

Poor Richard's Almanack

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Poor Richard's Almanack (sometimes *Almanac*) was a yearly almanack published by Benjamin Franklin, who adopted the pseudonym of "Poor Richard" or "Richard Saunders" for this purpose. The publication appeared continuously from 1732 to 1758. It was a best seller for a pamphlet published in the American colonies; print runs reached 10,000 per year.^[1]^[2]

Franklin, the American inventor, statesman, and publisher, achieved success with *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Almanacks were very popular books in colonial America, with people in the colonies using them for the mixture of seasonal weather forecasts, practical household hints, puzzles, and other amusements they offered.^[3] *Poor Richard's Almanack* was popular for all of these reasons, and also for its extensive use of wordplay, with many examples derived from the work surviving in the contemporary American vernacular.^[4]

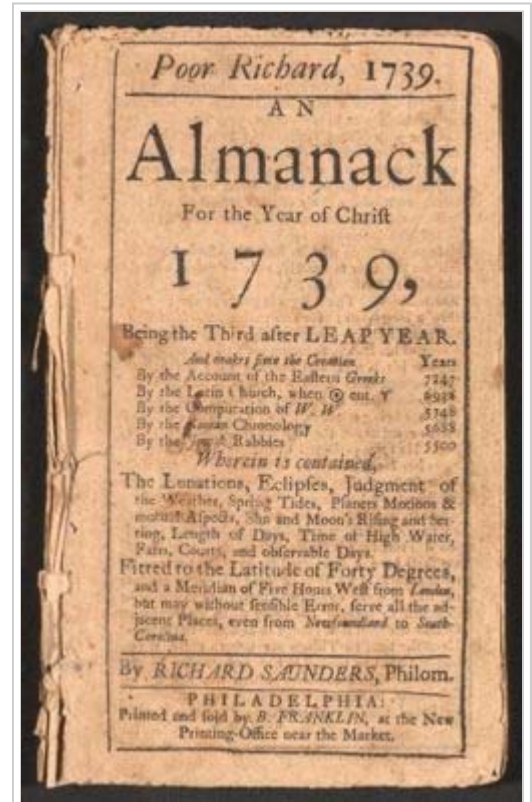
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Content

The *Almanack* contained the calendar, weather, poems, and astronomical and astrological information that a typical almanack of the period would contain. Franklin also included the occasional mathematical exercise, and the *Almanack* from 1750 features an early example of demographics. It is chiefly remembered, however, for being a repository of Franklin's aphorisms and proverbs, many of which live on in American English. These maxims typically counsel thrift and courtesy, with a dash of cynicism.^[5]

In the spaces that occurred between noted calendar days, Franklin included proverbial sentences about industry and frugality. Several of these sayings were borrowed from an earlier writer, Lord Halifax, many of whose aphorisms sprang from "[a] basic skepticism directed against the motives of men, manners, and the age."^[6] In 1757, Franklin made a selection of these and prefixed them to the almanack as the address of an old man to the people attending an auction. This was later published as *The Way to Wealth* and was popular in both America and England.^[7]



1739 Edition of Poor Richard's Almanack

Poor Richard

Franklin created the Poor Richard persona based in part on Jonathan Swift's pseudonymous character Isaac Bickerstaff. In a series of three letters in 1708 and 1709, known as the Bickerstaff papers, "Bickerstaff" predicted the imminent death of astrologer and almanack maker John Partridge. Franklin's Poor Richard, like Bickerstaff, claimed to be a philomath and astrologer and, like Bickerstaff, predicted the deaths of actual astrologers who wrote traditional almanacks. In the early editions of *Poor Richard's Almanack*, predicting and falsely reporting the deaths of these astrologers—much to their dismay—was something of a running joke. However, Franklin's endearing character of "Poor" Richard Saunders, along with his wife Bridget, was ultimately used to frame (if comically) what was intended as a serious resource that people would buy year after year. To that end, the satirical edge of Swift's character is largely absent in Poor Richard. Richard was presented as distinct from Franklin himself, occasionally referring to the latter as his printer.^[8]

In later editions, the homey original Richard character gradually disappeared, replaced by a Poor Richard who largely stood in for Franklin and his own practical scientific and business perspectives. By 1758, the original character was even more distant from the practical advice and proverbs of the almanack, which Richard presented as coming from "Father Abraham".^[9]

