

The Creed: What Poor Richard cost Benjamin Franklin.

By Jill Lepore

From *The New Yorker*, January 28, 2008. Online at
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/01/28/the-creed>

The enduring success of “The Way to Wealth” misled generations into thinking of Franklin as twee, quaint, and preachy.

Benjamin Franklin’s genius gave him no rest. *A discontented man finds no easy chair.* On April 4, 1757, he left Philadelphia by carriage, and reached New York just four days later, ready to sail for London. But one delay piled upon another, like so much ragged paper jamming a printing press, and he found himself stuck for more than two months. In all his fifty-one years, he could barely remember having “spent Time so uselessly.” (From childhood, Franklin, the son of a chandler, had toiled from dawn to dusk only to squander the tallow “reading the greatest Part of the Night.”) *Waste not life; in the grave will be sleeping enough.* He had some business to attend to—he wrote a new will, and more letters than other men write in a lifetime—but it was scarcely enough. “This tedious State of Uncertainty and long Waiting, has almost worn out my Patience,” he wrote to his wife, asking her to send along a pair of spectacles he had left behind. *What signifies your Patience, if you can’t find it when you want it.* He didn’t board until June 5th, and then the confounded ship lay anchored at Sandy Hook for two weeks. In his cabin, maybe even before the ship finally sailed on June 20th, he at last found something to do: he set about stringing together proverbs taken from twenty-five years of his “Poor Richard’s Almanack.”

Franklin finished his little essay at sea, on July 7, 1757. When he reached England, he sent it back on the first westbound vessel. It was published as the Preface to “Poor Richard Improved, 1758,” although it was soon reprinted, in at least a hundred and forty-five editions and six languages even before the eighteenth century was over, usually with the title “The Way to Wealth.” “It long ago passed from literature into the general human speech,” Carl Van Doren wrote in 1938, in an extraordinarily elegant biography of Franklin. This year marks the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of “The Way to Wealth,” among the most famous pieces of American writing ever, and one of the most willfully misunderstood. A lay sermon about how industry begets riches (*No Gains, without Pains*), “The Way to Wealth” has been taken for Benjamin Franklin’s—and even America’s—creed, and there’s a line or two of truth in that, but not a whole page. “The Way to Wealth” is also a parody, stitched and bound between the covers of a sham.

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In 1767, when Franklin was sixty-one, long since famous the world over for his experiments with electricity but years before he signed the Declaration of Independence, the Treaty of Paris, and the Constitution, his sister asked him for a copy of “all the Political pieces” he had ever

written. “I could as easily make a Collection for you of all the past Parings of my Nails,” he answered. Today, more than a half century after the editors of “The Papers of Benjamin Franklin” started collecting those parings—not just Franklin’s published writings but his thousands of letters, ledgers, notebooks, and unpublished essays—they’re still not finished, and not for lack of trying. (Thirty-eight of a projected forty-seven volumes of Franklin’s Papers have been published.) *If you wou’d not be forgotten as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things worth reading, or do things worth the writing.* Very few people have written more than Benjamin Franklin, and you would be hard pressed to think of anyone who has done more. And yet he remains as woefully misunderstood as his “Way to Wealth.” *Let all Men know thee, but no man know thee thoroughly.*

Franklin, who had a rule for everything, had a rule for writing: “*No Piece can properly be called good, and well written, which is void of any Tendency to benefit the Reader, either by improving his Virtue or his Knowledge.*” But he roped himself to this and so many other masts only because he found himself so cast about by “the Force of perpetual Temptations.” *He is a Governor that governs his Passions, and he a Servant that serves them.* He carried with him a little book in which he kept track, day by day, of whether he had lived according to thirteen virtues, including Silence, which he hoped to cultivate “to break a Habit I was getting into of Prattling, Punning and Joking.” What made Franklin great was how nobly he strived for perfection; what makes him almost impossibly interesting is how far short he fell of it.

