Parson Weems on Franklin’s Death

Almost every American is familiar with the story of young George Washington and the cherry tree. This anecdote has flourished in American folklore for 150 years despite numerous arguments denying its validity. The cherry-tree incident is a product of the imagination of the celebrated Mason Locke Weems, who is remembered chiefly for his borrowed and invented biographical fictions. His most famous invention—the chopping down of the cherry tree—was not inserted until six years after the first edition of his History of General Washington. Similarly it was three years after the first appearance of his Life of Benjamin Franklin that Weems created his highly conventional religious account of Franklin’s death. While both stories have an identical genesis their eventual places in history and folklore are distinctly dissimilar.

The history of the cherry-tree incident has been documented by Marcus Cunliffe. The popularity of the story is due, obviously, to its educational value as a moral lesson for the young and its anecdotal form. The example of young George putting truth before all else is a fine inspirational model for children. However, the example of Franklin’s gazing with rapture upon a picture of the crucifix provides no distinct moral for young people.

The persistence of the legendary cherry-tree incident is due, in part, to its consistency with the American conception of Washington’s character which it helped to create. Also of significance is its association with the American self-concept. One of our country’s assumptions is that, just as our nation is founded on the concepts of truth and justice, our first leader must be a man of truth. The current examination and re-evaluation of our national consciousness may have a profound effect on myths of this type. However, it is safe to assume that the cherry-tree incident will continue to be associated with George Washington. Conversely, a religious symbol such as a crucifix is not associated with the practical and wily Ben

Franklin. The common view of Franklin as Poor Richard and the author of the autobiography, as statesman and inventor, is inconsistent with the religiosity that Weems brings to his biography.

Fortunately, the probable circumstances surrounding Franklin’s death are available to us through several letters by close friends such as Polly Hewson and Dr. Benjamin Rush. Possibly, the most valid of the accounts of his death is that of his attending physician Dr. John Jones:

The stone with which he had been afflicted for several years had for the last twelve months confined him, chiefly to his bed; and during the extremely painful paroxysms he was obliged to take large doses of laudinum to mitigate his torture; still, in the intervals of pain, he not only amused himself with reading and conversing cheerfully with his family and a few friends who visited him, but was often employed in doing business of a public as well as private nature, with various persons who waited on him for that purpose; and in every instance displayed not only that readiness and disposition of doing good which was the distinguishing characteristic of his life, but the fullest and clearest possession of his uncommon mental abilities; and not infrequently indulged himself in those “jeux d’esprit” and entertaining anecdotes, which were the delight of all who heard him. About sixteen days before his death he was seized with a feverish indisposition, without any particular symptoms attending it, till the third day when he complained of a pain in the left breast, which increased till it became extremely acute, attended with a cough and laborious breathing. During this state when the severity of his pain drew forth a groan of complaint, he would observe—that sense of the many blessings he had received from that Supreme Being, who had raised him from small and low beginnings to such high rank and consideration among men—and made no doubt but his afflictions were kindly intended to wean from a world in which he was no longer fit to act the part assigned him.

In this frame of body and mind he continued till five days before his death, when his pain and difficulty of breathing entirely left him, and his family were flattering themselves with the hopes of his recovery, when an imposthummation, which had formed itself in his lungs, suddenly burst and discharged a large quantity of matter, which he continued to throw up while he had sufficient strength to do it, as that failed, the organs of respiration became gradually oppressed—a calm lethargic state succeeded—and on the 17th of April, 1790 about eleven o’clock at night, he quietly expired, closing a long and useful life of 84 years and three months.²

Although this letter essentially emphasizes Franklin's physical condition, it does exhibit religious and moral overtones. However, such overtones have an air of authenticity due to Franklin's numerous references in the *Autobiography* to God's beneficence. This letter is echoed in all the biographies which discuss the imposthumation, difficulty in breathing, lethargy and Franklin's eventual death. Most Franklin biographers refer to his death as coming at eleven o'clock, ending a life of eighty-four years and three months. Some quote Jones partially; others paraphrase him without acknowledgment.

In 1817 Weems printed *The Life of Benjamin Franklin, "Written chiefly by Himself with a collection of his best Essays, Humorous, Moral and Literary."* Included in the work is the autobiography, with a continuation "by a friend," Weems himself. Also included is the Jones letter, with the religious and moral observations italicized by Weems for emphasis. This letter is followed by Weems' attempt to portray Franklin as a devout Christian.

