

DARK SECRET HISTORIES

Joe Murray Callaghan (ed.)

**Mysteries, Challenges
and Suspense in the
Enlightened XVIIIth
Century**

feat. Benjamin Franklin, Hellfire Club, Sir Francis Dashwood, Dr. William Hewson, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Joseph Haydn, Ludwig van Beethoven, Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, Giacomo Casanova,
Chevalier de Seingalt

*... and Its Intriguing Dangerous
Splendour*

INTEGRAL

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The Secret Lives of Benjamin Franklin, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Giacomo Casanova, Daniel Defoe

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Notes on the Edition

A Ladies' Man: The Secret Life of Benjamin Franklin, Distinguished Member of *Hellfire Club* and Other Secret Societies

Benjamin Franklin may have been the amazing dexterous diplomat who helped draft the Declaration of Independence in 1776, but he apparently was incredibly dexterous in another area, too: the ladies department, according to the editors of Biography.com and other sources.

“Advice to a Friend on Choosing a Mistress” is a letter written by Benjamin Franklin, dated June 25, 1745, in which Franklin gives advice to a young man about channeling sexual urges. Due to its licentious nature, the letter was not published in collections of Franklin’s papers during the nineteenth century. Federal court decisions from the mid-to-late twentieth century cited the document as a reason for overturning obscenity laws, using it to make a case against censorship. Franklin begins by advising a young man that a cure for sexual urges is unknown, and the proper solution is to take a wife. Then, expressing doubts that the intended reader will actually marry, Franklin names several advantages of marriage. As supplementary advice in case the recipient rejects all previous arguments, Franklin lists seven reasons why an older mistress is preferable to a young one. Advantages include better conversation, less risk of unwanted pregnancy, and *greater prudence in conducting an intrigue*.

According to John Richard Stevens, the unnamed correspondent is a friend of Franklin’s named Cadwaller Colton and it remains unknown whether Franklin was serious or if the letter was ever delivered. Whether serious or humorous, the letter is frankly sexual: “The Face first grows lank and wrinkled; then the Neck; then the Breast and Arms; the lower Parts continuing to the last as plump as ever: So that covering all above with a Basket and regarding only what is below the Girdle, it is impossible of two Women to know an old from a young one. And as in the dark all Cats are grey, the Pleasure of corporal Enjoyment with an old Woman is at least equal, and frequently superior, every Knack being by Practice capable of Improvement”.

The Mistress letter was not the only document by Franklin that later generations censored. The bawdy portion of Franklin’s writing was accepted during his own era. Although the Mistress letter was not published during his lifetime, Franklin’s public works include an essay called “Fart Proudly”. A passage from his *Autobiography* describes an unsuccessful attempt to seduce a friend’s mistress. As John Semonche observes in *Censoring Sex: A Historical Journey Through American Media*, the autobiography was widely read during the 19th century because of its moral lessons, but the passage about the failed seduction was variously altered or deleted entirely. The Mistress letter was omitted from 19th century publications of Franklin’s works, and by some accounts it was singled out for suppression.

Benjamin Franklin was a lover of knowledge; after all, he was the quintessential Renaissance man. He gave us the lightening rod, the Franklin stove, bifocals, and *Poor Richard’s Almanack*. He was also an indispensable politician and civic activist who not only helped lay the groundwork for the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution but was also the country’s first ambassador to France.

But dig a little deeper in the history books and you may be surprised to find that the genteel, wise and portly old Franklin had an uncontrollable weakness for the opposite sex. As a teenager, he made advances towards his good friend’s mistress (yes, that was the end of their friendship) and let’s not forget that in his early 20s he fathered an illegitimate child whom his wife, Deborah, would eventually help raise.

Franklin's libido was apparently so strong, he himself was scared of it. In his autobiography, he confessed: "The hard-to-be-governed passion of my youth had hurried me frequently into intrigues with low women that fell in my way".

