

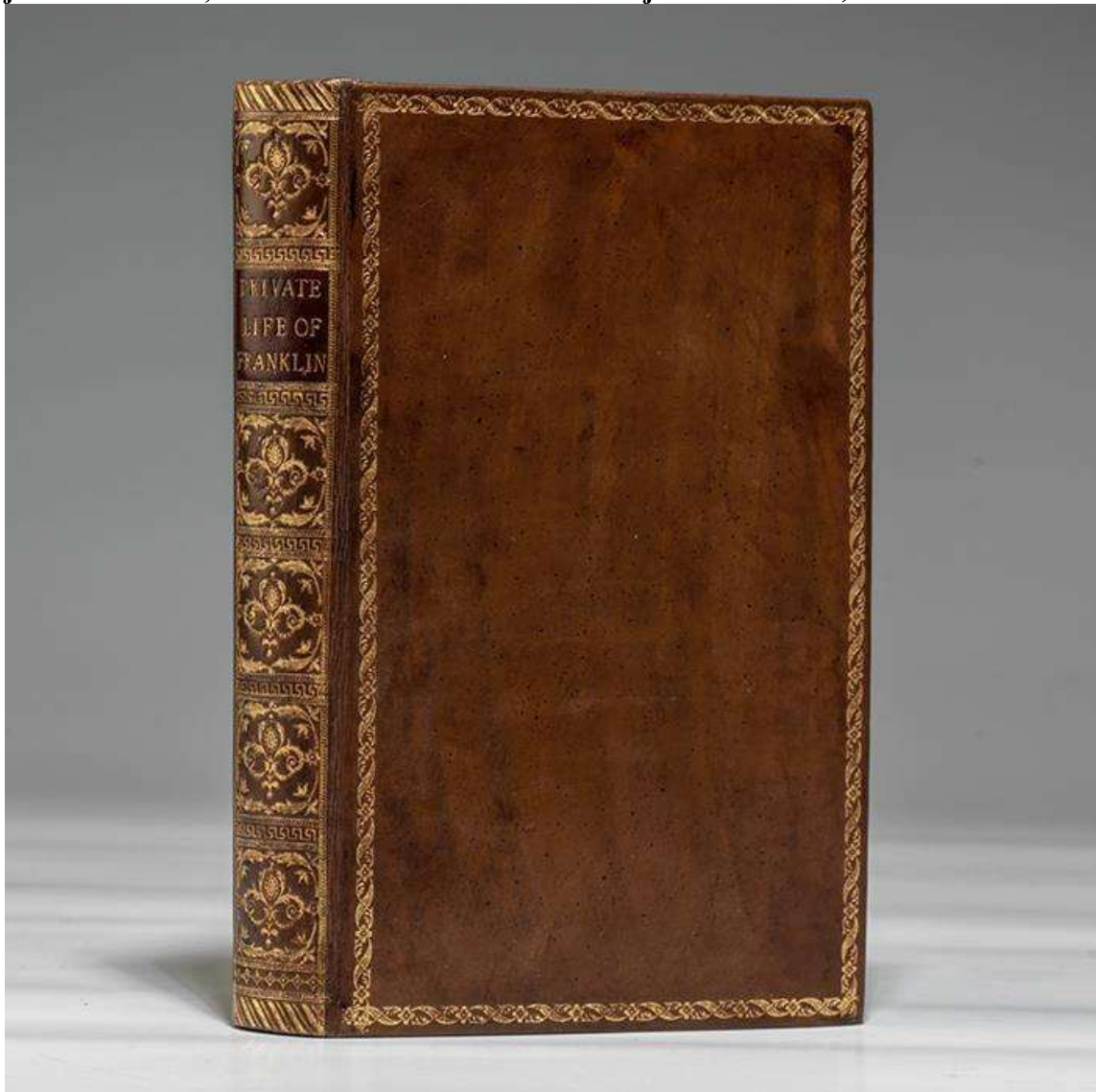
"The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin" (1793) by Benjamin Franklin: A Canonical Book

Curated by Stephen A Batman

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Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

Benjamin Franklin, *The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin*, 1793



THE
PRIVATE LIFE
OF THE LATE
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, LL.D.
LATE MINISTER PLENIPOTENTIARY FROM THE UNITED
STATES OF AMERICA TO FRANCE, &c. &c. &c.

Originally written by Himself,
AND NOW TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH.

