

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN VISITS THE IRISH HOUSE OF COMMONS

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Benjamin Franklin is known as a Founding Father of the United States of America. He was also well respected in Europe, outside of England of course, and nowhere more so than in Ireland. During a visit to Ireland in 1771 Franklin attended a meeting of the House of Commons and was given the great honour of sitting with the other members of Parliament rather than in the visitor's gallery. Franklin was impressed by what he saw in Dublin. It was only when he travelled outside of the city that he witnessed the real impact of British rule in Ireland.

I would like to provide some background on Benjamin Franklin. Ben Franklin was an entire package: Scientist, inventor, journalist, businessman, and statesman. He was a great American genius. His achievements were unparalleled.

He was the driving force behind:

- America's first public lending Library.
- First non-religious college
- first national newspaper
- As a diplomat he helped make America independence a reality. Next to George Washington, he was probably the most indispensable person to win the revolution.
- And with the matters of science he was nothing less than the greatest thinker of his time.

Franklin was born January 17, 1706 in Boston Mass. The 10th born of 17 children.

He wanted to write for his older brother's newspaper, the New-England Courant, but James wanted no part of it. So, Ben wrote a series of articles under the pseudonym "Silence Dogood" and slipped them under the door of the shop. To Ben's pleasure James printed them in the paper and they were a success. Ben was 16 years old and took on the persona of middle aged widowed women, telling her life story and giving no-nonsense opinions on the matters of the day. James soon found out and their relationship deteriorated.

However, by age 17 he had run away from an apprenticeship under his brother James in Boston and ended up in Philadelphia.

Ben was always striving for self-improvement. So, he listed 12 virtues he strived for. He made a chart with columns and would check off the areas he needed improvement. He explains in his autobiography that the project was doomed from the start. He said, "if he achieved moral perfection he would have sinned on the last item which was humility because he would have become full of himself having achieved perfection."

By 1730, age 24, he was elevated from journeyman printer to owner of his own shop. The name of his newspaper is the Pennsylvania Gazette. He took care of his image to build a business to be industrious and frugal. He made a point of pushing the paper bulk in a wheel barrel by himself down the street so all would see. He was crafting his image of a hard worker.

His knack for moral advice formed the backbone of his most successful publishing venture. He became Richard Saunders, in ***Poor Richard's Almanac***. Since he used an alias he could say things he normally wouldn't be able to say under Ben Franklin. Nothing became more famous than the maxims he placed in the margins:

God helps them that help themselves,

Haste makes waste,

A penny saved is a penny earned,

No gains without pains,

Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.

(He sold about 10,000 copies then which is approximately 3,000,000 today.)

By now, like a great tycoon, Ben starts franchising his print shops up and down the east coast. He takes a 50% equity stake and provides inventory and equipment and they provide the labor. His media empire is a stunning success.

Ben believes in self-improvement especially for the middling people. He believes you can't trust the elite.

He forms this social club called the JUNTO which is a 12-member group that meets every Friday. They eat, drink and sing songs and talk about how to make Philadelphia a better place. (Lending library, volunteer fire department, etc.)

The JUNTO was given rules of debating which are similar rules the constitutional convention was under.

Franklin also served the British crown as deputy post master....incidentally this position helped move his newspapers more efficiently.

Ben the inventor retires at age 42 and spends his time inventing.

- Invents fins, flippers, Pads for the hands, etc. for the swimmer.
- During a transatlantic voyage, Ben becomes interested in anomalies in ocean temperatures and ends up charting the gulf stream
- After calculating heat radiation and convection current, Ben designs the most efficient heating device of the 18th century.
- Ben get fed up between changing glasses to read and see far away so he fuses the glasses together and invents bi-focals.
- He invents the glass armonica
- His work with electricity made him an international star. Some new terminology:

(Battery, plus, minus, charge, discharge.....still used today.)

*** In 1751, he publishes his thesis and writes a plan to test his electrical discoveries. He goes through the Kite experiment. He develops the lightning rod.

He refuses to patent any of his inventions as he said they are for the people. Because of his electrical work:

- a. Yale, Harvard and William and Mary award him honorary degrees.
- b. The Royal Society of England awards him the Copley Medal and makes him a member.
- c. The King of France sends him congratulations. **“He was the man who tamed lightning”**

When Indians were attacking West Pennsylvania, he formed a militia and helped defend the state as well as helped build forts in the western portion of the state to protect the citizens there. When Great Britain needed money to replenish the treasury for the expense of the French and Indian war, Ben was sent to England to advocate against the Stamp act. (It should be noted that Ben originally agreed with the stamp act and was severely criticized in America.) Ben’s testimony, arguing against the stamp act in 1766 in Parliament, makes him the premier spokesman for the colonies which restores his reputation back in America.