The vast bulk of Franklin’s writing, and especially of his political pieces, is sober, stirring, and grave, as the occasion, and the times, all too often demanded. But he was also a sucker for a good joke, or, really, even a lousy one. He loved hoaxes and counterfeits and had the sort of fondness for puns that, if he hadn’t been so charming, would have been called a weakness. As it was, his enemies damned his “trivial mirth.” John Adams, who resented him, conceded, “He had wit at will,” and “talents for irony, allegory, and fable,” but characterized his humor as “infantine simplicity.” Franklin’s best satires are relentlessly scathing social and political commentary attacking tyranny, injustice, ignorance, and, at the end of his life, slavery. Yet reading his letters you get the sense that he couldn’t always govern his wit, as when, striving to collect himself, he began a new paragraph, “But to be serious.”

When Franklin was sixteen, and in the fourth year of a miserable apprenticeship to his brother James, a Boston printer, because their father had no money to send any of the six surviving Franklin sons to college (there were also seven daughters), he pulled off his first notable stunt. Disguising his handwriting, he wrote an essay under the pen name Silence Dogood, and slipped it under the printing-house door. James, who, like many masters, beat his apprentice, had no idea that his pest of a little brother was the author, and printed not only that first essay but thirteen more, in his newspaper. As the sharp-tongued Widow Dogood, the well-drubbed Ben offered “a few gentle Reproofs on those who deserve them,” including Harvard students, whose blindness to their good fortune left the poor apprentice all but speechless. Young Franklin then did his caustic widow one better. He invented for her a priggish critic, Ephraim Censorious, who

beseached Mrs. Dogood to save her scolding for the fair sex, since “Women are prime Causes of a great many Male Enormities.” Ahem.

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Franklin wrote heaps of this kind of stuff. He got older, and a little less sophomoric—*At 20 years of age the Will reigns; at 30 the Wit; at 40 the Judgment*—but he never lost his appetite for satire and imposture. In 1732, when he was an aspiring twenty-six-year-old printer in Philadelphia, having run away from his apprenticeship, fathered an illegitimate child, and married, he gave birth to the fictional Richard Saunders, a kindhearted but hapless astrologer with empty pockets. In the preface to the first “Poor Richard’s Almanack,” Saunders addressed his “Courteous Reader”: “I might in this place attempt to gain thy Favour, by declaring that I write Almanacks with no other View than that of the publick Good; but in this I should not be sincere; and Men are now a-days too wise to be deceiv’d by Pretences how specious soever. The plain Truth of the Matter is, I am excessive poor, and my Wife, good Woman, is, I tell her, excessive proud.” Sincerity and plain truth? Not a bit of it. Poor Richard was naught but pretense.

Almanacs, issued just before the New Year, were cheap page-a-month calendars, with tides, important dates, and the phases of the moon. They were handy. They were purchased, as Franklin pointed out, by “the common People, who bought scarce any other Books.” Printers filled their blank space with poems, jokes, prophecies, and proverbs, which were, alas, almost never beautiful, funny, true, or wise. Then came Poor Richard.

Franklin didn’t write most of Poor Richard’s proverbs. By his own guess, he wrote perhaps one out of every ten; the rest he found in books, especially anthologies like Thomas Fuller’s 1732 “Gnomologia: Adagies and Proverbs; Wise Sentences and Witty Sayings Ancient and Modern, Foreign and British.” But Franklin was the kind of literary alchemist who could turn drivel into haiku. Fuller had written, “A Man in Passion rides a horse that runs away with him.” Franklin outpaced him: *A Man in a Passion rides a mad Horse*. Where Titan Leeds, the author of “The American Almanack,” blathered, “Many things are wanting to them that desire many things,” Poor Richard pegged it: *If you desire many things, many things will seem but a few*.

