American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (AJHSSR)
e-ISSN :2378-703X
Volume-02, Issue-12, pp-113-117
www.ajhssr.com
Research Paper Open Access

A critical study of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography

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ABSTRACT: Benjamin Franklin, the son of a Puritan English family, is known as a founding father of the nascent American nation, and a pre-eminent exponent of individualism, a major aspect of the American character. I have chosen his autobiography for the particular circumstances of its creation as well as for its being a record of an 18th century American's endeavor to make a name for himself as a writer, a scientist and a politician. The first part of the paper attempts to redraw his family and country background which may be credited with some of the features of his personality. In the second part, I discuss his creed and ideas of a virtuous life. In the third part, I discuss the circumstances of his writing his Autobiography. A final part reviews a few opinions on Franklin and his autobiography, some of which are given by colleagues who were not ardent admirers of Franklin's, yet are extremely favorable. The unfavorable views given in the twentieth century are dismissed on the grounds of judging the man and the work by later set norms.

KEYWORDS: *Americanculture, autobiography, collectivism, deism, individualism,*

INTRODUCTION

BenjaminFranklin's *Autobiography* is a remarkable literary work in which one of America's founding fathers revealed a few exciting details about his life, especially his early life, which showed that Americans coming from modest backgrounds were not at a disadvantage in the race for individual success and prominence. The *Autobiography*, probably the earliest of the type in English, depicts various aspects of Franklin's personality, showing him as a statesman, a scientist and a distinguished writer. Though the autobiography may pale when compared with contemporary autobiography, especially if evaluated in terms of honesty and candour, its author's greatness, universally praised, has not suffered much.

Born in Boston, in 1706 of Protestant parents, Benjamin Franklin's family was among the English immigrants to the New World whose main drive for immigration was the quest for the freedom of worship. His father, Josiah, had turned Nonconformist, and he was "prevailed with", as his son Benjamin later reported, to accompany "some considerable men of his acquaintance" to go to America, since convertibles were at that time "forbidden by law and frequently disturbed". (Franklin / Lemisch, p. 21)

Besides the Puritans who pioneered the immigration to America, turbulent times in the first half of the 17th century, which witnessed the civil war and the execution of King Charles I, drove into the New World many other sects. Among these were the Quakers led by William Penn who founded Pennsylvania, the Cavaliers, "King's men", who headed to Virginia, and the English Catholics who founded Maryland on a piece of land granted by the King himself. While Josiah Franklin met people who "prevailed with" him to emigrate, the Quakers reached out to immigrants by publicizing the opportunities awaiting newcomers to their colony. Furthermore, as rewards were received for the sale of service contracts of poor migrants, ships' captains reportedly went to great lengths, including kidnapping, to load their vessels. Even judges encouraged immigration when they offered it as an alternative to serving prison sentences. (Outline, p.5)

Josiah Franklin's family was among the minority of English men who came to the "glaciated area strewn with boulders", that was New England, "an inferior farm country, with generally thin, stony soil, relatively little level land, short summers and long winters". However, the New Englanders took advantage of the good stands of timber and the nearby sea to build ships and accumulate wealth. They are thought to have "rapidly acquired characteristics that marked them as a self-reliant, independent people." (*Ibid.* p. 9)

Benjamin, the thirteenth child of Josiah's fifteen, showed diligence at the age of eight while in a grammar school but was withdrawn, for economic reasons, and sent to a school for writing and arithmetic. He did well in the former, but failed in the latter. Thus far progressed his meager schooling; thereafter he was apprenticed to his father for two years, then to his elder half-brother, James, who had returned from England with a press and letters to set up his business in Boston. At twelve, he signed an indenture to serve as an apprentice till the age of twenty-one.

Soon after, he felt this commitment to be a heavy burden, even though it initially provided him with access to better books, to quench his thirst for knowledge, than he could put his hand on earlier. Among the latter, he mentions Plutarch's *Lives*, Daniel Defoe's *Essay on projects*, and Dr Cotton Mather's *Essays to Do Good*. At this early age, he also detected his deficiency in using words to support his arguments, and subsequently he grew "more attentive to my manners of writing and determined to improve my style" (Franklin / Lemisch, p. 28). This he managed with the help of a volume of the *Spectator*, the London periodical published from 1711, by Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele, two English "conscious moralists… (with) the intention of improving the minds, morals and manners of their readers" (Anthology, p. 2188). Essays from that volume were examined for themes, which were developed in Franklin's diction, and later compared with the original. Some periods of time were allowed between reading and writing to erase every memory of the original in the process, and sometimes shuttling between prose and verse was used to good effect.

