

**The Book in America: Economic Aspects of the Material Text
Week 2 (January 27) -- Authorship and authors in the eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries**

“Franklin as Bookman” -- Daniel Traister, University of Pennsylvania:

Many years ago, in a book called *The Pooh Perplex*, Frederick Crews gave his underprivileged readers a glimpse of what it means to be a Yale boy. He included, as one of his imaginary lecturers on *Winnie-the-Pooh* -- the book that Crews's anthology of concocted essays, written from various critical points of view, concerns -- a talk by Yale Professor Murphy P. Sweat on “Al Milne,” *Winnie's* author. In a “contributor's note,” Crews identified Sweat both as a much loved Yale professor and as the editor of a famous freshman anthology bearing my favorite academic title, *All Previous Thought*.

In that same genre, immortalized by Sweat, I presented at our last meeting a thirty-minute version of “all previous thought” about the history of printing. Today, and even more embarrassingly, I'm charged to summarize some quite *specific* thought, namely, Jim Green's about Benjamin Franklin as a printer, and Rosalind Remer's about the printing world of colonial Philadelphia, and to do so while one of them is sitting right here. At least this won't last thirty minutes!

Consideration of Benjamin Franklin's career as a printer indicates a great many of the questions that need to be asked about the book trade in the environment of the colonial period in American history, which was, bluntly, a provincial market. It is worth remembering that, for the English-speaking book world, *every* market was “provincial” except for London's. That situation would not change for a very long time after

Franklin's retirement from the book business to a life of public business: as late as 1820, Sydney Smith could ask, "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book, or goes to an American play, or looks at an American picture or statue?" -- and he might have been answered that not even a lot of Americans did any of these things. At any rate, a provincial market posed real issues for anyone who sought successfully -- that is, profitably -- to make his or her way in it. Capital was by no means easy to come by. The equipment that a printing office required demanded access to printing presses, type, and paper. It demanded access to materials to print that would find customers and not simply sit on shelves tying up scarce capital as unsold product. And it asked the printer to figure out how to find and then, not necessarily an easier prospect, once they were found also how to supply his or her customers with what they were willing to buy. How people trained for the printing or allied book trades, where they found the money to acquire their equipment and furnish their shops, what the balance they found between selling materials they had printed themselves vs. materials acquired from other sources, whether from this or the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, and even what language group they would print for -- a real issue, we need to recall, in Pennsylvania, where a large portion of the population sought books in German, not English: all of these were issues for anyone contemplating entrance into this business. Franklin's career illuminates some, though not necessarily all, of these and other questions, and the ways in which he and his contemporaries solved or failed to solve them.

No one here needs a summary of Franklin's *Autobiography*. Its first section recalls Franklin's early training as an apprentice in the printing office of his brother in Boston,

his decision to seek his independence and fortune elsewhere, and his trip, first to New York, where he could not find work, and then to Philadelphia, where he did. We see Franklin as a journeyman in Philadelphia printing offices, and later in London, learning both his craft and how to keep himself from some of the many temptations that would prevent the majority of his fellows from rising to mastery of their own printing offices. He appears surprisingly honest both about the temptations to which he does not succumb -- strong drink -- and those to which he is rather more inclined -- sex. He also describes his study of English prose style, pointing out the usefulness of such knowledge to someone who would earn a living as a printer. (If no other authors turn up, one has always got at least oneself.)

But about the central issue of work and rising in (and through) it, the *Autobiography* is slightly disingenuous, to say the least. It depicts Franklin triumphing in his competition for work with the people running other Philadelphia printing offices -- people like Samuel Keimer. But by emphasizing his own personal virtues, his disinclination towards vices such as drink, and his conscious cultivation of industry both in appearance and in reality, he manages to mystify and obscure more brutal and far less idealized economic activities. Watching Franklin succeed is, in fact, enormously instructive. In part, of course, the lessons of his success are intended to provoke his readers to emulate, e.g., Franklin's preference for water, or his -- occasionally quite alarming -- moral accounting. But his success also instructs his readers in the ways a provincial, undercapitalized businessman can succeed in a small but growing economic climate.

