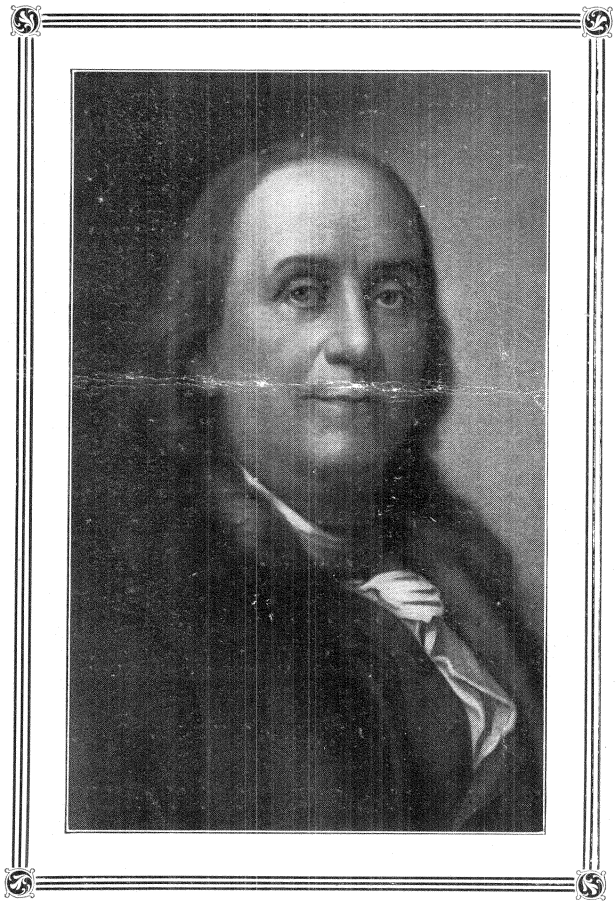
Franklin *and* Freedom

An Address by Joseph Fels to the "Poor Richard" Club of Philadelphia, January 6, 1910.



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UNTIL philosophers are kings, and the princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, cities will never cease from ill—no, nor the human race as I believe—and then only will our state have a possibility of life, and see the light of day.—Plato.

Franklin and Freedom

AN ADDRESS BY JOSEPH FELS TO THE "POOR RICHARD" CLUB OF PHILADELPHIA, JANUARY 6th, 1910

The City of Philadelphia is indebted to an honored merchant, Justus C. Strawbridge, for a beautiful statue of her first citizen and adopted son, Benjamin Franklin. The statue is extremely pleasing, and matches well the encomium by Washington which, with dignified simplicity, graces the pedestal:

> Venerated for benevolence,
> Admired for talents,
> Esteemed for patriotism,
> Beloved for philanthropy.

He who knows Benjamin Franklin only from his extraordinary, varied and persistent services to his country, state and city; his observations and pioneer work in gathering secrets from Dame Nature; and the homely and quaint maxims of "Poor Richard," has not yet learned the whole worth of the man. There are three subjects which engaged Franklin's thoughts which, I think, he would emphasize, could he converse with us from his pedestal by the Post Office. His counsel might not be welcomed by the people of Philadelphia, but none could take offence, for his benevolence was innate. "His statue in Boston was placed," said his eulogist, "to receive and, I had almost said, to reciprocate the daily salutations of all who pass."

In such kindly spirit I wish to speak of three subjects which engaged Franklin's thoughts. They concern the questions of trade, peace and the tenure of land.

A FREE TRADER

Franklin opposed the doctrine known as "protection," sometimes defined as "public taxation for private purposes." He was not of the class known as tariff reformers. He did not even believe in tariff for revenue. He held that any governmental interference between buyer and seller was wrong and productive of evil. He was, without compromise, a free trader. I quote from "The Internal State of America:"

> And when the government had been solicited to support such schemes by encouragement in money or by imposing duties on importation of such goods, it has been generally refused on this principle, that if the country is ripe for the manufacture, it may be carried on by private persons to advantage; if not, it is folly to think of forcing nature. . . . . The governments in America do nothing to encourage such projects. The people by these means are not imposed on either by the merchant or mechanic.