Among other famous writings he acquainted himself with were Locke's On Human Understanding, Messrs. Du Port Royal's The Art of Thinking, Xenophon's Memorable Things of Socrates, besides reading Shaftsbury and Collins, all of which made him, as he admitted "a doubter as I already was in many points of our religious doctrines" (Franklin / Lemisch, p. 30).

II. BIRTH OF A WRITER

Franklin had his debut as a writer when he contributed anonymously to the newspaper his brother undertook to publish. He wrote under an assumed name, "Mrs. Silence Dogood", keeping his secret until such a time when he was sure of favorable appraisal from good authorities. The revelation antagonized further his brother, as Benjamin reports, and the younger brother managed to shorten his apprenticeship, when he took advantage of restrictions put by the Authorities on James that compelled him to publish the newspaper under the name of Benjamin. At the time, Benjamin did not feel the pangs of remorse as he remembered his brother's harshness toward him. However, some fifty years later, when he set to write his *memoirs*, he admitted that he was "too saucy and provoking" so as to enrage his brother, and considered the way he retaliated against James as "one of the first errata of my life", which estranged the two brothers for a long while.

It was the charge of atheism which had started to circulate in Boston, as well as his enchantment with the sea, that sealed Franklin's decision to go to Philadelphia, after his brother's pressures brought to bear on other printers led to denying Franklin an opportunity to make an independent living. Except for meeting his wife-to-be Miss Deborah Read, his stay in Philadelphia, which involved him mainly in printing, was of little significance. He soon was victimized by the governor of Pennsylvania, William Keith, who encouraged him to set up his own business and offered to finance the purchase of all equipment needed from London.

The ambitious business novice was tempted, and discovered, to his pain and when it was too late to avoid suffering, that the governor's promises were hollow. His stay in London was fraught with many unfortunate adventures, including making unwelcome passes on the mistress of his only friend, and spending money he was entrusted with.

Furthermore, Miss read received only one letter from him in which he reported that, due to unfulfilled promises, he would not be able to make a quick return. (Franklin / Lemisch, pp. 64, 81) However, his 18-month stay in London was not totally wasted; Franklin made the acquaintance of many people of prominence, embraced deism which qualified his expressions of religious belief, and was promised an audience with Isaac Newton that never took place.

III. COLLECTIVISM AND INDIVIDUALISM

Franklin returned to Philadelphia, but faced difficulties in dealing with a new master. However, he soon experienced a reversal of fortunes when a sympathetic colleague offered to set up a partnership with him in a printing business to be financed by that colleague's father. Soon, Franklin was on his way to a life of plenty in which he could afford to retire early and occupy himself with many intellectual, educational and scientific activities. This business in conducting of which he made good use of a chain of connections with powerful people, besides the *Almanach* which sold immense quantities for a great number of years, made him a rich man.

Among the major projects in which he was involved are the first circulatory library in the United States (1731), the American Philosophical Society (1743-1744), and the Pennsylvania Academy (1749) which was later renamed the University of Pennsylvania. The major force behind these projects was the Junto, "an association of aggressive young "leather-apron men" not old enough or respected enough for membership in one of the town's gentlemen's clubs". (Lemisch / Franklin, p.197) It is suggested that Franklin modeled his society on Mather's "Young Men Associated" and Defoe's "Friendly-societies" as well as the workings of the New England meetings.

Lemisch who agrees with this genealogy sums it up by saying that "The lesson of all three models was clear: men associated could do more to help society and, not incidentally, themselves, than could men isolated. The great individualist saw the uses of collectivism." (*ibid.*) This sounds uncharacteristic of Franklin who is justly credited with expounding individualism and instilling it in the American character.

The *Almanach*, which Franklin started in 1732, bears major signs of the individualism that Franklin expounded. There is hardly an adage in his most famous essay in that Almanach, The Way to Wealth (1757) that preaches co-operation or collective efforts. Another example is the list of thirteen virtues that he trained himself to practice week after week, for four rounds, in order to attain moral perfection. It is made up of temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity and humility. Some critics were not sympathetic, not even lenient in criticizing Franklin, either because they thought of other more important virtues, or because of individualism that exudes from what Franklin chose.

