Frankliniana

Three Short Pieces

Undated pen sketch by Thomas Birch of the figurehead of the 74-gun ship of the line Franklin.
A Franklin Anecdote

The fierce light of intensive research has beaten so long upon the life and public career of Benjamin Franklin that it is difficult to evoke a phase not already known and discussed. However, new points of view do turn up and from unexpected sources. An anecdote recently culled from a quaint small volume, *Almanach Littéraire, ou Étrennes d’Apollon*, published in Paris in 1787 (and now in the archives of the American Philosophical Society), affords an unlooked-for aspect of Franklin’s health cult.

This book, picked up I vaguely remember at a riverside stall during the course of some forgotten ramble along the Left Bank of the Seine, lay long neglected in my library. It is a compilation of anecdotes, mostly contemporary, published annually after 1777. My copy is the eleventh of these publications. The publisher seems to have eked out an existence (a starveling one, it is to be feared) by the sale of the book and by peddling prints of the glorious victory of Fontenoy.

Picking up the volume recently, I was struck with the frequency of American allusions. This is the more surprising because in 1787 it might reasonably be thought that interest in American affairs had somewhat abated in France. Franklin had left two years before for Philadelphia; his agreeable villa at Passy was in other hands. The succeeding American envoy, Mr. Thomas Jefferson, had modest quarters in the Rue de Berri and was woefully lacking in the picturesque elements which had distinguished his predecessor. There is no record of Jefferson’s wearing a fur cap or operating a private printing press or composing engaging madrigals for the ladies of Auteuil. Then, too, Philadelphia was far away, and the Parisians had only a vague interest in the travel-stained delegates then alighting at their several taverns to take their part in a new Constitutional Convention. As for Poor Richard, now back home near the High Street, he wrote an occasional letter to old friends overseas, to le Veillard, to Madame de Houdetot, and to the Abbé Morellet, but he also was fast becoming a memory.
And yet interest in American affairs could not have entirely abated, for here is the *Almanach Littéraire* full of American comment. For instance, was there ever penned a more graceful tribute than that of an enthusiastic admirer "*Pour mettre au bas du Portrait de M. le Commodore Paul-Jones*"?

Bellone a vue ce grand Guerrier  
Cueillir les palmes de la Gloire  
Et sa tête est faite au laurier  
Comme son bras à la Victoire.

A few pages further on we are given a description of the bust of Lafayette which the grateful state of Virginia had commissioned in Paris for its State House at Richmond. Following is an account of Admiral d’Estaing, not so long from his campaign in Rhode Island waters (1778) and now, we are told, dabbling with painting.

But the most compelling and interesting American allusion is the story about Franklin which appears on an early page of the *Almanach*.

L’illustre Franklin, à l’âge de vingt ans, était déjà animé de cet esprit philosophique qui l’a conduit si bien & si loin dans l’étude de la nature & dans celle de l’homme. Il voulut essayer de vivre de pain & d’eau. Ce Philosophe était alors Imprimeur & travaillait à la presse toute la journée. Avec ce travail assidu, il a vécu six semaines d’environ une livre de pain par jour, n’ayant d’autre boisson que de l’eau, & sans apercevoir en lui aucun affaiblissement de corps ou de la pensée. Sa Mère, à qui on demandait pourquoi son fils menait une vie si étrange, repondait: "c’est qu’il a lu un fou de Philosophe, un certain Plutarque; mais je le laisse faire. Il s’en lassera bientôt.

Although this youthful idiosyncrasy of Franklin is not unknown to his commentators, this particular anecdote as related in the *Almanach* seems to have escaped the notice of even so indefatigable a Franklin scholar as Carl Van Doren.

We know that the boy Benjamin used to abstract his father’s books and devour them surreptitiously. "Plutarch’s lives there was in which I read abundantly . . . ," he tells us in his *Autobiography*. But few of us would conceive that he took the precepts of the Philosopher so seriously. Was Madame Helvetius conversant with the anecdote when she referred to Franklin as the American Plutarch? And was it she who related the story to the editor of the *Almanach*? We shall probably never know.

