

Who Was Benjamin Franklin?

by H. Graham Lowry

The life of Boston-born Benjamin Franklin is generally the leading example historians offer, in arguing that America's Founding Fathers owed nothing to the nation-building conspiracy begun before 1630 by John Winthrop's Massachusetts Bay Colony. According to this typical historical fraud, Franklin rejected his own Puritan past, and modeled himself after eighteenth-century British liberalism and French Enlightenment radicalism. Centuries of lying must again be swept aside.

Benjamin Franklin was Cotton Mather's most gifted protégé. When he moved to Pennsylvania, Franklin also raised the political banner of Jonathan Swift. In 1737, Alexander Spotswood appointed him postmaster of Philadelphia. Franklin became the crucial link between the in-depth republican citizenry of New England, and the strategically placed, republican elite fostered by Spotswood in Virginia. That combination won the American Revolution; but until now, the real story has never been told.

Alexander Spotswood's 1722 treaty with the Iroquois secured the opening to the West. Yet his immediate removal by George I, from the governorship of Virginia, eliminated the unique advantage of executive authority to seize that opportunity. In any case, the battle for a continental republic would depend on a vast army of citizens, to colonize—and fight for—the land beyond the mountains. The stronghold for the future republic was still Massachusetts, where George Washington would raise the Continental Army in 1775. The battle was raging there even in 1722, the year that the young Benjamin Franklin first appeared on the front lines, at the age of sixteen.

In 1722, Cotton Mather was the leading target of the same "Venetian" powers behind the ouster of Spotswood. Mather never held political office, but he was the acknowledged leader of America's republican forces. He had proven that repeatedly, especially since organizing the overthrow in 1689 of Sir Edmund Andros' attempted dictatorship over New England. Mather had also given the signal in America for the republican offensive begun in 1710, which brought Jonathan Swift's friend Robert Hunter to the governorship of New York, and Spotswood to Virginia.

Contrary to popular mythology, Benjamin Franklin did not begin life on his own as a teenage runaway, seeking new thrills in Philadelphia. Nor was he merely a composite of the fortunate dilettante, the inventive tinkerer, the shrewd opportunist, and the insincere moralist who parlayed his talents to become the consummate pragmatic politician. His debt to Cotton Mather, for

What Is an American Patriot?

Over the past few months, *EIR* has published a series of articles on the American patriotic tradition, with the purpose of creating the political and intellectual climate in which a genuine American patriotic candidate can emerge for the 2008 elections—a candidacy which does not yet exist.

We have concentrated especially on the period of the early 19th Century, when patriots had to fight in the context of a series of poor, or even treasonous Presidents (viz. Jackson, Van Buren, Pierce, Polk, Buchanan).

This week, however, we have decided to go back to the "original" American Patriot, America's most beloved Founding Father, Benjamin Franklin. This installment honors Franklin's birthday, Jan. 17, 1706, by republishing a slightly edited chapter (Chapter 10) on the First Founder from Graham Lowry's groundbreaking work *How the Nation Was Won: America's Untold Story, Volume 1, 1630-1754*, first published in 1987. Lowry rips apart all the myths to show how Franklin was the product of a nation-building conspiracy dating back to the earliest days of our republic.



Library of Congress

Benjamin Franklin, contrary to popular myth, was no dilettante or tinkerer; he was the crucial link between the republican citizenry of New England, and the strategically placed republican elite—the combination that won the American Revolution.

example, is acknowledged in his own writings. The importance of that connection, however, is partly obscured by an element of caution imposed by Franklin himself, virtually throughout his life. The reasons for that will become clear in later sections of this history. It should suffice to note here that Franklin was the leading agent of the American conspiracy to found a continental republic from the 1730s onward. During an active career spanning more than sixty years, Franklin was often forced, by circumstances of political warfare, to keep significant details of his activities and associations out of public view.

The Puritan Prodigy

Benjamin Franklin was born January 17, 1706, to Josiah and Abiah Folger Franklin, his father's second wife. Benjamin was one of seventeen children, and the youngest of ten sons. Like so many citizens of Massachusetts, his father Josiah was a political refugee, faced with persecution by the crown when he joined the nonconformist opposition to

Charles II near the end of his reign. Benjamin was named for Josiah's brother, who also sided with the nonconformists, while "the rest of the family remained with the Episcopal church," Franklin reports in his *Autobiography*.¹

In 1685, Josiah Franklin became a parishioner at the Old South Church, built next to founding Governor John Winthrop's house, a venerated landmark which still stood at the time of the Revolution, when British troops tore it down and burned it for firewood during their occupation of Boston. Josiah's early years in New England were marked by intense political turmoil, during the attempt by the newly imposed royal governor, Sir Edmund Andros, to eliminate the colonists' republican freedoms.

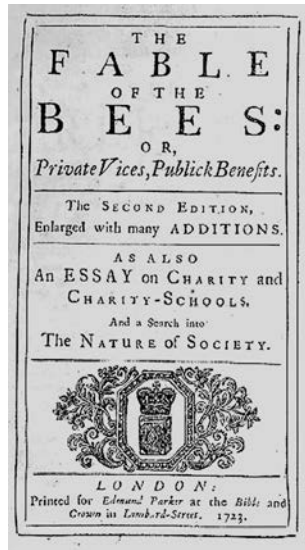
The elder Franklin soon became a close associate of the colonial opposition led by Increase and Cotton Mather, who in 1689 spearheaded the overthrow of the dictator in the Andros Rebellion. That same year, Josiah Franklin, then a widower, married fellow parishioner Abiah Folger. Franklin proudly notes in his *Autobiography* that she was "the daughter of Peter Folger, one of the first settlers in New England, of whom honourable mention is made by Cotton Mather in his ecclesiastical history of that country, entitled *Magnalia Christi Americana*, as a "godly and learned Englishman," if I remember the words rightly."²

With support from Judge Samuel Sewall—the most prominent member of the Old South Church, a close ally of the Mathers, and a political leader in his own right—Josiah Franklin became a congregational leader. For a newcomer of little means financially, he also attained unusual influence in civic affairs. Besides serving the town as a constable, tithing-man, and clerk of the market, Josiah presided over the "Associated Families" organization for his district, within the political network established by Cotton Mather.

Samuel Sewall's *Diary* notes that the weekly meetings for the Old South neighborhood took place at "Mr. Josiah Franklin's." Sewall adds that Josiah, a violinist who enjoyed playing regularly, was often called upon to "set the tune" for the hymns and offer the closing prayer for the meetings. The Franklin household became a gathering place for Boston's republican leaders, providing Benjamin from his childhood onward with an extraordinary view of their concerns and aspirations. As Franklin recalled of his father in his *Autobiography*, "I remember well his being frequently visited by the leading men who consulted him for his opinion in affairs of the town

1. Jesse Lemisch, ed., *Benjamin Franklin, The Autobiography and Other Writings* (New York, 1961), 21.

2. *Ibid.*



Mandeville's book, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, argued that the interests of the state were nothing more than the aggregate fulfillment of its individuals' hedonistic pleasures. He became a celebrated "social theorist," through his public campaign against any state interference in "private vices."

or of the church he belonged to, and who showed a good deal of respect for his judgment and advice."³

An artisan of modest income with a large family to support, Josiah apprenticed all of Benjamin's older brothers to various trades, but Benjamin was something of a child prodigy. He was a precocious reader ("I do not remember when I could not read," he noted later), and the evidence points to his attracting the attention of the Mathers and Samuel Sewall even as a boy. Josiah was encouraged by "the opinions of all of his friends that I should certainly make a good scholar," and accordingly Franklin was enrolled at the age of eight in Boston's prestigious Latin School, to prepare for entrance into Harvard and education for the ministry.

At the Latin School, Franklin quickly distinguished himself among the sons of leading Puritans. Entering the same year with Mather Byles, Increase Mather's grandson and Cotton's favorite nephew, Franklin rose in less than a year from the middle to the head of his class, and was "remov'd into the next class above it." But by all published accounts, including Franklin's own, his father felt financially unable to sustain his son through college, withdrew him from the Latin School, and placed him for one more year in a school teaching only writing and arithmetic. At the age of ten, Franklin returned home to assist his father in his candle-making trade, marking the end of his formal education.⁴

But this was far from the end of Franklin's education by the Mathers. Deliveries of his father's candles took him fre-

quently to their homes, and his "bookish inclination" must have made him marvel at Cotton Mather's library, by far the largest in North America. "I remember well," he wrote to Cotton's son Samuel in 1784, "both your father and grandfather, having heard them both in the pulpit, and seen them in their houses." Franklin's voracious reading continued during this period, and in his father's "little library" he read Cotton Mather's *Essays to Do Good*, the book he credited as the single most important in shaping his life's work.

Franklin reports briefly in his *Autobiography* that *Essays to Do Good* "perhaps gave me a turn of thinking that had an influence on some of the principal future events of my life." Looking back later on his career as statesman, scientist, and founding father of his country, Franklin wrote to Samuel Mather that the book had "an influence on my conduct through life; for I have always set a greater value on the character of a doer of good, than on any other kind of reputation; and if I have been, as you seem to think, a useful citizen, the public owes the advantage of it to that book."⁵

Franklin also used *Essays to Do Good* as the republican organizing manual Mather intended it to be. The book set forth specific "Points of Consideration" for the members of Mather's "reforming societies," just as Franklin posed "Standing Queries" for the Junto he founded in Philadelphia in 1727.

