Member might propose what Queries we should desire, and was to report to Junto what pass'd in his separate Club; the Promotion of our particular Interests in Business by more extensive Recommendations; and the Increase of our Influence in public Affairs and our Power of doing Good by spreading thro' the several Clubs the Sentiments of the Junto. The Project was approv'd, and every Member undertook to form his Club: but they did not all succeed. Five or six only were completed, which were call'd by different Names, as the Vine, the Union, the Band, etc. They were useful to themselves, and afforded us a good deal of Amusement, Information, and Instruction, besides answering in some considerable Degree our Views of influencing the public Opinion on particular Occasions, of which I shall give some Instances in course of time as they happened.



Notes

1. John Bunyan: John Bunyan (1628–1688) published *The Pilgrim's Progress* in 1678; his works were enormously popular and available in cheap one-shilling editions.
2. R. Burton: a pseudonym for Nathaniel Crouch (ca. 1632–1725), a popularizer of British history
3. Chapmen's Books: peddlers' books, hence inexpensive
4. Plutarch's Lives: Plutarch (ca. 46–ca. 120 A.D.), Greek biographer who wrote *Parallel Lives* of noted Greek and Roman figures
5. a Book of Defoe's: Daniel Defoe's *An Essay upon Projects* (1697) offered suggestions for economic improvement.



6. another of Dr. Mather's: Cotton Mather published *Bonifacius: An Essay upon the Good* in 1710.
7. Letters: type
8. bound: apprenticed
9. Indentures: a contract binding him to work for his brother for nine years. James Franklin (1697–1735) had learned the printer's trade in England.
10. Journeyman's Wages: be paid for each day's work, having served his apprenticeship
11. an ingenious Tradesman: Mr. Matthew Adams (Franklin's note)
12. One...Pirate: The full texts of these ballads cannot be found; George Worthylake, lighthouse keeper on Beacon Island, Boston Harbor, and his wife and daughter were drowned on November 3, 1718; the pirate Blackbeard, Edward Teach, was killed off the Carolina coast on November 22, 1718.
13. Grubstreet Ballad Style: Grub Street in London was inhabited by poor literary hacks who capitalized on poems of topical interest.
14. Men of all Sorts that have been bred at Edinburgh: Scottish Presbyterians were noted for their argumentative nature.
15. a Latin Testament: a copy of the New Testament in Latin
16. clamber: climb with difficulty; scramble
17. one of my Sons: Francis Folger Franklin, who died of smallpox before he had been inoculated. Franklin did not have him inoculated because Francis was recovering from an intestinal disorder.
18. Queries: questions to be discussed