


THE
AMERICANIZATION
OF
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN



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INTRODUCTION



THE FOLKSY FOUNDER

Benjamin Franklin has a special place in the hearts and minds of Americans. He is, of course, one of the most preeminent of the Founders, those heroic men from the era of wigs and knee breeches. Men as diverse as Henry Cabot Lodge and Garry Wills have ranked him along with Washington as the greatest of the Founders.¹ Of these heroic men of the eighteenth century, Franklin seems to have a unique appeal. He seems the most accessible, the most democratic, and the most folksy of the Founders. His many portraits suggest an affable genial old man with spectacles and a twinkle in his eye ready to tell us a humorous story. He seems to be the one we would most like to spend an evening with. Ordinary people can identify with him in ways they cannot with the other Founders. Stern and thin-lipped George Washington, especially as portrayed by Gilbert Stuart, is too august and awesome to be approachable. Although Thomas Jefferson has democratic credentials, he is much too aristocratic and reserved for most people to relate to; besides, he was a slaveholder who failed to free most of his slaves. John Adams seems human enough, but he is too cranky and idiosyncratic to be in any way the kind of American hero ordinary folk can get close to. James Madison

is much too shy and intellectual, and Alexander Hamilton is much too arrogant and hot tempered: neither of them makes a congenial popular idol. No, of all these great men of the eighteenth century, it is Franklin who seems to have the most common touch and who seems to symbolize better than any other Founder the plain democracy of ordinary folk.

Indeed, perhaps no person in American history has taken on such emblematic and imaginative significance for Americans as has Franklin. We may not agree with his enemy John Adams that Franklin combined “practical cunning” with “theoretick Ignorance,” but we may well share Adams’s belief that he is “one of the most curious Characters in History.”² Franklin has become, in the view of literary historian Perry Miller, one of the most “massively symbolic” figures in American history.³

Scholars today tend not to believe anymore in the notion of an American character, but if there is such a thing, then Franklin exemplifies it. In 1888 William Dean Howells called Franklin “the most modern, the most American, of his contemporaries,” and many other commentators have agreed.⁴ He seems to have embodied much of what most Americans have valued throughout their history. His “homely aphorisms and observations,” one historian has written, “have influenced more Americans than the learned wisdom of all the formal philosophers put together.”⁵ Although Franklin was naturally talented, declared one nineteenth-century admirer, he achieved his success by character and conduct that were “within the reach of every human being.” All of his teachings entered into the “everyday manners and affairs” of people; they “pointed out the causes which may promote good and ill fortune in ordinary life.” That was what made him such a democratic hero.⁶

Unlike the other great Founders, Franklin began as an artisan, a lowly printer who became the architect of his own fortune. He is the prototype of the self-made man, and his life is the classic American success story—the story of a man rising from the most obscure of origins to wealth and international preeminence. Franklin, the author of *The Way to Wealth*, has stood for American social mobility—the capacity of ordinary people to make it to the top through frugality and industry and to flourish. The unforgettable images of Franklin that he himself helped to create—the youth of seventeen with loaves of bread under his arms, the scientist flying a kite to capture lightning in a storm, the fervent moralist outlining

his resolves that once followed will lead to success—have passed into American mythology and folklore. If any single figure could symbolize all of America, it was Franklin. Not surprisingly, he became for historian Frederick Jackson Turner and many subsequent biographers and panegyrists “the first great American.”⁷

He was the nation itself, declared the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1889, “the personification of an optimistic shrewdness, a large, healthy nature, as of a young people gathering its strength and feeling its broadening power.” He has represented everything Americans like about themselves—their levelheadedness, common sense, pragmatism, ingenuity, and get-up-and-go. Because of his inventions of the lightning rod, bifocals, the Franklin stove, and other useful instruments, he has been identified with the happiness and prosperity of common people in the here and now. He was the one, as an 1833 history of the United States put it, “who has made our dwellings comfortable within, and protected them from the lightning of heaven.” He spoke to common people, to “that rank of people who have no opportunity for study,” as the *Columbian Class Book* declared in 1827. He was, as one admirer wrote in 1864, “a genuine product of American soil.”⁸ Millions of people have quoted and tried to live their lives by his Poor Richard sayings and proverbs, such as “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy wealthy and wise.”⁹ Those who wanted to know the way to wealth read Franklin. He has stood for industry, frugality, thrift, and every materialistic virtue that Americans have valued.

