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Prologue: The Fourth of July

Britain first dreamed the Enlightenment dream, but it was America that made it happen. To be precise it made it happen at about ten thirty in the morning of Thursday, the Fourth of July, 1776.[1] On that day fifty or so delegates from thirteen of the British American colonies came to a vote on adopting the amended text of the Declaration of Independence. Of these, all but New York, who pleaded for more time, assented. Inside the Pennsylvania State House, where the Second Continental Congress was taking place, a little piece of bureaucratic theatre ensued. It is not recorded but it is easily imagined. The document was attested by the slender, dark, Irish-born secretary Charles Thomson. It was then passed along to be authorised by the imposing figure of John Hancock, the Boston merchant who was serving as the President of Congress. As Hancock's hand flourished and his quill scratched across the paper, the umbilical cord that had connected colonial America to the mother country for more than a century and a half was cut.

Memories of that occasion would remain with the text's principal author for the rest of his life. Ten days before his death – he died with impeccable timing on 4 July 1826 – Thomas Jefferson recalled the 'host of worthies, who joined with us on that day, in the bold and doubtful election we were to make for our country, between submission or the sword'. It was a happy reflection, Jefferson acknowledged, that half a century on, the wisdom of their actions had been borne out. The Declaration turned out to be a signal, 'arousing men to burst the chains, under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government'. Ever since that day, Jefferson added, 'all eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man'.[2]

There was no such clarity as the sun rose over the Delaware on 4 July 1776. That morning was refreshingly cool in Philadelphia. As

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Jefferson left his lodgings on Seventh and Market Street for the short journey to the State House, temperatures were yet to nudge into the seventies. As for the business of the day, Jefferson, like everyone else, knew what was coming. The great confrontation had taken place three days earlier, on 1 July, when the faction opposed to independence – led by the Philadelphian lawyer John Dickinson – made one last, impassioned plea for caution. The thirteen colonies, united or not, were wretchedly vulnerable. In New York a mighty British fleet was expected any day, and when they arrived they would find their opponents without money, allies or munitions. To go to war against Great Britain in such circumstances, Dickinson starkly put it, was, 'to brave the storm in a skiff made of paper'.[3]

Dickinson was answered by John Adams, the delegate from Massachusetts, whose tireless advocacy for independence had made him the star of Congress. Adams was a man who perfectly conformed to Edmund Burke's description of American lawyers as 'acute, inquisitive, dextrous, prompt in attack, ready in defence, full of resources'.[4] Over the past months Adams had done as much as anyone to bring the issue of independence to a head. As he rose in reply to Dickinson on 1 July, a spectacular summer storm broke. With the debates inside the State House wreathed in secrecy, no record of Adams's words would be preserved for posterity. But those who witnessed his speech considered it to be the finest of his life. Adams argued with resolve, and with touches of brilliance. He made the case for courage. A tense vote on independence followed the next day. The issue was decided.

Attention then transferred to the wording of the Declaration. It was nearly a month since 11 June when Jefferson had been appointed to a body – later solemnised in history as 'The Committee of Five' – charged with preparing the document. The as-yet unwritten declaration's chief purpose was the setting out of the colonies' rationale for separating with Britain, should that be their decision. Still something of a stripling among the other delegates at thirty-three, Jefferson had hitherto appeared as a brooding, silent, relatively untested member of Congress. But as a Virginian he had the advantage of being a representative of the most populous and influential colony and ever since his pamphlet, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774), he had been marked out for his perceptive mind and lucent, supple prose.

After his appointment to the committee, Jefferson was delegated – seemingly by Adams – the task of preparing an initial draft. This was

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no easy assignment. So much had been said during the past decade. So many claims and counterclaims. Jefferson's challenge was to marshal all the years of collected experience into a single text: one that would function both as a legal indictment that clarified the crimes of the past, and as a piece of philosophy that pointed the way to a beckoning future. To achieve this Jefferson would need to find a persuasive mode of expression, but at the same time he had to take care not to overextend himself. He could not stray beyond the ideas that had already been expressed in Congress.

Jefferson met this challenge in sparkling style. From its opening sentence, 'When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for a people to advance from that subordination in which they have hitherto remained,'[5] his words flowed with what the historian Carl Lotus Becker has termed 'that felicitous, haunting cadence which is the peculiar quality of Jefferson's best writing'.[6] When Adams first read the draft, he found himself 'delighted with its high tone, and the flights of Oratory with which it abounded'.[7] Some parts of the preamble were then tightened or fortified by Adams and Benjamin Franklin, who were also on the Committee of Five. Together they also scrutinised Jefferson's list of twenty-four distinct charges against King George III, before the draft was submitted for consideration.[8] Then Jefferson's agonies truly began. Words, phrases, entire paragraphs were picked over, quibbled at or struck out as Congress sought to find a balance that was palatable to all.

By the morning of 4 July, with about a quarter of his initial draft deleted, Jefferson's miseries were at an end. Perhaps the tall, rangy Virginian enjoyed a morning stroll to the State House, along Philadelphia's clean, cobbled, regular streets. Or perhaps, like the gentleman that he was, he rode his horse. We do not know. We can only be sure that at about breakfast time, Abraham Clark, a delegate from New Jersey, was confiding in a letter home that a declaration, 'I expect, will this day pass Congress. It is nearly gone through, after which it will be Proclaimed with all the State and Solemnity circumstances will admit. It is gone so far that we must now be a free independent State, or a Conquered Country.'[9]

Several items of business lay before Congress that morning. Adopting the amended text of the Declaration was second on the list. So it was that in mid-morning a fair, handwritten copy of the text was produced. It was presumably a single sheet of standard crown paper, 15 by

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20 inches, but one that, as Jefferson with his tidy, quantifying mind might have calculated, would reduce the size of the British Empire by around 400,000 square miles. This crucial document in the history of the United States is now missing, presumed destroyed. But we can just about catch sight of it in our mind's eye, the words flowing along in Jefferson's suave, schoolmasterly hand.

Much of the emotive language – on slavery, on King George – had been scratched out during the previous days. But the most flourishing phrase of all had survived, with only minimal adjustment, to the end. This was a trio of nouns that appeared in the second sentence, nouns that grew rhythmically and enchantingly in length. These words were destined one day to become an evergreen mantra for politicians, and a shorthand for that ideal we call the American Dream.

'Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.'

Over the past quarter millennium this felicitous line has become world famous. In America itself it is part of secular scripture. It is carved into the white imperial marble of Jefferson's own memorial in Washington, D.C., and it is inscribed on porcelain enamel panels inside the caverns of Mount Rushmore. Every Fourth of July readers of the *New York Times* can read the words in the paper's annual Independence Day issue, and on countless other days theatre-goers can hear the phrase delivered with irresistible style in Lin-Manuel Miranda's hit musical, *Hamilton*:

> Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness
> We fought for these ideals we shouldn't settle for less.[10]

There is a winning clarity here. So much is evoked with such little language. In a phrase of just seven words Jefferson, it seems, has captured the unique purpose and energy of the American Revolution. To hear these words is to be instantly transported back to that founding moment, a seemingly simpler time before all the traumas and antagonisms of our current age; a time when all that existed was an inspiring vision written on a piece of paper in Philadelphia.