To begin with, it helps to be lucky, observant, or both. When, after his return from England, Franklin re-attached himself to Keimer, he quickly realized that Keimer needed him to train people who were much cheaper labor than he. He also understood quickly how shaky Keimer's business really was. The ability of Keimer's other inexpensive employees to work without expensive Franklin hanging around and drawing a wage would be the measure of Franklin's success, and would quickly be followed by Franklin's own dismissal from Keimer's office. And so it proved. But Keimer had failed to reckon -- typically, for Keimer seems never to have been the acutest of businessmen -- with the parent of one of the young men who freed his son from Keimer's service and bought a printing office for that son in partnership with Franklin, to whom he loaned money to establish the new printing office. Additionally, the timing of an order for printing money from the New Jersey colonial administration required "cuts and various types" that only Franklin could supply. Keimer had to take Franklin back into his office at the same time as his two employees were setting up their own printing office, probably completely without his knowledge. Moreover, Keimer had managed to get moved -- Jim, less delicate than I, says he "stole" -- from his earlier rival, Bradford, a large project for the Philadelphia Friends. His later rival, Franklin, managed to get that project, stalled at Keimer's printing office, moved (or "stolen") yet again, out of Keimer's office and into his own. Whatever one may say about Franklin in all of this, Keimer seems to have been a dunce.

Smith, Barney used to trot out John Housman in ads that would inform us that "Smith, Barney makes money the old-fashioned way: they earn it." Franklin made money in an

even more old-fashioned way: he *printed* it -- *literally* “made it.” Or, to make this point in a generalizable form, Franklin sought, and often won, government contracts. These provided him with steady work and a market for that work: job work, commissioned work, its customer backed by the resources of the Crown and its representatives. The customer required printed copies of its own laws, summaries of its own activities, and certain kinds of forms. It would also need, now and again, a printer to make its paper currency for its own use and for the use of its subjects -- another kind of “form,” if you will. When Keimer, after firing Franklin, took him back for the New Jersey money-printing contract, in working on it Franklin was also meeting people in positions that would allow them to send him their own subsequent orders.

Franklin was to build his business through taking care “not only to be in reality industrious and frugal, but [also] to avoid all appearances to the contrary”. He found that “being esteem’d an industrious, thriving young man” was itself a means of improving his business situation, but so too was the network of people he met, from jobs and from the many organizations that he was instrumental in forming. “The printing of the Newcastle paper money” came “thro’ my friend Hamilton.” Hamilton also procured for him work on the laws and proceedings of the Newcastle government; he received loans from the father of a co-worker; and so forth. An officer of many organizations, he was well-located to fill their printing needs, if any.

He also sought ways to augment his business in ways that required intellectual acuity but relatively little by way of capital outlays. His books were small. If he could pirate them --

see for one obvious example *The Friendly Instructor*, on display in the exhibition now on view in the gallery outside this room (in the case labeled “Scenes of Learning: Households and Clubs”) -- he did. Piracy saves money on royalties. If he could vend small books profitably -- another obvious example: his Poor Richard almanacs, which were extremely profitable -- he did. When he published a full-size book, such as *Cato Major* (1744), it was published not under the illusion that it might make money (and that book did not make money). In current parlance, you might chalk it up to “good will” or “advertising” -- or, perhaps, just to “currying favor” with those whose support mattered to Franklin’s business.

Franklin’s other full-sized books included reprints of books published in Great Britain; books designed to reap the advantages of the religious revival of the middle of the century and associated with the name of George Whitefield; or standard English devotional works. He also printed a psalter, which did badly, an edition of Richardson’s *Pamela* -- it also failed to sell well -- and a New Testament no copies of which survive but which must have faced an extreme up-hill battle in a marketplace dominated by established British Bible printers. Because Franklin made fewer bad judgments such as these than good ones like *The Friendly Instructor* -- and feeding at the government trough -- he prospered.