A comparison of the two documents clearly establishes how directly Franklin followed Mather's plan. For example, Mather's "Points" include the following political agenda:

VII. Does there appear any instance of OPPRESSION or FRAUDULENCE, in the dealings of any sort of people, that may call for our essays, to get it rectified?

VIII. Is there any matter to be humbly moved unto the LEGISLATIVE POWER to be enacted into a LAW for public benefit?

Franklin's "Queries" raise the same issues:

14. Have you lately observed any defect in the laws of your country, which it would be proper to move the legislature for an amendment? Or do you know of any beneficial law that is wanting?

15. Have you lately observed any encroachment on the just liberties of the people?

Point number nine in both the Mather and Franklin docu-

3. *Ibid.*, 24.

4. *Ibid.*, 22–23.

5. Franklin to Samuel Mather, May 12, 1784, in A.H. Smyth, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1907), IX, 209.

ments raises an identical question: whether the members know of any case of illness or affliction and the remedies to be used. Appropriately, it was on the issue of how to deal with a smallpox epidemic that Franklin waged his first political fight on Cotton Mather's behalf.⁶

The Hell-Fire Contagion

During Franklin's adolescence in Boston, a new wave of corruption arose, with the further influx of speculators and profiteers attached to the rum-molasses-slaves triangle trade, built up by oligarchical shipping interests in New England. By 1714, the British Whigs, whom Jonathan Swift fought against, had toppled the ministry he had guided under Queen Anne. The peace negotiations pressed forward by Swift had brought the long war in Europe to an end, but with Queen Anne's death and the accession of George I of Hanover to the British throne, peace signaled a new round of speculative looting of the major powers' already war-weakened economies.

Related, worsening economic conditions in New England—then shaping Josiah Franklin's decision to withdraw Benjamin from the Latin School—also prompted Cotton Mather to again champion in 1714 the creation of a bank to promote economic recovery, as he had following the Andros Rebellion a quarter of a century earlier. Appealing to an influential contact in England, Mather pled the cause of New Englanders, groaning under worthless bills of credit and a wave of land seizures for unpaid mortgages.

But his plan for establishing a sound credit system in New England fell largely upon deaf ears among the vermin now loose in London. Less than five months after George I's coronation, Mather noted for his English correspondent, "the Government" had sided with a faction who "have appeared violently against this projection" for a new banking policy in New England.⁷

New England's woes were compounded the same year by a devastating smallpox epidemic in Boston, a scorching summer, and another wheat shortage exacerbated by the Belcher grain monopoly. In London, the oligarchy felt secure enough to advocate bestiality as the ideal of state policy.

Bernard Mandeville, a supposed professor of medicine from Holland, brought into England in the wake of William of Orange's "Glorious Revolution," published in 1714 his *Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits*. Already a cult figure among England's proliferating, Satan-worshipping, secret societies, Mandeville now openly argued that the interests of the state were nothing more than the aggregate fulfillment of its individuals' hedonistic pleasures. The precursor of such radical libertarians as Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham, Mandeville became a celebrated "social theorist," through his

public campaign against any state interference in "private vices." He was also the key figure behind London's not-so-secret Hell-Fire Club, whose members acted out their bestial rites under the names of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles, and several millennia's worth of the oligarchy's demons and devils.

In 1721, at the age of fifteen, Benjamin Franklin joined the battle against these forces, in the middle of one of the most intensive campaigns to destroy the Mathers that their opponents had ever mounted. On the enemy side, he found his eldest half-brother James, to whose printing business he had been unwillingly apprenticed in 1718, for the onerous term of nine years. James Franklin had returned the previous year from London, where he acquired his press and type for printing—and familiarity with the degenerate admirers of Bernard Mandeville. By 1722, the Mathers were to accuse James Franklin of promoting "an Hell-Fire club."

James Franklin set up his printing business in Boston, and soon fell in with a circle of radical Anglicans attached to Boston's only Episcopal church, and allied with the radical Whigs of Elisha Cooke, Jr.'s political machine in common cause against the Mathers' republican leadership. At the center of the Anglican operation was one John Checkley, born in Boston in 1680, but subsequently trained in England at the Anglican stronghold of Oxford. After an oddly-accounted-for decade in Europe "collecting art," Checkley surfaced in Boston again in 1710, the year Cotton Mather launched his broadened republican organizing effort with his *Essays to Do Good*. Setting himself up as a bookseller, Checkley went on to become a major propagandist against the Mathers' congregational doctrines, and the leading lay advocate for the Church of England in Boston. (He eventually became the ordained rector of King's Church in Providence, Rhode Island, the nesting place for so many enemies of New England republicanism.)

Checkley's initial tactic against the Mathers was to portray them as Presbyterians opposed to congregational order, as he did in a 1721 pamphlet entitled *Choice Dialogues, between a godly Minister and an honest Countryman, concerning Election and Predestination*. Cotton Mather took note of it in his diary as one of the "cursed Pamphlets and Libels, wherewith some wicked Men, are endeavoring to Poison the Country."⁸ Mather countered by having his brilliant nephew, the Roxbury minister Thomas Walter, publish a reply under the title *A Choice Dialogue between John Faustus, a Conjuror, and Jack Tory his Friend*.⁹

A key figure within Checkley's circle of intriguers, all habitués of the notorious Hall's Tavern in Boston, was the Scottish doctor William Douglass, who had studied at Paris, Leyden, and Edinburgh, and was an avowed hater of the Puritan clergy. Douglass was to assume the role of scientific expert in Checkley's campaign to destroy the Mathers, and made

6. Franklin, "Standing Queries for the Junto," in *Writings*, Lemisch, ed., 199–200; Mather, *Bonifacius*, 136–137.

7. Mather to Sir Peter King, December 22, 1714.

8. Cotton Mather, *Diary*, March 2, 1721.

9. *Ibid.*, March 3, March 11, May 13, 1721.

Cotton Mather, Franklin's teacher, pioneered the use of vaccinations to combat a devastating smallpox epidemic, for which he came under blistering attack from the pro-British crowd. He enlisted the help of Dr. Zabdiel Boylston, who is lampooned, in this satirical illustration from the time.



enough noise to become a public figure soon after his arrival in Boston in 1716.

The Mathers' republican forces were simultaneously being battered by the radical Whig agitation directed by Elisha Cooke, Jr.'s political machine. Still determined to give the British monarchy an excuse to eliminate the liberties retained in the royal charter negotiated by Increase Mather, Cooke's faction played on the real suffering which his friends had brought upon New England. They sought to force a hopeless confrontation that would end in the sort of thoroughgoing feudal control which John Locke had advocated for all of the American colonies. In 1719, campaigning for ruinous, inflationary currency schemes to hoodwink Bostonians seeking economic relief, Cooke's allies took the lion's share of seats in the House of Representatives. On November 5, Cotton Mather preached a sermon warning of the "Satanic Party's" intentions to abolish the liberties remaining under the charter.¹⁰ Four years later, Cooke's henchmen partially succeeded, forcing the resignation of Mather's ally, Governor Samuel Shute, through repeated violations of the legislature's obligations to the executive as set forth in the charter.

As Mather wrote then, to an English ally and later financial patron of scientific education at Harvard, Cooke's faction had acquired "the knack of perverting and misleading a Ma-

jority of poor, and weak (tho' sometimes honest) Countrymen in our House of Representatives; and so they produced *Votes* which any Governor must count Intolerable." Mather recalled his sermon from 1719, and noted that "I have since been an object for the utmost Rage of the Satanic Party, and not only had their printed Libels continually darted at me, but had Attempts made upon my very Life."¹¹

The Battle for Science

It was nothing less than an issue of life or death which became the battleground between Cotton Mather and the oligarchical forces opposing him. The same struggle brought Benjamin Franklin into active political life for the first time, though in a manner which historians typically have blatantly distorted or obscured.

Late in the spring of 1721, an epidemic of the dreaded smallpox, which had blasted New England's hopes at so many critical times in the past, erupted again in Boston. As a member of Britain's Royal Society, Cotton Mather had read some of its reports in 1719 on experimental attempts at vaccination undertaken in the Levant in the Middle East, and had independently investigated similar reports from the Caribbean. He was convinced that small doses, drawn from the infected tissue of a smallpox victim, could be administered to inoculate others against the disease. Mather launched a campaign through his civic organizations to persuade citizens to come forward and be

vaccinated. As administering physician, Mather enlisted Dr. Zabdiel Boylston (whose brother would become the great-grandfather of President John Adams). While certainly there were doubts about the new remedy proposed, Mather's opponents responded in frenzied rage against the prospect of his becoming the scientist-savior of the city.

John Checkley and William Douglass had drawn James Franklin, the restless printer still in search of steady business, deeper into their circle. They now chose him as a leading instrument for their propaganda barrage against the Mathers. With their backing, James Franklin agreed to start a new paper in Boston, the weekly *New England Courant*, to compete with the *Boston Gazette* and *Boston News-Letter*.