I make no comment further than this; we have progressed since then, yet to-day complaints of imposition are widespread.

In 1775, when the colonies were restive under the restrictions imposed by England, Franklin suggested the following proposal:

> Whenever she (England) shall think fit to abolish her monopoly . . . and allow us a free commerce with all the rest of the world, we shall well nigh agree to give and pay into the sinking fund 100,000 pounds sterling per annum for the term of one hundred years.

To counteract the proposed restraining acts of Parliament, Franklin moved in Congress, July 21st, 1775, as follows:

> That all custom houses in the colony shall be shut up, and all officers of the same discharged from the execution of their several functions, and all the ports of the said colonies are hereby declared to be henceforth open to the ships of every state in Europe that will admit our commerce and protect it . . . . .

Franklin's biographer, Smyth, said: "Franklin's freedom of trade was based on a natural right." Personally I am a free trader. I respect every man's right to buy or sell to the best advantage, believing that "mind your own business" is the best part of the Golden Rule. But if Franklin's theory be unsound, I suggest to my fellow citizens that their settled judgment of Franklin's wisdom must be revised. The revision must include also in its disapproval the opinions of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Patrick Henry and all the signers of the Declaration of Independence; for therein is an indictment of George III "for cutting off our trade with all parts of the world." It must also question the wisdom of that provision of Magna Charta which declares:

> All merchants may safely and without molestation depart from England and come to England as well by land as by water, to buy and to sell, free from all evil duties . . .

It is interesting to note that the just and gentle founder of Pennsylvania, that "holy experiment," for the general good refused a great financial temptation for a monoply of trade with the Indians. Penn has recorded his feelings that Pennsylvania had been given him to honor the Lord's name, and to serve his truth and people, that an example and standard might be set up to the nations; therefore, "I determined not to abuse his love, nor to act unworthy of his providence, and so defile what came to me clean."

Although Franklin's opinions were radical, they were expressed with moderation, kindness and persuasiveness. In a letter to Peter Collinson he wrote:

> In time, perhaps, mankind may be wise enough to let trade take its own course, find its own channels, and regulate its own proportions, etc. At present most of the edicts of princes, placaerts, laws and ordinances of kingdoms and states for the purpose prove political blunders; the advantages they produce not being general for the Commonwealth, but particular to private persons or bodies in the State who procure them, and at the expense of the rest of the people.

In 1784, in a letter to Vaughn, he wrote:

> I am sorry for the overturn you mention of those beneficial systems of commerce that would have been exem-

> plary to mankind. The making England entirely a free port would have been the wisest step ever taken for its advantage.

There are hosts of protectionists who fear the ruin of their country if traders be allowed to fetch and carry without let or hindrance. To them I commend Franklin's words written in 1774:

> It were therefore to be wished that commerce were as free between all the nations of the world as it is between the several counties of England: so would all by mutual communication obtain more enjoyment . These counties do not ruin one another by trade; neither would the nations.

Cobden, whose mind, Smyth says, was fertilized by Franklin, held that the moral progress and elevation of a people depend, first of all, upon a removal of carking care, and upon the ability to secure with reasonable labor the loaf, the coat and the roof. It was clear to Franklin, as to Cobden, that free trade best tended toward the certainty of these conditions for his countrymen, but his interest was broader than the colonies; it embraced the world. In a letter to the English historian, Hume, he writes:

> I have lately read with great pleasure the excellent essay on the jealousy of commerce. I think it cannot but have a good effect in promoting a certain interest too little thought of by selfish man, and scarcely ever mentioned, so that we hardly have a name for it; I mean the interest of humanity, or common good of mankind. But I hope particularly from that essay an abatement of the jealousy . . . of the commerce of the colonies.