But just as Jefferson's line has had the most vibrant of afterlives, it has a captivating pre-history too. Many have noticed that several weeks before the Declaration's appearance, in the *Virginia Declaration of*

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Rights, a lawyer called George Mason laid claim to the 'inherent rights' of the 'good people of Virginia', among which were 'the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety'.[11] Nor were such thoughts confined to America. In Britain, in the 1750s and 1760s, Samuel Johnson made repeated use of the line 'the pursuit of happiness',[12] while his rival, the republican historian Catharine Macaulay, dwelt in her own political pamphlets on the 'virtue, liberty, and happiness of society'.[13] Other instances abound, from as far back as John Locke's 'life, liberty and estate',[14] which featured in his *Two Treatises of Government* in 1689, right through to the parting words the Scottish printer William Strahan wrote to his estranged friend Benjamin Franklin in July 1775. 'I wish', Strahan signed off in terms that seem prophetic to us now, 'the Liberty and Happiness of all our Brethren with You.'[15]

There are patterns of thought here, similar to those the Harvard professor Bernard Bailyn identified in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967). Detecting these patterns, Bailyn argued, was vital if one was to unlock the subtle codes of the revolutionary era. For despite appearances, the revolution was no straightforward affair. No white American colonist before 1774 could honestly claim to be oppressed. In the colonies there was almost total freedom of speech and freedom of conscience. The colonists could trade without many restrictions, they were spared several of the taxes that were levied on their English counterparts, and they made much of their privileges as freeborn Britons – privileges that entitled them to a range of legal protections, from Habeas Corpus to the right to trial by jury. There was no Bastille on the banks of the Delaware, no Star Chamber on Broadway. Indeed, for much of the century the colonists generally wanted more of Britain than less of it. 'We have often wished', wrote William Franklin, the royal governor of New Jersey, to a London friend, 'that we could put Great Britain under sail, bring it over to this country and anchor it near us.'[16]

This is a playful line but it is one that conveys an important message. As Bailyn demonstrated in his Pulitzer Prize-winning study, and as we tend to forget today, the relationship between Great Britain and her American colonies in the pre-revolutionary years was complex. Rather than being repulsed by an overbearing parent, the colonists were often in awe of a nation they considered uniquely special. It is easy to see why. For the first seventy-six years of the eighteenth-century,

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it was Britain that was generally regarded as the glamorous, revolutionary nation. It was the English, after all, who had thrown off two tyrannical monarchs in the previous century, obtaining for her people a spectrum of rights virtually unknown anywhere else in the world. The most satisfying and enduring of these episodes, and the one that truly gave Britain its glossy, modern sheen, was the Glorious Revolution of 1688, when James II and his Catholicism were chased out of the kingdom. The following year a Bill of Rights was passed, curbing the Crown's power, preventing the levying of taxes without Parliamentary consent, banning the keeping of a standing army during peacetime and ensuring the free election of political representatives. These were some of the privileges enjoyed uniquely by British citizens, a place where people loved to speak of their Parliament as the greatest assembly in the world.

So it was that for much of the eighteenth century the colonists gazed east, much as we look to the west today, towards a land of liberty. It was commonly held that it was there, in Great Britain, that the purest, most exhilarating and fulfilling form of life was to be experienced. This was the kind of life that was written about in the periodical essays and novels, magazines and newspapers: the kind of enlightened life that was being lived by philosophers like Isaac Newton, wits like Joseph Addison, adventurers such as George Anson and the prosperous, buccaneering merchants of the City of London. It was the kind of life people wanted to experience for themselves and it was the kind of life that was worth defending if it ever came under sustained attack.

In the 1760s, as Bailyn showed, this is precisely what the colonists believed was happening. From their distant position, an ocean's width away from the hub of political power in London, they detected what they interpreted as an artfully laid plot against their liberty. The plot, Bailyn wrote, 'transformed the meaning' of their struggle. It converted them from zealous partisans into unruly rebels, whose burning ambition was to protect the privileges and liberties they believed were being snatched away. The conviction that such a plot existed 'added an inner accelerator to the movement of opposition'. Whether the conspiracy was real or not was less important than the fact that the colonists thought it was. This belief 'could not be easily dispelled: denial only confirmed it, since what conspirators profess is not what they believe; the ostensible is not the real; and the real is deliberately malign.'

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> It was this – the overwhelming evidence, as they saw it, that they were faced with conspirators against liberty determined at all costs to gain ends which their words dissembled – that was signalled to the colonists after 1763, and it was this above all else that in the end propelled them into Revolution. [17]

The conspiracy against liberty that Bailyn identifies is a familiar one to historians of the eighteenth century. It centres on political events in Westminster in the years following the accession of King George III in 1760 and the Treaty of Paris in 1763. Key to it are the taxes that were laid by the British Parliament on the American colonies in the years 1765 and 1767. The astonishing story of John Wilkes played a vital role too. The colonists followed Wilkes's dramatic career obsessively, and in it they found proof of what they suspected. A tyrannical cabal absolutely was attempting to destroy the liberties that set Britain apart. It was of the utmost importance that they oppose any attempts to execute the same scheme in America. In this way the revolutionary dynamic was set. The channel of events was put into a course that would flow towards the Pennsylvania State House on 4 July 1776.

Today the line 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' is strongly associated with the events of the Fourth of July. But over the years I have come to think of it as having a broader meaning; one that should not be confined to a single moment in time. For contained in that phrase is so much revealing history. 'Life' gives us not only Locke's theory about a person's 'natural right' to biological life, but something that meant just as much to figures like Jefferson at the time. This was the 'Enlightenment' life, that questing, expansive and empowering form of existence that arose in a distinctive (and morally suspect) form in Britain during the first half of the eighteenth century. 'Liberty' is a word that captures better than any other the political strife of the 1760s that shattered the harmony between the colonies and the mother country. 'Happiness', meanwhile, is an aspiration that drives to the core of what the delegates in 1776 were striving to achieve. Some of them were utopians; others were gritty pragmatists. They were all, however, motivated by the pursuit of an ideal identified by the historian Darrin M. McMahon as 'a radical new force during the Age of Enlightenment'.[18]

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Contained within this line, then, is a compelling, unfolding story:

Enlightenment Britain; the political crisis; a dream of something better. This is the story I tell in this book. To make sense of a history that is complex, I have abandoned the overarching narrative to focus instead on a number of significant, mainly British participants, whose involvement in the events of their time is often underplayed. Among them are the impetuous politician John Wilkes; the formidable man of letters Samuel Johnson; the republican historian Catharine Macaulay; and the ruthless polemicist Thomas Paine. All these, as we shall see, thought just as long and hard about life, liberty and happiness as Thomas Jefferson did.

But at the heart of this story are two other men. One, Benjamin Franklin, is universally known today as a Founding Father and arguably the greatest American that ever lived. The other, William Strahan, is only remembered by a tiny few. The friendship between the two, however, is one of the most extraordinary of the time. It is a friendship that reveals more about that most complex and significant of events, the American Revolution, than just about any other.

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Life

(1740–1759)

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1

A New Man

On 11 December 1740, as the first snow of winter fell in the city of Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin released the most thrilling issue of his newspaper for months. It was days like this that printers relished, when they had a story to turn heads and ignite conversation. But for Franklin, the printer and proprietor of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, this excitement was tempered by anxiety. Because for all the drama of his front page story, he knew that tucked away inside the paper was something far more explosive.

That December Franklin was a month shy of his thirty-fifth birthday. He was an instantly recognisable figure in the raucous streets around his Market Street print shop. He stood at a modestly tall five feet nine inches, had golden brown hair, deep set hazel eyes and, although often hesitant or reticent in conversation, he was decisive in action. As he flitted between Market Street and the Pennsylvania State House, where he oversaw political proceedings as Clerk of the Assembly, he gave off a faint air of prosperity. He wore a silk-lined coat in the winter months, along with Holland shirts that ruffled at the sleeves. These flashes of affluence, conspicuous enough in a colonial society that was highly alert to such details, still fell short of true refinement. To study Franklin more closely was to see he was a working man. He was bull-necked. His chest and shoulders were powerful from years of heaving type cases and working the press. Although he was now edging into middle age, people could still just about glimpse the athletic boy who, long before he was known for anything else, was known for his skill as a swimmer in the turbulent waters of Boston harbour.