But even with the passage of time, Franklin's passions were unrelenting; in fact they seemed to have only grown stronger. From age 50 and until his death at 84, he spent very little time in Philadelphia with Rebecca (she died 16 years before him). Instead, for most of those years, he was busy hobnobbing in London and Paris, accruing a reputation for his extracurricular activities. So affirmed a verse that was circulating around him:

*Franklin, tho' plagued with fumbling age
Needs nothing to excite him.
But is too ready to engage
When younger arms invite him.*

Perhaps one of the more revealing documents on his views on women, which had been known in certain circles but kept under wraps for almost 200 years, was that later censored letter he wrote in 1745, offering advice to a young man who was having trouble with his own insatiable libido.

In this letter Franklin advised: "In all your Amours, you should prefer old Women to young ones". He goes on to explain that with older women they tend to have more discretion, will take care of you when you're sick, are cleaner than prostitutes, and that "there is no hazard of children". He also explained that you can't really tell who's old or young when you're in the dark...

Stephen Coss also adds that there was a big problem concerning the relation with his wife: he lived estranged from her for almost two decades!

In October 1765, Deborah Franklin sent a gushing letter to her husband, who was in London on business for the Pennsylvania legislature. "I have been so happy as to receive several of your dear letters within these few days", she began, adding that she had read one letter "over and over". "I call it a *husband's Love letter*", she wrote, thrilled as though it were her first experience with anything of the kind.

Perhaps it was. Over 35 years of marriage, Benjamin Franklin had indirectly praised Deborah's work ethic and common sense through "wife" characters in his *Pennsylvania Gazette* and *Poor Richard's Almanac*. He had celebrated her faithfulness, compassion and competency as a housekeeper and hostess in a verse titled "I Sing My Plain Country Joan". But he seems never to have written her an unabashed expression of romantic love. Whether the letter in question truly qualified as his first is unknown, since it has been lost. But it's likely that Deborah exaggerated the letter's romantic aspects because she wanted to believe her husband loved her and would return to her.

That February Franklin, newly arrived in London, had predicted that he would be home in "a few Months". But now he had been gone for 11, with no word on when he would come back. Deborah could tell herself that a man who would write such a letter would not repeat his previous sojourn in England, which had begun in 1757 with a promise to be home soon and dragged on for five years, during which rumors filtered back to Philadelphia that he was enjoying the company of other women. (Franklin denied it, writing he would "do nothing unworthy the Character of an honest Man, and one that loves his Family".) But as month after month passed with no word on Benjamin's voyage home, it became clear that history was repeating itself.

This time Franklin would be gone for ten years, teasing his imminent return almost every spring or summer and then canceling at nearly the last minute and without explanation. Year after year Deborah

stoically endured the snubbing, even after she had a stroke in early spring 1769. But as her health declined, she gave up her vow not to give him “one moment’s trouble”. “When will it be in your power to come home?” she asked in August 1770. A few months later she pressed him: “I hope you will not stay longer than this fall”.

He ignored her appeals until July 1771, when he wrote her: “I purpose it [his return] firmly after one Winter more here”. But the following summer he canceled again. In March and April 1773 he wrote vaguely of coming home and then in October he trotted out what had become his stock excuse, that winter passage was too dangerous. In February 1774, Benjamin wrote that he hoped to return home in May. In April and July he assured her he would sail shortly. But he never came. Deborah Franklin suffered another stroke on December 14, 1774, and died five days later.

Americans tend to idealize the Founding Fathers. So what should we make of Benjamin Franklin? One popular image is that he was a free and easy libertine—the American founding playboy. But he was married for 44 years. Biographers and historians tend to shy away from his married life, perhaps because it defies idealization. John and Abigail Adams had a storybook union that spanned half a century. Benjamin and Deborah Franklin spent all but two of their final 17 years apart. Why?