This "interest of humanity or common good of mankind" for which Franklin sought a name,—shall we call it cosmopolitanism—a citizenship of the world? It is that for which philosophers have taught, and poets have sung, and saints have prayed. Yet with clear vision Franklin saw in the trader, however humble, however selfish or prosaic, yet unconsciously its missionary, a courier for civilization, a promoter of peace on earth and good will among nations. Instead of waylaying the trader, Franklin advised that he should be welcomed with open

arms. "Many," said the prophet, "shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased." It is the demand of the trader which removes barriers separating mankind; witness the Atlantic cables, the Suez Canal, the Simplon Tunnel and the brave attempt at Panama, appalling in difficulty. Success to them all, workers together for good! Well has Stephens said: "Trade is the Peacemaker of God, and in her service shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, 'Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.'"

That Franklin's desire for the general good was not mere sentiment is shown by his refusal to patent several successful inventions. Disapproving privilege in others, he would not profit by it for himself. "I declined," said he in his Autobiography, "from a principle which has ever weighed with me on such occasions, viz., that as we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others, we should be glad to serve others by any inventions of ours, and this we should do generously and nobly."

He declined also to copyright his writings.

And the last public paper by Franklin, within two months of his death, was a plea for the liberation of the blacks.

WAR AND PEACE

However tempting the subject, let us leave it to consider briefly Franklin's testimony against war. In 1783, after the return of peace, he wrote to Sir Joseph Banks as follows:

> I join with you most cordially in rejoicing at the return of peace. I hope it will be lasting, and that mankind will at length, as they call themselves reasonable creatures, have reason and sense enough to settle their differences without cutting throats; for, in my opinion, there never was a good war or a bad peace. What vast additions to the conveniences and comforts of living might mankind have acquired, if the money spent in wars had been employed in works of public utility! What an extension of agriculture, even to the tops of our mountains; what rivers rendered navigable, or joined by canals; what bridges, aqueducts,

> new roads and other public works, edifices and improvements, rendering England a complete paradise, might have been obtained by spending those millions in doing good, which in the last war have been spent in doing mischief; in bringing misery to thousands of families, and destroying the lives of so many thousands of working people, who might have performed the useful labor.

"Never a good war or a bad peace!"—an amazing conclusion! However much we may differ with Franklin, let us realize the breadth of his sympathies. Perhaps we, as a people, are mistaken in our alarms and preparations for war. Perhaps it may not be necessary or advisable to prepare the Big Stick and the Dreadnaught. Perhaps by a careful respect for the rights of all men, white, black, brown or yellow, they may learn to love us, and never dream of harming us! So thought William Penn; his "holy experiment" was successful. So also thought Lycurgus, the Spartan,—"for he did not fence the city with walls, but fortified the inhabitants with virtue, and so preserved the city forever." So also thought Ulysses S. Grant (alas! that his thought was too late). On his return from his voyage round the world, he said:

> Though I have been trained as a soldier, and participated in many battles, there never was a time when in my opinion, some way could not be found of preventing the drawing of the sword. I look forward to an epoch when a great recognized committee of nations will settle international differences, instead of keeping large standing armies as they do in Europe.

Before, therefore, we approve of another conflict, let us pause to think of the counsel of Franklin; let us look beyond the pomp and circumstance of war; rather let us think of devastated fields and flaming roof trees, of bereaved households, of broken mothers, sad-eyed widows and helpless children. The glory is transient; the grief is permanent.

THE LAND QUESTION

What were Franklin's thoughts upon the land question? —a question which, slowly here, but swiftly in England, is engaging political thought, and promising dramatic developments.

The question was not in his day pressing, as that of trade had been. The settlements on the seaboard were trifling; behind them lay a continent untouched. Franklin has, however, recorded interesting observations. I quote from his "Internal State of America":

> We are sons of the earth and sea, and, like Antæus in the fable, in wrestling with a Hercules, we now and then receive a fall; the touch of our parents communicates to us fresh strength and vigor to renew contests . . . The truth is that though there are in America few people so miserable as the poor of Europe, there are also very few that in Europe would be called rich. It is rather a general happy mediocrity that prevails. There are few great proprietors of the soil, and few tenants; . . . very few rich enough to live idly on their incomes.