Newspapers, also small, generate income from sales, subscriptions, and advertisements. Franklin pioneered a non-partisan press not because he was not partisan but because he wanted to offend no potential customers, He might print something controversial, but if

you asked him to do so the risk would be yours and the venue would not be Franklin's own newspaper. Newspapers helped pushed him into the post office. The "first" American postmaster general found his way to the post office as a means of gathering news and, far more significantly, distributing his product. One is tempted, sometimes, watching Franklin's career, to wonder about the degree to which his later Revolutionary fervor was not an outgrowth of his realization that, for independent businessmen such as himself, that government governs best that governs closest -- and is therefore most malleable. One can think of him as Halliburton *avant la lettre*.

His relationship with Hugh Meredith -- the Keimer employee whose father loaned the two of them funds allowing his son to escape Keimer and Franklin to set up shop -- also indicates the importance, in a cash-poor economy, of access to credit. This is a recurrent theme in the history of American printing and publishing. In fact, we're sitting in a room named for the grandson of another Philadelphia printer, Mathew Carey, only able to solve his own credit and cash-flow problems, as Jim has pointed out elsewhere, by getting himself appointed to the Board of the Bank of Pennsylvania.

And distribution! Once you had printed stuff, even if you were sure it had a market, how did you get it to market? And how did you get paid for it? In the age of FedEx, interstates, and wire transfers, we tend to forget that Franklin, his contemporaries, and his successors had no railroads, few and very small canals -- distinctly not including the Erie Canal, and an infrastructure of roads that we would find exceptionally revolting even in the developing world. At this time it is probably accurate to think of the Americas as "the

developing world,” but not yet “developed.” Jim has written about the correspondence between Carey, years later, and his distributor, Mason Locke Weems, the latter constantly complaining about books that are not well calculated to sell in rural and southern markets -- but how would a printer know? -- and also about what happens to loads of books when they fall off a horse into a creek or off a cart and into the mud. For Franklin, half a century earlier, operations at a distance involved not only all of these problems but currency issues, as well. Recall his surprise at the three-pence worth of bread he got as he entered Philadelphia -- so much bread that he eventually gave some of it away -- “not [at that time] considering or knowing the difference of money,” he comments, between the Massachusetts and Pennsylvania colonies. We can wire transfer funds across currencies. They could not easily gauge the relative value of different colonial currencies.

Competition was another issue that Franklin, for all his vaunted visibility of industry, needed to face. You may recall Jim’s comment, when we last met, that Franklin was extremely effective in this respect. After Keimer, he did not have to bully or drive competitors out of town. No such high-handedness proved necessary, if, instead, you could buy your competition out of town. He arranged to set up potential competitors in business, for a share of their profits, so long as they took their printing businesses to another part of the world -- doing well by doing good, as Tom Lehrer calls it. Access to government office, if you are doing the government’s printing, is another salutary route to keeping the government’s business out of the hands of competitors. Carey found his way to the Bank. Long before him, Franklin had found his own way to the Assembly, and for many of the same reasons.

He needed to secure supplies of paper. Since locally-made paper was largely in the hands of the Germans -- the Rittenhouse site can still be visited, off Lincoln Drive -- he was also securing a good relationship with a non-Anglophone market at the same time, while securing his own access to the substance without which his business would be impossible and at cheaper, local prices than might otherwise have been required.

I'd hoped to keep this summary very short indeed, and am now worrying that it has gone on too long. I've probably missed -- and surely misconstrued -- issues that Jim and Ros speak about in the selections from their works that Dan has put up on the web, but since Jim is here I will bring my shameless plagiarisms to a halt and allow him to add or correct in his own person as relevant issues come up.