In 1820 Weems published a second, more complete biography—"with many choice anecdotes and admirable sayings of this great man never before published by any of his biographers." Here Weems includes an allegedly authentic "anecdote" emphasizing the conventional religious character of Franklin's death and introducing for the first time the story of the crucifix:

The following I obtained from the Rev. Dr. Helmuth of the German church, Philadelphia. Hearing that this learned and pious divine possessed a valuable anecdote of doctor Franklin, I immediately waited on him. "Yes, sir," said he, "I have indeed a valuable anecdote of doctor Franklin, which I would tell you with great pleasure; but as I do not speak English very well, I wish you would call on David Ritter, at the sign of the Golden Lamb, in Front street; he will tell it to you better." I hastened to Mr. Ritter, and told him my errand. He seemed mightly pleased at it, and said, "Yes, I will tell you all I know of it. You must understand then, sir, first of all, that I always had a prodigious opinion of doctor Franklin, as the *usefulest* man we ever had among us, by a long way; and so hearing that he was sick, I thought I would go and see him. As I rapped at the door who should come and open it but old Sarah Humphries. I was right glad to see her, for I had known her a long time. She was of the people called Friends; and a mighty good sort of body she was too. The great people set a heap of store by her, for she was famous throughout the town for nursing and tending on the sick. Indeed, many of them, I believe, hardly
thought they would sicken, and die right if they had not old Sarah Humphries with them. Soon as she saw me, she said, ‘Well David, how dost?’”

“O, much after the old sort, Sarah,” said I, “but that’s neither here nor there; I am here to see doctor Franklin.”

“Well then,” said she, “thou art too late, for he is just dead!”

“Alack a day,” said I, “Then a great man is gone.”

“Yes, indeed,” said she, “and a good one too; for it seemed as though he never thought the day went away as it ought, if he had not done somebody a service. However, David,” said she, “he is not the worse off for all that now, where he is gone to: but come, as thee came to see Benjamin Franklin, thee shall see him yet.” And so she took me into his room. As we entered, she pointed to him, where he lay on his bed, and said, “there, did thou ever see anything look so natural?”

“And he did look natural indeed. His eyes were close—but that you saw he did not breathe, you would have thought he was in a sweet sleep, he looked so calm and happy. Observing that his face was fixed right towards the chimney, I cast my eyes that way, and behold! just above the mantle piece was a noble picture! O it was a noble picture, sure enough! It was the picture of our Saviour on the cross.”

I could not help calling out, “Bless us all, Sarah!” said I, “what’s all this?”

“What dost mean, David,” said she, quite crusty.

“Why, how came this picture here, Sarah?” said I, “you know that many people think he was not after this sort.”

“Yes,” said she, “I know that too, But thee knows that many who make a great fuss about religion have very little, while some who say but little about it have a good deal.”

“That’s sometimes the case, I fear, Sarah,” said I.

“Well, and that was the case,” said she, “with Benjamin Franklin. But, be that as it may, David, since thee asks me about this great picture, I’ll tell thee how it came here. Many weeks ago, as he lay he beckoned me to him, and told me of this picture up stairs, and begged I would bring it to him. I brought it to him. His face brightened up as he looked at it; and he said, ‘Aye Sarah,’ said he, ‘there’s a picture worth looking at! that’s the picture of him who came into the world to teach men to love one another!’ Then after looking wistfully at it for some time, he said, ‘Sarah,’ said he, ‘set this picture up over the mantle piece, right before me as I lie; for I like to look at it’; and when I had fixed it up, he looked at it, and looked at it very much; and indeed, as thee sees, he died with his eyes fixed on it’” (1820 edition, pp. 261–263).

Probably one reason that Weems presented a dramatized conventional religious account of Franklin’s death is that in the 1790’s with the appearance of Franklin’s autobiography his liberal re-
religious views became widely known for the first time. In his lifetime Franklin, though in some respects as radical as Paine about religion, was circumspect. He would never have dared publish a work such as *The Age of Reason* and, indeed, on one occasion advised an unknown correspondent to burn his manuscript because of the harm that might be caused by undermining conventional religious faith. The appearance of the autobiography provoked some attacks upon Franklin's reputation because of his confessed deistic tendencies, and it is likely that Weems was, at least in part, inspired to protect Franklin's reputation by wrapping him in the mantle of conventional Christianity. Weems was also exploiting what was already a common literary tradition—the depiction of the deathbed scenes of alleged infidels or atheists (for example, Hume and Voltaire) gripped in agony because of their heresies or confessing their sins and repenting at the moment of death.

Weems' version reflects none of the details of Dr. Jones' account of Franklin's final days. There is, incidentally, no verification for even the presence of the Quaker woman in any other account of Franklin's final illness. This apparent fabrication is obviously antithetical to the liberal cast of Franklin's religious beliefs. Franklin was opposed to dogma of all kinds and saw religious institutions as agents of social good, not divine salvation. His life was pointed toward a rational morality which is inconsistent with rigid church restrictions. It is important to keep in mind that Franklin postulated some ideas as firm articles of belief and to others he gave only perfunctory assent; therefore, quoted out of context he can be construed as an atheist, deist, or devout Christian. However, any study of Franklin's religious views will reveal a man whose life offers evidence that his embracing Christianity at death seems preposterous.3

The continuation of the myth was assured when it appeared, forty years later, in a biography of Franklin by John N. Norton, rector of the Ascension Church in Frankfurt, Kentucky. Just as he had done with the cherry-tree anecdote in a biography of Washington, Norton plagiarizes Weems' account verbatim. Ignoring the

3 The most recent treatment of this subject is Alfred O. Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God* (Durham, N. C., 1965).
lapse of forty years, Norton presents the anecdote as if he had gone to hear David Ritter's story.

