Three Letters to Benjamin Franklin

On February 29, 1782, the British House of Commons silently agreed to a motion in favor of an address to His Majesty George III, praying that the war on the continent of North America might no longer be pursued for the impracticable purpose of reducing the inhabitants of the country to obedience by force. Edmund Burke, a member of the House, that same day wrote to Benjamin Franklin in Paris congratulating him "as a friend of America; I trust, as not an enemy of England; I am sure, as the friend of mankind."

On this note other English friends of Franklin resumed, or continued, their correspondence with the American Minister to France. Under British law Franklin was an arch traitor—a former officer of the Crown who had signed the Declaration of Independence put forth by the revolted provinces and who had treasonously negotiated a treaty of alliance between the so-called United States and the ancient enemy of the Empire of which he had been a subject. Only the bolder of his friends in England had communicated with him during the war, and this correspondence had had to be intermittent and more or less surreptitious. But almost all of them looked upon him not as a traitor to the English, but as a powerful ally of the English Whigs, who had resisted the American policy of the Crown and who thought of themselves and the Americans as being in joint resistance to the encroachments of George III upon the rights of Parliament, of Englishmen, and of men in general.

One of the earliest of Franklin’s closest English friends who now felt free to renew their correspondence was Jonathan Shipley, Bishop of St. Asaph. Writing to Franklin on May 9, 1782, the Bishop, in explaining why he had not written during the war, did not hint at the fact, which he no doubt knew, that his daughter Georgiana had exchanged letters with Franklin, beginning with her letter of February 11, 1777, soon after she learned that he was in France. She was then twenty-one, “not of an age,” she wrote, “to be so very prudent,”

1 The three letters here printed for the first time are in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
but old enough to feel that she must let her “cher Socrate” know how she and her family still regarded him: “They continue to admire and love you as much as they did formerly, nor can any time or event in the least change their sentiments.” Franklin, replying with his gay and affectionate grace, had in one of his letters, on October 8, 1780, referred to her father as “the good Bishop,” and then had commented: “Strange, that so simple a character should sufficiently distinguish one of that sacred body!”—that is, the lords spiritual of England.

Bishop Shipley’s letter is dated Bolton Street, London, to which the family had moved from the Jermyn Street house where Franklin had often visited them. The bearer of the letter was to have been Henry Laurens, formerly president of the Continental Congress, who had been captured at sea by the British in September, 1780, had been a prisoner in the Tower of London for more than a year, and had recently been exchanged for Lord Cornwallis, captured at Yorktown. But Laurens did not go to Paris as soon as had been expected, and the Shipley letter reached Franklin by another hand. Franklin replied on June 10 in a moving letter in which he said that during the late hostilities he had been “apt to think, that there never has been, nor ever will be, any such thing as a good War, or a bad Peace”—an opinion which in slightly different words he had expressed in a letter to David Hartley on February 2, 1780, and which he was to repeat in a letter to Josiah Quincy on September 11, 1783.

From Jonathan Shipley, Bishop of St. Asaph

It is with the utmost pleasure I feel an Hour is at last arrivd, when I can write without impropriety to my dear & respectable Friend. You will be so just to me as to believe that my silence was not owing to neglect or indifference. Great caution was necessary to be observed by one of my rank & profession, who was acting in open opposition to an unsuccessful, detested & enrag’d Ministry. Even now I debar

2 The Bishop’s letter is printed as it was written, with two technical exceptions. His words “Dr Franklin” are actually not at the end, but at the bottom of the first of the four pages. The word the is spelled out, although Shipley used the old-fashioned symbol for th, which in manuscript looks so much like y that it is often transcribed as such and the word given as ye. But Franklin, reading the letter, saw and pronounced the apparent ye as the.
myself from the mention of any subject which concerns our publick situation, till the return of Peace which We all long for, & the Safety & Liberty that attends it. In the mean time I flatter myself with the hopes of seeing You once more & renewing those delightful conversations that are still present to my Memory. Do You still relish your old Studies & sometimes make use of that Key to the secrets of Nature, which She seems to have trusted to your care as to her particular Favourite? But tho Science has certainly lost, America has gain'd much more by your change of Employment. And after all the noblest Employment that falls to the Lot of Man is to serve our Country & to make Men better & happier. (I have not the Vanity at this instant to think of Preaching or writing; but to do it as You have done by advantageous Treaties & wise Laws & Statutes []). As for me I have employd myself as occasion offerd in feebly supporting the same good Cause in which You left me engag'd & which experience has renderd more dear to me even than Truth & Reason. I have found it not difficult to make some impression on disinterested or indifferent Men; but I must own I never was so lucky as to make a Convert of one who either had a Place or wish'd for one. But my great resource has been to seek a refuge from Publick Misery in domestick Happiness. That dear Family of mine takes a pride in continuing to love & admire You. Indeed they almost look upon You as something more than human.

We have now a new Ministry; with all of whom I have acquaintance & some degree of Friendship. Their present intentions are good & the People are their Friends; but I must wait to see whether they have the Sense to make a right use of Power before I form my opinion.

The Bearer Mr Laurens, who I hope will allow me to call him my Friend, is much respected here for his good Sense & every body must love him for his mild & benevolent Heart.