That childhood in Boston was now almost two decades behind him. He was born in 1706, the youngest son of a tallow chandler, Josiah Franklin, and his second wife Abiah. His youth was spent within the confines of the family – working first as his father's assistant, later as

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his brother's apprentice – in the austere culture of Puritan New England. Few of Franklin's contemporaries in Philadelphia knew much of this. Like so many in the boisterous young city, he had simply appeared one day in 1723 at the riverside, unkempt, disoriented, and, as he later remembered, with no more than 'a Dutch dollar and about a Shilling in Copper' to his name.[1]

Seventeen years later, many of those who had seen Franklin enter Philadelphia for the first time – a scene he would later brilliantly recount in his *Autobiography* – had vanished from the streets, carried away by the transience of life in the colonies. But while scores had died, failed or left to start anew, Franklin had prospered. His talent and drive marked him out from the start. He forged friendships with most of the ingenious figures of the city, like the book-loving Joseph Breintnall and the self-taught mathematician Thomas Godfrey. Soon after his arrival no less a man than Pennsylvania's governor, Sir William Keith, took notice of him. It was he who encouraged Franklin to cross the Atlantic to London for what turned out to be a formative eighteen-month stay in 1725–6. Apart from this one interlude, however, Philadelphia had always remained his home. By 1740, seventeen years after his arrival, he was established as a prominent citizen in the boisterous, expanding and fiercely competitive city, thickly enmeshed in its business and politics.

Anchoring Franklin to the centre of the city's everyday life was his newspaper. He released the *Gazette* on Thursdays, beneath the tagline: '*Containing the freshest Advices Foreign and Domestick*.' That week he had got hold of a delicious front-page story for his readers. It was told in a series of letters that had been written four months earlier in the Irish town of Nenagh. They described a horseback pursuit across rural Ireland. The chase had begun when a notorious band of robbers, the Kellymount Gang, 'well mounted and armed,' had been seen crossing from County Kilkenny into Tipperary. Catching the scent, twelve 'young and stout Fellows' had vowed to run them to ground. 'Never was there a Pursuit so vigorously carried on for the Time,' one letter affirmed. The hunt had extended over a vast region, from the meadows of Queen's County to the banks of the Shannon. It included two white-knuckle shootouts, one up a 'black Mountain' near a hill called Devil's Bit.[2] Coming mere months after the highwayman, Richard 'Dick' Turpin, had been executed at York, this was enthralling copy. For Philadelphia's sizeable community of Irish immigrants, in

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particular, it was a cocktail of adventure and nostalgia that could hardly be bettered.

Newspaper stories like these acted like portals. They were mechanisms that temporarily carried readers away from their isolated position on the fringes of the Empire, back to the Old World where they could, for a moment, feel the damp Irish breeze on their cheeks. This was something new and exciting. For all human history the bounds of life had been narrow. Life had been experienced in the parish and, when necessary, explained in the church. Newspapers altered this. With their rise, a kind of vicarious experience had emerged. A reader in Philadelphia could pick up a newspaper and find themselves a fly on a wall inside the court of George II, or aboard a fighting frigate in the Channel, or gazing at the gallows in an English county town.

Following an emerging formula, which appealed to a readership that was hyper-sensitised to news from the Old World, Franklin prioritised the best British and European stories by placing them at the start of his four-page paper. The later parts were reserved for domestic news, notices of runaways, inventories of newly arrived ships and adverts for land sales. It was in this section of the newspaper, on 11 December 1740, that Franklin inserted a piece that, in an understated way, eclipsed his lead story. It was written by Franklin himself. His 800 words were crowded into a single column in small type. 'The Public has been entertain'd for these three Weeks past', it began, 'with angry Papers, written expressly against me, and publish'd in the *Mercury*.'

> The *two first* I utterly neglected, as believing that both the Facts therein stated, and the extraordinary Reasonings upon them, might be safely enough left to themselves, without any Animadversion; and I have the Satisfaction to find, that the Event has answered my Expectation: But the *last*, my Friends think 'tis necessary I should take some Notice of . . .[3]

For those who knew Franklin, this was curious from the start. Throughout his career he had established a reputation for reserve. New acquaintances were often perplexed by this, finding him a difficult person to read. Unforthcoming in private, Franklin had taken equal care not to embroil himself in public disputes. However much enflamed by injustice, he had come to the conviction that forbearance was almost always the best way. It was an ethos that Franklin not only adhered to

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himself, it was one he propagated over and again to readers of his best-selling *Poor Richard's Almanack*:

> He that lieth down with dogs, shall rise up with fleas.
> It is better to take many injuries, than to give one.
> None preaches better than the ant, and she says nothing.[4]

But for a few weeks at the end of 1740, Franklin was provoked out of this pose. For all its charms, Franklin knew that Philadelphia, the 'City of Brotherly Love', was a ruthless place. It was a place, as Franklin decided, where even the ant must occasionally take a stand.

By 1740 thirteen British colonies existed along a narrow, continuous strip on the eastern coast of the North American continent. Their establishment had been the work of the previous century. Beginning as nothing more than vulnerable beachheads, held by a determined few, each of the colonies had gradually broken free from their enclave origins. By the 1740s they stretched several hundred miles inland. In this time, justified by the charters that they carried from the King of England, the settlers had built towns and roads, and established farms, all the time pushing further and further into lands that for tens of thousands of years had been home to the Indigenous American peoples. Few were troubled by this. Instead, more than a century after the first wooden houses were constructed at Jamestown in Virginia, the settlers retained a romantic sense of mission. This was a sensation that was equally felt by the preachers of Boston, the merchants of New York and the planters of Virginia.

Regional stereotypes such as these were well established by the 1740s. But behind them lay thirteen complex colonial worlds that operated in their own distinct ways, with their own particular hopes and concerns. They were all united, however, by the bond they continued to share with Great Britain. This was a foundational relationship that was both structural and emotional. It was often described, then as now, in terms of a mother and her children. It is an appealing image but it is one that needs to be qualified. If Britain was the mother, then she was something of an erratic one. Often distracted by her own domestic cares, and more interested in financial growth than anything else, she had never quite got around to defining the limit of her children's freedom.

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While the colonies were indulged to some extent – being nourished by British trade and held together by a framework of English law – they were generally left alone to deal with their own problems. The colonists broadly liked this dynamic. It allowed them to grow without too much intrusion from London, while at the same time they knew that if any great problem appeared they could send petitions across the Atlantic to the king. These, however, rarely elicited a quick reply. The news took anywhere between one and two months to travel between America and Britain and, thanks to the prevailing winds, it usually took even longer to come back. Even when a petition arrived in Westminster it was rarely dealt with quickly. By the 1740s there was really only one word that made the British establishment, either at St James's or in the Palace of Westminster, sit up and think hard about America. That word was 'France'.

This was the second vital aspect of the colonial dynamic. For as much as the colonies cherished their founding bond with Great Britain, they shared a distrust of the ancient enemy. The French, as everyone well knew, had their own designs on the North American continent. And while the British colonies had been growing on the Atlantic coast, far away, inside the boundless interior, the French had been making charts, building forts and striking treaties with peoples like the Odawa or the Abenaki. The anxiety the colonists felt in 1740 could be understood by simply glancing at a map. Surrounding the British colonial strip to its north and west lay an enormous territory known simply as New France. In recent years apprehensions concerning this had become muddled up with something else. The 1730s had been filled with territorial and trade squabbles with the other great European power, Spain. There had been differences concerning the newest and southernmost of the colonies, Georgia, and there had been confrontations in the Caribbean. These spats had ripened into formal war in 1739, and due to the *Pacte de Famille* between King Philip V of Spain and his Bourbon nephew, Louis XV of France, escalation was feared. To those who lived in British America, it seemed as if the long-anticipated contest for supremacy on the continent was soon to begin.