During the nineteenth century Franklin became not only an icon that ordinary people could emulate but also the most important mythical figure used to assimilate foreigners to American values. Franklin came to represent the America of innovation and enterprise, of moneymaking and getting ahead. He was everything that immigrants thought America was about. America, even into our own time, as one twenty-first-century immigrant put it, has remained “a land of opportunity, and one [where] if you worked hard you could get ahead.”¹⁰ No one has stood for that promise of getting ahead better than Franklin. Schools in the nineteenth century began using his *Autobiography* to teach moral lessons to students. Many people seemed to know his writings as well as they knew the Bible. It is not surprising that the book Davy Crockett had with him when he died at the Alamo was not the Bible but Franklin’s *Autobiography*.¹¹

DEBUNKING FRANKLIN

So overwhelming did Franklin's image of the boy who worked hard and made it become in the nineteenth century that humorists like Mark Twain could scarcely avoid mocking it. Franklin's example, said Twain in 1870, had become a burden for every American youngster. The great man, said Twain, had "early prostituted his talents to the invention of maxims and aphorisms calculated to inflict suffering upon the rising generation of all subsequent ages. His simplest acts, also, were contrived with a view to their being held up for the emulation of boys forever—boys who might otherwise have been happy. . . . With a malevolence which is without parallel in history," wrote Twain, "he would work all day and then sit up nights and let on to be studying algebra by the light of the smouldering fire, so that all other boys might have to do that also or else have Benjamin Franklin thrown up to them."¹²

As Twain's sardonic humor suggests, Franklin has had many detractors. And most of them have been much more genuinely critical than Twain. Indeed, the criticism that Franklin has aroused over the past two centuries has been as extraordinary as the praise. Franklin may be the most folksy and popular figure among the Founding Fathers, yet at the same time he is also the one who has provoked the most derision.

Of course, from the beginning of professional history-writing at the end of the nineteenth century, historians have been busy trying to strip away the many myths and legends that have grown up around all the Founding Fathers in order to get at the human beings presumably hidden from view. Indeed, during modern times this sort of historical debunking of the Founders has become something of a cottage industry. But the criticism leveled at Franklin has been different. Historians did not have to rip away a mantle of godlike dignity and loftiness from Franklin, as they had to do with the other Founders, in order to recover the hidden human being; Franklin already seemed human enough. Indeed, it was his Poor Richard ordinariness that made him vulnerable to criticism. As William Dean Howells noted, Franklin came down to the end of the nineteenth century "with more reality than any of his contemporaries." Although this "by no means hurt him in the popular regard," it

certainly did not help his reputation with many intellectuals.¹³ Precisely because of his massive identification with middling and materialistic America, he became the Founder whom many critics most liked to mock. As John Keats pointed out as early as 1818, there was nothing sublime about Franklin, or about Americans in general, for that matter.¹⁴

Like Franklin, Thomas Jefferson has often been identified with America, and thus he too has come in for some hard knocks, especially over the past generation, mostly for his hypocrisy, his ideological rigidity, and his unwillingness to free his slaves. But as intense as this criticism of Jefferson has been, it is not quite comparable to the ridicule and condemnation that Franklin has suffered over the past two centuries. Jefferson has never been accused of lacking elegance or of being a lackey of capitalism.

Almost from the beginning of America's national history, many imaginative writers, defenders of elegance, and spiritual seekers of various sorts found that by attacking Franklin they could attack many of America's middle-class values. Aristocratic-minded Federalists scorned the emerging penny-getting world of 1800 and saw Franklin as its symbol. He was the one "who has the *pence table* by heart and knows all the squares of multiplication."¹⁵ All of the things that turned Franklin into a middling folk hero became sources of genteel contempt and ridicule. Those who believed that Franklin's *Autobiography* was supposed "to promote good morals, especially among the uneducated class of the community," declared the *North American Review* in 1818, could not be more wrong. "The groundwork of his character, during this period, was bad; and the moral qualities, which contributed to his rise, were of a worldly and very profitable kind."¹⁶ In the minds of these imaginative intellectuals Franklin came to stand for all of America's bourgeois complacency, its get-ahead materialism, its utilitarian obsession with success—the unimaginative superficiality and vulgarity of American culture that kills the soul. He eventually became Main Street and Babbitry rolled into one—a caricature of America's moneymaking middle class.