The smallpox epidemic spread rapidly during the summer of 1721, lasting through to the following spring, and ultimately striking half the population of Boston. Cotton Mather announced the inoculation campaign in a letter to the *Boston Gazette* of July 27, 1721, also signed by Increase Mather and four leading ministers. Simultaneously, the *Courant* made its first appearance. For its third issue, John Checkley wrote that it was "the chief design of which Paper to oppose the *doubtful* and *dangerous* practice of inoculating the *Small-Pox*."¹²

11. Cotton Mather to Thomas Hollis, Nov. 5, 1723, in *Diary*, same date.

12. *New England Courant*, No. 3, Aug. 14-21, 1721.

Cotton Mather was accused of spreading the disease by inoculation. On August 15, he inoculated his own son Samuel, who lived in good health until 1785, at the ripe old age of seventy-nine. On November 1, he brought his nephew, Thomas Walter, from nearby Roxbury for inoculation, and was then accused of bringing “outsiders” into town to infect them. On November 4, the Boston town meeting, dominated by Elisha Cooke, Jr.’s “Satanic Party,” voted to prohibit anyone from entering Boston to be vaccinated, and extended the ban to anyone already inoculated. On November 13, while Thomas Walter lay asleep in Cotton Mather’s bedroom, overcoming the mild effects of his vaccination, a bomb was thrown through the window at 3 a.m. The iron grenade struck the window casement, which fortunately knocked off the fuse, preventing the explosion. Tied to the bomb by a string, “that it might outlive the breaking of the Shell,” Mather noted, was a message: “COTTON MATHER. You Dog, Dam you: I’l inoculated you with this, with a Pox to you. [sic]”¹³ Within the Franklin household, the repercussions of this attempt to assassinate Cotton Mather must have been severe.

Franklin’s *Autobiography* is no help. The portion of it covering his life up to 1730 was written in 1771 as a letter to his son William, when Franklin was still in England as the official diplomatic representative of Massachusetts. William Franklin, educated as a lawyer at the Inns of Court in London while living with his father, became royal governor of New Jersey, and sided with the crown during the American Revolution. William fled to England, and Franklin’s account of his own early years in Boston passed through many enemy hands. On issues of obvious political significance, it must be read with an eye to what is missing, and with extensive cross-checking of other sources for further clues.

The precise moment of Benjamin Franklin’s recruitment by the Mathers is not so far documentable. He was only fifteen when his brother James began publishing the *Courant*, though by several accounts the Mathers took Benjamin aside to discuss his brother’s actions with him. How much sway Josiah Franklin still held over the renegade James is also unclear, but the issue of the *Courant* immediately following the attempted bombing of Cotton Mather’s house carried Mather’s account of the incident verbatim, “to prevent wrong Representations that may be made of a late Occurrence much talked of.”¹⁴ Governor Shute, also a political target of the Cooke machine, offered a hefty £50 reward for identification of the terrorist.

But the genocidal campaign against inoculation continued. The ethical equivalent of Britain’s Hell-Fire Club appeared in Boston, with John Checkley as president, as “The Society of Physicians Anti-Inoculator,” meeting at Hall’s Tavern, where its members took oaths to destroy Mather. To the Cooke-controlled Boston selectmen, William Douglass sub-

mitted a translation, purportedly of a French army doctor’s claims, that persons inoculated in the Near East during the previous century, had died twenty and twenty-five years later of ulcers and tumors! With the aid of Cooke’s henchmen, and a strident campaign of public lying in the pages of the *New England Courant*, Checkley and his friends were rapidly creating an anti-science mob in Massachusetts.

Like the anti-science, environmentalist cults of today, deployed to smash the remaining vestiges of the American System’s commitment to technological progress, the “anti-inoculators” had no interest in the scientific validity of the vaccine Mather and Boylston developed. Although the epidemic was well under way when Dr. Boylston began administering smallpox vaccinations, of the 286 persons he inoculated, only six died—barely more than two percent. The death rate among the rest of Boston’s smallpox victims was approximately 700 percent higher, with 844 fatalities out of 5,759 cases. Smallpox epidemics in Britain during this period were similarly devastating, but no one tried to assassinate Dr. Boylston when he inoculated the royal princesses, on a mission to London to demonstrate the efficacy of the new vaccine.

There is no precise count of how many Bostonians died needlessly because they refused inoculation under the sway of Checkley’s vicious campaign. But there is no doubt that it took a heavy toll on that will to do good necessary to a people’s survival. To Increase and Cotton Mather, the two remaining giants of the Puritan republic, it appeared that the dominion of Satan was at hand. In January 1722, as James Franklin’s *Courant* continued its efforts to prevent inoculations, one of its scribblers went so far as to write, “Most of the Ministers are for it, and that induces me to think it is from the D[evi]; for he often makes Use of good Men as instruments to obtrude his Delusions on the World.”¹⁵ Such blasphemy, such open celebration of evil, did not go unanswered, and Benjamin Franklin was inevitably an intimate witness. Despite years of incapacitating illness, Increase Mather, now over eighty-two years old, rose from his bed to charge James Franklin on a public street with fostering “an Hell-Fire Club.”

Increase Mather was a living link to the republican commonwealth founded by John Winthrop as the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Born in 1639, Mather was educated at Harvard and then at Trinity College, Dublin, where the Mathers’ family relations remained intellectually influential into the lifetime of Jonathan Swift. After serving in England, as an intelligence agent of the republican cause until the Stuart Restoration of 1660, Mather returned to Massachusetts and an extraordinary career as minister, scientist, philosopher, and statesman. He earned the mantle of leadership in New England, succeeding the great John Winthrop, Jr., after the latter’s death in 1676.

This second Winthrop—who molded the Connecticut colony into a broadened republican flank for Massachusetts, whose library in the wilderness abounded with the works of Machia-

13. Cotton Mather, *Diary*, Nov. 13, 1721.

14. *New England Courant*, Nov. 13–20, 1721.

15. *Ibid.*, Jan. 1–8, 1722.

velli, Erasmus, Thomas More, Johannes Kepler, Jean Bodin, and Blaise Pascal, and who corresponded with the young Leibniz in Germany—was one of those New England heroes “worthy to have their Lives written, as copies for future Ages to write after,” as Cotton Mather put it. In 1675, John Winthrop, Jr., exemplified his political and military leadership by stopping an invasion of Connecticut by royal forces before they could even come ashore. King Charles II’s attempt to subjugate Connecticut was led by Sir Edmund Andros, the man later overthrown and clapped in irons during the Massachusetts rebellion of 1689, engineered by Winthrop’s key collaborator of the 1670s, Increase Mather.

Whatever freedom Massachusetts retained by 1722, much of it was due to wariness on London’s part after the Andros Rebellion, and to the liberties preserved even under royal government by the new charter secured by Increase Mather. Despite the decay which spread through Massachusetts by the time of the smallpox fight, it was no small matter for James Franklin to be publicly threatened with the wrath of God, by the elder statesman of the Puritan republic.

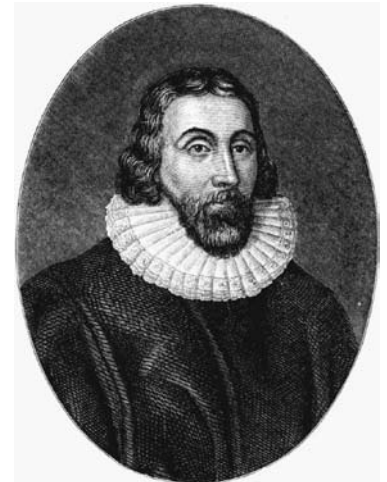
“I that have known what New England was from the Beginning, cannot but be troubled to see the Degeneracy of this Place,” Mather declared in response to the *Courant’s* latest blasphemy. In advertisements run in both the *Boston News-Letter* and *Gazette*, Mather added,

I cannot but pity poor [James] *Franklin*, who tho’ but a *Young Man* it may be Speedily he must appear before the Judgment Seat of God, and what answer will he give for printing things so vile and abominable?

Mather’s rage focused on the *Courant’s* insinuation “that if the Ministers of God approve of a Thing, it is a Sign of the Devil; which is a horrid thing to be related!”¹⁶

In the midst of this situation, imagine sixteen-year-old Benjamin Franklin, whose father witnessed the Andros Rebellion and became a respected citizen-leader in Cotton Mather’s drive against the cultural decline which was threatening to extinguish New England’s republican aspirations. Yet according to standard historical accounts, Benjamin Franklin had no role in the most dramatic political battle Massachusetts had seen during his life—except that of a juvenile prankster eager to have fun at the expense of those crotchety old Mathers. But nations are not created that way, and their founders invariably demonstrate something more than a flair for juvenile delinquency.

16. *Boston News-Letter*, Jan. 22–29, 1722.



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Increase Mather (left) and his son Cotton, were the two remaining giants of the Puritan republic, and a living link to the commonwealth founded by John Winthrop (right) as the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Cotton Mather recruited Franklin to political intelligence work.

Worsening Prospects

The deteriorating situation confronting Cotton Mather and his fellow republicans certainly permitted no frontal assaults, and demanded the most skillful flanking maneuvers. Royal license for the bestial ethics of a Bernard Mandeville had provided sufficient footing to deploy an irrationalist mob in Massachusetts, far enough to lend cover to an open attempt on Mather’s life. His supportive circle of republican allies and friends, led by key colonial governors, had also been broken. Robert Hunter, a friend in common to Swift and Mather, had left the governorship of New York in 1719. Governor Shute of Massachusetts was under pressure both from London and from Cooke’s “Satanic Party.” Governor Spotswood of Virginia was removed from office in 1722, while negotiating the treaty with the Iroquois that opened the way for westward expansion.