TO WHICH ARE ADDED,
SOME ACCOUNT OF HIS PUBLIC LIFE, A VARIETY OF
ANECDOTES CONCERNING HIM, BY M. M. BRISSOT,
CONDORCET, ROCHEFOUCAULT, LE ROY, &c. &c.
AND THE EULOGIUM OF M. FAUCHET,
CONSTITUTIONAL BISHOP OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CALVADOS,
AND A MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL CONVENTION.

Épuisé ce clo fulmen, mox sceptrum tyrannia. Turgot.
A Paris, ce grand homme, dans notre ancien régime, seroit resté dans l'ob-
scurité; comment employer le fils d'un chandelier? Le Roy.

L O N D O N :
PRINTED FOR J. PARSONS, NO. 21, PATER-NOSTER ROW.

1793.

"THE EPITOME OF FRANKLIN'S SPIRIT" AND "THE MOST WIDELY READ OF ALL AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES": 1793 FIRST EDITION IN ENGLISH OF FRANKLIN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AN UNCUT COPY

First edition in English (expanded from the French) of Franklin's renowned autobiography, "the most widely read of all American autobiographies," a wide-margined uncut copy.

"The most widely read of all American autobiographies... [*The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin*] holds the essence of the American way of life" (Grolier 21). "This account is the epitome of Franklin's spirit. In it one sees him as a typical though great example of 18th-century enlightenment, a Yankee Puritan who could agree with Rousseau and Voltaire and use the language of Defoe and Addison with a genial homely twang" (Hart, 142).

"A year after Benjamin Franklin's death his autobiography was published in Paris in March of 1791... Known today as *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, this classic piece of Americana was originally written for Franklin's son William, then the governor of New Jersey. The work portrays a fascinating picture of life in Philadelphia, as well as shrewd observations on the literature, philosophy, and religion of the time. Franklin wrote the first five chapters of his autobiography in England in 1771, resumed again 13 years later (1784-85) in Paris and later in 1788 when he returned to the United States. Franklin ends the account of his life in 1757 when he was 51 years old.

Considered to be the greatest autobiography produced in colonial America" (Archiving Early America). The ultimate treatise on man's ability to better himself, the *Autobiography* is especially notable for its wonderful and humorous pragmatism. With Fauchet's *Eulogium* half title. Occasional mispagination without loss of text. Howes F323. Sabin 25573. Ford 386.

FRANKLIN, Benjamin. *The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin*, LL.D. Late Minister Plenipotentiary from the United States of America to France... Originally written by Himself, and Now Translated from the French. London: Printed for J. Parsons, 1793. Octavo, period-style full speckled calf-gilt, red Morocco spine label, marbled endpapers, uncut.

Interior quite clean and fine.

Introduction

"The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin," more commonly known today as "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin," stands as one of the most influential autobiographies ever written, despite its unusual and complex publication history. Franklin began writing this unfinished record of his life in 1771 and continued working on it intermittently until his death in 1790¹. The book was not published during Franklin's lifetime, and the first edition appeared in French translation in Paris in 1791, followed by the first English edition in London in 1793 under the title "The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin"⁸. Interestingly, this English version

was actually a translation back into English from the French edition, resulting in considerable differences from Franklin's original text⁸.

Franklin's motivations for writing his autobiography were multifaceted. He initially framed it as a letter to his son William in 1771, expressing his desire to acquaint his son with his English ancestors, to share parts of his life with which William was unfamiliar, to provide future descendants with insights into the means of his success, and, with characteristic humor, to relive the past and gratify his own vanity⁹. The cultural and political climate surrounding the book's creation and publication was tumultuous, spanning the American Revolution and its aftermath. When Franklin began writing in 1771, tensions between the American colonies and Britain were escalating. By the time the book was published posthumously, the United States had established its independence, and Franklin had become celebrated as one of the nation's Founding Fathers.

The autobiography emerged during a period of significant political and social transformation, as the newly formed United States was establishing its national identity. Franklin's narrative, with its emphasis on self-improvement, industry, and civic virtue, resonated with the emerging American ethos of upward mobility and self-determination. As Franklin's friend Benjamin Vaughan noted in 1783 after reading part of the manuscript, it exemplified "the manners and situation of a rising people"⁴.

The Author

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) was one of the most remarkable figures in American history—a polymath whose life embodied the diverse talents and interests that characterized the Enlightenment era. Born in Boston as the 15th of 17 children to a poor tallow chandler, Franklin rose from humble beginnings through "hard work, thrift, intelligence and skill" to become a prosperous printer, influential civic leader, renowned scientist, successful diplomat, and ultimately one of the Founding Fathers of the United States⁷.

