



## The Library Chronicle

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### Franklin's Elegy

## FRANKLIN'S ELEGY

Through the kindness of thirty-two Friends the University Library has acquired what is believed to be the earliest extant manuscript of Benjamin Franklin, one of his earliest efforts in literary composition. This unique treasure is entitled "Elegy on My Sister Franklin." It is written on four pages of a sheet of note-paper, and is initialed "B.F." By a previous owner it has been handsomely bound in full red morocco, with gilt border-line. Well may we consider the acquisition of this interesting item of *Frankliniana* one of the most important events in the recent history of the Library.

The manuscript is not dated, nor do we know the name of the sister-in-law in whose memory it was written. As Dr. Pepper remarked in making the public presentation of the poem to the Library, this offers an attractive problem for investigation, though it is likely to be difficult to solve. From data given in the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* it would seem that "my sister Franklin" may have been Elizabeth Tyng, wife of his brother Samuel; ———Gooch, wife of his brother John; or the wife of his brother Peter. Pending further investigation we shall welcome any information which any of our readers may be able to contribute on this point.

Unless the name of the sister-in-law and the date of her death can be established we cannot know positively when the elegy was written, but it was probably between 1718 and 1722, when Franklin was between 12 and 16 years old; most probably, we think, it was nearer the earlier date than the later. This is not surprising when one remembers the "Dogood Papers," written when he was 16, and his account of literary aspirations which he entertained at a still earlier period. When he was but 12 years old he was apprenticed to his brother James, who had set up his printing press in Boston. "I now had access to better books," he says in the Autobiography. "An acquaintance with the apprentices of book-sellers enabled me sometimes to borrow a small one . . . . I now took a fancy to poetry, and made some little pieces; my brother, thinking it might turn to account, encouraged me and put me on composing occasional ballads. One was called *The Lighthouse Tragedy*, and contained an account of the drowning of Captain Worthilake, with his two daughters; the

# Regy on my Sister Franklin.

Warm from my Breast surcharg'd with Grief & Weep  
These melancholly strains spontaneous flow  
Flow for a favorite Sister's sad Disease  
Flow for the worthiest of the female Sex  
Congratulate this sad Intercourse, O my Friends!  
Your heart-felt Sorrows for a Time suspend  
And sympathize with me whilst I lament  
Our Friend's Disease and give my Passions Vent.  
O what a Loss have all her Friends receiv'd  
A general Loss which never can be retriev'd  
We've lost a Mother, Daughter Sister kind  
In whom such Virtues, Grace and Worth combin'd  
May gracious Heaven enable us to meet,  
With ease compose this Affliction great.  
His Heavenly Commands that passive we resign  
Our Will and Treasure to the Will divine  
Yet Spite of Reason & Nature will rebel  
Our grateful Sighs and filial Tears impel

And sighs and Tears the afflicted Prose ease  
As lenient Balm, rankling Wounds appease.  
My much-lov'd Sister, who afflicted sore  
With Christian Patience her Affliction bore,  
And waited Heaven's own Time to break her chain  
And seek her native Home the Empyreal Plain  
My dear my much-lov'd Sister! — O my Friend  
None in this World on nothing may depend:  
For soon as we esteem ourselves possess'd  
Of every needful Thing to make us blest,  
Some Friend's Demise (like hers we now lament)  
Casual Mischance, or tragical Event,  
Like an intrudent Guest will intervene  
Frustrate our Hopes and mar our blissful Scene  
How weak! how vain! how void all mundane Joys  
& Medley fraught with Nonsense, Shew and Noise!  
O what is Life which we so high esteem,  
A Bubble, Vapour, Shadow, fleeting Dream!  
From sordid Dust we sprang & surely must  
Or soon, or late return to native Dust,  
What mortal Man e'er in his best Estate  
All Vanity, Pride, Folly and Deceit  
From Joy to sorrow & from Bliss to Woe,  
How sudden the Transition here below!

And what our Pleasures and Possessions here  
Ideal joys and Pleasures insinuate  
Grown have their Thorns and Opulence its Brand  
And all our Pleasures their Alloy of Pain  
Still the Vicissitudes of Life declares  
Uncertainty alone is certain here  
And none of this Side Heaven not even the best  
Completely perfect or completely blest  
No sublunary Pleasures long endure  
And from Death's ~~sublime~~ <sup>terrible</sup> thought can us ensure  
Who o'er all Flesh maintains a sovereign sway  
And Millions fall his Victims every Day  
Nor Worth, Wit, Beauty, Wealth or Power can free  
From rigid Fate's irrevocable Decree  
Whom ~~myself~~ <sup>some</sup> by Heaven's own Finger wrote  
Our Life, Death, Happiness and Misery note  
O'er might this worthy Saint whose wayward Fate  
The now deplory had claim'd a longer Date  
Of circling Years her Men to juve and blest  
Enjoy her Honour and Life's good Things possess  
But nought avails Perfections, Gifts and Parts  
So Honour's Proof against Death's fate-wing'd Dart