Internationally, the situation was also deteriorating rapidly. Remaining nation-building factions in both Britain and France had been flattened, along with numbers of America’s republican allies, in the economic crash of 1720, when the Venetian-rigged speculative schemes known as the South Sea Bubble in Britain and John Law’s Mississippi Bubble in France were blown out.

The simultaneous efforts to ruin both the British and French economies drew considerable attention from Cotton Mather, who knew better than most that evil was not localized in one country or under one label. At the time of the attempt on his life in November 1721, Mather was just completing works on both cases: *The Roaring of the South Sea* on the collapse of the British bubble, and a book in French, *Une Grande Voix du Ciel, à la France, sous la Verge de Dieu* [A Great Voice from Heaven, to France, under the Scourge of God.] Mather’s diary notes that

he sought to offer “Seasonable Reflections and profitable instructions” for the “Unhappy Nation” of Britain, and urged the French “to come out of Babylon.” He had consulted with Governor Shute on “how to get my *Grande Voix du Ciel*, into France,” anticipating that if he could secure distribution of the book inside the country, then reeling under the Orléans’ Venetian-Jesuit rampage, “very astonishing may be the Consequences of it.”¹⁷

At the same time, Mather was “Writing Letters for *Europe*,” where a series of smallpox epidemics were “making terrible Destruction,” to circulate “a further and more distinct Account of the *Small-Pox Inoculated*, the Method and Success of it among us, and the Opposition to it; By which Means, I hope, some hundreds of thousands of Lives, may in a little while come to be preserved.”¹⁸

Cotton Mather’s situation in Massachusetts, as underscored by the *New England Courant*’s hate campaign against his effort to stop the smallpox epidemic, was more immediately distressing. For all the well-meaning people he had inclined to do good, he as yet had no one willing to *lead* a fight at the level of command required. After the *Courant* flaunted its claim at the beginning of January 1722 that the Mathers’ support for inoculation meant it must be the work of the devil, Cotton put the problem before “a meeting of the Ministers” on January 15.

Citing his hopes in writing *Essays to Do Good*, Mather told his colleagues,

my Opportunities to do good, which have been to me the Apple of my Eye, have been strangely struck at. Odd Occurrences have happened, which have produced unaccountable Combinations in all Ranks of Men, to disable me for doing what I have most inclined unto. The most false Representations imaginable have been made of me; and of my Conduct. And tho’ I could easily have confuted the Slanders and Clamours, I have rather borne them with Silence. . . .

I am at length reduced unto this Condition, that my Opportunities to do good, (except among a few of my own little remnant of a Flock,) appear to me almost entirely extinguished, as to this Country [New England]. I must employ my Faculties, in projections to do good in more distant Places. And I bless God, I have there a Prospect of some Things, whereof I shall know more



This engraving by William Hogarth (1721) depicts the folly of the South Sea Bubble scheme. Hogarth and his ally Jonathan Swift deployed their brilliant satires against the Hell-Fire Club-dominated British society.

hereafter. But at present, *I have done! I have done!* I have done treating you with any more of my Proposals. If they should be never so good, yet if they be known to be mine, that is enough to bespeak a Blast upon them. Do *you* propose as many good Things as you please, and I will second them, and assist them and fall in with them, to the best of my Capacity.¹⁹

Besides Mather’s forceful challenge to his associates, for whom he had served as intellectual leader and political commander-in-chief for more than thirty years, the interesting feature of this address is his reference to his remaining opportunities to do good “among a few of my own little remnant of a Flock.” Just two weeks earlier, in his diary entry for January 1, Mather reported that he was privately forming a new society for “some of my Flock” who desired to “be more fully acquainted” with the “Mysteries of the *Kingdom of God*, wherein His *Will shall be done on Earth as it is in Heaven*.” The group was to meet once a fortnight at Mather’s house. He hoped “that the Society may afford me Opportunities to do for the Flock, some further considerable Services.”²⁰ . . .

Discovering Franklin’s Secrets

Benjamin Franklin left Boston in late September 1723, ostensibly because his half-brother James had blacklisted him among Boston’s printers, and because he had made himself “a little obnoxious to the governing party.” Cotton Mather’s en-

17. Cotton Mather, *Diary*, Sept. 14, Oct. 12, and Nov. 24, 1721.

18. *Ibid.*, Nov. 30 and Dec. 1, 1721.

19. *Ibid.*, Jan. 15, 1722.

20. *Ibid.*, Jan. 1, 1722.

emies in the Cooke machine controlled the legislature.²¹ The only surviving account of Franklin's decision is the portion of his autobiography written in 1771, as a letter to his son William, who defected to the British during the Revolution. Franklin's own reluctance, to commit sensitive intelligence matters to paper, was by no means diminished by the fact he was writing to his son. William Franklin had been targeted while in London with his father, during the 1760s, for recruitment into the networks of the Hell-Fire Club. Sir Francis Dashwood, His Majesty's postmaster general at the time, was then Benjamin Franklin's official superior. Franklin directed the postal service for the American colonies. Dashwood was the head of the Hell-Fire Club.²²

Yet this first part of the autobiography, covering Franklin's life to approximately 1730, was also written as a kind of "essay to do good" for his son. Thus the pattern of his activities, as related, is to a definite purpose, even though their particular significance is masked by withholding important details. Only by reading that pattern, in the context of precise knowledge of the time, can one learn the secrets of the young Benjamin Franklin's role in the battle for the American republic. When he departed for Philadelphia in 1723, the seventeen-year-old Franklin was no runaway adventurer. He had already worked as an undercover agent for Cotton Mather, against the Boston branch of the Hell-Fire Club.

With Robert Walpole's coming to power, George I's government had by 1723 openly embraced Bernard Mandeville's doctrine that "private vices" and official corruption were the basis for "public benefits." "The strategic urgency of building an American republic was now all the greater. Virginia's Governor Spotswood, with Pennsylvania's Keith and New York's Hunter and Burnet, had opened the door with the 1722 Treaty of Albany with the Iroquois. That agreement had removed the main threat to settling Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, beyond the Blue Ridge, and confirmed its route to the West along the Potomac River, deep into the Allegheny Mountains. The potential also existed to extend Pennsylvania's settlements to the Alleghenies, and to funnel waves of pioneers into the Shenandoah Valley, stretching toward Kentucky and Tennessee. America's republican command, however, was now weakened. Walpole had forced Spotswood's removal from office in 1722, and New York's Governor Burnet was unequal to the leadership of his predecessor Robert Hunter, the republican colleague of Swift and of Mather. In Philadelphia, Governor Keith remained in office, but was under siege by the Quakers' "monied men." Yet Pennsylvania was the keystone for building colonies beyond the mountains. It was no accident that Benjamin Franklin, Cotton Mather's most gifted protégé, was deployed there.

Consider the chain of events which Franklin reports, masked as mere happenstances. His departure from Boston



Sir Robert Walpole was a leading enemy of the emerging American Republic, and a key figure in the Hell-Fire regime in London.

was arranged in secrecy, for passage on a ship bound for New York, under a cover story established by his closest intellectual companion, whom he had known since childhood. The two "had read the same books together," and while Franklin lived in Boston,

most of my hours of leisure for conversation were spent with him; and he continued a sober and industrious lad [and] was much respected for his learning by several of the clergy and other gentlemen. . . . [emphasis added].²³

Upon arrival in New York, Franklin presented himself, as a young printer in search of work, to William Bradford, the publisher of Robert Hunter's satirical play, *Androboros*. Bradford forwarded him to his son Andrew, a printer in Philadelphia, telling Franklin, "If you go thither I believe he may employ you."²⁴

21. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 34–35.

22. Donald McCormick, *The Hell-Fire Club* (London, 1958), 42.

23. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 35, 46.

24. *Ibid.*, 35.

By a series of boat trips and a fifty-mile hike through New Jersey to the Delaware River, Franklin proceeded to Philadelphia in a most inconspicuous fashion, where on arrival he *made certain he would be observed*. In work clothes dirtied by his long journey, he joined a procession of “many clean dressed people” entering “the great meetinghouse of the Quakers near the market.” There he “sat down among them, and after looking round awhile and hearing nothing said, . . . I fell fast asleep and continued so till the meeting broke up, when someone was kind enough to rouse me.” The next morning, dressed “as neat as I could,” he went to the print shop of Andrew Bradford, where Franklin found “the old man his father whom I had seen at New York, and who traveling on horseback, *had got to Philadelphia before me* [emphasis added].”²⁵ Without directly making the point, Franklin here provides the evidence that William Bradford—a member of the circles of Swift, Hunter, and Mather—personally oversaw establishing Franklin’s initial cover in Philadelphia.

