Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

Benjamin Franklin

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"He was therefore, feasted and invited to all the court parties. At these he sometimes met the old Duchess of Bourbon, who, being a chess player of about his force, they very generally played together. Happening once to put her king into prize, the Doctor took it. 'Ah,' says she, 'we do not take kings so.' 'We do in America,' said the Doctor."--Thomas Jefferson.]

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

OF

BENJAMIN

FRANKLIN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
_by_
E. BOYD SMITH

EDITED
_by_
FRANK WOODWORTH PINE

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"He was therefore, feasted and invited to all the court parties. At these he sometimes met the old Duchess of Bourbon, who, being a chess player of about his force, they very generally played together. Happening once to put her king into prize, the Doctor took it. 'Ah,' says she, 'we do not take kings so.' 'We do in America,' said the Doctor."--Thomas Jefferson.

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Pages 1 and 4 of _The Pennsylvania Gazette_, Number XL, the first number after Franklin took control xxi

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"I was employed to carry the papers thro' the streets to the customers" 36

"She, standing at the door, saw me, and thought I made, as I certainly did, a most awkward, ridiculous appearance" 48

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"In the evening, hearing a great noise among them, the commissioners walk'd out to see what was the matter" 224

"Our axes ... were immediately set to work to cut down trees" 278

"We now appeared very wide, and so far from each other in our opinions as to discourage all hope of agreement" 318

"You will find it stream out plentifully from the key on the approach of your knuckle" 328

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The end papers show, at the front, the Franklin arms and the Franklin seal; at the back, the medal given by the Boston public schools from the fund left by Franklin for that purpose as provided in the following extract from his will:

"I was born in Boston, New England, and owe my first instructions in literature to the free grammar-schools established there. I therefore give one hundred pounds sterling to my executors, to be by them ... paid over to the managers or directors of the free schools in my native town of Boston, to be by them ... put out to interest, and so continued

at interest forever, which interest annually shall be laid out in silver medals, and given as honorary rewards annually by the directors of the said free schools belonging to the said town, in such manner as to the discretion of the selectmen of the said town shall seem meet."

INTRODUCTION

We Americans devour eagerly any piece of writing that purports to tell us the secret of success in life; yet how often we are disappointed to find nothing but commonplace statements, or receipts that we know by heart but never follow. Most of the life stories of our famous and successful men fail to inspire because they lack the human element that makes the record real and brings the story within our grasp. While we are searching far and near for some Aladdin's Lamp to give coveted fortune, there is ready at our hand if we will only reach out and take it, like the charm in Milton's _Comus_,

"Unknown, and like esteemed, and the dull swain Treads on it daily with his clouted shoon;"

the interesting, human, and vividly told story of one of the wisest and most useful lives in our own history, and perhaps in any history. In Franklin's _Autobiography_ is offered not so much a ready-made formula for success, as the companionship of a real flesh and blood man of extraordinary mind and quality, whose daily walk and conversation will help us to meet our own difficulties, much as does the example of a wise and strong friend. While we are fascinated by the story, we absorb the human experience through which a strong and helpful character is building.

The thing that makes Franklin's _Autobiography_ different from every other life story of a great and successful man is just this human aspect of the account. Franklin told the story of his life, as he himself says, for the benefit of his posterity. He wanted to help them by the relation of his own rise from obscurity and poverty to eminence and wealth. He is not unmindful of the importance of his public services and their recognition, yet his accounts of these achievements are given only as a part of the story, and the vanity displayed is incidental and in keeping with the honesty of the recital. There is nothing of the impossible in the method and practice of Franklin as he sets them forth. The youth who reads the fascinating story is astonished to find that Franklin in his early years struggled with the same everyday passions and difficulties that he himself experiences, and he loses the sense of discouragement that comes from a realization of his own shortcomings and inability to attain.

There are other reasons why the _Autobiography_ should be an intimate friend of American young people. Here they may establish a close relationship with one of the foremost Americans as well as one of the wisest men of his age.

The life of Benjamin Franklin is of importance to every American primarily because of the part he played in securing the independence of the United States and in establishing it as a nation. Franklin shares with Washington the honors of the Revolution, and of the events leading to the birth of the new nation. While Washington was the animating spirit of the struggle in the colonies, Franklin was its ablest champion abroad. To Franklin's cogent reasoning and keen satire, we owe the clear and forcible presentation of the American case in England and France; while to his personality and diplomacy as well

as to his facile pen, we are indebted for the foreign alliance and the funds without which Washington's work must have failed. His patience, fortitude, and practical wisdom, coupled with self-sacrificing devotion to the cause of his country, are hardly less noticeable than similar qualities displayed by Washington. In fact, Franklin as a public man was much like Washington, especially in the entire disinterestedness of his public service.

Franklin is also interesting to us because by his life and teachings he has done more than any other American to advance the material prosperity of his countrymen. It is said that his widely and faithfully read maxims made Philadelphia and Pennsylvania wealthy, while Poor Richard's pithy sayings, translated into many languages, have had a world-wide influence.

Franklin is a good type of our American manhood. Although not the wealthiest or the most powerful, he is undoubtedly, in the versatility of his genius and achievements, the greatest of our self-made men. The simple yet graphic story in the _Autobiography_ of his steady rise from humble boyhood in a tallow-chandler shop, by industry, economy, and perseverance in self-improvement, to eminence, is the most remarkable of all the remarkable histories of our self-made men. It is in itself a wonderful illustration of the results possible to be attained in a land of unequaled opportunity by following Franklin's maxims.

Franklin's fame, however, was not confined to his own country. Although he lived in a century notable for the rapid evolution of scientific and political thought and activity, yet no less a keen judge and critic than Lord Jeffrey, the famous editor of the _Edinburgh

Review_, a century ago said that "in one point of view the name of Franklin must be considered as standing higher than any of the others which illustrated the eighteenth century. Distinguished as a statesman, he was equally great as a philosopher, thus uniting in himself a rare degree of excellence in both these pursuits, to excel in either of which is deemed the highest praise."

Franklin has indeed been aptly called "many-sided." He was eminent in science and public service, in diplomacy and in literature. He was the Edison of his day, turning his scientific discoveries to the benefit of his fellow-men. He perceived the identity of lightning and electricity and set up the lightning rod. He invented the Franklin stove, still widely used, and refused to patent it. He possessed a masterly shrewdness in business and practical affairs. Carlyle called him the father of all the Yankees. He founded a fire company, assisted in founding a hospital, and improved the cleaning and lighting of streets. He developed journalism, established the American Philosophical Society, the public library in Philadelphia, and the University of Pennsylvania. He organized a postal system for the colonies, which was the basis of the present United States Post Office. Bancroft, the eminent historian, called him "the greatest diplomatist of his century." He perfected the Albany Plan of Union for the colonies. He is the only statesman who signed the Declaration of Independence, the Treaty of Alliance with France, the Treaty of Peace with England, and the Constitution. As a writer, he has produced, in his _Autobiography_ and in _Poor Richard's Almanac_, two works that are not surpassed by similar writing. He received honorary degrees from Harvard and Yale, from Oxford and St. Andrews, and was made a fellow of the Royal Society, which

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