When Edgar Allan Poe wrote a satirical piece on the dry and systematic ways of "The Businessman" (1845), he never mentioned Franklin by name, but any reader would have known who his model was. A businessman, said Poe, loved order and regularity and hated geniuses—all those imaginative sorts who violated the "fitness of things." Unlike fanciful geniuses who

were apt to write poetry, a businessman was the product of “those habits of methodical accuracy” that had been “thumped” into him; thus with his “old habits of *system*,” wrote Poe, using one of Franklin’s favorite phrases, the successful businessman was carried “swimmingly along.”¹⁷

Everyone who had a quarrel with superficial bourgeois America necessarily had a quarrel with Franklin, for he was, as Herman Melville said, “the type and genius of his land. Franklin was everything but a poet.” In his novel *Israel Potter* (1855), Melville created a vivid and wonderfully satiric picture of Franklin. His Franklin was “the homely sage and household Plato,” who possessed “deep worldly wisdom and polished Italian tact, gleaming under an air of Arcadian unaffectedness.” He was at one and the same time “the diplomatist and the shepherd . . . ; a union not without warrant; the apostolic servant and dove. A tanned Machiavelli in tents.” Melville’s Franklin, as his character Israel Potter describes him, was “sly, sly, sly.” “Having carefully weighed the world, Franklin,” wrote Melville, “could act any part in it . . . printer, postmaster, almanac maker, essayist, chemist, orator, tinker, statesman, humorist, philosopher, parlor-man, political economist, professor of housewifery, ambassador, projector, maxim-monger, herb-doctor, wit,” anything and everything but a poet.¹⁸

Nineteenth-century Americans, like the characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Biographical Stories,” were not sure why Franklin had become so famous. It was doubtful, said Hawthorne’s storyteller, “whether Franklin’s philosophical discoveries, important as they were, or even his vast political services, would have given him all the fame which he acquired.” Instead, it was as the author of *Poor Richard’s Almanack* that Franklin had become “the counselor and household friend to almost every family in America.” No matter that Franklin’s proverbs “were all about getting money and saving it,” they were “suited to the condition of the country.”¹⁹

The condition of the country was capitalistic, and that was what made Franklin both a hero and a villain to so many people. He was the patron saint of business, and since the business of America, as President Calvin Coolidge liked to say, was business, Franklin became America itself. Gilded Age defenders of business like T. L. Haines simply borrowed Franklin’s maxims and turned them into manuals for making money and getting ahead.²⁰

Since Franklin had become so identified with the art of getting, saving, and using money, it was inevitable that scholars seeking to understand the sources of capitalism would sooner or later fasten upon Franklin. In his famous work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), the great German sociologist Max Weber found Franklin to be a perfect exemplar of the modern capitalistic spirit. No one, wrote Weber, expressed the moral maxims underlying the ethic of capitalism better than Franklin. For Franklin, "honesty is useful, because it assures credit; so are punctuality, industry, frugality, and that is the reason they are virtues." But Franklin was not a hypocrite, wrote Weber; as revealed by his character "in the really unusual candidness of his autobiography," his virtues were not designed to aggrandize the individual. "In fact," said Weber, "the *summum bonum* of this ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life," had nothing to do with individual happiness. "It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational." In Weber's opinion Franklin believed that "man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose in life," regardless of his actual material needs. This was "a leading principle of capitalism," akin to certain religious feelings in its intensity and asceticism. "Benjamin Franklin himself, although he was a colourless deist, answers in his autobiography with a quotation from the Bible, which his strict Calvinist father drummed into him again and again in his youth: 'Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings.'" Franklin's ethic, Weber concluded, was the ethic of capitalism, expressed "in all his works without exception."²¹

Since apparently no imaginative writer, artist, or intellectual could like capitalism, it went without saying that nearly all these sensitive souls would dislike Franklin, the proto-capitalist. Someone who thought that the end of life was merely the making of money obviously lacked depth and spirituality. And if Franklin was superficial and soulless, so too was America. With his apparently shriveled spirit, Franklin was everything that imaginative artists found wrong with America.