The Province of Pennsylvania was situated in the middle of these British American colonies, tucked away from the Atlantic coast behind New Jersey. There was something special about this place. Founded on the basis of a charter that had been granted on 4 March 1681, sixty years on it remained, along with Delaware and Maryland, one of the

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few proprietary colonies* and it retained the utopian aura of its founder. William Penn was a remarkable figure. Described by one historian as being a mix of 'courtier and sectarian; saint, schemer, and scholar',[5] he was the wealthy son of an English admiral who had the vision of creating 'a free Colony for all mankind'.[6] Penn's project was a response to the religious strife that had riven English society in the seventeenth century. A convert to the new Quaker sect, he had seen at first hand the need for a place where a person's freedom of conscience was guaranteed. When Charles II had given him lands in the New World in lieu of debts owed to his father, Penn set about establishing a society where no one was to be injured on religious grounds and where everyone was welcome so long as they believed in one Christian God.

Penn named this experimental colony 'Pennsylvania', or Penn's Wooded Country, and he had decided that 'a green country town' was to lie at its heart.[7] He engaged an English surveyor called Thomas Holme to realise this vision. Having crossed the Atlantic, Holme had started work in 1683. It was at precisely this time that Isaac Newton was beginning his *Principia Mathematica*, three thousand miles away at Trinity College in Cambridge. Newton's masterpiece and Holme's *Portraiture of the City of Philadelphia* were entirely different works, but they were both expressions of the same emerging culture. They conformed to a central tenet of Enlightenment thinking: that order was Nature's first law. Holme's streets were not haphazard. They did not twist and turn outwards from a cathedral or a castle. Instead he designed a grid of intersecting streets that slotted into an area, two miles by one, between two rivers. A few avenues and a central square were Holme's

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* Over time different types of colony had evolved. There were royal colonies 'governed directly by the Crown through a governor and council', chartered colonies 'governed by royal charter without direct interference from the Crown', and proprietary colonies, which were governed by a proprietor who had been awarded a charter by the monarch to govern with 'the fullest prerogatives of government'. Many of the thirteen east-coast colonies that existed in 1740 were founded in the seventeenth century as proprietorships. As they developed most converted into Crown colonies as the British monarchy sought to concentrate power. In addition to this grouping, Britain had around a dozen other colonial possessions in the New World. These included Nova Scotia and Newfoundland in the north-east of the continent, as well as Caribbean islands like Barbados and Jamaica.

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only flourishes. Philadelphia's allure was not only its tolerance; it was also its regularity. In the coffee houses of London this 'green country town' was soon being talked of as a beacon of rationalism: an enlightened settlement in a land filled with space and promise.

Set beside the broad Delaware, roughly eighty miles upstream from the Atlantic Ocean, and opening out onto fine, fertile lands, Philadelphia's potential was easy to see. Letters back to Europe spoke of charming creeks, vast apple orchards and the huge pigs that roamed the nearby woodlands, fattening themselves on fallen peaches. Whether this was propaganda or not, by 1740 people knew at any rate that Philadelphia now ranked among the largest settlements in the colonies. Where seventy years before the Lenape had hunted deer in woodlands and panthers were to be found prowling among whortleberry bushes, there now stood civic buildings and churches. A Quaker aristocracy controlled the politics and mercantile affairs of the town, whose inhabitants, owing to Penn's insistence on religious tolerance, also included Anglicans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans and Catholics. While many, like Franklin, had family ties to England, there were others with links to Scotland, Ireland and Sweden, and, especially in what was called the 'back country' there were communities from Germany and Holland. More elusive in the archives, but visible everywhere, were slaves of African origin. They had formed part of Philadelphia's social fabric since its earliest years and, by 1740, comprised around a tenth of its population.[8]

Any of these people could be found in 1740 milling together on Holme's little network of streets. While by European standards Philadelphia remained a modest size – its population of 10,000 was still only around half of that of Bristol – its handsome, brick-built State House, under construction since 1732, and elegant Christ Church added touches of refinement. Commerce was brisk too. Situated at the centre of British America, on the post road that ran for a thousand miles between Boston and Charleston, it was a natural hub. Outside Franklin's printing shop on Market Street flowed a constant stream of traffic. There were rowdy parties of sailors with their broad trousers, scarlet waistcoats and pigtails, Quakers in their beaver hats, gentlemen with swords hanging at their sides, hawkers, maids and stevedores, hauling goods from the riverside to the open-air stalls of the bustling Jersey Market.

While the stream of faces was ever changing, Franklin's New Printing Office remained a constant feature of this lower stretch of Market

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Street. It was here, aged twenty-two, in 1728, that he had first set up his press. By 1740 his business had developed substantially. It was now something that is best imagined as an upstairs-downstairs operation. While Benjamin oversaw the printing upstairs, on the ground floor his wife Deborah stewarded a general store. Often marginalised in the Franklin story, Debby's contribution to the family's success was substantial. She kept the accounts, served customers and, with each passing year, enhanced the range of stock for sale. A trip to Franklin's on Market Street meant more than a chance to buy a *Gazette* or stationery, like quills, paper and inkstands. Visitors could also pick up tea leaves and goose feathers; luxuries such as chocolate; watches and telescopes; and Franklin specialities like the family's very own Crown Soap.

While paying for any of these, customers could hear the creaks and groans of the press. More often than not these were signs that a fresh issue of the *Gazette*, produced weekly since Franklin had taken control of the title in 1729, was on the way. But in the autumn months it might also have been the sound of the best-selling *Poor Richard's Almanack* going into print. One of Franklin's chief ambitions in his early days in business had been to successfully enter the almanac market. It was here that the best and surest money was to be made. Almanacs were pocket-sized, cheaply bound and filled with practical details for everyday use, like the phases of the Moon, calculations of the tides or prognostications of the weather. Simply written and practical, they were hugely popular. For many of the working people in colonial America – farmers, builders, smiths and sailors – an almanac was the only kind of book they owned apart from a Bible.

After several aborted attempts, Franklin had launched *Poor Richard's Almanack* at Christmas 1732. In many respects it was a conventional performance, with its content structured around the months of the year and enlivened with little verses and predictions. But a clever ploy made it stand out. As a young boy in Boston Franklin had been besotted with the daring and creativity of writers like Jonathan Swift, Richard Steele and Joseph Addison. From all of these Franklin borrowed elements to create a persona that was irresistible to his readers. 'Richard Saunders' introduced himself in the debut *Almanack* as a humble country man, who passed his nights gazing up at the stars and toying with his philosophical instruments, which his long-suffering wife Bridget derided as his 'rattling-traps'.[9] Once he had divined his predictions for the next

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year, Saunders, or so the pretence went, then transmitted them to Franklin in Market Street for printing.