Adieu my dear venerable Friend & let me hope that I may once more be happy in your Society

Your ever obligd & affection

Bolton Street
May 9th—82
D' Franklin

[Endorsed, but not in Franklin's hand:]

Asaph 9, May 1782
The second of these letters is from Benjamin Vaughan, the most devoted and active of Franklin's younger disciples in England. Vaughan, whose mother was Sarah Hallowell, of Boston, had, in 1799, published in London a valuable collection of Franklin's *Political, Miscellaneous, and Philosophical Pieces*. The frontispiece was an engraving based on a portrait medallion that Franklin had sent from France to Georgiana Shipley; and the volume's motto, which called Franklin "His country's friend, but more of human kind," had been contributed by her father. Close friend of Franklin's friends the Shipleys, Vaughan had the confidence of another of Franklin's friends, the Earl of Shelburne, one of the two secretaries of state in the Rockingham ministry that succeeded Lord North's. Vaughan suggested that, instead of sending a "bargaining" diplomat to treat with Franklin and the other American peace commissioners in Paris, Shelburne send Richard Oswald, a retired merchant who had lived in America and whom Franklin might find congenial. Oswald arrived in Paris in March, and in July Vaughan followed as a private agent of Shelburne, who had become Prime Minister on the death of the Marquis of Rockingham that month. In September, at the request of John Jay, Vaughan went back to England to represent to Shelburne the special interests of the United States which Jay thought might otherwise suffer from a conflict with the special interests of France and Spain. Jay insisted that a new commission to Oswald should authorize him to treat with the commissioners of "the United States of America," a specific designation which would mean that Great Britain recognized the existence of the new nation in advance of the formal treaty.

Writing to Franklin on September 23, Vaughan reported that the commission, though drawn, had not yet been sealed, but only because the Chancellor of the Exchequer, William Pitt, was out of town. The revised commission was delivered to Oswald in Paris on September 27 by the courier with whom Vaughan had traveled. A letter from him of that date to William Temple Franklin\(^3\) says that Vaughan had brought the articles he had been "committed . . . to procure" for Franklin in England. It is not certain what medicine Shelburne had sent for the bladder stone with which Franklin had been painfully

\(^3\) This letter is in the American Philosophical Society.
afflicted since about the end of August. Referring to Franklin’s “son,” Vaughan, of course, meant the grandson Temple.

At some time not long after Vaughan’s return to Paris, he was shown the outline, not the manuscript, of Franklin’s memoirs, now called the Autobiography, of which Franklin had written only the first part at the Shipley country house near Winchester in August, 1771. Vaughan’s letter of January 1, 1783, urging Franklin to go on with his plans for an autobiography, has regularly been printed with the second part, which Franklin wrote in Paris in 1784.

From Benjamin Vaughan

Totteridge, Herts, Sept. 23rd, 1782.

My dearest sir,

Lest by some accident I should miss the opportunity of travelling with the courier, I sit down just to tell you that I am prepared to depart the instant I hear the commission is sealed, which by the Chancellor having been at Buxton has been for some days delayed.

I have got together the different articles committed to my care to procure, and shall not be long upon the road.

I hope your health is better. Lord Shelburne has insisted on my bringing you a medicine to prevent a return of your complaints. I beg my best regards to your son; and am, my dearest sir,

Your ever devoted, grateful, & affectionate

Benj Vaughan

[Endorsed in another hand:]

Vaughan Sept 23.

1782.

The last of these three letters is from Sir Edward Newenham, Irish patriot and member of the Irish Parliament, who with his family had come to Paris early in the fall of 1782 and had been hospitably entertained by Franklin and his grandson. A part of
Newenham's journal of his French travels has been edited by Dixon Wecter from the manuscript in the Public Archives of Canada, with numerous details concerning Franklin's circle in Paris and Passy. Newenham left Paris on October 20 for the south of France, and was in Marseilles in late November. In Liège, on June 20, 1783, he was the guest of William Augustus Miles, who as a boy had gone to America, had served in a civilian capacity under Admiral Sir George Brydges Rodney in the West Indies, had been for a time a prisoner of war in St. Lucia, and after his release had settled in Seraing, near Liège. Miles' early writings, here enthusiastically praised by Newenham, were minor pamphlets on abuses in the ordnance office and on the suppression of *The Beggar's Opera*. He was later a correspondent, and in some degree an agent of William Pitt, and a busy miscellaneous writer. It was to the impetuous Newenham that Franklin on June 20, 1785, wrote, with the "anxious freedom of a friend," to dissuade him from trying to cross the Channel in a balloon as Jean-Pierre Blanchard and John Jeffries (of Boston) had done the past January.

*From Sir Edward Newenham*

Liege 20 June 1783 —

My Dear Sir —

Hearing that the Irish Parliament will immediately be dissolved, I am obligd to return to Dublin without having the pleasure of paying my respects to you, & Congratulating you, upon the final completion of your Glorious Cause—

I am now at the house of William Augustus Miles Esq' whose writings have rendered Essential services to the Cause of Liberty; he Early & warmly Supported the rights and Priviledges of your Excellencys fellow-Subjects in America; he intends to Visit Paris before he returns to England, therefore I beg leave to Introduce him to your

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4 Dixon Wecter, "Benjamin Franklin and an Irish 'Enthusiast'," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, IV (January, 1941), 205-234.
Excellency, & shall consider any Civilities you or your Amiable & Virtuous Grandson shew him, as personaly conferred upon me—

Wishing you every happiness that this Life can bestow—

I have the Honor to remain, My D' Sir
with the most Sincere Respect & Esteem
your Excellencys
most obligd & Humble Ser',
Edward Newenham

P S
Lady Newenham & my Son have charged me to present their best
Respects to your Excellency & your Grandson—

[Address page:]
To His Excellency Doct' Benj: Franklin
Minister Plenipotentiary from
The United States of America
Passy
Paris—

The English Bishop, the young Anglo-American disciple, the ardent Irish politician—all throw fresh and characteristic light on Franklin’s gift for making and holding friends. It was more than a gift; it was a genius. Franklin’s genius was as great for friendship as for business or literature or science or diplomacy or statesmanship. He made friends with the world, and his friends were the friends of the United States.

New York City

CARL VAN DOREN