Andrew Bradford offered Franklin the hospitality of his home, until a less obvious place of employment could be arranged. William Bradford then conducted Franklin to “another printer in town lately set up, one Keimer,” who intended to challenge the younger Bradford for the business in Philadelphia. To the newcomer Keimer, the “old gentleman” Bradford pretended to be a local dignitary:

“Neighbor,” said Bradford, “I have brought to see you a young man of your business; perhaps you may want such a one.” . . . And taking old Bradford, whom he had never seen before, to be one of the townspeople that had a good will for him, [Keimer] entered into a conversation on his present undertaking and prospects. . . .²⁶

Even though Franklin told Keimer “who the old man was,” he was soon hired. He began spending his evenings “among the young people of the town that were lovers of reading.” He reported his new station to Boston, but only through the friend who had arranged his departure, “who was in my secret and kept it when I wrote to him.”²⁷

Soon after Franklin was established in Philadelphia, word of the arrangement was passed to Governor William Keith, by Franklin’s brother-in-law Robert Homes, “master of a sloop that traded between Boston and Delaware.” It was not long before Keith appeared “finely dressed” at Keimer’s door, to request a meeting with Benjamin Franklin, the “promising” young man he had recently heard of, who “should be encouraged.” The governor ignored Keimer,

and with a condescension and politeness I had been

25. *Ibid.*, 37–40.

26. *Ibid.*, 40.

27. *Ibid.*, 40–41.

quite unused to, made me many compliments, desired to be acquainted with me, blamed me kindly for not having made myself known to him when I first came to the place, and would have me away with him to the tavern where he was going . . . to taste, as he said, some excellent Madeira. I was not a little surprised, and Keimer stared like a pig poisoned.²⁸

At the tavern, Keith told Franklin that he wanted him to become the public printer for Pennsylvania—certainly an unusual offer for a supposed young vagabond from Boston. Keith then suggested that Franklin’s father—a longtime organizer for Cotton Mather—might provide him the money to set up his own print shop.²⁹

On my doubting whether my father would assist me in it, Sir William said he would set forth the advantages, and he did not doubt he should determine to comply. So it was concluded I should return to Boston by the first vessel with the Governor’s letter of recommendation to my father. In the meantime the intention was to be kept secret, and I went on working with Keimer as usual.³⁰

Letter in hand, Franklin sailed for Boston at the end of April 1724.

The *Autobiography* reports that Franklin’s father refused to finance a new printing business for his son, “being in his opinion too young to be trusted with the management of an undertaking so important,” but he was pleased that Benjamin had so impressed “a person of such note” as the governor of Pennsylvania.³¹ But here the account makes a crucial omission, of enormous significance for deciphering the document as a whole. No mention is made of the fact that on this return to Boston, Franklin met privately with Cotton Mather! Sixty years later, after Britain had conceded the sovereignty of the United States at the Treaty of Paris, Franklin wrote from France to Cotton’s son, Samuel Mather, “The last time I saw your father was in the beginning of 1724, when I visited him after my first trip to Pennsylvania.” The letter again paid tribute to Cotton Mather’s determining influence on his life.³²

Franklin returned to Philadelphia, making the first leg of the journey by sloop to New York. There he made contact with Robert Hunter’s hand-picked successor:

The then Governor of New York, Burnet, son of Bishop Burnet, hearing from the captain that a young man, one

28. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

29. *Ibid.*, 42.

30. *Ibid.*, 43.

31. *Ibid.*, 44.

32. Franklin to Samuel Mather, May 12, 1784, in Smyth, ed., *Writings of Franklin*, IX, 209.



Soon after his arrival in Philadelphia, the young Benjamin Franklin received the patronage of the governor of Pennsylvania and other leading citizens, which enabled him to establish his own, successful printing business.

of his passengers, had a great many books, desired him to bring me to see him. . . . The Governor received me with great civility, showed me his library, which was a very considerable one, and we had a good deal of conversation about books and authors. This was the second governor who had done me the honor to take notice of me, and for a poor boy like me was very pleasing.³³

Next, Governor Keith arranged a mission to London for the “poor boy,” ostensibly to purchase new type and printing equipment. Keith told Franklin, “Then when there you may make acquaintances and establish correspondences in the book-selling and stationery way.”³⁴

In considerable detail the *Autobiography* reports Franklin’s arrangements with Keith for the voyage. He was to sail in late October on the *Annis*, the annual ship from Philadelphia to England. Keith was to furnish him with recommendations to “a number of his friends,” as well as a letter of credit for the printing purchases. During the months awaiting his passage, Franklin reports, Governor Keith “had me frequently to his

house.”³⁵ Much is made of Keith’s repeated postponements in delivering the promised letters to Franklin, of his sailing from Philadelphia without them—expecting Keith to intercept the ship at Newcastle, and of arriving in England to discover Keith had supplied no letters at all. There Franklin made a great show of being “a poor ignorant boy,” whose trusting nature had been betrayed by the Pennsylvania governor.³⁶

From the higher level of evidence, it is clear that this episode with Keith was simply part of Franklin’s cover story for a secret intelligence mission. Consider again the *pattern* of his accounts in the *Autobiography*, juxtaposed against the provable course of his activities. Franklin’s career in political combat begins with his anonymous Silence Dogood papers, supposedly written to impress the Hell-Fire Club circle controlling his half-brother James, but in fact undertaken as an undercover operation in support of Cotton Mather. He flees Boston in secret, purportedly fearing reprisals from his brother’s enemies, yet on his return is welcomed into Mather’s home. Robert Hunter’s friend, the New York printer William Bradford, arranges Franklin’s first employment in Philadelphia, but sends him on an arduous overland and riverboat journey to get there, instead of letting Franklin accompany him on horseback. Perhaps no one took notice of Franklin’s meeting with New York’s Governor Burnet, but Keith’s patronage could hardly be overlooked.

Governor Keith, after all, was the known ally of Robert Hunter and Alexander Spotswood. Franklin’s own safety, as well as any prospects for a successful undercover mission in Britain, thus depended upon his having no apparent ties to Keith—nor to Cotton Mather. Franklin’s *Autobiography*, written nearly half a century later, still preserves his cover, yet provides decipherable clues. He deliberately obscures his personal connection to Mather, while praising his *Essays to Do Good*. Keith’s relationship is portrayed as duplicitous, but Franklin concludes that account by declaring that Keith was “otherwise an ingenious, sensible man, a pretty good writer, and a good governor for the people. . . . Several of our best laws were of his planning and passed during his administration.”³⁷ The young Franklin, to the extent his actual connections could be hidden, was an ideal agent for a counterintelligence mission against Robert Walpole’s Hell-Fire regime in London. The appearance of hostility to Keith was especially important, for the scrutiny of Walpole’s agents had already been attracted by another American arrival in 1724. Alexander Spotswood, the man who would later appoint Franklin postmaster of Philadelphia, had returned to London, ostensibly to reconfirm his land titles in Spotsylvania County, Virginia.³⁸

Franklin arrived in London on Christmas Eve, 1724. Two

35. *Ibid.*, 52–53.

36. *Ibid.*, 53–55.

37. *Ibid.*, 55.

38. Dodson, *Spotswood*, 287.

33. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 46.

34. *Ibid.*, 48.

things are certain. Whether Keith had furnished him with any letters or not, someone had paid his passage. Second, Franklin had not come to London simply to work in printing houses for more than a year-and-a-half.

Hell-Fire London

Coordinating a republican movement in the American colonies had always been hampered by the difficulty of obtaining adequate intelligence concerning machinations in London. Now the problem was even greater. Since the blowout of the South Sea Bubble, and the restructuring of power under the parliamentary regime of Robert Walpole and his “stockjobbers,” Britain’s political map had been drastically redrawn. London was fast becoming “Venice-on-Thames,” and was threatening to supersede Sodom and Gomorrah. For a glimpse of how far London soon descended into the inferno, one need only study the engravings of Swift’s ally, the artist William Hogarth.

Culturally, and thus politically, the nature of the beast had changed. Following George I’s taking the throne in 1714, and the publication of Bernard Mandeville’s *The Fable of the Bees* the same year, Satanic cults proliferated among Britain’s elite. The most notorious were the various branches of the Hell-Fire Club, modeled after Mandeville’s doctrine that evil, vice, and corruption were the ideal means of the state’s controlling its servants, or the drones of the hive. Mandeville’s bestial notions were later celebrated by such hedonistic “philosophers” as Voltaire, Helvetius, Montesquieu, James Mill, and Jeremy Bentham. In 1720, the year of the Bubble and an unrestrained Venetian rampage against Britain, the Hell-Fire clubs played a major part in the intended shock treatment. The most prominent one was founded that year by the new Lord Wharton (later elevated to duke). The club’s dining menu included “Hell Fire Punch,” “Holy Ghost Pie,” “Devil’s Loins,” and “Breast of Venus” (garnished with cherries for nipples).³⁹

Even in London, such open Satan-worshipping was a bit ahead of its time, and in 1721 a King’s Order-in-Council was issued banning the Hell-Fire clubs—at least in such public forms.⁴⁰ But the Satanic notion, that there is no distinction between good and evil, continued to rule government policy, and was promulgated quite directly by George I’s chief minister, Robert Walpole.⁴¹ Increase Mather was entirely accurate, when in 1722 he charged James Franklin with promoting a “Hell-Fire Club” in Boston, for publishing the claim that man cannot distinguish between the work of God and the work of the Devil.

