



THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: A PROTOTYPE

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Abstract

As American writers struggled self-consciously to bring into being a national literature and to convey to the world a sense of the national character, the popularity of Franklin's *Autobiography* played a key role. Reading it, the world and Americans themselves, sensed the answer to Crèvecoeur's question, "What is an America?" In a twinkling, apparently timeless and eternal patterns of life seemed outmoded. If one wanted to know what Americans were like, what their national aspirations were, one had but to read Franklin's *Autobiography*. It has been as well a persistent reminder, whenever American society tends to stratify and stagnate and vulgarize, of what is being lost or betrayed.

Keywords: Autobiography, aspirations, stratify, stagnate, vulgarize, and betrayed.

Introduction:

Autobiography has existed since antiquity. But the autobiographical tendency belongs chiefly to the modern rather than to the ancient world, because modern man seems to be more self-conscious than his classical counterpart. The term "autobiography"- first used by Robert Southey in 1805-tends to be liberally applied to any kind of personal writing which has to do with the facts of the author's life, irrespective of whether the author has intended to create a continuous and determine work of self-portraiture. Autobiography, like biography, manifests a wide variety of forms, beginning with intimate writings made during a life that were not intended for publication. Broadly speaking, we can divide informal autobiography and formal autobiography. Informal autobiography includes (a) letters, diaries and journals, and (b) memoirs and reminiscences. The former represent a scale of increasingly self-conscious revelation. The latter are autobiographies that emphasize what is remembered rather than who is remembering. The author, instead of recounting his life, deals with those experiences of his life, people, and events that

he considers most significant. The formal autobiography offers a special kind of biography truth: a life reshaped by recollection, with all of recollection's conscious omissions and distortions.

Discussion

To write autobiography came with the opening of new mental horizons in the eighteenth century. The typical autobiographer of this period is Jean Jacques Rousseau. His confessions and their sequels show him as he was. To this category belongs, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. It has been observed that Americans have a great capacity for self-criticism: "Nowhere else is national self-criticism practiced with a severity so relentless and a mockery so bitter". (L.P.Jacks, 3). In fact, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* is considered as the greatest autobiography. Benjamin Franklin is perhaps the most famous eighteenth-century American, next only to George Washington. He "represented perhaps more fully than any other one man the temper and personality of the American eighteenth century: its rationalism and middle-way common sense, its political concerns and its

humanitarian activities, its interest in science and the natural world, its belief in individual integrity and its deistic religious tendencies". (Norman Foerster, 138).

Franklin was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 17, 1706, son of a tallow chandler and soap boiler, young Franklin was apprenticed in his brother's print shop, Philadelphia to make his fortune. He soon made it, becoming a wealthy man and Philadelphia's first citizen, and then retires from business in 1748, hoping to spend a quiet, contemplative life in his library and laboratory. However, he was soon appointed as Deputy Postmaster for the colonies, an office he held for nearly twenty years. He also became deeply involved in the argument between the colonies and Britain, and after 1757 served as colonial agent for Pennsylvania but Georgia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts in their dealings with King and Parliament. In 1775, having given up hope of finding any way to avert the imminent clash between colonies and empire, he returned to America.

At sixty-nine, when he might have retired to his study. Franklin's career in public life was just beginning. He was not a political philosopher. He was a practical organizer, a diplomat, and a political tactician. He was also a believer in liberty, reason, and justice. He served as a member of the Pennsylvania Committee of Correspondence, as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, as one of the committee appointed to draft the Declaration of Independence, and as the new nation's first representative to France. In 1778 he secured the French alliance, the greatest single factor in the ultimate victory of the American cause, and in 1783, he served with Adams and Jay on the committee that signed the United States to begin two terms as governor of Pennsylvania, and final, at eighty-one, he sat in the Philadelphia convention with men half his age to write the American Constitution.

Franklin was one of the first-rank scientific scholars of his century, responsible for some of the most notable basic research done in his time. His contributions to the science of electricity were especially important. He also wrote more than a hundred scientific papers in medicine, botany,

hydraulics, physics, engineering, agronomy, chemistry, and ethnology—first at twenty-three, his last at seventy-nine. A member of the Royal Society of London, Franklin held seven honorary degrees, mastered six languages, and was recognized as one of the world's great scientists by eight foreign governments.

