Preface.

Benjamin Franklin. The name inevitably conveys—it once did to me, anyhow—a benevolent, stuffy old gentleman, complacently mouthing admonitions to diligence and thrift. When you find, instead, a man who challenges your own stuffiness, you wonder where that image came from. I think it may have started with the Autobiography, begun as a letter addressed to his pretty stuffy grown son. The Autobiography is the man’s re-creation of himself, undertaken when he was sixty-five years old, and written with a practiced literary skill in a paternal voice. It is worth study in itself as a work of art and for the unique historical information contained in it, but it can also screen the man himself from us.

The man himself is a puzzle and a prize. He fascinated people at the time and continues to fascinate many of us today. Why? I think because of his combination of common sense and uncommon ideas, of the prosaic and the poetic, plebeian and patrician, expected and unexpected. I shall not attempt to exhibit everything that Franklin did or thought. Instead, I will try first to meet him as an ordinary, gregarious, good-natured human being, welcomed everywhere for a chat, a joke, a drink, a song, an adventure.

The man we will meet is not the precocious youth of the Autobiography. We will skip that and cut to the man in his full powers. Apart from a tantalizing glimpse of him as he saw himself at twenty in a unique youthful journal, the earliest single item in this reader is a letter to his parents when he was already thirty-two. The choice is partly a necessity. Franklin’s surviving papers will fill forty-seven volumes in the complete edition under way. Only the first two volumes and half of the third were needed for
everything he wrote in the first half of his long life (eighty-four years). It was what he did in the second half that mattered, after he had left his business career behind. He was in his forties when he performed the electrical experiments and observations that made him famous throughout the world, in his forties when he dedicated himself to a public career that would last for the rest of his life. He was seventy when he helped write the Declaration of Independence, seventy-six when he signed the peace treaty with England, eighty-one when he helped draft the Constitution of the United States. He was the only founding father to sign all three of these documents. But we should note that none of them was quite what he had wanted it to be.

Indeed he seldom got his way in the public measures he helped to bring about. He was a great proponent of the federal union that now guides us, but not its architect—he would have preferred something a little different. In 1754 he proposed a plan of union for England’s North American colonies. It was accepted by a congress of representatives but then rejected by all the colonies. In 1775, at the Continental Congress, he proposed articles of confederation for a continental union. The Congress declined to consider them and later adopted a much weaker set with provisions Franklin had specifically opposed. In 1776, after helping draft the Declaration of Independence, he argued for the United States to defend itself without any foreign assistance. Instead, the Congress sent him to France—to get foreign assistance, which he did very successfully. In 1782, along with John Adams and John Jay, he negotiated the treaty with Great Britain that ended the war, but the treaty contained none of the articles to benefit mankind and his country that he would most have liked to see in it. In 1787 he attended the Constitutional Convention, but the convention rejected the provisions he advocated. In 1776 he had presided at the drafting of the Pennsylvania state constitution, which included unique democratic provisions that he cherished. But as he lay dying in 1790 his fellow Pennsylvanians gave up his constitution for a more conservative one, with provisions to which he had written strenuous objections.

Franklin’s willingness to suppress his own wishes in order to carry out what other people wanted tells us something about him, something that will become more comprehensible as we get to know him. This was not
your usual founding father, and this reader is not intended to show his achievements as a founder or even as a father. It is directed at the man and what he thought it meant to be a man, a human being: what he made of the natural world he found around him, how he dealt with the joys and sorrows, the puzzles and problems that the company of other human beings brought him, and, more particularly, how he responded to the opportunities and responsibilities that being an American presented to him.

Franklin had a well-honed talent for speaking clearly. Even in writing about complex issues in complex situations, he could cut to the quick and make his point to the most casual reader. So you can read the selections at random if you wish. Each will make sense by itself. But I have arranged them in a sequence, not always chronological, that I believe will exhibit the man as he developed, first as a human being, then as a deservedly renowned scientific thinker, and finally as a visionary striver for a better world. To this end I have divided the selections into four parts. Part I is aimed at getting to know the man as others in his time knew him, to find out what it would have been like to spend time with him and why it would have been such good fun. We want to meet him on equal terms, as he met everyone, before looking at what makes him worth remembering today. Part II is devoted to a characteristic that distinguished him from most of the rest of us then and now: an intellectual curiosity that challenged him to make sense out of things that others took for granted. His ability to ask questions and look for answers made him world famous in his time because of what he found out about electricity. His questions and answers about other things that puzzled him did not have as far-reaching results but show us the man’s restless mind, continually challenged by the wonders of everyday life.

The last two parts of the reader may strike some as controversial. They are devoted to what I believe was the driving force in Franklin’s public career. Sometime in his forties he decided on a life of public service. At the same time, I believe, he decided that the public he should serve was more than his neighborhood or city or province but something larger: an America that was not yet what we would call a nation but would become one in the not very distant future. In 1751 the idea, or vision as I prefer to say, came to him of America as part of the British Empire but destined to be the
foundation and stronghold of a new incarnation of that empire. For the rest of his life, I believe, that vision guided his public career. Part III of the reader is taken up with his campaign to persuade the existing leaders of the empire to recognize Americans for what they were and what they would be.

By 1776 the unwillingness of the British to recognize facts meant that Franklin’s efforts would now be directed toward enabling Americans to make the most of their future by themselves. Part IV follows those efforts. Here as elsewhere in the volume, the focus, the principle of selection from his papers, is to show the man, what he wanted rather than what he got, what his America could have been rather than what it became, but also to show his satisfaction with what he and his fellow founders did, however short it fell from what he would have wished.

In selecting the readings and in my introduction to them I have benefited more than I can say from the assistance and collaboration of others. From the beginning Marie Morgan has worked with me, and we have exchanged thoughts so often that the book is as much hers as mine. In choosing the selections I had the advantage of the CD-ROM of the entire body of Franklin’s papers, published and unpublished, prepared by the Packard Humanities Institute. The ability to call up any document instantly by author, recipient, date, or subject greatly facilitated making choices. The CD-ROM has now been placed online at franklinpapers.org. The actual text of each document printed here, however, has been taken directly either from one of the thirty-eight volumes of the Papers now in print or from the original manuscript or photocopy of those not yet in print. Ellen Cohn, as editor of the definitive Papers of Benjamin Franklin, gave her expert advice and supervised the transcriptions from the originals. Lauren Shapiro and Christopher Rogers at Yale University Press made valuable suggestions about format, and Eleanor Goldberg gave valuable assistance in obtaining the illustrations. Susan Laity, in editing the final manuscript as it went to the printer, has given the book a stylistic organization, accessibility, and coherence it could not otherwise have achieved. And Nancy Ovedovitz fitted the book with a typographical design worthy of the man it celebrates.