*Reading, Pa.*
Pennsylvania and an Early Russian Radical

Pushkin called the *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) of Aleksander Radishchev "mediocre" and refrained from discussing its "barbarous style." However, Lenin mentioned Radishchev casually in an essay on Russian national pride, and Soviet criticism has fallen into line behind Lenin. Consequently, it is currently Communist orthodoxy to see in Radishchev "the writer and thinker of the eighteenth century most near to us," and in the *Journey* "the apogee of Russian eighteenth-century social thought." Whatever its real literary merits, the *Journey* is probably unique historically in its juxtaposition of Pennsylvania and early Russian radicalism. For Radishchev's real crime, that which made Catherine II call him a Free Mason and worse than the leader of the revolt of the 1770's, Pushkin reports, was that "he praised Franklin." Actually, Radishchev's idealization of American virtues was the conventional attitude among "enlightened" Europeans of the period, but the *Journey* often localizes the stereotype in Pennsylvania. Because of this, the Russian Academy of Science officially warned its readers in 1940 that "... it is necessary to remember that in speaking of the political structure of America Radishchev had in view primarily the state of Pennsylvania, different from all others in the United States. Pennsylvania was inhabited by free farmers, knowing neither the landowner's terror nor slavery; bourgeois-democratic relations then prevailed there, colored to a certain extent by the patriarchal quality of farm labor."

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1 Pushkin-Kritik, ed. by N. V. Bogoslovskii (Moscow and Leningrad, 1934), 365.
3 Akademiia Nauk SSSR. Institut Literatury. A. N. Radishchev (Moscow and Leningrad, 1936), vi.
5 Pushkin-Kritik, 362.
The rambling structure of the sentimental journey gave Radishchev frequent opportunity to display his admiration and specific knowledge of Pennsylvania. In the course of the lengthy discussion of censorship, for example, he rejects the problem of *lèse-majesté* as unimportant: let the offended dignitary seek redress in the courts as a private individual, or better still, let him answer print in print. Witness the example of “Mister Dickinson, famous as a participant in the recent American Revolution, later president of Pennsylvania, who did not hesitate to combat attacks made against him. The first official of his state, he descended into the arena, published his defense, justified himself, refuted the arguments of his opponents and shamed them. . . .”

The two pages devoted to the American experience with freedom of the press are illustrated by reference to the individual states. The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 is cited twice (Sections 12 and 35 of the *Declaration of Rights* and the *Frame of Government*, respectively), and the constitutions of Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware, once each. Russian scholars have agreed that Radishchev’s source was the *Constitutions des treize États-Unis de l’Amérique*. However, they confess themselves perplexed because this collection does not include what Radishchev presents as Section 35 of the Pennsylvania “project of the frame of government printed so that the inhabitants might communicate their remarks in July, 1776.” This and the other passages cited by Radishchev can all be located in one work, the *Recueil des loix constitutives des colonies angloises*, perhaps not now available in Russian libraries. The Pennsylvania Constitution

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7 Radishchev, I, 301.
8 Ibid., I, 334–335.
9 *Constitutions des treize États-Unis de l’Amérique* (A Philadelphie et se trouve à Paris, 1783), 193, 213, 228, 264, 311. Franklin’s part in arranging this translation is shown in Sparks’ edition of the *Works* (Boston, 1840), IX, 503, 508, 523.
10 IA. L. Barskov in his “A. N. Radishchev—Torzhok”, in Akademiia Nauk SSSR. Institut Literatury, *XVIII Vek*, II, 69, and in his edition of Radishchev, II, 467, admits this difficulty, and points out the availability of “very few books on Pennsylvania history in Moscow and Leningrad libraries.”
11 A more complete description is *Recueil des loix constitutives des colonies angloises, confédérées sous la denomination d’États Unis de l'Amérique Septentrionale*. Auquel on a joint les Actes d'indépendence, de confédération & autres actes du Congrès general, traduit de l’anglois. Dédité à m. le docteur Franklin (À Philadelphie, et se vend à Paris, chez Cellot & Jombert, 1778), 69, 115, 159, 206, 270–271. Another printing, with some variations on the title page, but with the same pagination, appeared in the same year.
of 1776 given there is accompanied in footnote by a text introduced as: “Projet d’une forme de Gouvernement pour l’Etat de Pensylvanie, imprimé pour mettre les habitans en état de communiquer leurs remarques. (Juillet 1776).”12 In addition to the obvious parallel it provides with Radishchev’s phrasing, this reference also explains his error in dating as July, 1776, a document first released in September.