Charles Angoff wrote: "Not a word about nobility, not a word about honor, not a word about grandeur of soul, not a word about charity of mind!" (Angoff / Sanford, p. 55) D. H. Lawrence went tit-for-tat with Franklin's creed that confirmed his faith and with Franklin's list of virtues. Instead of God, he talked about gods, and while to Franklin Order, for instance, meant to "let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time", to Lawrence, Order takes a global sense. "Know", he wrote, "that you are responsible to the gods inside you and to the men in whom the gods are manifest. Recognize your superiors and your inferiors, according to the gods. This is the root of all order". (Lawrence / Sanford, p. 62)

Lawrence also took Franklin to task for his war against England and Europe that he did directly and indirectly. He was referring, by the former, to Franklin's role at the Court of France "making a small but very dangerous hole in the side of England". As regards the latter, Lawrence was referring to what Franklin did at the home front by "setting up this unlovely, snuff-colored little ideal, or automaton of a pattern American". "The pattern American, this dry, moral, utilitarian little democrat, has done more to ruin the old Europe than any Russian nihilist", he added. (*Ibid.* p. 64)

IV. THE AMERICAN ART OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Franklin's *Memoirs* was probably the first autobiography written in English. The English had been the major, if not the sole inspiration, of the North Americans, especially when it comes to thoughts, and ways and forms of expressing them. The English themselves, however, had not known the art of writing autobiography. In fact, the English Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709 - 1784) is surely credited with advancing the art of writing biographies that were neither panegyric nor scandalous. But, apparently he was so pre-occupied with writing about other people's lives that the writing of his own life eventually fell to a friend of his, James Boswell. *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL. D.*, could, nevertheless, be conceived as the nearest biography to an autobiography. For one thing, many parts of the biography, written mainly in the form of dialogues, could easily be rendered autobiographical by merely substituting the name "Johnson" by "I" and "me", with few other changes. For another, as Dr. Johnson knew that Boswell intended to write his life, he insisted that he should write it truthfully, as he himself wrote other people's lives in *Lives of the poets* (1779, 1781), and in the earlier *Life of Richard Savage* (1744).

Franklin started to write what later constituted the first part of the autobiography in 1771 in Twyford at the Bishop of St. Asaph's. This part was written in the form of a letter to his son, with two objectives: to write down some anecdotes about his ancestors in England which was a pleasurable pastime of his, and to instruct "my posterity" in "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." (Franklin / Lemisch, p. 16) When Franklin revised that part, ten years later, he admitted indirectly that the first part was not intended to the public, and added that the following part was so indeed, as it was written in accordance with an advice given by friends Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan. James was a Quaker who kept the only copy of the letter to his son and wrote to him, in late 1782 or early 1783, enclosing a copy of that letter "in hopes it may be a means, if thou continues it up to a later period, that the first and latter part may be put together; and if it is not continued, I hope thou wilt not delay it." Benjamin Vaughan, sometimes described as an Englishman (*ibid.* p. 325), sometimes as "half American English" (Van Doren / Franklin. p. 809) was friend, editor and disciple of Franklin, and was aware of an outline of his life written by Franklin but had never seen the manuscript of the first part. Granted the opportunity and learning about James's suggestion, Vaughan wrote back to Franklin edifyingly that he wished "that you should let the world into the traits of your genuine character." (Franklin / Lemisch, p.87).

V. FRANKLIN AND ROUSSEAU

As the art of writing autobiographies was yet to blossom in the Anglo-Saxon world, we suggest that Franklin, and probably one or the other of his friends who advised him to take up such a task, (Vaughan's letter is datelined **Paris**, January 31, **1783**) might have been encouraged by the publishing of the French philosopher Jean Jacque Rousseau's *Confessions* in 1781. By then, Franklin, the widely read in French and one of three commissioners appointed to secure French support for the American cause; a major figure who must have learnt about the controversial autobiography of his fellow deist, and the French philosopherwas offered an additional reason for going on that previously untrodden road. Franklin, it must be acknowledged, never mentions Rousseau in his *Memoirs*. In fact only once does the name of the French philosopher appear anywhere in his

writings. That was when, in a letter he wrote in 1785, he praised Rousseau's "admirable eloquence" in pleading "for the rights of children to their mother's milk", and attributed to that plea the partial change of mode and the fact that "some ladies of quality now suckle their infants and find milk enough." (Franklin / Van Doren, p. 643).

Compared with Rousseau's *Confessions*, Franklin's autobiography seems to lack candor, utmost honesty and self-revelation that characterize Rousseau's work. Nowhere in the autobiography would one meet or feel the confidence and the warmth of Rousseau's words in the very beginning of his *Confessions*:

> I have unveiled my utmost self even as Thou hast seen it, O Eternal Being. Gather round me the countless host of my fellowmen; let them hear my confessions, lament for my unworthiness, and blush for any imperfections. Then let each of them in turn reveal, with the same frankness, the secrets of his heart at the foot of the Throne, and say, if he dare, '*I was better than that man!*'" (Rousseau, Vol. I, pp. 1-2).