Later, in 1876, John S. C. Abbott, in a series entitled "American Pioneers and Patriots," wrote a biography of Franklin with the following description of his death:

There was, in one of the chambers of his house, a very beautiful painting of Christ on the Cross. He requested his nurse, a very worthy woman, of the Friends persuasion, to bring it down and place it directly before him. The reverend David Ritter, a great admirer of Franklin, called to see him. He had, however, but a few moments before, breathed his last. Sara Humphries, the nurse, escorted David into the chamber, to view the remains.... "You know that many people think he was not after this sort." (Abbott utilizes Weems' version verbatim from this point on, pp. 370-372.)

While Abbott gives no source for the information his treatment obviously indicates he borrowed it from either Weems' or Norton's version. Abbott was also "guilty" of perpetuating the cherry-tree incident in a biography of Washington written for the same series.

The persistence of the myth was greatly aided when it appeared in the first major Franklin biography, James Parton's *Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1864). In describing Franklin's last hours Parton observes that the great man was confined to bed and "had a picture of Christ on the cross placed so that he could conveniently look at it as he lay in bed. 'That,' he would say, 'is the picture of one who came into the world to teach men to love one another' " (p. 618). Parton attributes the anecdote to Weems and later, even elaborates upon the incident: "His last look, it is recorded, was cast upon the picture of Christ. He died with his eyes fixed upon it. His countenance recovered at once, all its wanted serenity and benignity, and he lay like a good old man in a gentle slumber. To use the ancient language, he had fallen asleep in Jesus, and rested in hope of a blessed immortality" (p 619). We see in Parton's account a reduction of the extended original of Weems. This tendency is more evident in E. M. Tomkinson's biography of Franklin (1885) for a series called "The World's Workers." The myth is considerably shorter and more succinct in this account, an attempt at a more fablelike form: "A little while before he died, he asked the nurse to hang a picture of Our Lord on the Cross just where he could see it; as she did so, he said—"Ay
Sarah, there is a picture worth looking at. That is the picture of Him who came into the world to teach men to love one another” (p. 125).

Shortly before the turn of the century a change is seen in the nature of biographies in general, and the Franklin histories in particular. The elaborate romantic and didactic treatments are replaced by works with a greater degree of scholarly integrity, more concerned with reality than morality—evidence of America’s increasing secularization. The True Benjamin Franklin, written in 1898 by S. G. Fisher, states in the preface it is opposed to “the Franklin that never existed, and could not, in the nature of things, exist” (p. v).

It would seem at this point that, unlike the folk myth of the cherry tree, the myth of Franklin’s death scene comes to an end. It does not die, however, but changes its level of appearance and now appears in several biographies written specifically for young readers. This is, at least, consistent with Weems’ original intention—the moral instruction of youth.

The Boy’s Life of Benjamin Franklin, by Helen Nicolay (New York, 1935) includes the following: “A minister who called upon him tells us that a picture of the crucified Christ hung where he could see it, and, indicating it, Franklin said ‘That is the picture of one who came to teach men to love one another’ ” (p. 326). Similarly, the ironically titled True Story of Benjamin Franklin (Boston, 1940), by E. S. Brooks, observes that: “with his eyes fixed upon a framed picture of Christ, ‘The one,’ he said, ‘who came into the world to teach men to love one another,’ the patriot closed his eyes in the world forever” (pp. 244–245). The wording of the phrase “one who” (rather than “him who” as Weems wrote it originally) indicates that Brooks took Parton’s version as his source.

The fictional account of Franklin’s death scene, based on Weems’ “imagined” anecdote, has not escaped into folklore as the cherry-tree story has. It is present only in a limited number of children’s stories. The myth does tend to show its effects in accounts which romanticize Franklin’s passing but, as Alfred O. Aldridge points out, “It is hard to believe . . . that Franklin ever dwelt in rapture, on his deathbed or anywhere else.”

—Ibid., 265.
Yet Weems' fictionalized account of Franklin's deathbed "conversion" proved to be a surprisingly hardy strain of fiction. Ironically it was Weems' basic moral sense which gave rise to his half-truths and inventions. It is easier now to view his efforts in this light. But when sensible morality becomes trenchant religiosity it is harder to forgive the parson his iniquities. A man of Franklin's wide-ranging interests and intellect needs a biographer far different from the moralizing Weems. Weems' attempt to give conventional Christian significance to Franklin's death failed due to the character of its subject and our increasingly secular world.

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