Polite and gentle, Richard Saunders was an easy man to like. But what Philadelphians loved most about him was his dark humour. In his first tenderly written preface, Saunders casually predicted the sudden death of his chief rival in the almanac trade, a man named Titan Leeds. ‘He dies,’ Saunders wrote, ‘by my Calculation made at his Request, on Oct. 17, 1733, 3 ho., 29m., P.M., at the very instant of the ☌ of ☉ and ☿.’[10] Such audacity was unprecedented in the colonial almanac trade and it elicited the expected response from Titan Leeds, who declared himself at the first opportunity to be very much alive. In response he attacked this Richard Saunders as ‘a false predicter, an ignorant, a conceited scribbler, a fool, and a lyar’.[11] With everything going perfectly to plan, Franklin seized his opportunity to twist the knife one more time. He replied:

> Mr Leeds was too well bred to use any man so indecently and so scurrilously, and moreover his esteem and affection for me was extraordinary: so that it is to be feared that pamphlet may be only a contrivance of somebody or other, who hopes, perhaps, to sell two or three years’ Almanacks still, by the sole force and virtue of Mr Leeds’ name.[12]

What Franklin knew, but most of his readers did not, was that this whole episode was an almost perfect replication of an infamous hoax perpetrated by Jonathan Swift in London a generation before. Franklin, though, could hardly have expected it to go as well as it did. Saunders’ temerity thrilled readers so much that the first number of *Poor Richard’s* sold out instantly. Its readership had continued to expand ever since, so that by 1740 it was selling a remarkable 10,000 copies a year right across the colonies, from the windswept north to the sunny south.

This success had provided Franklin with an unexpected opportunity. His initial aim was to make money out of the title but, seeing the extent of its reach, he had begun to sense other possibilities. With the colonies still so young and lacking a unified identity, Franklin realised that *Poor Richard’s* provided him with a platform which he could use to spread his ideas about how an ‘American life’ – which Franklin thought of as a life of the colonists’ own making, constructed inside the safety

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of their own property – might be lived. 'I consider'd it as a proper Vehicle', he reflected, 'for conveying Instruction among the common People, who bought scarce any other Books.'[13] Franklin disseminated this 'instruction' through pithy, often funny maxims that he sprinkled throughout the pages.

> Great talkers, little doers.
> Nothing but money, is sweeter than honey.
> The worst wheel of the cart makes the most noise.
> Where there's marriage without love, there will be love without marriage.
> Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.[14]

Poor Richard's and the *Gazette* might have been Franklin's best-known publications, but his press was more often than not busy with other work. These were the bonds and counterbonds, bills of sale, apprentice indentures and promissory notes: the documents that were the cogs and gears of the Georgian world. Franklin really was, as the writer Jill Lepore has genially put it, 'a jack-of-all-pages'.[15]

One of Franklin's great advantages in business was his strategic mind. He had a natural ability to step back from the emotion of a situation so he could better interpret it with logic. This talent equipped him well for chess, a game he played with single-mindedness from youth. He wrote revealingly about the chain of thoughts that passed through his mind when a game was in process. 'If I move this piece, what will be the advantage of my new situation? What use can my adversary make of it to annoy me? What other moves can I make to support it, and to defend myself from his attacks?'[16]

Franklin's cool strategising made him a difficult character to read. But for those with the sharpest eyes there were signs during the late summer of 1740 that something was being planned in the Market Street shop. The most conspicuous evidence of this were the visits of a local conveyancer called John Webbe. Webbe is a hazy figure to us today. Little can be said for sure of his life apart from the fact that he was 'Scotch Irish', a name given to those who had migrated from the northern part of Ireland. Where people came from mattered. Those, like Franklin, who could trace their family back to England were esteemed

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in the colonial caste system. 'To be an Old England-man,' Franklin recalled, 'was, of itself, a character of some respect, and gave a kind of rank among us.'[17] By contrast the Scots Irish endured a low reputation. People considered them to be wild, uncouth and untrustworthy, and the *Gazette* abounded with stories of Irish runaways and petty criminals. Franklin, however, was clearly more disposed to Webbe. He was an educated man with an interest in politics who had contributed several pieces to the *Gazette* over the years. In late 1740, Franklin had decided to make him into something more.

The project he had in mind was an attractive one. With the *Gazette* on a steady footing, *Poor Richard's* going well and his finances healthy, Franklin had decided that the time was ripe to take on the latest and most exciting form in journalism. Sometime in early 1741 he planned to release America's first-ever magazine. Until a decade before, 'magazine' had been used exclusively to denote a military storehouse. But in 1731, playing on the idea that words were weapons, a London printer called Edward Cave had converted the term for a new use. Cave's title, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, was billed as a storehouse of ideas. At forty pages long, it was longer than a newspaper, and with twelve monthly issues it was more regular than an almanac. Opening Cave's magazine readers could enjoy a range of the best weekly essays, pieces of poetry, snippets of news, lists of notable births, deaths and marriages, the prices of goods at the Exchange and a catalogue of recently published books. All of this, carefully selected and edited, was distilled into one elegant publication, and one, Cave estimated, that spared his readers the task of sifting '200 *Half-sheets per Month*'.[18]

Due to the sheer amount of work involved, people expected Cave's project to fail within months. But there turned out to be something attractive about magazines. Soon Cave was selling between two and three thousand copies every month and demand increased with every passing year. Central to this success was the format. With a month to prepare each issue Cave was able to compile a publication of breadth, quality and style. In an age that still lacked a central body of reference works these characteristics were appealing. Readers began to treat his magazine as an authority. They would thumb through it to check a date or a name or to settle an argument. To this authority, Cave added innovation. Each year he pioneered a new journalistic technique. He ran poetry competitions, immersive historical essays, original features on scientific discoveries like electricity, and cleverly disguised (to avoid

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the official censor) records of Parliamentary debates. His latest innovation had come just one year earlier, in 1739, when a range of original woodcut maps appeared alongside a feature on the complex geography of Crimea and Ukraine.

Franklin, who had spent a formative eighteen months working in London's printing houses as a young man, loved the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Years later he would affirm that, despite its many imitators, it had 'always been, in my Opinion, by far the best'.[19] The contents were excellent enough, but Cave had added to them an air of aspiration. While the loaded term 'gentleman' featured prominently in the title, the magazine was not exclusively written for the monied few who sauntered around St James's in their elegant attire. Instead it was a title that could be picked up by a successful merchant in the city, or a clever apprentice who wanted to animate his mind with knowledge. This was a characteristic Franklin admired. He had long rooted his own identity in what he called the 'middling sort'. These were the industrious, practical people who, to his mind, were the heartbeat and future of colonial America. They were the people with whom he had established clubs and collaborated on civic projects ever since he had been in Philadelphia. Now they were the prospective readers he had in mind in late 1740 as he entered into discussions with John Webbe about producing an American magazine.

Webbe was vital to Franklin's plan because there was no way he could compile the magazine himself. Over the previous years Franklin had taken on a growing number of official posts. In 1736 he secured the role of Clerk of the colony's Assembly, a position which gave him 'a better Opportunity of keeping up an Interest among the Members'.[20] The following year he was appointed to an even more desirable office. As postmaster for Pennsylvania he had taken overall responsibility for storing, sorting and delivering all of the letters – both foreign and domestic – that passed through the colony. These responsibilities came on top of Franklin's other professional and civic commitments. To add to them the challenge of compiling a magazine was a step too far.

Webbe presented a solution to this problem. He was a tolerably good writer with a curiosity about politics, and he was seeking a challenge. Although he was certainly no Edward Cave, the pool of suitable literary men in Philadelphia was not large. A series of meetings was held and discussions developed into an agreement. The magazine, it was decided, was to be a joint venture. Webbe was to oversee the

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editorial content while Franklin was to assume responsibility for production and distribution. Franklin had settled on a cover price of fifteen shillings for an annual subscription. This was substantially more than the ten shillings he charged for the *Gazette*, but it reflected the costs of production and superior quality of the contents. As to profits, Franklin was to reap seventy-five per cent of the proceeds from the first 2,000 copies sold. Should the magazine sell more than that, the excess would be evenly split between the two of them.