We pride ourselves upon having progressed since that day. We have millionaires and multi-millionaires, but we have tramps and paupers. Landlordism and tenancy are increasing; so also is the strain of business life. Women and children are pressed into the ranks of labor; the fireside and the playground are drafted for the machines. And on our streets at night I see sadder sights than these. We call it progress.

Let us quote from Franklin's "Observations on the Increase of Mankind":

> Land being thus plenty in America, and so cheap that a laboring man that understands husbandry can in a short time save money enough to purchase a piece of new land sufficient for a plantation whereon he may subsist a family such are not afraid to marry, for if they even look far enough forward to consider how their children when grown up, are to be provided for, they see that more land is to be had at rates equally easy, etc., ... but, notwithstanding this increase, so vast is the territory of North America, that it will require many ages to settle it fully, and till it is fully settled, labor will never be cheap here, where no man continues long a laborer, but gets a plantation of his own.

It was in 1751 that those hopeful words were written by a man thoughtful, careful and restrained in the use of language. Franklin did not foresee. The lapse of time is far from having been "many ages," yet to-day Labor is cheap—dirt cheap.

That being whom the Psalmist declared to be a little lower than the angels, whose possibilities are boundless; whom Shakespeare apostrophized so gloriously as "in apprehension so like a God"—is a drug upon the market. When you built your new opera house, such beings fought for a chance to dig its cellars. To meet the needs of the poor, so vast is the problem that charity finds it necessary to be "organized" and statistical; and the quality of mercy has become strained. We read, and forget, that the bread line at the Bowery Mission has increased from 1500 to 2000 men—not vagabonds, says the Mission Superintendent, but men out of work. And newspaper accounts of suicides because of despondency are common. The vast territory which Franklin thought a safeguard against poverty for "many ages" is but sparsely settled. Yet stories of distress are commonplace, perennial and, alas! "tiresome." We dismiss them with a shrug.

Last January Secretary Garfield submitted information of 32,000 cases of alleged land frauds, mainly in States west of the Mississippi. The fact is ominous. Lowell saw that destruction lies that way, as destruction had waited for Rome,

> Where Idleness enforced saw idle lands,
> Leagues of unpeopled soil, the common earth,
> Walled round with paper against God and Man.

In our own favored land monopoly is making its stealthy way. There are scores of individual and syndicate holdings ranging from 20,000 acres each to 20,000,000 acres each. Yet we wonder at the increase in the cost of living, and the "drift to the cities"; and we cry, "Back to the land!" Let the slum dweller who would work in Nature's storehouse go back to the land if he will and if he can; he will find ample room unoccupied, but owned, "held for a rise." He must make terms with monopoly; between the landlordism of the slums and the landlordism of the fields he is between the Devil and the deep sea.

A philosopher has told us that in Nature there are no punishments; there are only consequences. In Nature, as in mathematics, two and two make four, yesterday, to-day and forever. But, when we consider the remedies which we apply to the consequences, the words of John Stuart Mill cannot be

too often repeated: "When the object is to raise the general condition of a people, small means do not merely produce small effects; they produce no effects at all." I acknowledge the good intentions of our Good Government Clubs, our Municipal Leagues and our charities whose name is Legion, but—"hell is paved with good intentions." Addressing themselves to effects instead of to causes, their labors are vain as those of Sisyphus.

We complain that the men in the bread line sell their votes; what else have they to sell? Neglecting equity, we defraud and disemploy them; we do not attend to the public business; it is a prey to corruption, and the consequences annoy us. What else should we expect? "Drive thy business," says Poor Richard, "or it will drive thee."

Had similar conditions existed in Franklin's time, I think he would have studied them; he would have been put upon inquiry; his benevolence was of a kind that walks with open eyes, that traces effect to cause, that seeks remedy, and stops not with palliatives. But at that time the question was not urgent, and the public demands on Franklin's time were constant. Otherwise, I think he could not have failed to concur in the opinion expressed by Thomas Jefferson. Being in France thirty-four years afterward, and observant of the causes which soon after brought to pass the French Revolution, Jefferson wrote:

> Whenever there are in any country uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right. The earth is given as a common stock for man to labor and live on.