The next reference to Pennsylvania, or more precisely, to the Quakers, echoes one of Radishchev’s admitted models, the Histoire des deux Indes of Raynal. Seeing his fellow passengers moved by the spectacle of a sale of serfs, Radishchev breaks out into an apostrophe beginning: “O Quakers, if we had your spirit, we would club together to buy these unfortunates and give them their freedom.”13 The scene is an obvious reminiscence of the freeing of the slaves by the Quakers that Raynal describes so animatedly.14

Raynal is again probably the inspiration for what is today, as it was in Catherine’s time, the most suspect paragraph politically in the Journey. To savor it fully, the dogma of Russian nationalism that Mikhail Lomonosov was an intellectual giant on the order of Leonardo da Vinci, pre-eminent in all branches of the sciences and arts, must first be understood. In the “Word on Lomonosov,” a kind of tailpiece to the Journey, Radishchev compares Lomonosov with Benjamin Franklin:

Shall we accord him [Lomonosov] the most flattering laudatory description which man can see under his own image? An inscription not designed as a mere compliment for a true darer for power: “He snatched thunder from the Heavens, and the sceptre from the hands of tyrants.” Shall we place near him [Franklin] Lomonosov who explored the force of electricity and its effects, who could not be diverted from studying electricity, even though he saw it kill his teacher? Lomonosov knew how to produce the force of electricity, knew how to avert the bolt of lightning, but Franklin in this science is the architect, and Lomonosov merely the laborer.15

12 Ibid., 72. Radishchev translates all but the last clause of Section 35 (pages 115–116). The entire English text of this “Projet” can be found in the issues of the Pennsylvania Evening Post and Pennsylvania Gazette for Sept. 10 and Sept. 18, 1776, respectively, but the section quoted is there numbered not 35, but 36.
13 Radishchev, I, 347.
15 Radishchev, I, 450.
This inscription is, of course, the famous "il arracha la foudre au ciel, et le sceptre aux tyrans" quoted from Raynal,\(^\text{16}\) with the significant difference that Radishchev translates "tyrants" by the Russian "tsars." Pushkin explains Catherine’s anger at the praise of Franklin in this way: "... a monarch attempting to unite all the different parts of the state could not with indifference see the departure of the colonies from the control of England."\(^\text{17}\) Possibly, Radishchev, if alive today, might again know banishment and Siberian exile. A government propagandizing a kind of exaggerated nationalism might not complacently read the praise of an American at the expense of a Russian national hero.

\textit{Library of Congress} 

\textit{Leonard N. Beck}

\(^\text{16}\) Raynal, IX, 300.

\(^\text{17}\) Pushkin-Kritik, 362.

\section*{Two Epitaphs for Ben}

Separated by forty pages in that fascinating, loosely compiled catchall of mounted manuscripts spanning the years 1730–1783, which Pierre Eugène du Simitière collected at least in part with an eye toward a later historical work, occur two poems on Benjamin Franklin. Each an undated and somewhat premature epitaph, they represent two clearly opposed attitudes which took their color from the differing political views of the citizens of the Middle Colonies. No suggestion of authorship is given; the manuscripts are in du Simitière’s own fine hand.\(^1\)

The first item would seem, on internal evidence, to have been originally composed in the neighborhood of 1767 or 1768, since the deeds of patriotism cited for "America’s great son" are colonial, not national, and his chief fame in afterlife is predicated on his scientific discoveries, his name to be exalted by "The Royal Medal." (It may be remembered that he was chosen Fellow of the Royal Society of London in 1756, member of the Royal Society of Sciences, Göttingen, 1 The Scrap Volume of the rich du Simitière manuscript collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia (founded by Franklin in 1731) is now deposited with the Free Library of Philadelphia and is used with the kind permission of both. The first "epitaph" is found on page 65 of the Scrap Volume; the second, on page 105.
in 1766, and of the Royal Academy of Science of Paris in 1772, although the latter date seems too late for the present reference.)

Opening with a quotation from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* (Epistle IV, lines 247 and 248), the unknown author contrives a series of imitative couplets of the same self-contained sort, but, alas, of far different quality.

**MUSING NEAR A COOL SPRING**

"A wit's a feather and a chief's [sic] a rod
An honest man's the noblest work of God."

Pope

---

Dear Patriot muse that honest men behold
Record his Acts in characters of gold.

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Who plann'd the Scheme of the associates to unite
Who wrote *plain truth* to bring that Scheme to light?2
Who bid Yon Academick structure rise?3
"Behold the Man!" each lisping babe replies.
Who Schemed Yon Hospital for the helpless poor?
Who op'd to charitable use each folding door.4
Our Country's cause, what senator defends?
Void of all partial, or all private ends.5
Who to his publick trust has firmly stood?
And built Fort Allen for his country's good.6
Who form'd a Law our Forces to unite?7
And deign'd to execute that Law aright.