This is how things stood in the autumn of 1740, when all of Franklin's carefully laid plans came crashing down. The astonishing, enraging moment arrived in the first week of November when his bitter rival, the printer Andrew Bradford, produced an advertisement for a magazine of his own. This three-page 'plan' was carried in Bradford's newspaper, the *American Weekly Mercury*. To complement the *Mercury*, the advert revealed, this new production was to be called the *American Magazine*. It was to be a monthly compendium of 'publick affairs', or 'A PUBLICK THEATRE . . . on which the most remarkable Transactions of each Government may be *impartially* represented.'[21] Although the plan was signed by Bradford, by now Franklin surely knew the worst of it. Not only had he been outmanoeuvred by his old rival, Franklin had also been double-crossed. For the editor of this *American Magazine* was to be one John Webbe.

'Three may keep a Secret, if two of them are dead,' Franklin wrote in *Poor Richard's* in 1735.[22] It was a maxim he would often have cause to reflect on in Philadelphia, where business dealings were notoriously knockabout. But there was something especially maddening about Webbe's treachery in 1740. Franklin channelled his outrage into an announcement of his own. He answered the advert in the *Mercury* at the first opportunity, in the *Gazette* of 13 November. He revealed to his readers that he, too, had been planning to print a magazine. In fact Franklin's *General Magazine* would be released *before* Bradford's *American Magazine*, '*In* January *next*'. He elaborated:

> This MAGAZINE, in Imitation of those in *England*, was long since projected; a Correspondence is settled with Intelligent Men in most of the Colonies, and small Types are procured, for carrying it on in the best Manner. It would not, indeed, have been published quite so soon, were it not that a Person, to whom the

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> Scheme was communicated in *Confidence*, has thought fit to advertise it in the last *Mercury*, without our Participation; and, probably, with a View, by Starting before us, to discourage us from prosecuting our first Design, and reap the Advantage of it wholly to himself.[23]

Having revealed the depth of Webbe's treachery, Franklin announced his price. Abandoning the original idea of selling subscriptions at 15 shillings a year, he revealed that the magazine would be sold for just ninepence an issue. Franklin would also make 'considerable Allowance to Chapmen who take Quantities'. For a man so prudent, it was this decision, more than anything else, that revealed the pitch of his rage.

What happened next was extraordinary even by the vehement standards of the time. After a weekend's brooding, by the Monday morning Webbe had decided that rather than visit Franklin to settle their differences in private, he was going to use the *Mercury* as a forum for putting Franklin on public trial. Always happy to see Franklin abused, Andrew Bradford gave Webbe all the space he wanted.

Webbe's polemic was printed under the title 'The Detection'. It amounted to a coruscating, intensely personal assault on Franklin's character. He described Franklin as a man of malicious temperament who had gratified this vice by 'blackening the Reputation of a private Person'. In the face of such a provocation, Webbe wrote, he had a civic duty to respond. If he did not defend himself then it was likely Franklin would, as he described it, 'not stop at this single Instance of spitting his Malignity from his Press, but be incouraged to proceed in making use of it as an Engine to bespatter the Characters of every other Person he may happen to dislike'.[24]

Franklin's method of smearing his opponents, Webbe elaborated, was sly. Rather than state his name directly, before outlining his accusations, Franklin had preferred to peddle insinuations relating to 'a Person'. To Webbe this was a cowardly, dishonourable formulation of language. Indeed, it was

> by far the most mischievous Kind of Lying; for the Strokes being oblique and indirect, a Man cannot so easily defend himself against them, as he might do, if they were straight and peremptory. There is something too more mean and dastardly in the Character of an

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> indirect Lyar than a direct one. *This* has the Audacity of a Highwayman, *That* the Slyness of a Pickpocket. Both indeed rob you of your Purse, and both deserve a Gibbet; but, were I obliged to pardon either, I could sooner forgive the *bold* Wickedness of the one, than the *sneaking* Villainy of the other. [25]

Having dealt with Franklin's tone, Webbe progressed to his argument. He conceded that Franklin had 'communicated' a desire of printing a magazine. But what of that? 'If that were a Consequence,' he reasoned, 'then Mr. Franklin has only to *offer* himself as a Printer of Books or Pamphlets to every Man that he thinks has a Talent for Writing, and they shall from thenceforth be restrained from publishing any Thing without his Consent.' As it was, talks between Webbe and Franklin had progressed into an agreement. But after contemplating the terms, Webbe had seen how much they were ridiculously weighted against him. Having determined that Franklin was trying to exploit his labour, he explained, 'I thought my self, on these Discoveries, even supposing there were no grosser Frauds yet behind to mention, acquitted from my Engagement.' He rounded off:

> Of what Composition, then, is the soul of that Man, who, having contrived to make a Property of his Friend, will afterwards charge him with a Violation of Trust, and *coolly* and *deliberately* endeavour to murder his Reputation in the *most publick Manner*, on which his Livelihood, tho' not in the Capacity of a Magazine-Writer, entirely depends.[26]

Webbe's 'The Detection' was printed in Bradford's *Mercury* on 20 November. To support his argument, he included a transcription of Franklin's rough notes for the magazine contract and, as an added titillation, the *Mercury*'s readers were promised 'the Remainder of the *Detection* in the next'. At a glance, it was a devastating performance. Webbe laid Franklin bare as a grasping, craven, domineering and untrustworthy businessman. But closer inspection showed a flimsiness to his argument. If Webbe's intention was to refute Franklin's claims, then had he not achieved the opposite? He had admitted that Franklin had approached him about the magazine first, and confirmed that he had subsequently broken his contract by carrying his idea to Bradford.

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Whatever the case, the weeks that followed were as uncomfortable for Franklin as they were lively for the readers of Philadelphia's newspapers. Incapable of letting the matter lie, Webbe renewed his assault with greater vigour over three consecutive issues. Abandoning his idea of a 'detection', he instead ran line by line through Franklin's advert for the *General Magazine*, treating his plan with scorn and sarcasm. Finding similarities between his and Franklin's '*ideas*', he likened his plight to that of the Roman poet Virgil who, having written some elegant lines in honour of Caesar, had been amazed to discover a mediocre poet called Bathyllus claiming them for his own. Even by Webbe's standards this was high-flown stuff. For weeks Franklin chose not to answer. His only public comment came in characteristic style. In the newly launched *Poor Richard's Almanack* for 1741, readers were provided with another maxim. 'If you would keep your secret from an enemy, tell it not to a friend.'[27]

While he remained tight-lipped in public, privately Franklin was furious about Webbe's treachery. Rather than having the long winter months before him, during which he could experiment with designs, plan print runs and ensure the quality of the copy, he now had the irritation of a competitor and the stress of a deadline. Worst of all was the prospect of being outdone by his old rival, Andrew Bradford. For years Franklin and Bradford had loathed one another. This dislike could be traced all the way back to the first days after Franklin's arrival in Philadelphia. Then, young and penniless, Franklin had called at Bradford's print shop in search of work. He had ended up lodging with Bradford for a time and found him to be an unscrupulous operator, content to spy on rivals and steal ideas. Not only was he devious, to Franklin he reeked of privilege. Andrew was the son of William Bradford, one of the first printers in all the colonies. Raised in the trade with all of his father's plum contacts, Andrew had been able to establish himself unopposed. He had launched the *Mercury* as Philadelphia's first newspaper, been appointed postmaster and had pocketed all the fat governmental contracts, printing the laws, proclamations and minutes of the Assembly. By the time the young Franklin knocked on his door in 1723, Bradford was established: connected, wealthy and secure.