No artist found more wrong with Franklin and America than did the English writer D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence's hilarious attack in his *Studies*

in *Classic American Literature* in 1923 is the most famous criticism of Franklin ever written. To Lawrence, Franklin embodied all those shallow bourgeois moneymaking values that intellectuals are accustomed to dislike. Franklin was “this dry, moral, utilitarian little democrat,” the “sharp little man,” the “middle-sized, sturdy, snuff-coloured Doctor Franklin,” “sound, satisfied Ben,” who was a “virtuous little automaton” and “the first downright American.”²²

Lawrence was not the only creative writer to find Franklin a convenient means for saying something about America. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, one of the most American characters in all of literature, was an earnest believer in Franklin’s message of self-improvement as a young boy.²³ Franklin’s resolutions in fact became a model for the young Gatsby’s self-imposed schedule: “Rise from bed, 6.00 A.M.,” “Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling, 6.15–6.30,” “Study electricity, etc., 7.15–8.15,” “Work, 8.30–4.30 P.M.,” “Baseball and sports, 4.30–5.00,” “Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it, 5.00–6.00,” “Study needed inventions, 7.00–9.00.” If these weren’t enough, Gatsby added some “General Resolves” that the abstemious Franklin might have approved of: “No wasting time at Shafters,” “No more smokeing or chewing,” “Read one improving book or magazine per week,” “Save . . . \$3.00 per week.” With such resolutions, as Gatsby’s father said, the young boy “was bound to get ahead.” Franklin’s resolves became part of what Fitzgerald wanted to say about Gatsby’s desire to realize the so-called American dream.

No matter that this dream eluded Gatsby, as Fitzgerald thought it eluded all Americans. As long as Americans keep trying to grasp that “green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us,” Franklin will remain a central figure in American mythology. His remarkable life seems to reaffirm for all Americans the possibility of anyone’s, however humble his birth and background, making it.²⁴

THE HISTORIC EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANKLIN

Gatsby may be a powerful representative American character, but he is a fictional figure. Franklin, on the other hand, was a real person, not invented. Or was he? Does Franklin’s *Autobiography*, perhaps the most

widely read autobiography in the world, give us an accurate picture of the man? Much of twentieth-century literary criticism of the *Autobiography* has emphasized Franklin's sophistication, humor, and sense of irony as a writer. How seriously must we take Franklin? Is young Franklin, the character of the first two sections of the *Autobiography*, really the same person as the older Franklin, the author? Do we really know Franklin, know him as well as we know, say, Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby?

In fact, the historic Franklin, the Franklin of the eighteenth century, seems to elude us as much as Gatsby's ever receding green light eluded him. When we actually recover the Franklin of the eighteenth century, he does not seem to fit the image we have created of him. First of all, his life was not really about the making and saving of money. He was in fact the most benevolent and philanthropic of the Founders and in some respects the least concerned with the getting of money. Despite achieving fame as a scientist, he never believed that science was as important as public service. Indeed, at the age of forty-two, he retired from business and devoted the remainder of his life to serving his city, his colony, his empire, and then, after independence in 1776, his state and the United States.

Far from being the spokesman for moneymaking and bourgeois values, Franklin repeatedly mocked those who were caught up "in the Pursuit of Wealth to no End." In 1750, he wrote that at the end of his life "I would rather have it said, *He lived usefully*, than, *He died rich*."²⁵ He continually warned against the abuse of money in politics and in fact urged that governmental officials should serve without pay. After his retirement from business in 1748 he often thought like a genteel aristocrat, not a tradesman.

Although he may have eventually become the supreme symbol of America, he was certainly not the most American of the Founders during his lifetime. Indeed, one might more easily describe him as the least American and the most European of the nation's early leaders. He was undoubtedly the most cosmopolitan and the most urbane of that group of leaders who brought about the Revolution. He hobnobbed with lords and aristocrats in Britain and the rest of Europe. He conversed with kings and even dined with one. No other American, even Jefferson, knew more Europeans or was more celebrated abroad in more countries than Franklin.