THE SINGLE TAX

The last paper which I shall quote is most pleasing and important; a fitting finale. It is a letter written in 1768 from London to Du Pont de Nemours in France; that Du Pont whose sons founded the powder works near Wilmington, Delaware:

> I received your obliging letter of the 10th of May, with the most acceptable present of your "Physiocratie" . . . There is such a freedom from local and national prejudices

> and partialities, so much benevolence to mankind in general, so much goodness mixt with the wisdom in the principles of your new philosophy, that I am perfectly charmed with them, and wish I could have stayed in France for some time to have studied at your school, that I might by conversing with its founders have made myself quite a master of that philosophy . . . I had, before I went into your country, seen some letters of yours to Dr. Templeman that gave me a high opinion of the doctrines you are engaged in cultivating, and of your personal worth and abilities which made me greatly desirous of seeing you . . . .
>
> I am sorry to find that that wisdom which sees in the welfare of the parts the prosperity of the whole seems yet not to be known in this country. It is from your philosophy only that the maxims of a contrary and more happy conduct are to be drawn, which I therefore sincerely wish may grow and increase till it becomes the governing philosophy of the human species as it must certainly be that of superior beings in better worlds.

Like most strong men, Benjamin Franklin, as we know, was careful and moderate in his language. It were well, therefore, to examine doctrines of which such a man says, "I am perfectly charmed with them," and for which he hopes such growth and increase that they may become the governing philosophy of the human species.

The physiocrats, or "natural order men," were philosophers and political economists who lived in France in the reign of Louis XVI. The most prominent members of the school were Turgot, the King's Minister of Finance, and Quesnay, his favorite physician. Their doctrine was, in a word, the narrow one that government should do no more than to protect and preserve the rights of life and property, and to administer justice. Governmental interference with production and exchange was not allowable. Trade was to be free, and the entire revenue, the "impot unique," was to be taxed from the rent of land. This proposal of Quesnay to substitute one single tax upon ground rent for all others was praised by the elder Mirabeau "as a discovery equal in utility to the invention of writing, or the substitution of the use of money for barter."

I regret it if these words appear to be extravagant, for extravagance is weakness. Yet they are as moderation itself when compared with those of one who was notably calm, philo-

sophical and sound in judgment. It was of this philosophy that Franklin wrote, "I am perfectly charmed with it:" it was of this philosophy that he expressed the hope that it might finally govern the whole race; it was this philosophy that he thought worthy of superior beings in better worlds.

The philosophy which so charmed Franklin, and from which he hoped so much, was unhappily placed. It was making progress, undoubted progress, when the storm of the French Revolution broke; it was overwhelmed, and became naught but a memory to students of history. It is a curious fact that in after years, this doctrine was independently thought out and revived by a young man who knew nothing of the great Frenchmen who preceded him; a young man, moreover, who was born in Franklin's loved city of Philadelphia, a reader of Franklin's works, and an eager attendant upon lectures at the Franklin Institute; like Franklin, too, a printer, a philosopher and a free trader. He wrote what John Russell Young characterized as "a solemn message to mankind." The message was "Progress and Poverty," couched in masterly English worthy of the subject. But as of old, so to-day, a prophet is not without honor, but in his own country, and among his own kin. As yet lightly regarded in his native city and land, his revived doctrine of the "impot unique," the doctrine which had so charmed Franklin, here known as the "single tax," is marching apace in the Antipodes, in Germany and in England. I think the time will come when Henry George's birthplace on Tenth Street will rival in attractive power our Independence Hall.

Benjamin Franklin once wrote of his gratification in the thought that his works were respectfully quoted by others. But I acknowledge more than a feeling of respect; I have had as well a keen pleasure in thus spreading further the pure and peaceable counsels of this printer, philosopher and statesman.

When next I pass the statue by the Post Office I shall be mindful of the suggestion of Franklin's eulogist at Boston. I shall tip my hat, and shall almost expect the face of bronze to light with pleasure.

In conclusion—if I have given but scant attention to a great subject, it is because my time is short, but the explanation is in every library, and "a word to the wise is enough," as Poor Richard says.