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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**

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Cassell's National Library (New Series) the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin by Benjamin Franklin

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INTRODUCTION.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S Autobiography ends with the year 1757, when he was sent to England as representative of the Assembly of Philadelphia. His services were found to be so valuable that he was appointed agent also for the States of Massachusetts, Maryland, and Georgia. The Royal Society of England not only made him one of its Fellows, in the manner described on page 180 of this volume, but also awarded to him a gold medal. He received honorary Doctorates from the Universities of Oxford, Edinburgh, and St. Andrews; and he was made an Associate of the Academy of Paris. Having returned to America in 1762, he was again sent to England to assist in labouring to avert war between the mother country and the transatlantic colonies. After strenuous efforts, that were made in vain, Franklin returned to Philadelphia in 1775, and was thenceforth active among those leaders of opinion who secured the Declaration of Independence of the thirteen United States on the 4th of July, 1776. Franklin then went to Paris as minister for the United States of America.

In Paris he secured the aid of France in the coming struggle. When the struggle ended with the signing of a treaty of peace that conceded independence, Franklin, then seventy-six years old, signed for the United States the treaty which he had assisted in negotiating. Three years later he went back to America, where he took part in the revision of the Articles of Union. He died full of years and honours on the 17th of April, 1790, at the age of eighty-four.

After his death a general mourning for two months was ordered by Congress, as a tribute to the memory of one of the best and wisest of those who had assisted in the forming of the thirteen States into a nation.

Franklin began to write this Autobiography in the form of a letter to his son, the Governor of New Jersey, in 1771, when he was sixty-five years old, and a holiday-guest in Hampshire, at the house of his friend, Dr. Jonathan Shipley, Bishop of St. Asaph's. He had brought the account down to the time of his marriage when the holiday was over. After thirteen years another chapter was written, at Passy, in 1784. The rest was added in 1788, when Franklin was eighty-two years old.

H. M.

THE
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BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.

CHAPTER I.

I HAVE ever had a 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 learn the circumstances of *my* life, many of which you are unacquainted with; and expecting the enjoyment of a few weeks' uninterrupted leisure, I sit down to write them. Besides, there are some other inducements that excite me to this undertaking. 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. They may also deem them fit to be imitated, should any of them find themselves in similar circumstances.

This good fortune, when I reflect on it (which is frequently the case), has induced me sometimes to say, that if were left to my choice, I should have no objection to go over the same life from its beginning to the end; requesting only the advantage authors have of correcting in a second edition the faults of the first. So would I also wish to change some incidents of it, for others more favourable. Notwithstanding, if this condition was denied, I should still accept the offer of recommencing the same life. But as this repetition is not to be expected, that which resembles most living one's life over again, seems to be to recall all the circumstances of it, and, to render this remembrance more durable, to record them in writing.

In thus employing myself, I shall yield to the inclination so natural to old men, of talking of themselves and their own actions; and I shall indulge it without being tiresome to those who, from respect to my age, might conceive themselves obliged to listen to me, since they will be always free to read me or not. And, lustly (I may as well confess it, as the denial of it would be believed by nobody), I shall, perhaps, not a little gratify my own vanity. Indeed, I never heard or saw the introductory words, "Without vanity I may say," &c., but some vain thing immediately followed. Most people dislike vanity in others, whatever share they 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 who 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 attribute the mentioned happiness of my past life to His divine providence, which led me to the means I used, and gave the success. My

belief of this induces me to *hope*, though I must not *presume* that the same goodness will still be exercised towards 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 us, even in our afflictions.

Some notes, which one of my uncles, who had the same curiosity in collecting family anecdotes, once put into my hands, furnished me with several particulars relative to our ancestors. From these notes I learned that they lived in the same village, Ecton, in Northamptonshire, on a freehold of about thirty acres, for at least three hundred years, and how much longer could not be ascertained.

This small estate would not have sufficed for their maintenance without the business of a smith, which had continued in the family down to my uncle's time, the eldest son being always brought up to that employment; a custom which he and my father followed with regard to their eldest sons. When I searched the registers at Ecton, I found an account of their marriages and burials from the year 1656 only, as the registers kept did not commence previous thereto. I, however, learned from it that I was the youngest son of the youngest son for five generations back. My grandfather, Thomas, who was born in 1695, lived at Ecton till he was too old to continue his business, when he retired to Banbury, in Oxfordshire, to the house of his son John, with whom my father served an apprenticeship. There my uncle 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 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, who grew up: viz., Thomas, John, Benjamin, and Josiah. Being at a distance from my papers, I will

give you what account I can of them from memory ; and if my papers are not lost in my absence, you will find among them many more particulars.

Thomas, my eldest uncle, was bred a smith under his father, but being ingenious, and encouraged in learning, as all his brothers were, by an Esquire Palmer, then the principal inhabitant of that parish, he qualified himself for the bar, and became a considerable man in the county; was chief mover of all public-spirited enterprises for the county or town of Northampton, as well as of his own village, of which many instances were related of him; and he was much taken notice of and patronised by Lord Halifax. He died in 1702, the 6th of January, four years, to a day, before I was born. The recital which some elderly persons made to us of his character, I remember struck you as something extraordinary, from its similarity with what you knew of me. "Had he died," said you, "four years later, on the same day, one might have supposed a transmigration."

John, my next uncle, was bred a dyer, I believe of wool. Benjamin was bred a silk dyer, serving an apprenticeship in London. He was an ingenious man. I remember, when I was a boy, he came to my father's in Boston, and resided in the house with us for several years. There was always a particular affection between my father and him, and I was his godson. He lived to a great age. He left behind him two quarto volumes of manuscript, of his own poetry, consisting of fugitive pieces, addressed to his friends. He had invented a short-hand of his own, which he taught me; but, not having practised it, I have now forgotten it. He was very pious, and an assiduous attendant at the sermons of the best preachers, which he reduced to writing according to his method, and had thus collected several volumes of them.