As historian Carl Becker once pointed out, Franklin “was acquainted personally or through correspondence with more men of eminence in letters, science, and politics than any other man of his time.”²⁶

Certainly no other American leader lived more years abroad than Franklin. In fact, Franklin spent the bulk of the last thirty-three years of his life living outside of America, in Britain and France. At several points it was doubtful whether he would ever return to America, or wanted to—or even cared much about America. Far from being a natural and thoroughgoing American, Franklin at several points in his life experienced what we today might call the anxiety of national identity. He was not sure where he rightly belonged. Was he English? Or British? Or did he really belong in France? We should not take his Americanness for granted. Nor should we take his participation in the Revolution for granted.

At the beginning of the imperial crisis in the early 1760s—the crisis that would end with the breakup of the British Empire and the independence of the United States—no one could have identified Franklin with a radical cause. Certainly, no one could have predicted that he would become one of the leaders of the American Revolution. In 1760 there were few Englishmen who were as dedicated to the greatness of the British Empire as he.

It was then hard to see any difference at all between Franklin and the man who would eventually come to symbolize for Americans the arch-Tory and the foremost enemy of American liberty and American independence: Thomas Hutchinson. Both Franklin and Hutchinson were good Enlightenment figures—literate, reasonable men, with a deep dislike of religious enthusiasm. Both were imperial officials, dedicated to the British Empire. They had in fact cooperated in forming the Albany Plan of Union in 1754, which presented a farsighted proposal for intercolonial cooperation and imperial defense. Both Franklin and Hutchinson were getting-along men—believers in prudence, calculation, affability—and they made their way in that monarchical society by playing their parts. Both were believers in the power of a few reasonable men, men like themselves, to run affairs. Both regarded the common people with a certain patronizing amusement, unless, of course, they rioted—then the two officials were filled with disgust.

It is hard from the vantage point of the early 1760s to predict that the paths of Franklin and Hutchinson would eventually diverge so radically. In many respects Franklin seems the least likely of revolutionaries. Certainly his participation in the Revolution was not natural or inevitable; indeed, Franklin came very close to remaining, as his son did, a loyal member of the British Empire. On the face of it, it is not easy to understand why Franklin took up the Revolutionary cause at all.

First of all, Franklin, unlike the other Founders, was not a young man. He was seventy in 1776—not the age that one associates with passionate revolutionaries. He was by far the oldest of the Revolutionary leaders—twenty-six years older than Washington, twenty-nine years older than John Adams, thirty-seven years older than Jefferson, and nearly a half century older than Madison and Hamilton. Because he came from an entirely different generation from the rest of the Founders, he was in some sense more deeply committed to the British Empire than they were.

More important, unlike these other Revolutionary leaders, Franklin already had an established reputation; indeed, prior to the Revolution he was already world-famous. He had everything to lose and seemingly little to gain by participating in a revolution. The other American Revolutionary leaders were young men, virtually unknown outside of their remote provinces. We can generally understand why they might have become revolutionaries. They were men of modest origins with high ambitions who saw in the Revolution opportunities to achieve that fame that Hamilton called “the ruling passion of the noblest minds.”²⁷ But Franklin was different. He alone already had the position and the fame that the others only yearned for. He was already known all over Britain and the rest of Europe. Because of his discoveries concerning electricity, which were real contributions to basic science, he had become a celebrity throughout the Atlantic world. He had become a member of the Royal Society and had received honorary degrees from universities in America and Britain, including St. Andrews and Oxford. Philosophers and scientists from all over Europe consulted him on everything from how to build a fireplace to why the oceans were salty. Well before the Revolution he was one of the most renowned men in the world and certainly the most famous American.

Since he scarcely could have foreseen how much the Revolution would enhance his reputation and turn him into one of America's greatest folk heroes, why at his age would he have risked so much?

We do not usually ask the question of why Franklin became a revolutionary. Somehow we take his participation in the Revolution for granted. Because he is so identified with the Revolution and with America, we can scarcely think of him as anything but a thoroughgoing American. But this is a problem of what historians generally call whiggism—the anachronistic foreshortening that tends to see the past and persons in the past as anticipations of the future. Franklin has become such a symbol of America that we have a hard time thinking of him as anything but an American folk hero or the spokesman for American capitalism. We have more than two hundred years of images imposed on Franklin that have to be peeled away before we can recover the man who existed before the Revolution. Franklin in the late 1760s and early 1770s was not fated to abandon the British Empire and join the American cause. How he became estranged from that empire and became, almost overnight, a fiery revolutionary is an important part of the story of his Americanization.