After an unhappy apprenticeship with his older brother, Franklin left Boston at 17 to make his own way in Philadelphia, where he established himself as a printer and publisher⁷. His civic activism led to the establishment of numerous public institutions, including "a fire department, a postal service, a hospital, a library and an academy that eventually became the University of Pennsylvania"⁷. Franklin's commitment to public service extended to politics, where he served as a colonial agent in London, advocating for American interests before Parliament².

During the American Revolution, Franklin emerged as a leading spokesman for the American cause. He testified before Parliament against the Stamp Act and other British policies, arguing that Americans already contributed heavily to the defense of the Empire². In 1772, he obtained and sent to America private letters from Massachusetts officials that inflamed tensions with Britain². After being humiliated before the Privy Council in 1774, Franklin abandoned his previous accommodationist stance and returned to Philadelphia in March 1775 as the colonies moved toward revolution².

Franklin's personal life was complex. In 1730, at age 24, he publicly acknowledged his illegitimate son William, who would later become the royal governor of New Jersey². The American Revolution created a painful rift between father and son, as William remained loyal to the British Crown while Benjamin embraced the revolutionary cause². This family division reflected the broader conflicts tearing apart colonial society during this tumultuous period.

Franklin's international reputation was cemented by his diplomatic service. He spent many years in Europe, particularly in France, where he successfully negotiated the crucial French alliance during the Revolutionary War and later helped secure the peace treaty with Britain that recognized American independence². By the time of his death in 1790, Franklin had become an international celebrity and was mourned on both sides of the Atlantic as a scientist, statesman, and sage.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin" deserves its place in the canon of essential American literature for several compelling reasons. First, it stands as the quintessential American success story, chronicling Franklin's rise from humble origins to prosperity and prominence through self-improvement and industry. This narrative of upward mobility became a foundational element of American identity and continues to resonate in American culture today.

Second, the autobiography articulates a distinctly American philosophy of practical virtue and civic engagement. Franklin's famous list of thirteen virtues and his systematic plan for moral improvement represent an approach to ethics that is pragmatic rather than theoretical, focused on building character through daily habits rather than abstract principles⁴. This practical morality, accessible to people of all religious backgrounds, helped shape American values during the nation's formative period.

Third, the work provides invaluable insights into the intellectual and cultural milieu of colonial and revolutionary America. Through Franklin's eyes, readers witness the emergence of a distinctly American identity separate from British influence. His narrative reveals how Enlightenment ideals of reason, progress, and civic virtue were adapted to the American context and incorporated into the nation's self-conception.

Fourth, the autobiography exemplifies the American ideal of the self-made individual who contributes to the common good. Franklin portrays himself not merely as a success story but as a civic-minded citizen who establishes institutions for public benefit. This balance between individual achievement and community service became a central tension in American culture, one that continues to define debates about American values.

Finally, the autobiography's enduring influence on American literature and thought cannot be overstated. It established a template for American autobiographical writing and self-representation that influenced generations of authors. As Benjamin Vaughan noted in 1783,

Franklin's narrative was connected with "the detail of the manners and situation of a rising people"⁴. The autobiography thus became not just one man's story but a narrative about America itself—its values, aspirations, and self-image as a nation where industry and virtue could lead to success.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "Eat not to dullness. Drink not to elevation."

This opening precept from Franklin's thirteen virtues emphasizes moderation and self-control⁷. In our current era of consumption and excess, Franklin's advice remains remarkably relevant. Modern Americans face unprecedented access to food, alcohol, and other indulgences, leading to various health crises including obesity and substance abuse. Franklin's simple directive reminds us that self-restraint is essential not just for physical health but for maintaining the clarity of mind necessary for productive citizenship. His emphasis on moderation rather than abstinence reflects a pragmatic approach to virtue that acknowledges human desires while advocating their reasonable management.

2. "Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself, i.e. waste nothing."

Franklin's principle of frugality speaks directly to contemporary concerns about sustainability, consumerism, and financial responsibility⁷. In an age of environmental crisis and mounting personal debt, his advice to avoid waste and ensure that expenditures benefit oneself or others provides a framework for ethical consumption. This quote challenges the modern equation of consumption with happiness and suggests instead that thoughtful resource management contributes to both personal well-being and social good. Franklin's frugality was never miserliness but rather a careful stewardship of resources that enabled both personal advancement and community contribution.

