

*This fabulous man, whose thought, inventions, wit, wisdom and charm made him the idol of the Enlightened world of Europe and America, was properly hailed by Thomas Jefferson as "the father of American philosophy." Richly sceptical all his life about conventional theology, metaphysics, and pompous formalism in all its guises, Franklin loved to call attention to his humble birth, his youthful poverty, his self-taught and self-made role. A youthful rebel against the proper Puritan Boston of his birth, his Autobiography has made immortal the vivid image of his arrival in Philadelphia, hardly a penny in his jeans, walking along Market Street as he munched his puffy two-penny rolls. His rapid rise by dint of hard work, shrewd sense, artful connections with men who could afford to help him—so that his success as a printer, journalist, almanac maker, Philadelphia politician was rapidly assured—has been persistently and wilfully misunderstood as the "essence" of the real Benjamin Franklin—a man presumably the ideal type for the early Capitalist: the ascetic, penny-pinching, ledger-watching business creature, whose dream of tomorrow opens only another compulsive field for squeezing profits and engineering future expansion by investment of saved earnings. Perhaps the modern critic would do better to be guided by Franklin's contemporaries who knew him in quite other terms, as an indispensable man, the embodiment of that new man, the American.*

*In truth, very uncommon talents drew the world to him. In France, in England, throughout Europe, his value as a great scientist and moral philosopher, and his personal traits of brilliance paired with benevolence, were the source of his fame. John Adams, who could not abide him, at least partly because of this very acclaim, once drew this estimate of his rival's reputation: "Franklin's reputation was more universal than that of Leibnitz or Newton, Frederick or Voltaire; and his character was more beloved and esteemed than any or all of them. His name was familiar to government and people, to kings, courtiers, nobility, clergy, and philosophers, as well as plebians, to such a degree that there was*

scarcely peasant or citizen, a valet de chambre, coachman or footman, a lady's chambermaid or a scullion in a kitchen who was not familiar with it and who did not consider him a friend to humankind. When they spoke of him they seemed to think he was to restore the golden age." The good David Hume, a great friend of Franklin's, who knew after repeated encounters with the American that this man was not at all a façade, once wrote to him: "America has sent us many good things, gold, silver, sugar, tobacco, indigo, etc. but you are the first philosopher, and indeed the first great man of letters, for whom we are beholden to her."

Perhaps most interesting of all is the appraisal made of Franklin by a gentle young Bostonian, some thirty years after the celebrated printer's "book of life" had closed. Ralph Waldo Emerson, then in his twenties, wrote thus to his aunt: "Was Dr. Franklin (one of the most sensible men that ever lived) as likely to be born elsewhere as at Boston. . . ? Don't you admire (I am not sure you do) the serene and powerful understanding which was so eminently practical and useful, which grasped the policy of the glove and the form of a fly with like facility and ease; which seemed to be a transmigration of the genius of Socrates—yet more useful, more moral, and more pure. . . Franklin was no verbal gladiator, clad in complete mail of syllogisms, but a sage who used his pen with an effect which was new and had been supposed to belong to the sword. He was a man of that singular force of mind . . . which seems designed to affect by individual influence what is ordinarily accomplished by the slow and secret work of institutions and national growth. . . . Many millions have already lived and millions are now alive who have felt through their whole lives the powerful good effect of Franklin's actions and writings. His subtle observation, his seasonable wit, his proved reason, and his mild and majestic virtues made him idolized in France, feared in England and obeyed in America."

The selections from his writings reveal the extraordinary range of curiosity and mastery of subject-matter that was Franklin's benchmark. In his own time, Franklin's advancement of new theoretical discoveries in the field of electromagnetism placed him distinctly in the vanguard of the eighteenth century's typically modern rage for the extension and diffusion of science. A full study by I. B. Cohen of Franklin's contribution to science, theoretical as well as applied, bears the significant title: *Franklin and Newton, and demonstrates from the perspective of the twentieth century the correctness of the eighteenth century's tribute to him as "the Newton" of their time.* Thus, Franklin's work in science should be understood as one road toward that early ideal he had announced, "to love truth and to seek and serve it," rather than as a gadgeteer's merely practical invention of mechanical comforts. To be sure, Franklin did invent the Franklin stove, the lightning rod, bifocal lenses, and innumerable other improved instruments. It even followed from his understanding of the proper relationship of theory and practice

that "helps" and instruments should be the products of fruitful new concepts in basic research—though he fully appreciated the intrinsic value of knowledge as a supreme expression of human delight. Boswell's mention to Dr. Johnson of Franklin's remarkable definition of man as "a tool-making animal" is a reminder that Franklin, like his mentor, Sir Francis Bacon, saw human intelligence as experimental, active, and productive rather than as the comparatively rationalistic view that is implicit in the Aristotelian definition of man as a "rational animal."

If scientific originality brought Franklin the plaudits of the Royal Society and the community of scientific men, his political role made him a completer man and an historical agent of vast significance. For Franklin's political role was wholly unique. His own life provided the symbolism for his country's progress from subservient colonial status to independent creation of nationhood. As a youth, Franklin felt himself to be virtually in a position of slavery, as an indentured apprentice to his older brother. His response to that harsh treatment was flight to a new and self-sufficient life, and he wrote that he was thus early impressed "with that aversion to arbitrary power that has stuck to me through my whole life." Years of service to Philadelphia and to Pennsylvania as a powerful political leader and legislator, and his important missions to England where he became conspicuous as the colonial agent for Pennsylvania, Georgia, New Jersey and Massachusetts, and the chief advocate of the American cause, provided him with an experience of both the mother country and his own which none of his countrymen could parallel. Precisely because he had done his utmost to negotiate differences between the Colonies and the Ministry and Parliament of George III and concluded, sadly but wisely, that reconciliation was henceforth a coward's illusion, his decision to throw in his lot, at an advanced age, with the most active revolutionaries in the Continental Congress in 1775 was a momentous one. He brought his splendid talents and his reservoir of experience to the patriot side. One need only consider what it would have meant to the loyalists, to English morale, and conversely to the timid "olive branch" peace-petitioners in Congress had Franklin joined the other side instead, to begin to sense the importance of his initial revolutionary role.