In many respects Franklin in 1776 emerged as the quintessential republican, dedicated to a world in which only talent counted, not who your father was or whom you married. Once Franklin joined the Revolutionary cause, he inevitably became a fervent believer in a republican world where leaders were disinterested gentlemen, free from any occupation and the cares of making money. Franklin, long since retired from his printing business, was in 1776 more than willing to devote himself to the service of the new United States without any expectation of monetary reward. No one except Washington gave more of himself to the new nation.

The eight years Franklin spent abroad as the chief envoy from the United States to France furthered the process of his Americanization. Amid the luxury of the French court, the most sophisticated in all of Europe, Franklin became much more self-conscious of his image as the representative American, as the symbol of the simplicity of the New World and its difference from the corruptions of the Old World. Because the French needed this symbol before the Americans themselves did, they first created the image of Franklin as the rustic democrat, as the simple untutored genius from the wilds of America who had become

one of the world's great scientists and writers. Franklin was well aware of this image and developed and used it on behalf of the American cause.

As important as Franklin's French experience was in his Americanization, however, it was in the several decades immediately following his death in 1790 that the modern image of Franklin as the self-made bourgeois moralist and spokesman for capitalism was really created. As the new American republic developed into much more of a democratic, money-making society than anyone had anticipated, the need for a Founder who could represent the age's new egalitarian and commercial forces became ever more pressing. Only with the publication of his *Autobiography* in 1794 did the idea of Franklin as the folksy embodiment of the self-made businessman and the creator of the American dream begin to gather power, until today, more than two centuries later, the historic Franklin of the eighteenth century remains buried beneath an accumulation of images. Consequently, despite hundreds of biographies and studies of Franklin and over three dozen volumes of his papers magnificently published in a modern letterpress edition, we still do not fully know the man.

THE MAN OF MANY MASKS

Franklin is not an easy man to get to know. Although he wrote more pieces about more things than any of the other Founders, Franklin is never very revealing of himself. He always seems to be holding something back—he is reticent, detached, not wholly committed. We sense in Franklin the presence of calculated restraint—a restraint perhaps bred by his spectacular rise and the kind of hierarchical and patronage-ridden world he had to operate in.²⁸ Certainly there were people in Philadelphia who never let him forget “his original obscurity,” and that he had sprung from “the meanest Circumstances.”²⁹ Despite his complaining that he was never able to order things in his life, we sense that he was always in control and was showing us only what he wanted us to see. Only at moments in the early 1770s and at the end of his life do we sense that the world was spinning out of his grasp.

Beyond the restrained and reserved character of his personal writings is the remarkable character of his public writings, especially his

Autobiography—“this most famous of American texts,” as one scholar calls it.³⁰ Literary scholars have continually interpreted and reinterpreted the *Autobiography* but still cannot agree on what Franklin was trying to do in writing it. Among the Founders, Jefferson and Adams also wrote autobiographies, but theirs are nothing like Franklin’s. His resembles a work of fiction in that we cannot be sure that the narrative voice is the same as the author’s. Indeed, much of the reader’s enjoyment of the *Autobiography* comes from the contrast between Franklin’s descriptions of the “awkward ridiculous Appearance” the teenaged printer made upon his arrival in Philadelphia and “the Figure I have since made there.”³¹ It is hard to interpret the *Autobiography*, since, as scholars have pointed out, Franklin moves between several personas, especially between the innocence of youth and the irony of a mature man.³²

In all of Franklin’s writings, his wit and humor, his constant self-awareness, his assuming different personas and roles, make it difficult to know how to read him. He was a man of many voices and masks who continually mocks himself.³³ Sometimes in his newspaper essays he was a woman, like “Silence Dogood,” “Alice Addertongue,” “Cecilia Shortface,” and “Polly Baker,” saucy and racy and hilarious. At other times he was the “Busy Body,” or “Obadiah Plainman,” or “Anthony Afterwit,” or “Richard Saunders,” also known as “Poor Richard,” the almanac maker. Sometimes he wrote in the London newspapers as “An American” or “A New England-Man.” But other times he wrote as “A Briton” or “A London Manufacturer,” and shaped what he wrote accordingly. During his London years he wrote some ninety pseudonymous items for the press using forty-two different signatures.³⁴ For each of the many pieces he wrote both in Philadelphia and in London he had a remarkable ability to create the appropriate persona. Indeed, all of his many personas contribute nicely to the particular purpose of his various works, whether they are essays, skits, poems, or satires. “Just as no other eighteenth-century writer has so many moods and tones or so wide a range of correspondents,” declares the dean of present-day Franklin scholars, “so no other eighteenth-century writer has so many different personae or so many different voices as Franklin.” No wonder we have difficulty figuring out who this remarkable man was.³⁵