What really set Franklin’s almanacs apart was Poor Richard himself, who started out as an affectionate imitation of Jonathan Swift’s 1708 parody of an imaginary almanac-maker, Isaac Bickerstaff. Like Bickerstaff, Saunders confidently, and, of course, wrongly, prophesied the death of his chief rival—in this case, the unfortunate Titan Leeds—reading the future by the stars badly to suggest that it couldn’t possibly be done well. Not everyone picked up on the homage to Swift, but Franklin’s lampoon was hard to miss. (It helped that the word “poor” in the title of an almanac was an eighteenth-century term of art, a promise that a book would be silly and a warning that it might be vulgar. Poor Richard’s rivals included Poor Robin and Poor Will.) Almanacs forecast twelve months’ worth of weather. Franklin knew this for nonsense: in 1741,

Poor Richard predicted only sunshine, explaining to his Courteous Reader, “To oblige thee the more, I have omitted all the bad Weather, being Thy Friend R.S.”

Franklin’s brainchild was tenderhearted, henpecked, and witless. *Ever since Follies have pleas’d, Fools have been able to divert.* Poor Richard had picked up his pen because his wife had threatened to burn his books and stargazing instruments if he didn’t earn a few more farthings, and because “The Printer has offer’d me some considerable share of the Profits.” Saunders liked his privacy, and never told anyone where he lived: “I would eat my Nails first.” But everyone knew that Franklin kept his house and printshop on Market Street, where he sold his almanacs for five pence each. Franklin’s wife, Deborah, who called the best-selling almanacs “Poor Dicks,” could barely keep them in the shop.

Saunders once complained that rumors had circulated “*That there is no such a Man as I am;* and have spread this Notion so thoroughly in the Country, that I have been frequently told it to my Face by those that don’t know me.” Some ill-natured fiends had even suggested that Benjamin Franklin was really Poor Richard. A pox on them. “My Printer, to whom my Enemies are pleased to ascribe my Productions,” Saunders protested, “is as unwilling to father my Offspring as I am to lose the Credit of it.”

Poor Richard was Benjamin Franklin’s most famous bastard, but by no means his last. Over the course of his long life, Franklin used dozens of pen names, from the high-minded Americanus to the humble Homespun to the farcical and low FART-HING. Still, a pseudonym was too thin a veil for his most scandalous pieces, which he circulated only in manuscript. *Strange! That a Man who has wit enough to write a Satyr; should have folly enough to publish it.* In 1745, when Franklin was thirty-nine, he produced a parody of a gentleman’s-conduct manual that his most exhaustive biographer, J. A. Leo Lemay (in the second volume of a planned seven-volume biography), calls “a small masterpiece of eighteenth-century bawdry.” Franklin, who had suffered much from “that hard to be govern’d Passion of Youth,” wrote a letter advising a young man suffering the same, but unwilling to seek the remedy of marriage, to take only older women for mistresses, because “There is no hazard of Children.” Also, older women are wiser, better talkers, better at intrigue, and better at other things, too, “every Knack being by Practice capable of Improvement”; not to mention, “They are so *grateful!!*”

Franklin counterfeited court documents, elegies, and even Scripture. Some of his fakes are so cunning that they weren’t discovered to be fakes, or his, until long after he was dead, partly because he was remarkably discreet (*Three can keep a secret if two of them are dead*) and partly because he was a practiced mimic. The boy too poor to go to Harvard had taught himself to write by imitating the prose style he found in an English gentleman’s magazine, *The Spectator*. He made *The Spectator* the tutor he never had: he read an essay, abstracted it, and then rewrote the argument from the abstract, to see if he could improve on the original. To make his prose more lyrical, he then turned the essays into poetry, and back again. In an essay he later wrote on literary style, which reads like Strunk and White, he pledged himself to brevity (“a multitude of

Words obscures the Sense”), clarity (“To write *clearly*, not only the most expressive, but the plainest Words should be chosen”), and simplicity: “If a Man would that his Writings have an Effect on the Generality of Readers, he had better imitate that Gentleman, who would use no Word in his Works that was not well understood by his Cook-maid.”