The conventional wisdom is that their marriage was doomed from the beginning, by differences in intellect and ambition and by its emphasis on practicality over love; Franklin was a genius and needed freedom from conventional constraints; Deborah’s fear of ocean travel kept her from joining her husband in England and made it inevitable that they would drift apart. Those things are true—up to a point, considers Stephen Coss. But staying away for a decade, dissembling year after year about his return, and then refusing to come home even when he knew his wife was declining and might soon die, suggests something beyond bored indifference.

In this colorful and intimate narrative, one of his biographers, Walter Isaacson, provides the full sweep of Franklin’s amazing life, showing how he helped to forge the American national identity and why

Franklin was a great man—scientist, publisher, political theorist, diplomat. But we can’t understand him fully without considering why he treated his wife so shabbily at the end of her life. The answer isn’t simple. But a close reading of Franklin’s letters and published works, and a re-examination of events surrounding his marriage, suggests a new and eerily resonant explanation. It involves their only son, a lethal disease and a disagreement over inoculation.

As every reader of Franklin’s *Autobiography* knows, Deborah Read first laid eyes on Benjamin Franklin the day he arrived in Philadelphia, in October 1723, after running away from a printer’s apprenticeship with his brother in Boston. Fifteen-year-old Deborah, standing at the door of her family’s house on Market Street, laughed at the “awkward ridiculous Appearance” of the bedraggled 17-year-old stranger trudging down the street with a loaf of bread under each arm and his pockets bulging with socks and shirts. But a few weeks later, the stranger became a boarder in the Read home. After six months, he and the young woman were in love.

Meanwhile, Pennsylvania’s governor, William Keith, happened upon a letter Franklin had written and decided he was “a young Man of promising Parts”—so promising that he offered to front the money for Franklin to set up his own printing house and promised to send plenty of work his way. Keith’s motives may have been more political than paternal, but with that, the couple “interchang’d some Promises” in Franklin’s telling and he set out for London. His intention was to buy a printing press and type and return as quickly as possible. It was November 1724.

Nothing went as planned. In London, Franklin discovered that the governor had lied to him. There was no money waiting, not for equipment, not even for his return passage. Stranded, he wrote Deborah a

single letter, saying he would be away indefinitely. He would later admit that “by degrees” he forgot “my engagements with Miss Read”. In declaring this a “great Erratum” of his life, he took responsibility for Deborah’s ill-fated marriage to a potter named John Rogers.

But the facts are more complicated. Benjamin must have suspected that when Sarah Read, Deborah’s widowed mother, learned that he had neither a press nor guaranteed work, she would seek another suitor for her daughter. Mrs. Read did precisely that, later admitting to Franklin, as he wrote, that she had “persuaded the other Match in my Absence”. She had been quick about it, too; Franklin’s letter reached Deborah in late spring 1725 and she was married by late summer. Benjamin, too, had been jilted.

Just weeks into Deborah’s marriage, word reached Philadelphia that Rogers had another wife in England. Deborah left him and moved back in with her mother. Rogers squandered Deborah’s dowry and racked up big debts before disappearing. And yet she remained legally married to him; a woman could “self-divorce”, as Deborah had done in returning to her mother’s home, but she could not remarry with church sanction. At some point she was told that Rogers had died in the West Indies, but proving his death—which would have freed Deborah to remarry formally—was impractically expensive and a long shot besides.

Franklin returned to Philadelphia in October 1726. In the *Autobiography* he wrote that he “should have been asham’d at seeing Miss Read, had not her Friends persuaded her to marry another”. If he wasn’t ashamed, what was he? In classic Franklin fashion, he doesn’t say. Possibly he was relieved. But it seems likely, given his understanding that Deborah and her mother had quickly thrown him over, that he felt at least a tinge of resentment. At the same time, he also “pity’d” Deborah’s “unfortunate Situation”. He noted that she was “generally dejected, seldom cheerful, and avoided Company”, presumably including his. If he still had feelings for her, he also knew that her dowry was gone and she was, technically, unmarriageable.