Of all the Founders, Franklin had the fullest and deepest understanding of human nature. He had a remarkable capacity to see all sides of human behavior and to appreciate other points of view. He loved turning conventional wisdom on its head, as, for example, when he argued for the virtue and usefulness of censure and backbiting.³⁶ But then again are we sure that he is not putting us on? He certainly enjoyed hoaxes and was the master of every rhetorical ploy. No American writer of the eighteenth century could burlesque, deride, parody, or berate more skillfully than he. He could praise and mock at the same time and could write on both sides of an issue with ease.

It is easy to miss the complexity and subtlety of Franklin's writing. He praises reason so often that we forget his ironic story about man's being a reasonable creature. In his *Autobiography* he tells us about how he abandoned his youthful effort to maintain a vegetarian diet. Although formerly a great lover of fish, he had come to believe that eating fish was "a kind of unprovok'd Murder." But one day when he smelled some fish sizzling in a frying pan, he was caught hanging "between Principle and Inclination." When he saw that the cut-open fish had eaten smaller fish, however, he decided that "if you eat one another, I don't see why we mayn't eat you." And so he had heartily dined on cod ever since. "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable Creature*," he concluded, "since it enables one to find or make a Reason for every thing one has a mind to do."³⁷

None of the Founders was more conscious of the difference between appearance and reality than Franklin. Not only did he continually comment on that difference, but he was never averse to maintaining it. If one could not actually be industrious and humble, he said, at least one could appear to be so.

Although he wrote against disguise and dissimulation and asked, "Who was ever cunning enough to conceal his being so?" we nevertheless know that he was the master of camouflage and concealment. "We shall resolve to be what we would seem," he declared, yet at the same time he seems to have delighted in hiding his innermost thoughts and motives. "Let all Men know thee," Poor Richard said, "but no man know thee thoroughly: Men freely ford that see the shallows."³⁸

While sometimes bowing to the emerging romantic cult of sincerity,

he remained firmly rooted in the traditional eighteenth-century world of restraining one's inner desires and feelings in order to be civil and get along. He never thought that his characteristic behavior—his artful posing, his role playing, his many masks, his refusal to reveal his inner self—was anything other than what the cultivated and sociable eighteenth century admired. He was a thoroughly social being, enmeshed in society and civic-minded by necessity. Not for him the disastrous assertions of antisocial autonomy and the outspoken sincerity of Molière's character Alceste in *Le Misanthrope*. Like many others of his day, Franklin preferred the sensible and prudent behavior of Alceste's friend Philinte, who knew that the path of good sense was to adapt to the pressures and contradictions of society.³⁹ Unlike, say, John Adams, Franklin never wore his heart on his sleeve; he kept most of his intentions and feelings to himself. He was a master at keeping his own counsel. As Poor Richard said, "Three may keep a Secret, if two of them are dead."⁴⁰

Franklin is so many-sided, he seems everything to everyone, but no image has been more powerful than that of the self-improving businessman. This modern image of Franklin began to predominate with the emergence of America's democratic capitalism in the early republic; and, like Alexis de Tocqueville's description of that rambunctious democratic America, Franklin's personification of its values has had a remarkable staying power. Just as we continue to read Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* for its insights into the democratic character of our society in our own time nearly two centuries later, so too do we continue to honor Franklin as the Founder who best exemplifies our present-day democratic capitalist society. As the symbol of an American land of opportunity where one works hard to get ahead, Franklin continues to have great meaning, especially among recent immigrants.

But to recover the historic Franklin we must shed these modern images and symbols of Franklin and return to that very different, distant world of the eighteenth century. Only then can we go on to understand how the symbolic Franklin was created.