2 *Plain Truth* appeared in November, 1747, arraigning the Proprietorship and the Assembly for failure to unite in plans for the colonies' defense. "... We are like the separate Filaments of Flax before the Thread is form'd, without Strength, because without Connection, but union would make us strong, and even formidable." Albert H. Smythe, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1905), II, 351.

3 This refers to the founding of the Academy of Philadelphia in 1749, which later became the University of Pennsylvania.

4 The Pennsylvania Hospital was founded in 1751.

5 Franklin was colonial agent for the Province of Pennsylvania in 1757.

6 He pushed forward the construction of forts to defend Pennsylvania's frontier in 1756.

7 *An Act for the Better Ordering and Regulating such as are Willing and Desirous to be United for Military Purposes Within the Province of Pennsylvania* (1755).
Who found out means our Treasury to supply?
Who would not suffer publick Faith to die?  
Who was the man brave Braddock did record?
"The only man that with him keep [sic] his word."  

Twas He, whose name, the good and just will sound
While patriot deeds on faithful records stand.

Great thy reward for all thy Labours done,
And at the great Tribunal will be known.
There will thy Genius other worlds survey,
And there adore the glorious God of day.

There Bacon Newton will our F——lin greet
And place him in his Electrific seat.
'Ore Urope, asia, africk's, scienced Fame,
The Royal Medal will exalt thy name,
Transfer the palm by thy great genious won
And proudly own America's great son.
If then thy sphere, to Eelecterise above,
Dart me one ray in pitty and in love
Oh! send thy influence, if permitted send,
To guide my soul to my beloved Friend.

The second manuscript in the Scrap Volume is a far more capable performance metrically, as well as a nimble use of a conceit. The Franklin Stove is the versatile Sage's chief contribution for the year 1742, reference to the familiar kite experiment and the lightning rod move the possible date of composition ten years later, while the

8 While the reader thinks most naturally of Franklin's service during the Revolution, the context seems to indicate reference here to his shrewd arguments for the colony's right to issue its own currency. See his Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper-Currency of 1729, and his Remarks and Facts Concerning American Paper Money of 1767 (Frank L. Mott and Chester E. Jorgensen, Benjamin Franklin. Representative Selections with Introduction and Bibliographical Notes [New York, 1936], cxlvii).

9 Franklin had assisted Braddock in 1755 by procuring wagons for the campaign against Fort Duquesne.

10 Although this has the sound of an elegy, the date of Franklin's death, 1790, rules this possibility out.

11 The Royal Society of London awarded Franklin the Sir Godfrey Copley gold medal on Nov. 30, 1753, for his experiments in electricity. Carl Van Doren, Benjamin Franklin (New York, 1938), 170.
Tory tone of the sentiment, finding its climax in the phrase "kindled the Blaze of Sedition," would seem to place it somewhere coincident with, or subsequent to, his dismissal as deputy postmaster general in 1774.

**INSCRIPTION**

On a Curious Chamber Stove in the Form of an Urn contriv’d in such a manner as to make the Flame descend instead of rising from the Fire: Invented by the celebrated B. F____.

Like a Newton sublimely he soar’d
To a Summit before unattain’d
New Regions of science explor’d
And the Palms of Philosophy gain’d

With a Spark that he caught from the skies
He display’d an unparall’d Wonder
And we saw with Delight & Surprize
That his Rod cou’d defend us from Thunder

O had he been wise to pursue
The Tract for his Talent design’d
What a Tribute of Praise had been due
To the Teacher and Friend of Mankind

But to covet political Fame
Was in him a degrading ambition
A Spark that from Lucifer came
And kindled the Blaze of Sedition—

Let candor then write on his Urn
Here lies the renown’d Inventor
Whose Flame to the Skies ought to burn
But inverted descends to the Centre

Well, Dr. Franklin, Time has settled the controversy and brought in its judgment. Pax vobiscum.

*University of Pennsylvania*  
*Thomas P. Haviland*

12 Franklin made his first experiments in electricity in 1752, and in that year installed the first lightning rod on his house.

13 Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, in their *Rebels and Gentlemen* (New York, 1942), 125, attribute this and the preceding stanza to the Quakeress Hannah Griffiths, but offer no date nor further information.