Once embarked, Franklin mustered his energies for what Verner Crane has called "his busiest and most brilliant decade in public service." In recognition of his contribution to the success of the revolution and mindful of his other role as leader of the scientific enlightenment, Turgot penned his classic epigram: "He seized the lightning from the sky, and the sceptre from tyrants." This epigram became an international slogan testifying to Franklin's dual image, uniting the two predominant passions of the age: man as a new Prometheus, stealing fire from heaven by bold but ordered intelligence, and man ready and able to revolt against tyranny. Both drives were manifestations of the yearning for

emancipation, the first emancipating mankind from slavish fear and dread, the second from political oppression to a fuller freedom.

The "Prometheus," however, was also a quite lovable man, fond of good conversation, broad jokes and hoaxes, and the whole spectacle of life. His humanity as a moralist, satirist, and creative reformer endeared him to philosophers and men of letters; and his magnetic mind and serene temper drew to him a vast circle of friends throughout America and Europe. Conspicuous among these friends were children, for whom he reserved his most exquisite subtlety and unqualified enthusiasm. He was apparently uncomfortable living in a house without young company—his own children, then grandchildren, nephews, the children of friends and even the children of unfriendly associates (John Quincy Adams remembered the enchanting times spent at Franklin's home in Passy during the very years that his father was feuding with Franklin). It must also be said that Franklin would not have thought it worth existing without the excitement of attractive women in his life—"attractive" in the usual sense, of appearance, or in the special sense of distinctive mind, style or spirit. For these women, with whom Franklin's world seemed always plentifully supplied, he demonstrated an unconcealed and apparently inexhaustible sexual interest, more or less "elevated" by clever correspondence, witty conversation, and what we today call "fun and games."

As a master of American prose, Franklin's style is suggested by his brief statement about education: "Men should be taught as if you taught them not." So seasoned was Franklin's understanding of human nature that he never ventured to instruct men without appealing to their sense of shocked surprise, or enchantment with parables, maxims, artful forms that removed the sting of direct controversy and criticism. Even his early quarrel with Calvinist theologians reflected his own sense of "disgust" with the soured tempers their polemics produced. His preference for morality and virtue over official piety is born of his humanistic philosophy. Man's work and conduct must produce good on earth and not on an installment plan beyond human knowledge or experience. As he phrased it, man's saying, "Lord, Lord" gave them no title to salvation; only their "Doing" the heavenly will. Faith for him becomes a means of producing virtue and morality among men; and morality alone justifies a hope of salvation. This faith caused Franklin to spend his "long life. . . in meaning well," enjoying the human comedy that his journey provided. "All among us may be happy," he once wrote, "who have happy dispositions; such being necessary to happiness even in paradise."

Whatever the subject of his interest was, Franklin's lucid and adaptive prose served him unfailingly. "The most exquisite folly," he sagely observed, "is made of wisdom spun too fine." His wisdom always appeared like an ideal form of common sense, whether it was a question of exposing England's shortsighted and unjust policy towards the American Col-

onies (as in his brilliant satiric newspaper article, "Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One") or of prodding the conscience of his own countrymen to appreciate human fallibility and the spirit of tolerant compromise (an attitude so perfectly defined in his "Speech in the Convention at the Conclusion of its Deliberations"). In his younger days, when he was in his youthful sixties, he had lightheartedly written playful bagatelles (like his marriage proposal to Madame Helvetius, in the form of a "dream" encounter with her dead husband in Elysium). Very different was the prudential mask he had assumed when he was in truth a young man and author of the "Poor Richard" almanacs, studding his pages with borrowed bits of folk wisdom and maxims from every land. The enormous success which Poor Richard's "Way to Wealth" achieved in France, where it was translated under the title *La Science du Bonhomme Richard*, has its amusing side. Misreading Father Abraham as a surrogate for Franklin himself, French critics and readers apparently read this summary of the proverbs compiled for the almanacs of the past quarter-century as serious moral and economic counsels, missing irony and satire in the piece altogether. This accident of over-evaluation converted "The Way to Wealth" into a primer of bourgeois moralism which doubtless influenced later misinterpretations—such as Max Weber's—of "the real" Franklin. One must never forget that Franklin, having made of himself the independent man, who was able to join the society of the free and easy, devoted the second half of his life to public service, arduous political leadership, and diplomatic service that gave Europe its first (and let us hope, not last) ambassadorial taste of American wit, art, skill and address conjoined with democratic and liberal sentiments.

Thus, Franklin, the Colonial turned American patriot, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and of the Constitution, was the first American to represent us personally and memorably face to face with the European world. He was in this experience indeed "the first American," creating the first impression of American character. He gave his new country a face, as well as a character, ideals as well as proverbs for business success. That he asked for the day when "a thorough knowledge of the rights of man, may pervade all the nations of the earth, so that a philosopher may set his foot anywhere on its surface, and say, 'This is my Country'" is one facet of his ardent, humanistic faith. Since he was not one to tilt at windmills, he did all he could with reason and common sense, meaning well and negotiating intelligently. The rest was the magic of human comedy, of the cosmic jest that dogs man's pursuit of goodness and truth.