When Benjamin Franklin arrived in London, a most vital intelligence task would have been to dissect this new form of the beast: the politically powerful networks of the Hell-Fire

Club. In 1723, Bernard Mandeville had delivered another shock, by publishing an expanded version of *The Fable of the Bees*, and riding roughshod over his remaining opposition.⁴² Yet Franklin’s *Autobiography* generally recounts this visit to London simply as the experiences of a young printer trying to make the best of a bad situation. Again, the exceptions to this portrayal confirm the actual nature of his mission. As an eighteen-year-old just arrived from America, supposedly without references or recommendations, he nonetheless “immediately got into work at Palmer’s, then a famous printing house in Bartholomew Close, and here I continued near a year.”⁴³ Soon, he constructed a variant on his Silence Dogood deception, by forging a literary passport into the very center of the Hell-Fire circles.

The composition was entitled “A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain.” Mised scholars and willful slanderers of Franklin have frequently cited this piece, as supposed evidence of his anti-Christian “deism” and philosophical affinity for British, Benthamite liberalism. Such claims, of course, assume the reader’s willingness to walk blindly off the precipice of a major contradiction, by ignoring Franklin’s lifelong career of fostering the divine spark of human creativity. His civic and educational ventures, his scientific discoveries and inventions, and his republican dedication to freeing America from the diseased minds governing Britain, are thus portrayed as mere opportunism, backed by an amateur’s run of luck. What Franklin’s enemies really hate, as exemplified in British historical and fictional writings to this day, is that he repeatedly outwitted and outmaneuvered them, right through to the founding of the United States.

Even in this portion of the *Autobiography*, Franklin repudiated this “Dissertation” as an “erratum” in his life. The account also provides more than enough evidence to indicate why he wrote it. His first mention of it is followed by a paragraph stressing that, during this same period, he made “as much use . . . as I could” of an “immense collection of second-hand books” he was able to borrow from a next-door bookseller. The “poor ignorant boy” had extensive resources at hand to produce his forgery. While working at Palmer’s, he “printed a small number” of the “little metaphysical piece.” In the *Autobiography*, Franklin makes no mention of its contents.⁴⁴

An examination of the “Dissertation” itself provides the next level of the evidence that it was written as a piece of intelligence-deception. It was addressed to his young friend James Ralph, one of Franklin’s “chief acquaintances” in Philadelphia. Ralph had sailed with him to England, roomed with him in London, and presented himself as a “freethinking” poet and job-hunter to the Venetian circles in such professions as the-

39. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits* (London, 1934; reprint of 1714 ed.); McCormick, *Hell-Fire Club*, 23; Kramnick, *Bolingbroke*, 201–204.

40. McCormick, *Hell-Fire Club*, 29.

41. Kramnick, *Bolingbroke*, 74.

42. Mandeville, *Fable*, editor’s introduction, 4.

43. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 56.

44. *Ibid.*, 56.

ater, journalism, and law. The *Autobiography* reports, “Ralph and I were inseparable companions.”⁴⁵ The connection further established Franklin’s cover. The “Dissertation,” printed early in 1725, begins with the following address to Ralph:

SIR, I have here, according to your Request, given you my *present* Thoughts of the *general State of Things* in the Universe. Such as they are, you have them, and are welcome to “em; and if they yield you any Pleasure or Satisfaction, I shall think my Trouble sufficiently compensated. I know my Scheme will be liable to many Objections from a less discerning Reader than your self; but it is not design’d for those who can’t understand it [emphasis in original].⁴⁶

Note Franklin’s emphasis that these *present*, objectionable thoughts are designed for people who already think this way. He adds with delicate irony, “You will easily perceive what I design for Demonstration. . . .”⁴⁷

Further evidence that Franklin faked the “Dissertation” to impress a particular circle, is provided by his extensive use of barbaric spellings and contractions, such as “*em*, *can’t*, *tho’*, and *us’d*. Jonathan Swift had launched a major campaign in 1711 against such degradation of the language, which the “modernists” of the Kit-Kat Club and similar Venetian agencies were deliberately trying to impose. None of Franklin’s other writings indulges in such liberal abuse, nor was he ignorant of the issue involved. In his *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Franklin published a piece in 1733, “On Literary Style,” in which he noted the “Observation of Dr. Swift, that modern writers injure the Smoothness of our Tongue, by omitting Vowels wherever it is possible. . . .”⁴⁸

From the arguments of the “Dissertation” itself, the intended victims of the piece become indisputably clear. Presenting a manic orgy of circular logic and sophistry, Franklin “proves” that good and evil, pleasure and pain, and life and death are all the same thing:

If [God] is all-powerful, there can be nothing either existing or acting in the Universe *against* or *without*



When Benjamin Franklin arrived in London in the early 1720s, a most vital intelligence task would have been to dissect the politically powerful networks of the Hell-Fire Club, which claimed, among other blasphemies, that man cannot distinguish between the work of God and the work of the Devil. Shown, a depiction of members of the Club.

his Consent; and what He consents to must be good, because He is good; therefore, *Evil* doth not exist. . . .

If there is no such Thing as Free-Will in Creatures, there can be neither Merit nor Demerit in Creatures. . . .

Evil is hereby excluded, with all Merit and Demerit; and likewise all preference in the Esteem of God, of one Part of the Creation to another. . . .

Pleasure is consequently equal to Pain. . . . Life is not preferable to Insensibility; for Pleasure and Pain destroy one another: That Being which has ten Degrees of Pain subtracted from ten of Pleasure, has nothing remaining, and is upon an equality with that Being which is insensible of both. . . .

Since every Action is the Effect of Self-Uneasiness, the Distinction of Virtue and Vice is excluded. . . .

No State of Life can be happier than the present, because Pleasure and Pain are inseparable. . . .⁴⁹

To a sane mind, such logic is a virtual parody of Satanic ideas. But to promoters of evil, the entire exercise would be undeniably appealing. Franklin concludes the “Dissertation”:

I am sensible that the Doctrine here advanc’d, if it were to be publish’d, would meet with but an indiffer-

45. *Ibid.*, 50, 55–56.

46. Franklin, “A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain,” in *Writings*, Lemisch, ed., 321.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 3, 1733.

49. Franklin, “Dissertation,” 322–327.

ent Reception. . . . “What! bring ourselves down to an Equality with the Beasts of the Field! with the *meanest part of the Creation!* “*Tis insufferable!*” But, (*to use a Piece of common Sense*) our *Geese* are but *Geese* tho’ we may think “em *Swans*; and Truth will be Truth tho’ it sometimes prove mortifying and distasteful.⁵⁰

The gaggle of historians who have cited this pamphlet, as proof of Franklin’s embracing British philosophical radicalism, have demonstrated that there are a lot of silly geese out there. Concerning Franklin’s purpose at the time, his *Autobiography* confirms that the quacks of the Hell-Fire Club eagerly consumed the crumbs he had thrown them:

My pamphlet by some means falling into the hands of one Lyons, a surgeon, author of a book entitled *The Infallibility of Human Judgment*, it occasioned an acquaintance between us; he took great notice of me, called on me often to converse on those subjects, carried me to the Horns, a pale ale house in — Lane, Cheapside, and introduced me to Dr. Mandeville, author of *The Fable of the Bees* who had a club there, of which he was the soul, being a most facetious, entertaining companion.⁵¹

In his next sentence, Franklin also provides a clue that he was fully aware of who controlled the pathetic Isaac Newton, the Venetian version of Aristotle. He reports that the same Mr. Lyons who brought him to Bernard Mandeville tried to arrange “an opportunity sometime or other of seeing Sir Isaac Newton, of which I was extremely desirous; but this never happened.”⁵²

Franklin’s description of the remainder of his London stay does not mention how he may have followed up his successful penetration of the Hell-Fire Club—accomplished in early 1725. But a conversation he had, at his home near Paris in 1783, identifies the man who helped him through this dangerous venture. He was none other than Dr. Zabdiel Boylston, Cotton Mather’s right-hand man in the smallpox inoculation fight. A prime target of Boston’s Hell-Fire networks, Boylston was in London during 1724–1725, when he inoculated Princess Caroline, who had been tutored by Leibniz as a young girl. Boylston’s grandnephew recorded his introduction to Franklin years later, in the presence of other company:

[He] arose from his chair and took me by the hand, saying, “I shall ever revere the name of Boylston; Sir, are you of the family of Dr. Zabdiel Boylston of Boston?” to which I replied that he was my great uncle; “then, Sir, I must tell you I owe everything I now am to him.”

He went on giving this account of himself, viz.: “When Dr. Boylston was in England, I was there reduced to the greatest distress, a youth without money, friends or counsel. I applied in my extreme distress to him, who supplied me with twenty guineas; and *relying, on his judgment, I visited him as opportunities offered*, and by his fatherly counsels and encouragements I was saved from the abyss of destruction which awaited me, and my future fortune was based upon his parental advice and timely assistance” [emphasis added].⁵³

Just as the *Autobiography* omits Franklin’s meeting with Mather in 1724, it makes no mention of his relationship with Boylston in London. When Franklin met Boylston’s young kinsman in 1783, he was beginning to prepare his *Autobiography* for publication. Not surprisingly, with other guests present, Franklin maintained the self-portrayal of “a poor boy in distress,” in recounting the London mission of his youth.