How he felt about America evolved over 30 years. He originally felt devoted to the British crown, that the British Empire was the best thing for America. Ben would eventually change his mind, but it took an identity crisis to happen. **Visiting and what he saw in IRELAND helped shape his attitude going forward.** He realized over time that Americans were 2nd class citizens.

The real issue he became to realize: the colonies were perceived to be subservient, economically and politically. They had no power to tax without permission from London.

Franklin arrived in Dublin on 5 September 1771. While in Dublin he met with Church of Ireland members of the Irish Parliament as well as Catholic and Presbyterian members of the Nationalist movement. Franklin wrote that he found the Nationalist leaders “disposed to be friends of America, in which I encouraged to confirm them, with the expectation that our growing weight might in time be thrown into their scale and, by joining our interests with theirs, a more equitable treatment from this nation might be obtained for them as well as for us.”

During his visit Franklin also travelled into the countryside outside of Dublin. He was shocked at the level of poverty he found there. Ireland was under the trade regulations and laws of England, which affected the Irish economy. He wrote “The appearance of general extreme poverty among the lower people is amazing. They live in wretched houses of mud and straw, are clothed in rags and subsist chiefly on potatoes. Our New England farmers of the poorest sort, regarding the enjoyment of all the comforts of life, are princes when compared to them.” He feared that the American colonies would suffer the same fate as the Irish if they did not free themselves from British rule. (Again, his opinion/attitudes were evolving)

January 13, 1772 Ben Franklin wrote a letter to Joshua Babcock:

"I have lately made a tour through Ireland and Scotland. In those countries, a small part of the society are landlords, great noblemen, and gentlemen, extremely opulent, living in the highest affluence. The bulk of the people are tenants, extremely poor, living in the most wretched dirty houses of mud and straw, and clothed only in rags."

When Ben arrived back in America in 1773, he serves as agent to the Massachusetts assembly and intercepted papers from the Royal Governor, Thomas Hutchinson. The Royal governor and the Massachusetts assembly were bitter enemies. The contents of the letters were to urge London to restrict civil liberties. They found out that Ben was the one who got hold of these letters and published them. England ordered him to appear at The Privy Council in London.

In 1774, The Privy Council dressed Ben down. They made him the scapegoat for everything wrong with America. England vented. Franklin chose to remain silent. According to one observer "he stood conspicuously erect, without the smallest movement of any part of his body. With a placid tranquil expression." Some say that his silence conveyed the impression of not guilty but contempt for his accusers. But there's one thing we do know about Ben and that is he walked into the Privy Council on the side of England and walked out an American.

In 1775, the revolutionary war starts, and The Continental Congress sends him to France to ask for money to bankroll the American cause.

There's a problem with this: The Declaration of independence was banned in France and you're asking a sitting king for help to break away from another king.

Luckily the working-class people of France loved and cheered Ben (much like the Beatles coming to America, or an Elvis Presley concert). So, the King had a balancing act.

Ben couldn't dress like the Parisians, so he dressed like an American Backwoods man with his fur hat. He played this backwoods man role for his Parisian audience. They couldn't get enough of Franklin. (He wasn't anymore a backwoodsman then they were).

While John Adams was in his office early in the morning, Ben would stroll in at noon from being out all night in what the French called a *salon*. Ben Franklin knew to win French hearts was to do things the French way; wine, dine, socialize at night. The French Foreign Minister refused to talk or acknowledge John Adams. In fact, they called him Sam Adams. Adams was jealous of Franklin.

John Adams was like the Rodney Dangerfield of politics "I get no respect". BF started with no resources but built himself into a person that people respected; Nowhere more so than France.

Anyway, he secured Frances' help when the battle of Saratoga was won.

Franklin did not forget the Irish after he returned to the American colonies. In a meeting with the Continental Congress in 1775 Franklin proposed an article inviting the other British colonies to enter into a confederated alliance with the American colonies. Franklin attempted to induce a simultaneous revolt within several British colonies. He also authored an address from the Continental Congress to the Irish people. In it Franklin

reiterated the strong connection between Ireland and the American colonies: "Your Parliament has done us no wrong. You had even been friendly to the rights of mankind; and we acknowledge with pleasure and gratitude, that your nation has produced patriots, who have nobly distinguished themselves in the cause of humanity and America." That connection, forged through war, immigration, and famine is still as strong today.