About 1755, Franklin wrote a pastiche of the Old Testament, a parable attacking religious persecution, in pitch-perfect King James. He had it printed and bound within the pages of his own Bible so that he could read it aloud and see who would fall for it. (Franklin was a Deist, though he usually kept his skepticism to himself. *Talking against Religion is unchaining a Tyger*.) In Franklin’s chapter of Genesis, Abraham casts a bent and bowed old man out of his tent and into the wilderness when the stranger reveals himself to be an infidel. At midnight, God, finding the old man gone, thunders at Abraham, “Have I borne with him these hundred ninety and eight Years, and nourished him, and cloathed him, notwithstanding his Rebellion against me, and couldst not thou, that art thyself a Sinner, bear with him one Night?”

Benjamin Franklin took a great deal of pleasure in his wit, and maybe most of all in Richard Saunders. Even after he retired from business, in 1748, to devote himself to reading, writing, scientific experiments, and what would turn out to be forty-two years of tireless public service, he kept on writing the prefaces to Poor Richard’s almanacs, now printed by his partner, David Hall. But by 1757, on that voyage to London to lobby for a more equitable distribution of the taxes Parliament was raising to pay for the French and Indian War, Franklin took up his favorite role for what he must have thought would be the last time. “The Way to Wealth” was Poor Richard’s swan song, Franklin’s farewell to a troubled America. (He did not return until 1762, and left again two years later. He spent most of the rest of his life in England and France.)

Saunders began by thanking his readers, “for they buy my Works; and besides, in my Rambles, where I am not personally known, I have frequently heard one or other of my Adages repeated, with, *as Poor Richard says*, at the End on’t.” This pleased him so much, he said, that “I have sometimes *quoted myself* with great Gravity.” Then he told a story. He had stopped his horse at an auction, where one Father Abraham, “a plain clean old Man, with white Locks,” stood before a crowd. (It’s hard not to hear the echo of Franklin’s Biblical Abraham.) “*Pray, Father Abraham, what think you of the Times?*” the crowd asked the old man. “*Won’t these heavy Taxes quite ruin the Country? How shall we be ever able to pay them?*” What followed—Father Abraham’s harangue—was, of course, Franklin himself, quoting himself, just as he’d hinted, with counterfeit gravity, and with his characteristic charity, since the speech was his parting gift to countrymen bearing the cost of a war for which there was no end in sight (not for nothing did it come to be called the Seven Years’ War):

Friends, says he, and Neighbours, the Taxes are indeed very heavy, and if those laid on by the Government were the only Ones we had to pay, we might more easily discharge them; but we have many others, and much more grievous to some of us. We are taxed twice as much by our *Idleness*, three times as much by our *Pride*, and four times as much by our *Folly*, and from these

Taxes the Commissioners cannot ease or deliver us by allowing an Abatement. However let us hearken to good Advice, and something may be done for us; *God helps them that help themselves*, as Poor Richard says. The rest of Father Abraham's speech, strung together from proverbs hoarded from earlier almanacs, endorsed thrift: "Here you are all got together at this Vendue of *Fineries* and *Knicknacks*. You call them *Goods*, but if you do not take Care, they will prove *Evils* to some of you. You expect they will be sold *cheap*, and perhaps they may for less than they cost; but if you have no Occasion for them, they must be *dear* to you. Remember what Poor Richard says, *Buy what thou hast no Need of, and ere long thou shalt sell thy Necessaries*."

After the hoary old man finished, the people "approved the Doctrine and immediately practised the contrary, just as if it had been a common Sermon." The sale opened, and "they began to buy extravagantly."

Franklin didn't heed Father Abraham's advice, either. When he reached London, he went shopping, and shipped to his wife a huge collection of china ("there is something from all the china works in England"), along with melons, bowls, coffee cups, four silver salt ladles, "a little instrument to core apples," tea cloths ("for nobody here breakfasts on the naked table"), a carpet, tablecloths, napkins, sheets, fifty-six yards of cotton, seven yards of fabric for covering chairs, snuffers, a snuff-stand, silk blankets, and a gown made of sixteen yards of flowered tissue. He even thought about buying his daughter a harpsichord, but, thrifty man, decided against it.