He, meanwhile, became more eligible by the year. In June 1728, he launched a printing house with a partner, Hugh Meredith. A year later he bought the town’s second newspaper operation, renamed and reworked it and began making a success of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. In 1730 he and Meredith were named Pennsylvania’s official printers. It seemed that whenever he decided to settle down, Franklin would have his pick of a wife.

Then he had his own romantic calamity: he learned that a young woman of his acquaintance was pregnant with his child. Franklin agreed to take custody of the baby—a gesture as admirable as it was uncommon—but that decision made his need for a wife urgent and finding one problematic. (Who that woman was and why he couldn’t or wouldn’t marry her remain mysteries to this day.) No desirable young woman with a dowry would want to marry a man with a bastard infant son. But Deborah Read Rogers would!

Thus, as Franklin later wrote, the former couple’s “mutual Affection was revived” and they were joined in a common-law marriage on September 1, 1730. There was no ceremony. Deborah simply moved into Franklin’s home and printing house at what is now 139 Market Street. Soon she took in the infant son her new husband had fathered with another woman and began running a small stationery store on the first floor.

Benjamin accepted the form and function of married life—even writing about it (skeptically) in his newspaper—but kept his wife at arm’s length. His attitude was reflected in his “Rules and Maxims for Promoting Matrimonial Happiness”, which he published a month after he and Deborah began living together. “Avoid, both before and after marriage, all thoughts of managing your husband”, he advised wives. “Never endeavor to deceive or impose on his understanding: nor give him *uneasiness* (as some

do very foolishly) to try his temper; but treat him always beforehand with sincerity, afterwards with *affection* and *respect*.”

Whether at this point he loved Deborah is difficult to say; despite his reputation as a flirt and a charmer, he seldom made himself emotionally available to anyone. Deborah’s famous temper might be traced to her frustration with him, as well as the general unfairness of her situation. (Franklin immortalized his wife’s fiery personality in various fictional counterparts, including Bridget Saunders, wife of Poor Richard. But there are plenty of real-life anecdotes as well. A visitor to the Franklin home in 1755 saw Deborah throw herself to the floor in a fit of pique; he later wrote that she could produce “invectives in the foulest terms I ever heard from a gentlewoman”.) But her correspondence leaves no doubt that she loved Benjamin and always would. “How I long to see you”, she wrote to him in 1770, after 40 years of marriage and five years into his second trip to London. “If you’re Having the gout... I wish I was near enough to rub it with a light hand.”

Deborah Franklin wanted a real marriage. And when she became pregnant with their first child, near the beginning of 1732, she had reason to hope she might have one. Her husband was thrilled. “A ship under sail and a big-bellied Woman / Are the handsomest two things that can be seen common”, Benjamin would write in June 1735. He had never been much interested in children, but after the birth of Francis Folger Franklin, on October 20, 1732, he wrote that they were “the most delightful Cares in the World”. The boy, whom he and Deborah nicknamed “Franky,” gave rise to a more ebullient version of Franklin than he had allowed the world to see. He also became more empathetic—it’s hard to imagine he would have written an essay like “On the Death of Infants”, which was inspired by the death of an acquaintance’s child, had he not been enraptured by his own son and fearful lest a similar fate should befall him.

By 1736, Franklin had entered the most fulfilling period of his life so far. His love for Franky had brought him closer to Deborah. Franklin had endured sadness—the death of his brother James, the man who had taught him printing and with whom he had only recently reconciled—and a serious health scare, his second serious attack of pleurisy. But he had survived and at age 30 was, as his biographer J.A. Leo Lemay pointed out, better off financially and socially than any of his siblings “and almost all of Philadelphia’s artisans”. That fall, the Pennsylvania Assembly appointed him its clerk, which put him on the inside of the colony’s politics for the first time.