An address to the good people of Ireland, on behalf of American, October 4, 1778.

In 1778, when the dissatisfaction of Ireland with the English system of restrictive commerce and manufactures was assuming serious proportions, Franklin, with his natural shrewdness, endeavored to turn it to America's advantage. He pointed out that the united colonies were not merely fighting for constitutional, but for commercial liberty as well, and that it was the interest of the Irish to make common cause with the Americans.

This address was probably printed on Franklin's private press at Passy and put on board a Dutch smuggler. Here they were discovered by an English privateer, whose commander delivered them to the captain of his Majesty's ship the *Portland*, by whom they were forwarded to the Lords of the Admiralty. Thus, they became part of the files of the Admiralty office and being transferred to the Public Record Office.

- This address escaped notice and is not printed in any editions of Franklin's works.

Franklin states in the opening paragraph "The misery and distress which your ill-fated country has been so frequently exposed to, and has so often experienced, by such a combination of treachery and violence, as would have disgraced the name of government in the most arbitrary country in the world, has most sincerely affected your friends in America, and has engaged the most serious attention of Congress."

But as for you, our dear and good friends of Ireland, we must cordially recommend to you to continue peaceable and quiet in every possible situation of your affairs, and endeavour, by mutual good will to supply the defects of administration. But if the government, whom you at this time acknowledge, does not, in conformity to her own true interest, take off and remove every restraint on your trade, commerce and manufactures, I am charged to assure you, that means will be found to establish your freedom in this respect, in the fullest and amplest manner. **And as it is the ardent wish of America to promote, as far as her other engagements will permit, a reciprocal commercial interest with you,** I am to assure you, they will seek every means to establish and extend it; **and it has given the most**

sensible pleasure to have those instructions committed to my care, as I have ever retained the most perfect good will and esteem for the people of Ireland. And am, with every sentiment of respect, their obedient and humble servant,

Benjamin Franklin.

Versailles, October 4, 1778.

NOTE: As you can see BF's visit to Ireland had an impact and helped shape his position about British rule, and American independence. BF was an advocate for the lower class and the working people of Ireland.

Ben Franklin was a remarkable man. 2nd paragraph of the Declaration of independence "we hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable, it was crossed out with ben franklin's pen and replaced with 'self-evident'.

Constitutional Convention. He strived for compromise.

John Adams wrote two weeks before Franklin's death "The history of our revolution will be one continued lie from one end to the other. The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electrical rod smote the earth and out sprang General Washington....and thence forward these two conducted all the policy, negotiations, legislatures and war."

Adams was wrong. Washington always received the credit he deserved, but Franklin's contributions to the revolution----guaranteeing French money, supplies, and troops, as well as negotiating a favorable peace, although as important as Washington's, were slighted.

Attacks by Adams, Arthur Lee, and others had taken their toll, and many came to question Franklin's loyalty to America.

Upon Frankin's death, the French National Assembly declared 3 days of national mourning. However, little mourning took place outside Philadelphia. James Madison in the House passed legislation to mourn Franklin but was shouted down in the senate by John Adams.

He knew people were making disparaging remarks about him. He was old and much of the fire was taken out of him. But the great Philadelphian would have the last word. Starting with the first publication in the 1790's, the autobiography created a new image of Franklin—**not** as a diplomat and European sophisticate but as a boy of humble origins who grew rich and devoted his life to public service. The book helped Franklin into a symbol for all members of the lower orders of society. ---tradesmen, farmers, artisans who were venting their anger at America's ruling class.

My wife Amy said “Wow, he had a lot going on.” This is not bad, for a guy who came to Philadelphia penniless.

In his “autobiography” Ben paints a picture of himself. He explains that when he arrived in Philadelphia he was scruffy looking character, dirty linens hanging from his pockets, with 2 shilling and 4 rolls of bread to eat. (It should be noted, it’s difficult to imagine George Washington or Thomas Jefferson describing or portraying themselves in such an inglorious manner).

Mark Twain (master of Parody) took a good-natured swipe at his autobiography.

“He was always proud of telling how he entered Philadelphia for the first time, noted Twain, with nothing in the world but 2 shillings in his pocket, and with 4 rolls of bread under his arm. But really when you come to examine it critically, it was nothing. Anybody could have done it.”