The reason behind the conservatism Franklin shows especially when he gives account of his wanton adventures as when he tried to seduce a friend's mistress or when he talked about "that hard-to-be-governed passion of youth (that) had hurried me frequently into intrigues with low women that fell in my way" (Franklin / Lemisch, p. 80) can only be guessed at. These are situations that Franklin cannot cite as examples to be followed; but as such things could not be overlooked without impairing the honesty of the narrator, a hasty reference was thought of as a reasonable compensation. The positions of both writers as regards women are of the essence, however. It is quite obvious that a man who would not marry his first beloved until he was quite sure that he could not expect money with a wife, owing to the poor figure a printer cut, is certainly not in the same league as someone who would abstain from carrying on with his mistress who had found another lover, because he was concerned about her dignity. (Rousseau, pp. 269-279)

There are, nevertheless, many similarities between the two Deists, least of which is that they both had the chance of living independently and batting for themselves away from home. They both strove to earn a living and met with many difficulties. However, Rousseau moved more within the circle of women friends, while Franklin moved within the circle of men friends such as the members of the all-male Junto mentioned above. Gladys Meyer even observes that "he had no intimate friend, letters to whom might give any direct clue to his inner spirit". She cites his epigram as "poor Richard": Let all men know thee, but no man know thee thoroughly". (Meyer / Sanford, p. 49). While Rousseau would not withhold intimate scandalous details such as when he was molested by a fellow Catholic Moor and scolded by the Superior of the 'holy house' for making a great fuss about it (Rousseau, pp. 65-66), Franklin concealed an unlikable side of himself, hiding the fact that he gave Deborah Dean an illegitimate son as her wedding present, and that his obesity caused his gout. (Angoff / Sanford, p. 51) Again, while Rousseau thought of his *Confessions* as his ultimate work carrying which he would stand before God on the Day of Judgment, Franklin made frequent reference to his other writings that he had published in his or other newspapers. In fact, the most important events in his life, especially his efforts to reconcile Britain and the American colonies, are not recorded in Franklin's autobiography but in other documents.

VI. CONCLUSION

Brown Goode, an American critic writing in 1890, draws a more likeable image of Franklin. "When he first met Voltaire", he writes, "in the hall of the French Academy of Sciences, the two old men saluted affectionately, amid the tears and the applause of the spectators, and it was proclaimed through Europe that Sophocles and Solon had embraced". "Nothing was further from his thoughts than to obtain for himself literary fame. And still, a century after his death, he stands prominently forth as the only great literary man of America in colonial days and in the first fifty years of the Republic". John Adams a colleague of Franklin's, but by no means the most ardent of his admirers compared him favorably to Newton, Leibnitz, Fredrick the Great and Voltaire and came up with the following valuation:

"Franklin's fame was universal. His name was familiar to government and people; to kings, courtiers, nobility, clergy, and philosophers, as well as to plebeians, to such a degree that there was scarcely a peasant or a citizen, coachman or footman, a lady's chambermaid or a scullion in the kitchen who as not familiar with his name and who did not consider him as a friend of human kind".

Despite unfavourable criticisms, which mostly judge Benjamin Franklin by later set norms and so do him undue injustice, he remains one of the fathers of the nascent American culture. Not only is he representative of his era, he actively informed the norms of the day. Little wonder that his popularity extended beyond his native country and that he was admired even by its enemy. He was a great man, a rare type whose inimitability largely explains the fewness of his disciples.

Notes on Bibliography

AS with all classics, the first edition of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* is rarely made available for modern researches, and is instead supplanted by edited versions. Lemisch and Van Doren are prominent biographers and editors of Franklin's, and their books, below, are as important for depicting their views and evaluations as for their editing the original material. When referring to Lemisch's views, we have used this form (Lemisch / Franklin, p..), whereas when Franklin himself was quoted in Lemisch's edited book, we used the form (Franklin / Lemisch, p..). Likewise we used the form (Van Doren / Franklin, p..) and (Franklin / Van Doren when referring to the editor's views and to Franklin's words respectively. Charles L. Sanford edited *Benjamin Franklin and the American Character*, a collection of essays by D. H. Lawrence, A. Whitney Griswold, Charles Angoff and others. When referring to either writer we used the following form (Lawrence / Sanford, p..)

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