That September 29, a contingent of Indian chiefs representing the Six Nations was heading for Philadelphia to renegotiate a treaty when government officials halted them a few miles short of their destination and advised them to go no farther. The legislature’s minutes, delivered to Franklin for printing, spelled out the reason: Smallpox had broken out “in the heart or near the middle of the town”.

Smallpox was the most feared “distemper” in Colonial America. No one yet understood that it spread when people inhaled an invisible virus. The disease was fatal in more than 30 percent of all cases and even more deadly to children. Survivors were often blind, physically or mentally disabled and horribly disfigured.

In 1730, Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette* had reported extensively on an outbreak in Boston. But rather than focusing on the devastation caused by the disease, Franklin’s coverage dealt primarily with the success of smallpox inoculation.

The procedure was a precursor to modern-day vaccination. A doctor used a scalpel and a quill to take fluid from smallpox vesicles on the skin of a person in the throes of the disease. He deposited this material in a vial and brought it to the home of the person to be inoculated. There he made a shallow incision in the patient’s arm and deposited material from the vial. Usually, inoculated patients became slightly ill, broke out in a few, smallish pox, and recovered quickly, immune to the disease for the rest

of their lives. Occasionally, however, they developed full-blown smallpox or other complications and died.

Franklin's enthusiasm for smallpox inoculation dated to 1721, when he was a printer's apprentice to James in Boston. An outbreak in the city that year led to the first widespread inoculation trial in Western medicine—and bitter controversy. Supporters claimed that inoculation was a blessing from God, opponents that it was a curse—reckless, impious and tantamount to attempted murder. Franklin had been obliged to help print attacks against it in his brother's newspaper, but the procedure's success won him over. In 1730, when Boston had another outbreak, he used his own newspaper to promote inoculation in Philadelphia because he suspected the disease would spread south.

The *Gazette* reported that of the "Several Hundreds" of people inoculated in the Boston area that year, "about four" had died. Even with those deaths—which doctors attributed to smallpox contracted before inoculation—the inoculation death rate was negligible compared with the fatality rate from naturally acquired smallpox. Two weeks after that report, the *Gazette* reprinted a detailed description of the procedure from the authoritative *Chambers's Cyclopaedia*.

And when, in February 1731, Philadelphians began coming down with smallpox, Franklin's backing became even more urgent. "The Practice of Inoculation for the Small-Pox, begins to grow among us", he wrote the next month, adding that "the first Patient of Note", a man named "J. Growdon, Esq," had been inoculated without incident. He was reporting this, he said, "to show how groundless all those extravagant Reports are, that have been spread through the Province to the contrary". In the next week's *Gazette* he plugged inoculation again, excerpting a prominent English scientific journal. By the time the Philadelphia epidemic ended that July, 288 people were dead, but that total included only one of the approximately 50 people who had been inoculated.

Whether Franklin himself was inoculated or survived a case of naturally acquired smallpox at some point is unknown—there's no evidence on record. But he emerged as one of the most outspoken inoculation advocates in the Colonies. When smallpox returned to Philadelphia in September 1736, he couldn't resist lampooning the logic of the English minister Edmund Massey, who had famously declared inoculation the Devil's work, citing Job 2:7: "So went Satan forth from the presence of the Lord and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of the foot unto his crown". Near the front of the new *Poor Richard's Almanac*, which he was preparing to print, Franklin countered:

God offer'd to the People salvation;

And 'twas refus'd by half the nation:

Thus (tho 'tis life's great preservation),

Many oppose inoculation.

We're told by one of the black robe,

The devil inoculated Job:

Suppose 'tis true, what he does tell;

Pray, neighbours, did not Job do well?

Significantly, this verse was Franklin's only comment on smallpox or inoculation through the first four months of the new outbreak. Not until December 30 did he break his silence, in a stunning 137-word note at the end of that week's *Gazette*. "Understanding 'tis a current Report" it began, "that my Son Francis, who died lately of the Small Pox, had it by Inoculation...."