

**ENGLISH CLASSIC SERIES, NO. 112-113-114. THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.
PREPARED FOR USE IN SCHOOLS, WITH
INTRODUCTION, NOTES, AND A
SUPPLEMENTARY SKETCH, CONCLUDING
THE STORY OF FRANKLIN'S LIFE, PRESENTED
MAINLY IN HIS OWN WORDS**

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J. W. ABERNETHY, Ph.D.



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INTRODUCTION.

THE Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin is an American classic, and it is the earliest product of our national genius entitled to that distinction. Its author was not a man of letters, yet he wrote extensively; and a few of his essays, the sayings of Poor Richard, and the Autobiography will always give him a prominent place in the history of American literature. He cultivated letters and the art of expression because he saw their practical value in the struggle for business success, and his writings are an excellent illustration of the utility of the highest literary qualities in the common employments of every-day life. The ease with which he wielded the pen, added to the habit of observing carefully and thinking clearly, made him a leader and teacher of men.

"The perennial charm of his Autobiography is like that of Robinson Crusoe," says George William Curtis; and this charm is due largely to a style that in its crystal clearness and forceful simplicity is the equal of that of De Foe. Plain, idiomatic, direct, with no ornament or grace except such as is native to the thought, the language forms a perfect transcript of the writer's mind. One is never in doubt about Franklin's meaning. But this charm is due still more to the picturesque and noble personality portrayed in the Autobiography. It records the career of one who from poverty arose to be revered by the greatest and wisest of two continents. Few men have influenced the world so widely and permanently as Franklin.

"Clear rather than subtle," says Prof. Beers, "without idealism or romance or fineness of emotion or poetic lift, intensely practical and utilitarian, broad-minded, inventive, shrewd, versatile, Franklin's sturdy figure became typical of his time and his people." He was the first great American, and his greatness was of many

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kinds. He was a distinguished scientist and practical inventor. Bancroft calls him "the greatest diplomatist of his century." He was a great moral teacher, the supreme philosopher of common-sense and the useful virtues. Says his latest biographer, Mr. Morse: "He was one of the most, perhaps the most agreeable conversationist of his age. He was a rare wit and humorist, and in an age when 'American humor' was still unborn, amid contemporaries who have left no trace of a jest, still less of the faintest appreciation of humor, all which he said and wrote was brilliant with both these most charming qualities of the human mind." And he concludes: "By the instruction which he gave, by his discoveries, by his inventions, and by his achievements in public life he earns the distinction of having rendered to men varied and useful services excelled by no other one man; and thus he has established a claim upon the gratitude of mankind so broad that history holds few who can be his rivals."

The only complete and correct edition of the Autobiography is that edited by the Hon. John Bigelow, who obtained the original MS. in France and first gave it to the public in 1868. By the courtesy of Mr. Bigelow and his publishers, the J. B. Lippincott Co., we are permitted to use the authorized text in the preparation of this edition. A few passages unsuitable for the class-room have been omitted, and also the two letters mentioned on page 75. In order that the book may be thoroughly adapted for the reading of young pupils, the spelling has been modernized and a few grammatical errors corrected; otherwise the text is given just as Franklin wrote it. The supplementary sketch of Franklin's life from the point where the Autobiography ends will serve, it is hoped, as an inducement to read more of the charming letters contained in Mr. Bigelow's "Life of Benjamin Franklin," a work of inestimable value to teachers as well as pupils. Also additional reading should be encouraged in such works as Parton's "Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin," Morse's "Life of Franklin" (American Statesmen Series), and Hale's "Franklin in France." The needed explanations of public events connected with Franklin's career will generally be found in the text-book of United States history, with which the Autobiography should always be used.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.

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 know the circumstances of my life, many of which you are yet unacquainted with, and expecting the enjoyment of a week's uninterrupted leisure in my present country retirement,¹ I sit down to write them for you. To which I have besides some other inducements. Having emerged from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world, and having gone so far through life with a considerable share of felicity, the conducting means I made use of, which with the blessing of God so well succeeded, my posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own situations, and therefore fit to be imitated.

That felicity, when I reflected on it, has induced me sometimes to say, that were it offered to my choice, I should have

1. He was at Twyford, England, visiting his friend the Bishop of St. Asaph, Dr. Jonathan Shipley, "America's constant friend," as he called him.

no objection to a repetition of the same life from its beginning, only asking the advantages authors have in a second edition to correct some faults of the first. So I might, besides correcting the faults, change some sinister accidents and events of it for others more favorable. But though this were denied, I should still accept the offer. Since such a repetition is not to be expected, the next thing most like living one's life over again seems to be a recollection of that life, and to make that recollection as durable as possible by putting it down in writing.

✓ Hereby, too, I shall indulge the inclination so natural in old men, to be talking of themselves and their own past actions; and I shall indulge it without being tiresome to others, who, through respect to age, might conceive themselves obliged to give me a hearing, since this may be read or not as any one pleases. And, lastly (I may as well confess it, since my denial of it will be believed by nobody), perhaps I shall a good deal gratify my own *vanity*. Indeed, I scarce ever heard or saw the introductory words, "*Without vanity, I may say,*" etc., but some vain thing immediately followed. Most people dislike vanity in others, whatever share they may 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 that 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 owe the mentioned happiness of my past life to His kind providence, which led me to the means I used and gave them 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 to us even our afflictions.

The notes one of my uncles (who had the same kind of

curiosity in collecting family anecdotes) once put into my hands, furnished me with several particulars relating to our ancestors. From these notes I learned that the family had lived in the same village, Ecton, in Northamptonshire, for three hundred years, and how much longer he knew not (perhaps from the time when the name of Franklin, that before was the name of an order of people,¹ was assumed by them as a surname when others took surnames all over the kingdom), on a freehold of about thirty acres, aided by the smith's business, which had continued in the family till his time, the eldest son being always bred to that business; a custom which he and my father followed as to their eldest sons.† When I searched the registers at Ecton, I found an account of their births, marriages, and burials from the year 1555 only, there being no registers kept in that parish at any time preceding. By that register I perceived 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 grew too old to follow business longer, when he went to live with his son John, a dyer at Banbury, in Oxfordshire, with whom my father served an apprenticeship. There my grandfather 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 child, a 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 that grew up, viz.: Thomas, John, Benjamin, and Josiah. I will give you what account I can of them, at this distance from my papers, and if these are not lost in my absence, you will among them find many more particulars.

† Thomas was bred a smith under his father; but, being ingenious, and encouraged in learning (as all my brothers were) by an Esquire Palmer, then the principal gentleman in

1. A Franklin, or *Franklein*, was a freeholder or small landholder; originally the son or descendant of a *vilein* or common laborer who had become rich. Chaucer pictures the *Franklein*, in his "Prologue," as the representative of a class of country gentlemen.