In his *Autobiography*, written decades later, Franklin's dislike of Bradford was still palpable. He derided his skill as a printer, branding him as 'very illiterate'.[28] He characterised Bradford's *Mercury* as 'a paltry thing, wretchedly manag'd, no way entertaining'.[29] Any profit

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Bradford accrued, Franklin intimated, came more from cronyism than ingenuity. For years Franklin whittled away at Braford's inky fiefdom, charming away the official contracts, building up the *Gazette* as a serious competitor to the *Mercury*, then wresting control of the almanac market with *Poor Richard's*. In 1737 Franklin struck what everyone knew to be the decisive blow. That year, in somewhat mysterious circumstances to the people of Philadelphia, he replaced Bradford as postmaster for Pennsylvania. This position brought only a token salary, but it carried prestige and gave Franklin control of the postal riders who carried not just letters, but also newspapers and almanacs to readers across the colony. He had marked his elevation by updating the *Gazette*'s imprint so that it read, tauntingly to his rival: 'Printed by B FRANKLIN, POST-MASTER.'

It is not hard to see why Bradford, stung by this series of reversals, took his chance for revenge. Now well into his fifties, Bradford's interest was more in acquiring land and property than it was in literary innovation.[30] But in his print shop on Front Street he had most of the equipment needed to produce a magazine and, with Webbe in his pocket, he had the perfect means of annoying his rival. Indeed, Webbe turned out to be an unexpectedly useful attack dog. Throughout November and into December he continued to claw away at Franklin's reputation. Was it not interesting, Webbe suggested, that Franklin had refused to reply to any of his pieces? According to all rules of logic, 'Facts *so stated*, and NOT DENIED, are, according to a *universal* Rule of judging, CONFESSED; and therefore Mr. Franklin's Silence is the *highest* Justification I can desire.'[31]

Webbe then, unwisely as it turned out, made a further allegation. Franklin was not only dishonourable as a businessman, he was vengeful too. Webbe revealed that since his elevation to the office of postmaster Franklin had abused his position infamously by preventing the postal riders from carrying copies of Bradford's *Mercury*. This was behaviour especially calculated to damage a rival business. After so many charges, personal and professional, it was this that finally brought Franklin's silence to an end.

The quarrel of late 1740 came at a poised moment in Franklin's life. He had come so far since that October morning seventeen years earlier when he had clambered out of a boat at Market Street Wharf and gazed at Philadelphia for the very first time. Now he was financially

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secure and socially connected. He was intellectually stimulated by the Friday evening meetings of his Junto or 'Leather Apron' Club, which he had formed together with most of his 'ingenious' acquaintances in 1727, 'for mutual improvement',[32] and he had acquired enough power to be able to propose and put into action projects for benefitting the community. But equally, as the new decade began, there was an undercurrent of unfulfilment. Now in his late thirties, Franklin was experiencing the sensation of time slipping past, of the melting away of his chances to truly make a mark on the history of the times.

These were unsettling thoughts. Franklin had long known that he possessed superior qualities of mind and all his business success was objective proof of this. But as yet he had no lasting legacy. He owned very little property and since the loss of his beloved son Frankie, who had died from smallpox in 1736, aged just four, it was unclear who would succeed him in business. Also frustrating was the fact that he remained stuck outside the sphere of the true elite. Franklin knew the great men of the colony. Many of them visited his shop, and with some his relationship stretched further. James Logan, the city's pre-eminent scholar, was one such person. He lived in style at a grand house to the north of the city, where he kept one of the best collections of books in the colonies. Logan thought enough of Franklin to allow him to browse his library, but along with excitement, his visits there must have been shaded by discontent. The books might have been accessible, but the world to which Logan belonged – the world of ideas, of politics, of science, of philosophy – remained out of reach for someone who, after all, remained just a provincial printer.

When Franklin started out twelve years before, an honest tradesman was all he wanted to be. He took care to cultivate his persona. He dressed plainly, kept away from the taverns, made sure that he was seen pushing his wheelbarrow, piled with papers, around the dusty streets. This was, as he later explained in his *Autobiography*, a calculated performance, intended to fix his identity as a humble but industrious artisan. Franklin's plan was successful. It brought him custom and this made him prosperous. But as he had grown more affluent, his identity had become problematic. As a tradesman, Franklin belonged to the ordinary class of workers. Such people might be industrious, they might even be ingenious, but as they spent their lives in the unvarying drudgery of practical work, those in the highest ranks of society did not believe them capable of elevated thinking. Their minds, the old

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prejudice held, were too obedient and too busy to engage with the deep, abstract demands of politics, philosophy or science.

And yet these were the fields Franklin felt himself powerfully drawn towards. As the 1740s began he was already puzzling over a problem that would preoccupy him for much of the next decade. If he was to fully realise his potential, then he would have to dismantle the very identity that he had so carefully cultivated. Could he somehow transition from an artisan into something more refined? Something that gave him more leeway to influence events? In Market Street in December of 1740, wearing his leather apron, with his blackened fingers, harassed by the cares of business and derided by John Webbe as being 'a *meer* Printer',[33] the idea of joining the true elites on their own level was too ludicrous to express. In colonial America, as in the mother country, each individual knew their place in the rigid hierarchy. This system was informed by categories like nationality, race, gender and family pedigree. There were nuances too, with some professions among the low and middling classes being seen as more respectable than others, and as many gradations among the ranks of the gentry. But at its most simplistic, as the historian Gordon Wood has pointed out, the essential distinction within colonial society was between two opposing groups: the aristocracy and the ordinary. This was the most important and fundamental of all social divisions. As Wood explains it:

> So distinctive and so separated was the aristocracy from ordinary folk that many still thought the two groups represented two orders of being. Indeed, we will never appreciate the radicalism of the eighteenth-century revolutionary idea that all men were created equal unless we see it within this age-old tradition of difference. Gentlemen and commoners had different psyches, different emotional makeups, different natures. Ordinary people were made only 'to be born and eat and sleep and die, and be forgotten'.[34]

Franklin might have embraced his ordinariness when he first set up as a printer – and much later he would proudly cultivate the story of his magnificent rise from the obscurity of his birth in Milk Street, Boston – but in 1740 it had become a source of discomfort to him. Although as a printer he was part of a new and dynamic profession, which conferred on him a powerful ability to shape and engage in culture, in itself the

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trade was still considered unrespectable. A New York printer, writing at this time, reflected that no family 'of Substance would ever put their Sons to such an Art'.[35] This was a verdict Franklin was forced to feel every time he climbed the steps to his press room.

Another mark of Franklin's ordinariness, and one he felt deeply, was his birth. Despite the fact that he was of English heritage, he was nonetheless one of seventeen children, and the youngest son at that, born to a candle maker. In Philadelphia, the best he could do with such a background was to keep quiet about it. In colonial America as in Europe, the advantages of belonging to a good family could never be underestimated. To be successful while lacking 'Hereditary Honour' was to risk being derided as a 'new man', 'an upstart' or 'the first of his family'. In an essay printed in London in 1739, a journalist explained how pervasive the prejudice was:

> I have known a Fox-hunter preferred in a Treaty of Marriage, because his Grandfather had been a General: And a Fellow that could not spell his Name, to a Man of Learning with equal Fortune, because the former had had a Lord Chancellor of the same. It is common for a Lady to have more Regard to the Arms she is to have on her Coach, than to the Companion she is to have in it.[36]

In 1740, then, Franklin was undistinguished by trade and birth as well as his marriage to Deborah, who for all her practical qualities, could never quite be considered 'polite'. And yet one day Franklin hoped to find a way into more elevated circles. How he could achieve this was a riddle. One thing, at least, was plain. To advance in the Georgian world, Franklin would have to be mindful of his character. Everyone knew that good character was the hallmark of a true gentleman. Such people were honourable, patriotic, genial, altruistic and true. They were the kind of people who would help a friend in need, who would be magnanimous when wronged, who would be fair in business and would rally to a collective cause. What they absolutely were not, was the type of person who would renege on business deals or who would hatch schemes in private to ruin their rivals.