Franklin preferred to keep his religious principles to himself, but he held them firmly and practiced them with deep sincerity. He had little interest in theological disputation or speculation, evolved his own set of Christian religious principles, and lived by them. He was, in effect, a deist who found proof of God in His world and works around him. The most acceptable way to worship translates the Christian principles he believed in into practical life. He attacked no sect, praised or argued with none, and worshipped God in his own way.

Franklin's autobiography brings to the reader some sense of the vitality and energy of Franklin's mind, as well as the variety of his life and the rationality and honesty of his character. He wrote slightly more than half of the manuscript at Twyford, Hampshire, England, in 1771: a small portion at Passy, near Paris, in 1784; and a few portions at Philadelphia in 1788-89, and the small, final portion in 1790. Because it was written at different times over a period of eighteen years, an alert reader may discover over the span certain difference of spirit and attitude. At Twyford Franklin, in his mid-sixties, enjoying good health obviously pleased at the chance to recall his youth, wrote with quiet satisfaction of his upward climb from runaway apprentice to man of fortune and reputation. When he resumed his task at Passy, however, he was an internationally known celebrity, writing not only the story of his life for his son and family, but a much more formal account for posterity of how he attained eminence, virtue and wealth. He was much more concerned in this portion with the public record of his career as businessman, civil leader, and scientist, than with his inward life. In 1788, he was eighty-two, ill and in retirement, and while the writing shows flashes of his old force and spirit, it is for the most part little more than a straightforward account of facts and dates.

The Autobiography describes Franklin's life only until 1757, after which came his careers as colonial agent, scientist, Revolutionary leader, diplomat, and statesman. It is therefore an unfortunately incomplete picture of the man, since it omits almost half of his life, and seems to emphasize the "success story", aspects of it. It should be remembered that Franklin retired from business at the age of forty-two, and spent the next the forty-two years of his life in the service of his fellow men and his country. For the last year of his life he was bedridden, escaping severe pain only by the use of opium. He died on April 17th, 1790, aged eighty-four, Philadelphia gave him the most impressive funeral that, that city had ever seen. Almost every critic of Franklin quotes the epigram of Turgot, the French economist: "He snatched the lightning from the skies and the scepter from tyrants".

Benjamin Franklin is one of the few men in history who, by personal achievement and public service, have become examples not only in their own times but for future generations as well. His *Autobiography*, is generally regarded as the prototype of the genre in American literature. Franklin begins his account of his life with a letter addressed to his son, thus proving Jacob Sloan's point that "the writer often asserts that he is recounting the story of his life for the instruction and edification of his children".

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 (Jacob Sloan. 27).

Of course Franklin's *Autobiography* has had its detractors. Mark Twain called the book, "Franklin's pernicious biography", while Melville called its author a "keen observer of the main chance". "I can't stand Benjamin", wrote D.H. Lawrence. "He tries to take away my wholeness" Both nineteenth and twentieth century critics seem

agreed with Charles Angoff that "Franklin represented the least praise worthy qualities of the inhabitants of the New World: miserliness, fanatical practicality, and lack of interest in what are usually known as spiritual things" (Ralph.L.Ketcham 25). To Lawrence, Franklin epitomized the Puritanism out of his (Lawrence's) past and within himself with which all of his writing- indeed, his very life-contended. Though there were many who agreed with Lawrence who did not like Franklin's self-satisfaction and sanctimoniousness, Franklin's self regard was justified. One of thirteen children in the family of a poor Bostonian artisan, he has risen by his own efforts. Besides, as Jacob Sloan observes:

his autobiography make it quite clear that Franklin's rise was not exclusively- or even mostly- due to the exercise of those bourgeois virtues he preached in the person of poor Richard: diligence, thrift, moderation- the work ethic, so much maligned nowadays. Rather Franklin used the work ethic as a technique to organize his genius- a word we use advisedly, because Benjamin Franklin was of the same mold as his contemporary Thomas Jefferson, a true eighteenth century universal genius (Jacob Sloan, 28).

Conclusion

Unlike many eighteenth century autobiographies, Franklin's story deals with no heroics in the conventional sense and chronicles no mysterious path to sainthood. He does not describe a world foreign and remote to most men, but a life began in a humble station easily recognized by many. Further, as already mentioned, he rose not by superhuman strength but by application of character traits accessible to anyone. His *Autobiography* is plain and simple. His language suits the life he describes-simple, direct, and down to earth.

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