Franklin’s Lessons from Swift

There is another, more important name that Franklin does not mention. That is Jonathan Swift, and again the omission is revealing. When Franklin arrived in London at the end of 1724, all Britain and Ireland were consumed in a political war that Swift had initiated that year, by striking in force against a weak flank of Walpole’s Hell-Fire regime. Although the cabinet had been reshuffled in 1721, to Walpole’s immediate advantage, there were still a few wild cards in the deck. One was Lord John Carteret, a friend of Swift, who became secretary of state, and resisted Walpole’s scheme of governing by maximum corruption. To get rid of Carteret, somewhat in the manner of Russia’s exiling political troublemakers to Siberia, Walpole had Carteret appointed lord lieutenant of Ireland, in early 1724.⁵⁴ Before Carteret arrived in Dublin, Swift had sprung the trap—and surfaced the republican movement he had been building in Ireland.

Walpole’s standards of graft were anything but small change. Walpole’s first government service dated back to the period when Godolphin and Marlborough ran Queen Anne’s cabinet, while enlarging their personal wealth to monumental proportions. Walpole had been dismissed as treasurer of the Navy and sent to the Tower in 1711, when it was discovered that £35 million in naval expenditures were unaccounted for.⁵⁵ In 1722, now as lord treasurer and chief minister to George I, Walpole had arranged a modest piece of corruption in issuing a patent to foist £108,000 in cheap copper coinage on the people of Ireland. The King’s mistress pocketed £10,000 in the deal, and an ironmonger, William Wood, who bought the patent, saw an easy £30,000 on the bottom line for himself. The

50. *Ibid.*, 327.

51. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 56–57.

52. *Ibid.*, 57.

53. Quoted in P.M. Zall, ed., *Ben Franklin Laughing* (Berkeley, 1980), 161.

54. Van Doren, ed., *Portable Swift*, intro., 28.

55. Swift, *Journal to Stella*, I, 252, 252n.

sums were trifling in the scale of Walpole's swindles, but *the issue* proved big enough to rock his ministry for the first time.

Following a protest by the Irish parliament, which had not been consulted on the new coinage, Swift went into action. Under the pseudonym M.B. Drapier, and using the persona of a small shopkeeper, Swift published a series of letters to mobilize Ireland against Wood's halfpence. They were addressed to the shopkeepers, tradesmen, farmers, and common people of Ireland, to the nobility and gentry, and finally "to the whole people of Ireland." From the printing of the first Drapier Letter, in April 1724, Swift made it clear that he was calling forth a mass republican movement:

I do most earnestly exhort you as men, as Christians, as parents, and as lovers of your country, to read this paper with the utmost attention, or get it read to you by others; which that you may do at the less expense, I have ordered the printer to sell it at the lowest rate.

. . . It is your folly that you have no common or general interest in your view, not even the wisest among you, neither do you know or inquire, or care who are your friends, or who are your enemies.

About four years ago a little book was written, to advise all people to wear the manufactures of this our own dear country [Swift's *Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture*]. It had no other design, said

nothing against the king or parliament, or any person whatsoever; yet the poor printer was prosecuted two years with the utmost violence. . . . This would be good enough to discourage any man from endeavouring to do you good, when you will either neglect him, or fly in his face for his pains; and when he must expect only danger to himself, and to be fined and imprisoned, perhaps to his ruin.

However, I cannot but warn you once more of the manifest destruction before your eyes, if you do not behave yourselves as you ought.⁵⁶

Swift counted on generating a special kind of political shock wave. For centuries, the Irish had succumbed to one oppression after another. Miserable poverty had been accepted as a normal way of life. Restrictions on their trade, industry, and agriculture were designed to keep it that way. Their parliament had no power; all their country's laws were made in England. Titles and estates in Ireland were awarded in London, though seldom to Irishmen, and the recipients' hostility to the natives was frequently increased by the "second-prize" status of their grants. For the people of Ireland, the worst of all this was their sense of being ruled by an unseen hand, with no enemy to strike at. Thanks to the stupidity of Robert Walpole, Swift was able to transform this sense of futility into anger, and focus it with accelerating speed against a known target.

Walpole never anticipated what hit him. A man with a gargantuan appetite for corruption, Walpole would not have had a second thought about endorsing Wood's patent for Irish halfpence. Yet it was precisely the "small change" aspect of this piece of graft, which led to Walpole's defeat. The poorest Irishman might be indifferent to still another case of exploitation on a grand scale. It was another matter, however, to reduce the value of the coins he had, so that he could not even afford "a quart of twopenny ale." Swift's plan of attack exploited Walpole's blunder to the fullest.

In his first Drapier Letter, Swift introduced as the perpetrator, "one Mr. Wood, a mean ordinary man," already cut down to size. He then described the swindle, that "Mr. Wood made his halfpence of such base metal, and so much smaller than the English ones," that they were worth only one-twelfth their face value. How, Swift asked, could "such an ordinary fellow as this Mr. Wood" be granted such looting rights, when "all the nobility and gentry here could not obtain the same favour?" The answer he pointed to was the issue of sovereignty:

Now I will make that matter very plain. We are at a great distance from the king's court, and have nobody there to solicit for us, although a great number of lords and squires, whose estates are here, and are our countrymen, spend all their lives and fortunes there.

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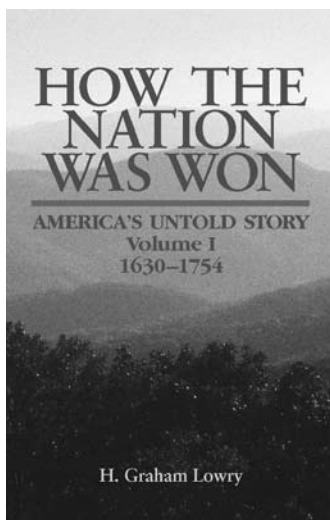
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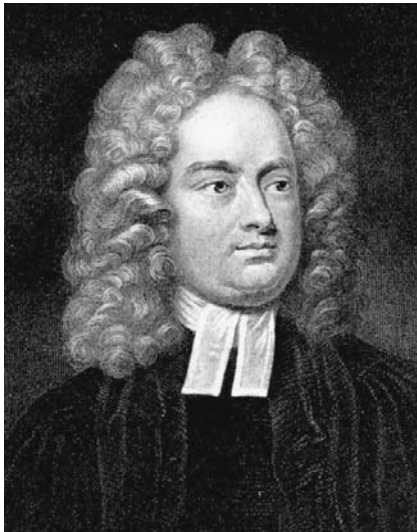
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56. Swift, "The Drapier's First Letter," in *Writings*, Landa, ed., 423-424.



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Jonathan Swift, who promoted the American cause in England, and sparked a political war against Walpole's Hell-Fire regime. His satirical masterpiece, Gulliver's Travels, lampooned the British oligarchy. In this scene, Gulliver meets the Brobdingnab farmer.



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Wood was “an Englishman” with “great friends,” and knew where to place his bribes to gain the attention of the king. Ireland was in no position to oppose the King’s authority as such, but Swift was not afraid to challenge “the great lord or lords who advised him.” Thus he warned Walpole:

I am sure if his Majesty knew that such a patent, if it should take effect according to the desire of Mr. Wood, would utterly ruin this kingdom, which bath given such great proofs of its loyalty, he would immediately recall it, and perhaps show his displeasure to somebody or other: but a word to the wise is enough.⁵⁷

For his readers, Swift reviewed the currency laws, which required acceptance of only gold and silver coins, despite the customary use of lesser metals for the smallest denomina-

57. *Ibid.*, 424–425.

tions. Nothing in English law required the Irish to take Wood’s “vile halfpence . . . by which you must lose almost eleven pence in every shilling.”⁵⁸

In this first letter, Jonathan Swift, the Dean of Dublin’s St. Patrick’s Cathedral, raised a voice the Irish people had seldom heard. His strategy was later adopted by American patriots preparing the War of Independence: if you are governed by a kingdom which claims it honors liberty, claim that liberty for yourselves. The Drapier’s first assault appeared to have little significance. History proved otherwise.

Therefore, my friends, stand to it one and all: refuse this filthy trash. It is no treason to rebel against Mr. Wood. . . . [The] laws have not left it in the king’s power to force us to take any coin but what is lawful, of right standard, gold and silver. Therefore you have nothing to fear.⁵⁹

In his subsequent letters, Swift’s exhortations became calculatingly more militant:

I will shoot Mr. Wood and his deputies through the head, like highwaymen or housebreakers, if they dare to force one farthing of their coin upon me in the payment of an hundred pounds. It is no loss of honour to submit to the lion, but who, with the figure of a man, can think with patience of being devoured alive by a rat.⁶⁰

Soon he was directly raising the issue of Ireland’s freedom:

Were not the people of Ireland born as free as those of England? How have they forfeited their freedom? Is not their Parliament as fair a representative of the people as that of England? . . . Are they not subjects of the same king? Does not the same sun shine upon them? And have they not the same God for their protector? Am I a freeman in England, and do I become a slave in six hours by crossing the channel?⁶¹

Swift’s *Drapier Letters* rallied all parties, all faiths, all Ireland against Wood and Walpole. “The Irish decorated and thronged the streets when the “Drapier Dean’ rode into Dublin. They proposed tearing down the statues of “military murderers’ to erect statues of Swift, the saviour of their country.”⁶² With an unprecedented breadth of popular support, Swift pro-

58. *Ibid.*, 430.