John Webbe knew this very well. He had spent time with Franklin over the previous months and perhaps during their meetings he had sensed his ambition. Webbe also likely knew, because most Philadelphians

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did, that Franklin's was far from being the unblemished life. There had been whispers. As a young man he had a habit, as Franklin's biographer Carl Van Doren described it, of going to women 'hungrily, secretly, and briefly'.[37] These moonlight assignations had long since come to an end, but gossip continued to trail him. Who, for instance, was the mother of his son William? The boy, aged about ten in 1740, was an acknowledged and cherished part of the Franklin household but few then (and none today) knew exactly where he came from. For his critics this was the behaviour of a rascal, and one moreover who, in a world of believing and practising Christians, was hardly ever to be seen inside a church. And what of his common-law marriage? Deborah's first husband may have vanished but he had never been certified dead. Then, worst of all for those who had come to regard Franklin's activities with an air of suspicion, was his enthusiastic membership of the Freemasons. What was this new and secretive society? Was it not just another of Franklin's dishonourable ways of getting ahead?

From his very first 'Detection' in the *Mercury*, Webbe played on such doubts. He framed his pieces as exposés that sought to show the people of Philadelphia a different man to the sagacious, hard-working printer they thought they knew. The Franklin that emerged from Webbe's descriptions was a sly, unkind, embittered man. Webbe claimed to have experienced this for himself in his dealings with Franklin, but for anyone wanting further evidence there was his malicious behaviour as postmaster. What better proof of his character could there be than this? Secret orders forbidding riders from even carrying copies of his rival's newspaper? Surely this was the work of a power-hungry upstart, rather than that of a community-loving artisan.

It was this accusation that Franklin knew he had to answer. On 11 December, he decided to set the record straight. It was true, Franklin owned, that he had forbidden the post's riders from delivering any copies of Bradford's *Mercury*. But this was not something of his own doing. He was only acting on direct orders from above, in fact orders that had come from none other than Alexander Spotswood. This was a name everyone knew. For decades Spotswood had been a high-profile figure in American society, serving most notably as lieutenant governor of Virginia. On his death six months earlier, he had been mourned as one of a pioneering generation of settlers. In his last years Spotswood had served as Postmaster General of America. It was in this capacity that he had come into contact with Andrew Bradford.

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Spotswood had considered Bradford lazy. His accounts were always wretchedly late and whenever Spotswood asked after them he was met with 'trifling Excuses *and* fallacious Promises'. The Postmaster General had first decided to punish Bradford by removing him from office. But even after this – a move that had resulted in Bradford's replacement by Franklin – he had failed to turn in the necessary papers, leaving a chasm in Pennsylvania's bookkeeping that stretched all the way back to 1734. Exasperated, Spotswood had written to Franklin telling him that Bradford's behaviour was 'no longer to be born with'. It deserved to be checked with '*some Mark of my Resentment*'.[38] So it was that Spotswood had ordered Franklin to prohibit Bradford's *Mercury* from being carried by the riders as a punishment. To prove his case, Franklin had Spotswood's letter printed in full in the *Gazette*.

This was a delightful turn in the story for those who had followed the saga over the past month. What had begun as a personal quarrel about a piece of business between Franklin and Webbe had developed, as the best stories do, into a tale that sucked in others: first Bradford, then Spotswood. Where, readers could only wonder, would it lead next?

Over the following week the weather turned cold. Inside Franklin's shop the mood was tense. As the winter closed in, a period of labour as intense as any Franklin had ever known lay before him. He had promised readers his magazine in little more than a month and he had to keep his word. As he began the process of compiling materials for the *General Magazine* the air grew sharp and icy. Soon brisk flurries of snow were falling over Philadelphia, from a gloomy, threatening sky.

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The Race

The bitter weather continued as the month wore on. On 15 December the Schuylkill River, just to the west of Philadelphia, froze fast. Meanwhile plates of ice three inches thick were seen floating down the Delaware. By the twentieth these had locked and fused between the harbour and the New Jersey shore. Then, after dark on Christmas Day, temperatures plunged. The next weeks were filled with a succession of snowy days and frosty nights. By the beginning of January Philadelphia's streets were forbidding places. The ice now extended past Front Street to the quays, wharves and jetties of the riverside. In more remote areas, in the woods, plains and valleys of rural Pennsylvania, snow lay deep.

When he had first come to inspect his newly chartered lands in 1682, William Penn found his colony's climate to be not unlike the south of France. He wrote home reporting that the air was sweet and clear, the sky serene, often without a cloud. But Penn soon learned that nature was capricious at the place he had chosen for his 'Holy Experiment' in religious toleration. Thick fogs and mists could descend or foul vapours rise from the rivers and creeks with perplexing speed. Summers were breathlessly hot. Most testing of all, though, were the terrible winds that gusted from the north-west. They carried to Pennsylvania the cutting chills of the Canadian Great Lakes. During winter the air was 'dry, cold, piercing and hungry',[1] quite different to the grim, damp, black winters of England.

It was this north-westerly wind that set in during January of 1741. It brought a spell of cold that surpassed everything anyone had ever known. The snow fell for hours at a stretch. The nights of 6 and 7 January were, by common agreement, estimated 'to be the coldest Days we have had these many Years'.[2] From south of Philadelphia, at a property called Yates's Houses, came the news that a large black bear had

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appeared in the yard 'and quarrelled with the dog'.[3] Though it was trailed and shot, people were left with the disquieting thought that the cold was driving wild animals into their civilised spaces. With the roads clotted in snow and ice, supplying the city was becoming troublesome too. The best remaining route ran straight across the frozen Delaware to the New Jersey shore. By early January scores of sleds were shuttling back and forth over the ice each day, carrying wood, coal and bread.[4]

As they slid towards Philadelphia, they passed the outlines of abandoned vessels in the harbour: their masts and spars frosted white, their hulls entombed in the ice. A minute more and they were skimming across the waterline and coming to a halt on Market Street. There, as the drivers rubbed whatever warmth they could into their hands, glancing up through the snow they might have seen the glow of a fire through the upstairs window of Franklin's New Printing Office.

Inside, the task that confronted Franklin was uniquely challenging. Three great difficulties confronted him. The first was the formidable size of the magazine project, which involved a combination of creative, technical and physical demands. Second was his insufficient workforce. Over the years he had constructed a trusted team of workers, which in early 1741 included Joseph Rose, Olaf Mallendar and James Parker. But they were labouring men, unsuitable for the editorial role Webbe had left vacant. There was no way around it: Franklin was going to have to compile the magazine himself. The last of his difficulties was the weather. Intense cold created a range of maddening problems for a printer. But looking out at the snowy streets in January 1741, Franklin knew that it was something that he could not escape.

There was, at least, the excitement of a new project. The *General Magazine*, however, was not just another printing venture. It was Franklin's first chance for years to engage directly with British journalistic culture, the very kind of literary work that set the coffee shops of the Strand and Covent Garden abuzz. For Franklin this was something rare and exhilarating. To truly understand a person, Napoleon Bonaparte would observe some years into the future, to truly know what their dreams and fears are, it is vital to know what the world was like when they were twenty years old. On Franklin's twentieth birthday, in January 1726, he was living in Duke Street, off Lincoln's Inn Fields, in the vibrant heart of London.

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There were few places on the planet as exciting as London at this