The best-known proverb of "The Way to Wealth" has vexed generations of the lazy-boned and sleepy-headed. *Early to Bed, and early to rise, makes a Man healthy, wealthy and wise*. "The sorrow that that maxim has cost me through my parents' experimenting on me with it, tongue cannot tell," Mark Twain once wrote. By the time Twain was writing, in 1870, Benjamin Franklin had turned into Father Abraham in the American imagination. "The Way to Wealth," so useful in the farming, boycotting, non-importing, independence-loving eighteenth century, came to be worshipped in the capitalizing, industrializing, Founders-revering nineteenth century. The joke fell flat. The parody within the sham became the man. Of the nineteenth-century's frugal, prudent, sober, homey, quaint, sexless, humorless, preachy Benjamin Franklin—loved (by Dale Carnegie), hated (by D. H. Lawrence), and held up (by Max Weber) as the original American Puritan striver, the prophet of prosperity—Twain wrote, "He was a hard lot."

Until Carl Van Doren's 1938 biography, Franklin was hostage to this narrow view of his character. Valiantly, Van Doren vowed "to rescue him from the dry, prim people who have claimed him as one of them." He wrote, "They praise his thrift. But he himself admitted that he could never learn frugality, and he practised it no longer than his poverty forced him to. They praise his prudence. But at seventy he became a leader of a revolution." Van Doren, who had earlier written a biography of Swift, couldn't have tried harder to free Franklin from the shackles that bound him. "The dry, prim people seem to regard him as a treasure shut up in a savings bank, to which they have the lawful key. I herewith give him back, in his grand dimensions, to his nation and the world."

Bad biographies make small men great; Franklin's biographers have had the opposite problem. It's difficult to fit Franklin between the covers of a book. His contributions to statesmanship, science, philanthropy, and literature were unrivalled both in his time and in ours. Even though Van Doren's "Benjamin Franklin" was "cut with hard labour to the bone," it still runs well past eight hundred pages. People who fall for Franklin fall hard. William Strahan, the London printer who brought out Samuel Johnson's dictionary, wrote in 1757, on meeting Franklin, "I never saw a man who was, in every respect, so perfectly agreeable to me. Some are amiable in one view, some in another, he in all." Van Doren felt the same way.

For all that Van Doren did, he failed to set Franklin free. Nearly every biographer to follow him has had to try to unfetter Franklin from his myth. "I do not come to bury this story, this Benjamin Franklin," David Waldstreicher wrote in his 2004 study of Franklin and slavery, "so much as to show how it became *the* story." "We seem to have been blinded" by Franklin's light, Joyce Chaplin observed, in "The First Scientific American." "Debunking Franklin" is what Gordon Wood tried to do in his 2004 "Americanization of Benjamin Franklin," in which he suggested that Franklin, the man Frederick Jackson Turner dubbed "the first great American," was essentially European. "Not Your Usual Founding Father," Edmund Morgan titled his 2006 selection of Franklin's writings, in which he deliberately skipped over "The Way to Wealth" and instead included a chapter called "The Uses of Laughter." But Benjamin Franklin is still good and stuck—a walking, talking, page-a-day desk calendar. To his twee reputation, the man's cosmopolitan, enlightened, revolutionary life and volume after volume of his Papers seem to matter not at all. As Poor Richard once said, sometimes *Force shites upon Reason's back*.

Maybe the blame ought to be laid at Franklin's own desk. On board that ship to London in 1757, he looked at twenty-five years' worth of Poor Dicks and chose ninety-odd proverbs to put in "The Way to Wealth," a set that, by any measure, is no fair sample of Poor Richard's wisdom, which was not mostly or even very much about money and how to get it. If Franklin hadn't been so worried about taxes, he might instead have pulled together some of Poor Richard's many proverbs about equality: *The greatest monarch on the proudest throne, is oblig'd to sit upon his own arse*. Or hypocrisy: *He that is conscious of a Stink in his Breeches, is jealous of every Wrinkle in another's Nose*. Or courtship: *Neither a Fortress nor a Maidenhead will hold out long after they begin to parly*. Or religion: *Serving God is Doing good to Man, but Praying is thought an easier Service, and therefore more generally chosen*. Or delusion: *He that lives upon Hope, dies farting*. (Scholars have suggested that the last one was a printer's error, and should have read "fasting," but, I ask you, who was the printer?) Or he might have chosen to collect the dozens of Poor Richard's proverbs advising *against* the accumulation of wealth: *The Poor have little, Beggars none; the Rich too much, enough not one*.