3. "Use no hurtful deceit. Think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly."

In our era of misinformation, social media manipulation, and partisan rhetoric, Franklin's commitment to truthfulness and ethical communication remains profoundly important⁷. This precept reminds us that integrity in thought and speech is fundamental to healthy democracy and civil discourse. Franklin understood that public deliberation depends on a shared commitment to honesty and fair representation of facts and ideas. His emphasis on thinking "innocently and justly" before speaking suggests that ethical communication begins with internal moral discipline rather than external regulation.

4. "Wrong none by doing injuries or omitting the benefits that are your duty."

This quote captures Franklin's understanding that ethical behavior involves both avoiding harm and actively fulfilling positive obligations⁷. In contemporary discussions of social justice, this dual aspect of ethics remains crucial. Franklin reminds us that moral responsibility extends beyond merely refraining from injuring others to include positive duties of assistance and contribution. This perspective challenges individualistic interpretations of liberty that focus exclusively on negative rights and suggests instead that citizenship entails positive obligations to one's community.

5. "Imitate Jesus and Socrates."

This concluding virtue in Franklin's list represents his integration of Christian ethics and classical philosophy⁷. By pairing Jesus and Socrates, Franklin suggests that wisdom can be drawn from multiple traditions, a perspective that remains valuable in our diverse, pluralistic society. This ecumenical approach to virtue reflects Franklin's pragmatic interest in what works rather than doctrinal purity. For contemporary Americans navigating complex religious and cultural differences, Franklin's willingness to draw ethical insights from diverse sources offers a model of principled pluralism that respects tradition without being constrained by it.

Five Major Ideas

1. The Pursuit of Moral Perfection

Franklin's systematic approach to self-improvement, centered on his famous list of thirteen virtues, represents one of the autobiography's most influential ideas. Franklin devised a methodical plan to develop these virtues, focusing on one per week in rotation⁴. This approach reflects his belief that character could be cultivated through deliberate practice and habit formation. Franklin's method combines Enlightenment rationality with practical psychology, recognizing that moral improvement requires not just good intentions but systematic effort. While Franklin acknowledges his imperfections and occasional failures in this pursuit, his commitment to continuous self-improvement established a template for American self-help literature and personal development philosophies that continues to this day.

2. Practical Education and Self-Directed Learning

Franklin's autobiography champions practical education and self-directed learning over formal academic training. Having received only two years of formal schooling, Franklin educated himself through voracious reading, discussion groups, and practical experimentation. His narrative emphasizes the value of useful knowledge that can be applied to improve one's circumstances and contribute to society. This pragmatic approach to education influenced American attitudes toward learning, contributing to a national culture that has historically valued

practical innovation and applied knowledge. Franklin's example suggests that education should be lifelong, self-directed, and oriented toward both personal advancement and public service.

3. Civic Virtue and Public Service

Throughout his autobiography, Franklin emphasizes the importance of contributing to the common good through civic engagement and institution-building. His establishment of various public institutions in Philadelphia—including a library, fire department, hospital, and academy—exemplifies his belief that individual success should be balanced with community service⁷. Franklin portrays civic engagement not as a sacrifice but as a source of personal satisfaction and social capital. This vision of citizenship as active participation in community improvement has profoundly influenced American civic culture and continues to inspire voluntary associations and public service initiatives today.

4. The American Success Ethic

Franklin's narrative establishes a distinctly American success ethic based on industry, frugality, and practical wisdom rather than inherited privilege. His rise from humble origins to prosperity and prominence through hard work and self-improvement became a template for the American dream. Franklin portrays success as accessible to anyone willing to cultivate the necessary virtues and habits, regardless of birth or background. This meritocratic vision has been both inspirational and problematic in American culture, offering hope for social mobility while sometimes obscuring structural barriers to advancement. Nevertheless, Franklin's success ethic remains a powerful influence on American conceptions of opportunity and achievement.

5. Pragmatic Morality and Religious Tolerance

Franklin presents a pragmatic approach to ethics focused on practical consequences rather than theological doctrines. While acknowledging the value of religion, he emphasizes virtues that can be embraced by people of all faiths or none. His moral system is justified primarily by its utility in promoting personal happiness and social harmony rather than by divine command. This pragmatic approach to ethics influenced American religious culture, contributing to a tradition of practical morality that transcends denominational boundaries. Franklin's emphasis on virtues that "appeal to people of all religions" reflects his commitment to religious tolerance and his belief that diverse citizens could unite around shared ethical principles despite theological differences⁴.