59. *Ibid.*, 430.

60. Quoted in *Portable Swift*, Van Doren, ed., 28.

61. *Ibid.*, 29.

62. William Alfred Eddy, ed., *Satires and Personal Writings by Jonathan Swift* (London, 1932), 296.

ceeded to close the trap. Walpole's propaganda machine in England had outdone itself, first by lying that the Irish welcomed the flood of Wood's debased coins, and then by charging they were "grown ripe for Rebellion, and ready to shake off the Dependency of Ireland upon the Crown of England."⁶³ Then the "Imposter [Wood] and his Crew" committed a fatal blunder, by underestimating both Swift's political power and his friendship with Carteret, the new lord lieutenant of Ireland. In October 1724, one of the British propaganda sheets for Wood declared "that the Lord Lieutenant is ordered to come over immediately, to settle his Half-pence."⁶⁴

Swift's fourth and final Drapier Letter, "to the whole People of Ireland," appeared on October 13, the day Carteret landed. Hawkers were crying it through the streets when he arrived in Dublin. Concerning Carteret's reported intention to impose Wood's halfpence, the Drapier answered,

I intreat you, my dear Countrymen, not to be under the least Concern, upon these and the like Rumours; which are no more than the last Howls of a Dog dissected alive, as I hope he hath sufficiently been. These Calumnies are the only Reserve that is left him.⁶⁵

Claims concerning Walpole's intentions, however, were treated with ironic care:

In another paper of [Wood's] contriving, it is roundly expressed, that Mr. Walpole will cram his Brass down our Throats. Sometimes it is given out, that we must either take these Half-pence or eat our Brogues. And, in another News-Letter, but of Yesterday, we read, that the same great Man hath sworn to make us swallow his Coin in Fire-Balls. . . .

What vile Words are these to put into the Mouth of a great Counsellor, in high Trust with his Majesty, and looked upon as a Prime Minister? If Mr. Wood hath no better a Manner of representing his Patrons; when I come to be a Great Man, he shall never be suffered to attend my Levee.⁶⁶

Whatever the reports of British intentions, the Drapier emphasized, they were

no Concern of ours. For, in this point, we have nothing to do with English Ministers. . . . The Remedy is wholly in your own Hands; and therefore I have digressed a little, in order to refresh and continue that Spirit so seasonably raised amongst you, and to let you see, that

by the Laws of *GOD*, of *NATURE*, of *NATIONS*, and of your own *COUNTRY*, you *ARE*, and *OUGHT* to be a *FREE PEOPLE*, as your Brethren in England.⁶⁷

Two weeks later, Carteret issued a proclamation offering a reward of £300 to anyone who would reveal the Drapier's identity within six months, "so as he be apprehended and convicted thereby." The edict was purely a matter of form, for consumption at court in London. Swift immediately revealed himself, and continued to be the regular dinner guest of Lord and Lady Carteret at Dublin Castle. Even an Oxford edition of Swift's writings, published in the 1930s, reports, "The Lord Lieutenant discreetly did nothing. To arrest Swift would have been to get himself promptly lynched by the mob."⁶⁸ The entire affair of Wood's halfpence ended in a stinging defeat for Walpole. Carteret remained lord lieutenant until 1730, when he returned to England to work for the opposition to Walpole. In a letter written in 1737, Carteret reported, "When people ask me how I governed Ireland, I say that I pleased Dr. Swift."⁶⁹

'Poor Richard's Almanack'

Benjamin Franklin's later writings, on behalf of America's independence, extensively demonstrate his debt to Swift. As early as the first *Poor Richard's Almanack*, which Franklin printed for the year 1733, he honored Swift in a special way. Employing the pseudonym Richard Saunders, instead of Isaac Bickerstaff, Franklin introduced his almanac by predicting the death of his rival "astrologer." Poor Richard, who did "nothing but gaze at the Stars," had decided to enter the almanac business. He had foreseen that the leading almanacker at the time was

soon to be removed, since inexorable Death, who was never known to respect Merit, has already prepared the mortal Dart, the fatal Sister has already extended her destroying Shears, and that ingenious Man must soon be taken from us. He dies, by my Calculation made at his Request, on *Oct. 17, 1733, 3 ho. 29 m. P.M.* . . .⁷⁰

Like Swift's *Bickerstaff Papers*, Franklin's early editions of *Poor Richard's Almanack* provided follow-up accounts concerning his prediction.

The importance Cotton Mather attached to Swift's *Bickerstaff Papers* has already been noted. The young Franklin, recruited to political intelligence work by Mather, must have studied the Drapier's war against Walpole's Hell-Fire regime with intense interest, to say the least. Franklin's opportunity to profile the networks of the Hell-Fire Club followed Swift's

63. Swift, "A Letter to the Whole People of Ireland," *ibid.*, 311–312, 298.

64. *Ibid.*, 298.

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*, 315.

67. *Ibid.*, 310.

68. *Ibid.*, 296. On the Carterets' hospitality, Van Doren, ed., *Portable Swift*, intro., 30.

69. Quoted in Swift, *Poems*, Rogers, ed., 911.

70. *Poor Richard, 1733*, facsimile of original edition (Philadelphia, 1977).



Library of Congress

Franklin's famous Poor Richard's Almanack honored Jonathan Swift, although for political reasons, Swift's name is never mentioned. Franklin, a voracious reader from a young age, is shown here at his writing desk.

roust of the halfpence scheme. Wood's patent was revoked by the crown in 1725 in an effort to end the matter, although he was granted a "pension" of £36,000.⁷¹ Franklin, "the poor ignorant boy," had by his own account a position of privileged access to the propaganda battles raging in London while he was there. Some time after deceiving the Hell-Fire Club with his "Dissertation," Franklin left Palmer's "to work at Watts's near Lincoln's Inn Fields, a still greater printing house. Here I continued all the rest of my stay in London."⁷²

Franklin did not sail for America until late July 1726. In March of that year, Jonathan Swift arrived in London, to coordinate an expanded campaign against Walpole. His undertaking such a mission, as the confessed author of the *Drapier Letters*, is further proof of the power of the movement he had built. On April 27, Swift even met privately with Walpole, to press his case for Ireland. Their meeting settled nothing, Swift reported, for Walpole had "conceived opinions . . . which I could not reconcile to the notions I had of liberty. . . ."⁷³ Swift's correspondence from this period in England is full of references to his meetings and exchanges of letters with leading figures of the Walpole opposition.

71. *Portable Swift*, intro., 31.

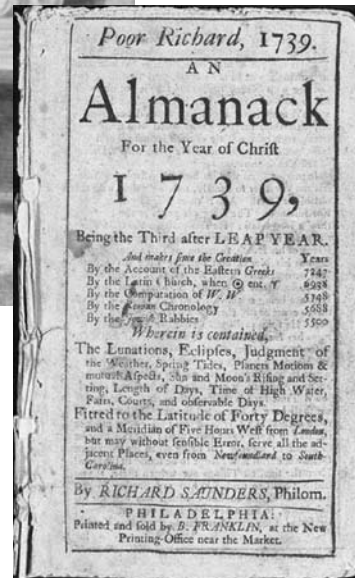
72. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 58.

73. Swift to the Earl of Peterborough, April 28, 1726, *Correspondence*, Williams, ed., III, 132.

Franklin's *Autobiography* offers a possible clue to his own connections to Swift's circles at this time. Among Swift's contacts in 1726 was Sir William Wyndham, an old acquaintance from the Queen Anne period. It was at Wyndham's London house, in June 1711, that some members and close associates of Queen Anne's anti-Marlborough government, formed a sort of private advisory body of "men of wit or men of interest." Swift was a charter member of the group, known as the Society, or the Brothers

Club. Wyndham became secretary at war in 1712 and chancellor of the exchequer the next year. He was arrested briefly in 1715, during the Whig Junto's purge on behalf of George I. At the time Franklin was in London, Wyndham was the co-leader of the Walpole opposition in the House of Commons.⁷⁴

At the very end of Franklin's stay, while he was making final arrangements to depart for America, he reports, "I was, to my surprise, sent for by a great man I



knew only by name, a Sir William Wyndham, and I waited upon him." Wyndham supposedly wanted Franklin to teach his sons how to swim—a little-known talent at the time.⁷⁵ It is more likely that Wyndham had some instruction to offer Franklin, but given the care he exercised in his *Autobiography*, he offers no further account of this extraordinary meeting.

Benjamin Franklin sailed from Gravesend on July 23, 1726. He returned to Philadelphia, where he immediately began building a republican machine of his own. It would soon begin to mesh with Spotswood's ongoing drive from Virginia, to open the continent. There were no governors in place, however, to push the project forward. Even Keith had been ousted during Franklin's absence. There was still, however, another crucial flank to exploit, which the enemy had so far failed to comprehend. This was Virginia's Northern Neck Proprietary, which under Lord Thomas Fairfax played an indispensable role in the success of the American Revolution.

74. Swift, *Journal*, I, 293–294, 293n.; Swift to Alexander Pope and John Gay, October 15, 1726, *Correspondence*, III, 172–173, 173n.

75. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 63.