Franklin didn't live by Poor Richard's proverbs, nor did he agree with all of them. *He that best understands the World, least likes it* could hardly be farther from Franklin's philosophy. And *Nothing dries sooner than a Tear* is not the sentiment of a man who, thirty-six years after the death of his four-year-old son, Francis, was still felled by grief at the thought of the boy.

But he did believe, earnestly and passionately, in hard work and sacrifice. The man behind Silence Dogood was committed to the principle of silently doing good. And he had boundless sympathy for the common people who bought his almanacs, people John Adams disdained as “rabble,” people as poor and humble as the tenth son of a second-rate Chandler. In 1757, when Franklin finally set sail on that ship to England, he picked proverbs that might help struggling Americans bear the cost of the war. “I would rather have it said, *He lived usefully*, than, *He died rich*,” Franklin once wrote, and he meant it.

In 1764, just before sailing again for England, Franklin may have written—scholars are uncertain—one last preface to his almanac. The war had ended in 1763, but half of Britain’s revenues were now going to pay interest on its debt, and Parliament, which had just passed the Sugar and Currency Acts, was debating a new stamp tax. Once again, Poor Richard urged frugality. “Taxes are of late Years greatly encreased among us, and now it is said we are to be burthened with the Payment of new Duties,” a distressingly sober and spiritless Saunders observed. “What are we to do, but, like honest and prudent Men, endeavour to do without the Things we shall, perhaps, never be able to pay for; or if we cannot do without them or something like them, to supply ourselves from our own Produce at home.” In these dire times, Poor Richard offered not proverbs but recipes, to help Americans get by without imported sugar: recipes for wine made from homegrown grapes, rum made from corn, and sugar made from beets. In London, in 1766, Franklin was questioned before the House of Commons during its deliberations on the repeal of the Stamp Act. Asked how soldiers sent to enforce the new taxes would be received, Franklin answered, “They will not find a rebellion; they may indeed make one.”

The king and Parliament heeded Franklin’s advice just about as much “as if it had been a common Sermon.” They sent the soldiers. They made a rebellion. In 1771, not long after the Boston Massacre, in which British troops fired into a crowd of civilians, Franklin began writing his autobiography. He never finished it; it breaks off in 1758, just after he tells the story of sailing to London. By 1771, “The Way to Wealth” had already risen to its unexpected status as his most celebrated piece of writing. “The Piece being universally approved was copied in all the Newspapers of the Continent,” Franklin noted. It had proved useful. Franklin’s “Autobiography,” as carefully crafted a piece of prose as anything he ever wrote, is, in some ways, “The Way to Wealth” writ large; it was, as he must have judged it, the most useful thing he could offer to the American people, into whose service he had long since pressed his very self. *The Master-piece of Man is to live to the purpose.*

Benjamin Franklin abridged his genius, his character, his life. But he reads better unabridged; and “The Way to Wealth” makes a poor epitaph. Maybe it’s wiser to repay his wit with irreverence, and remember him by the epitaph he wrote for himself, in 1728:

The Body of

B. Franklin,

Printer;

Like the Cover of an old Book,

Its Contents torn out,

And stript of its Lettering and Gilding,

Lies here, Food for Worms.

But the Work shall not be wholly lost;

For it will, as he believ'd, appear once more,

In a new and more perfect Edition,

Corrected and amended,

By the author.

And sweet, tenderhearted Poor Richard? Maybe he's best remembered by his annual farewell:
"May this Year prove a happy One to Thee and Thine, is the hearty Wish of, Kind Reader, Thy
obliged Friend, R. SAUNDERS."

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