Three Major Controversies

1. The Question of Franklin's Sincerity and Self-Presentation

One of the most persistent controversies surrounding Franklin's autobiography concerns the authenticity of his self-presentation. Critics like John Adams questioned whether Franklin's carefully crafted image of humble industry and virtue concealed a more calculating ambition and

vanity⁹. Adams believed Franklin deliberately cultivated a public persona that masked his true nature. This critique raises important questions about the relationship between Franklin's autobiography and the actual historical figure. Was the autobiography a sincere self-examination or a calculated exercise in image management? This controversy speaks to broader tensions in American culture between authenticity and self-invention, between being and seeming. The debate over Franklin's sincerity continues to influence how readers approach his autobiography, with some seeing it as an inspirational model and others as a sophisticated performance of virtue.

2. The Limitations of Franklin's Individualistic Success Ethic

Franklin's narrative of self-made success through individual virtue has faced significant criticism for its potential to obscure structural barriers to advancement. Critics argue that Franklin's emphasis on personal responsibility and self-improvement can be used to justify indifference to systemic inequalities and social injustice. By attributing his success primarily to his own industry and virtue, Franklin's narrative may understate the role of privilege, opportunity, and social context in enabling advancement. This controversy reflects ongoing debates in American culture about the balance between individual responsibility and social obligation, between personal agency and structural constraints. Franklin's individualistic success ethic continues to be both celebrated as empowering and criticized as potentially victim-blaming in contemporary discussions of opportunity and achievement in America.

3. Franklin's Complex Relationship with Slavery and Race

Franklin's autobiography largely avoids direct engagement with the institution of slavery, despite his eventual antislavery advocacy later in life. This omission has been the subject of significant controversy, as it reflects the broader tendency in early American literature to marginalize or erase the experiences of enslaved people. Franklin himself owned slaves for part of his life before becoming an abolitionist in his later years, a complex evolution not fully addressed in his autobiography. This controversy highlights the limitations of Franklin's moral vision and the selective nature of his self-presentation. The tension between Franklin's advocacy for liberty and his participation in a slave society reflects broader contradictions in American founding ideals. Contemporary readers must grapple with these contradictions when assessing Franklin's legacy and the values expressed in his autobiography.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin" because it provides an unparalleled window into the formation of American identity during the nation's founding era. Franklin's narrative captures the emerging values, aspirations, and contradictions that would shape American culture for centuries to come. His emphasis on self-improvement, industry, and civic engagement articulates an ethic of citizenship that remains relevant in contemporary democratic society.

The autobiography offers valuable insights into the practical application of Enlightenment ideals in the American context. Franklin's pragmatic approach to virtue, his commitment to useful knowledge, and his balance of individual achievement with public service exemplify an American adaptation of Enlightenment principles that continues to influence our national self-understanding. By engaging with Franklin's text, readers can better understand the intellectual foundations of American political and cultural institutions.

Furthermore, Franklin's narrative provides a useful point of reference for evaluating contemporary American values and practices. His thirteen virtues offer a framework for personal ethics that challenges the consumerism, polarization, and moral relativism of our current era. His emphasis on moderation, truthfulness, and justice speaks directly to contemporary social and political challenges, from environmental sustainability to the crisis of public discourse.

Reading Franklin's autobiography also encourages critical reflection on American mythology and its limitations. While celebrating Franklin's achievements and insights, thoughtful readers must also grapple with the blind spots and contradictions in his narrative—his relative silence on slavery, his complex family relationships, and the potential narrowness of his success ethic. This critical engagement helps citizens develop a more nuanced understanding of American history and values.

Finally, Franklin's autobiography reminds us that democracy requires virtuous citizens actively engaged in self-government and community improvement. In an era when many Americans feel disconnected from civic institutions and skeptical about public service, Franklin's example of citizen leadership offers an inspiring alternative. His vision of citizenship as both a responsibility and an opportunity challenges contemporary cynicism and encourages renewed commitment to the common good.

For all these reasons, "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin" remains essential reading for Americans seeking to understand their national heritage and contribute thoughtfully to their civic community. Its enduring relevance testifies to Franklin's remarkable insight into the human condition and the distinctive character of American society.

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