History

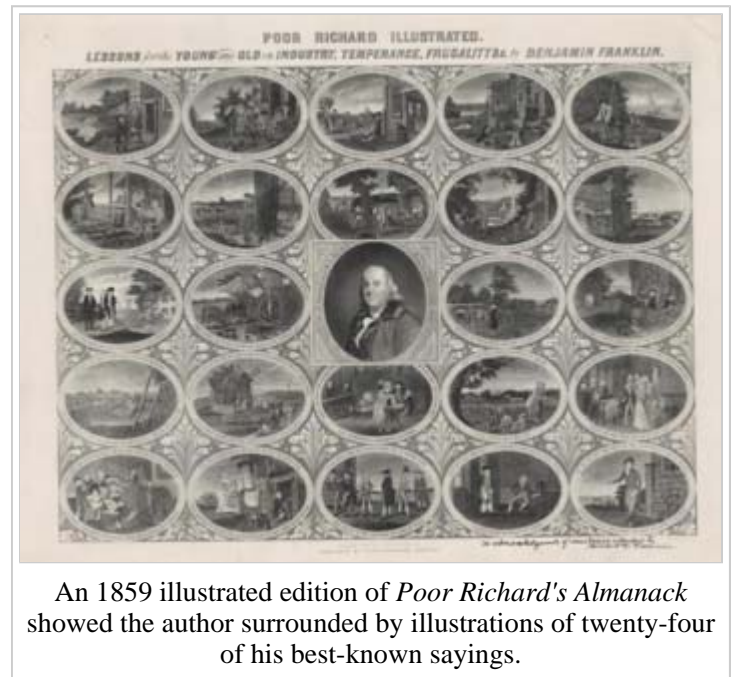
Franklin began publishing *Poor Richard's Almanack* on December 28, 1732,^[10] and would go on to publish it for 25 years, bringing his publisher much economic success and popularity. The almanack sold as many as 10,000 copies a year.^[2] In 1753, upon the death of Franklin's brother, James, Franklin sent 500 copies of *Poor Richard's* to his widow for free, so that she could make money selling them.^[10]

Serialization

One of the appeals of the *Almanack* was that it contained various "news stories" in serial format, so that readers would purchase it year after year to find out what happened to the protagonists. One of the earliest of these was the "prediction" that the author's "good Friend and Fellow-Student, Mr. Titan Leeds" would die on October 17 of that year, followed by the rebuttal of Mr. Leeds himself that he would die, not on the 17th, but on October 26. Appealing to his readers, Franklin urged them to purchase the next year's edition to show their support for his prediction. The following year, Franklin expressed his regret that he was too ill to learn whether he or Leeds was correct. Nevertheless, the ruse had its desired effect: people purchased the *Almanack* to find out who was correct.^[11]

Criticism

For some writers the content of the *Almanack* became inextricably linked with Franklin's character—and not always to



An 1859 illustrated edition of *Poor Richard's Almanack* showed the author surrounded by illustrations of twenty-four of his best-known sayings.

favorable effect. Both Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville caricatured the *Almanack*—and Franklin by extension—in their writings, while James Russell Lowell, reflecting on the public unveiling in Boston of a statue to honor Franklin, wrote:

“ ...we shall find out that Franklin was born in Boston, and invented being struck with lightning and printing and the Franklin medal, and that he had to move to Philadelphia because great men were so plenty in Boston that he had no chance, and that he revenged himself on his native town by saddling it with the Franklin stove, and that he discovered the almanac, and that a penny saved is a penny lost, or something of the kind.^[12] ”

The *Almanack* was also a reflection of the norms and social mores of his times, rather than a philosophical document setting a path for new-freedoms, as the works of Franklin's contemporaries, Jefferson, Adams, or Paine were. Historian Howard Zinn offers, as an example, the adage "Let thy maidservant be faithful, strong, and homely" as indication of Franklin's belief in the legitimacy of controlling the sexual lives of servants for the economic benefit of their masters.^[13]

Cultural impact

Napoleon Bonaparte considered the *Almanack* significant enough to translate it into Italian, along with the Pennsylvania State Constitution (which Franklin helped draft), when he established the Cisalpine Republic in 1797.^[14] The *Almanack* was also twice translated into French, reprinted in Great Britain in broadside for ease of posting, and was distributed by members of the clergy to poor parishioners.

The *Almanack* also had a strong cultural and economic impact in the years following publication. In Pennsylvania, changes in monetary policy in regards to foreign expenses were evident for years after the issuing of the *Almanack*. The King of France named a ship given to John Paul Jones after the *Almanack's* author - *Bonhomme Richard*, or "Clever Richard." A later almanack by Noah Webster, *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, was inspired in part by *Poor Richard's*.^[15]

Notes

- [^] Goodrich (1829)
- [^] ***a b*** Oracle ThinkQuest (2003)
- [^] The History Place (1998)
- [^] Innovation Philadelphia (2005)
- [^] Pasles (2001), pp. 492-493
- [^] Newcomb (1955), pp. 535-536
- [^] Wilson (2006)
- [^] Ross (1940), pp. 785-791
- [^] Ross (1940), pp. 791-794
- [^] ***a b*** Independence Hall Association (1999-2007)
- [^] Laughter (1999-2003)
- [^] Miles (1957), p. 141.
- [^] Zinn, 1980, 44.
- [^] Dauer (1976), p. 50.
- [^] Kneeland *et al* (1894), pp. 46-47

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External links

- Preface, Maxims, and other selections from several editions of Poor Richard's Almanack (<http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/loa/bfcont.htm>) via the Library of America
- Scans of 1753 version of *Poor Richard's Almanac* (<http://www3.gettysburg.edu/~tshannon/his341/pr1753contents.html>) via Gettysburg College.

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- Franklin, Benjamin; J.A. Leo Lemay (ed). *Benjamin Franklin: Autobiography, Poor Richard: Autobiography, Poor Richard, and Later Writings*. New York: Library of America, 2005. ISBN 1883011531.

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