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W. P. TRENT & JOHN ERSKINE

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GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS

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GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS

CHAPTER I

FRANKLIN, BROCKDEN BROWN, AND IRVING

AMERICAN literature in the most liberal sense of the term is now a little more than three hundred years old. In the strictest sense comprising only the books that are still somewhat widely read, it is not half so old. Historians may discuss and students may read or skim a few poets and historians and theologians; Crèvecoeur's *Letters of an American Farmer* and John Woolman's *Journal* deservedly win an admirer here and there; a handful of people know that no American and few men anywhere ever possessed a more powerful mind than that of Jonathan Edwards; but practically only one book written by an American before the close of the eighteenth century has sufficient excellence and popularity to rank as a classic. Oddly enough, this book, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, was first read in an imperfect French version, won much of its fame in a somewhat emasculated English form, and

was not known in its native raciness until 1868. Its author, although his writings fill ten volumes, was far enough from being a professional writer; but his is the first name with which a popular account of the achievements of American men of letters need begin. In the one hundred and twenty-two years that have elapsed since his death the volume of American literature has increased in at least equal proportion with the growth of the country in population and wealth and power, yet among the thousands of authors whose works constitute this literature there is no more interesting and versatile and humane personality than his. The best element in their work, as in his, is a certain "citizen note," a certain adaptability to the intellectual, moral, and esthetic needs of a large democracy. When this is said, one perceives how it is that one may also say that America has no more produced an author of the range and quality of Dryden than she has produced one of the range and quality of Milton or Shakespeare.

Franklin's life is too well known, too intimately connected with the history of his country and his age, to require extended treatment here. We think of him primarily as a Philadelphian, but his birth at Boston on January 17, 1706, connects him with that New