

ANALYSIS

Poor Richard's Almanac (1732-57)

Benjamin Franklin

"I endeavoured to make it both entertaining and useful... I therefore filled all the little spaces that occurred between the remarkable days in the calender with proverbial sentences, chiefly such as inculcated industry and frugality as the means of procuring wealth and thereby securing virtue..." *The Autobiography*

Franklin improved upon almanacs already in print and succeeded by satisfying popular tastes for a quarter century. Above all, he wanted to be useful to the common people. Issued annually, his almanac sold about 10,000 copies a year. It was the most familiar and quoted publication in colonial America after the *Bible*. Sort of a drugstore calendar similar to the almanacs of statistics published today, it was a paperbound pamphlet of 12-36 pages that supplied daily and seasonal information for farmers (over 90% of the population), navigators and others whose work depended on weather and changing natural conditions:

1. Astronomical data: times of sunrise and sunset, conjunctions of the planets and phases of the moon.
2. Astrological predictions: weather forecasts skeptically and humorously advanced.
3. Practical counsel: recommendations of dates for planting or fishing.
4. Homely instruction & entertainment: moral precepts, proverbs, quotations, verses and jokes.

Poor Richard Saunders was a fictional character, a mask or pose reflecting the image Americans were forming of themselves as a people: independent, industrious, practical, sociable, plain, modest, honest and humorous. Richard's light entertaining allusions to his wife Bridget and to their domestic life gave the annual editions the added appeal of an ongoing narrative like a television sit-com. Later, in his *Autobiography* Franklin again adopted a simplified pose in order to be more effective as an imperfect model of practical virtues.

MOST COMMON THEMES

1. Democracy
2. Morality
3. Usefulness
4. Getting along with others
5. Making money

Michael Hollister