Which sent by Heaven's transpierc'd Ser tender Heart,  
The best of Friends, my best of Friends! must part,  
'Tis how hard to lose a Friend sincerely  
(human Nature) will be satiate here  
How vain the Pomp and Pageantry of Woe  
Thou Tears more grateful which from Friendship flow  
Better one silent Tear, one heart-felt Sigh  
Than Tutcheons, Tombs and Epitaphs which lie  
And tho' I humbly trust our Friend deceas'd  
Is wafted to the Saints eternal Rest,  
Yet her sad Exit mangles my Resolves  
In Woes profound, My Soul involves  
With sighs & groans my labring Profrons swells  
And down my Cheeks Grief's tenderful Stream impels  
May Heaven forgive me if I ought offend  
Thus I mourn my dear departed Friend  
Sure Heaven forbid, but for our Friends to mourn  
Nor to bedew with Tears their peaceful Urn  
Since Tears assuage our Griefs, & sooth our Woe  
And our Affection and Affliction show  
If in this Life alone we have no rest  
We were of all most wretched and distressed

B.F.

other was a sailor's song, on the taking of *Teach* (or Black-beard) the pirate. They were wretched stuff, in the Grub-street-ballad style; and when they were printed he sent me about the town to sell them. The first sold wonderfully, the event being recent, having made a great noise. This flattered my vanity; but my father discouraged me by ridiculing my performances, and telling me verse-makers were generally beggars. So I escaped being a poet, most probably a very bad one."

The "Dogood Papers" were printed in the *New England Courant* in 1722. Number VII, in June, contained the famous "Receipt" for making an elegy, reading as follows:

"A RECEIPT to make a New-England  
Funeral ELEGY."

"For the Title of your Elegy. *Of these you may have enough ready made to your Hands; but if you should chuse to make it your self, you must be sure not to omit the words Aetatis Suae, which will Beautify it exceedingly.*

"For the Subject of your Elegy. *Take one of your Neighbours who has lately departed this Life; it is no great matter at what Age the Party dy'd, but it will be best if he went away suddenly, being Kill'd, Drown'd, or Frose to Death.*

"*Having chose the Person, take all his Virtues, Excellencies, &c. and if he have not enough, you may borrow some to make up a sufficient Quantity: To these add his last Words, dying Expressions, &c. if they are to be had; mix all these together, and be sure you strain them well. Then season all with a Handful or two of Melancholly Expressions, such as, Dreadful, Deadly, cruel cold Death, unhappy Fate, weeping Eyes, &c. Have mixed all these Ingredients well, put them into the empty Scull of some young Harvard; (but in Case you have ne'er a One at Hand, you may use your own,) there let them Ferment for the Space of a Fortnight, and by that Time they will be incorporated into a Body, which take out, and having prepared a sufficient Quantity of double Rhimes, such as Power, Flower; Quiver, Shiver; Grieve us, Leave us; tell you, excel you; Expeditions, Physicians; Fatigue him, Intrigue him; &c. you must spread all upon Paper, and if you can procure a Scrap of Latin to put at the End, it will garnish it mightily; then having affixed your Name at the Bottom, with a Moestus Composuit, you will have an Excellent Elegy.*

N.B. *This Receipt will serve when a Female is the Subject of your Elegy, provided you borrow a greater Quantity of Virtues, Excellencies, &c.*

“SIR,

“Your Servant,

“SILENCE DOGOOD.”

One can hardly read this “Receipt” and think that Franklin’s own elegiac effort was of later date. If we assume that it was written about the same time, this would involve the highly improbable hypothesis that it was designed as a facetious illustration of the “Receipt.” There can be little doubt, we think, that the “Elegy on My Sister Franklin” was written in 1718 or shortly after, in the period when the ambitious young printer’s apprentice, with vanity flattered by the success of “The Lighthouse Tragedy” and other ballads, had not yet perceived the probability of his becoming but “a very bad poet.” The “Receipt” written at 16 can be best understood as a satire directed not so much at the effusions of other writers as at his own effort, of which, at the still less mature age of 12, he had been proud.

The list of contributors to the purchase of this manuscript is as follows :

Dr. J. H. Austin	Dr. William McClellan
Dr. Detlev W. Bronk	Dr. E. P. Pendergrass
Dr. Charles W. Burr	Mrs. John P. Pepper
Mr. Thomas F. Cadwalader	Dr. William Pepper
Dr. G. M. Coates	Dr. Alexander Randall
Dr. George E. deSchweinitz	Dr. I. S. Ravdin
Mr. Russell Duane	Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach
Mr. A. Felix duPont	Mr. A. G. Rosengarten
Dr. Thomas Fitz-Hugh, Jr.	Mr. Maurice Bower Saul
Dr. Thomas S. Gates	Dr. Harry Shay
Dr. F. C. Grant	Dr. Alfred Stengel
Mr. R. C. Hill	Mr. C. F. C. Stout
Mr. Edward Hopkinson, Jr.	Dr. W. D. Tracy
Dr. Karl M. Houser	Dr. Gabriel Tucker
Mr. Samuel F. Houston	Mr. Charlton Yarnall
Dr. E. B. Krumbhaar	Mr. John E. Zimmerman

To all of these we are deeply grateful; and acknowledgment is particularly due to Dr. Krumbhaar, who first undertook to collect the money needed for its purchase; to Dr. Ravdin, who aided greatly in achieving the goal; and to Dr.



Rosenbach, who had purchased it at a recent auction and re-sold it to our friends for presentation to the Library, for the same price that he had paid, foregoing the handsome profit he could otherwise have made.

## A NOTEWORTHY MEETING

A meeting of the Friends of the Library, held in the Horace Howard Furness Memorial at the University Library on Thursday evening, September 27, was made memorable by two events of unusual interest: the presence of Dr. H. H. E. Craster, Librarian of the Bodleian Library, who was the principal speaker; and the presentation of the Franklin manuscript described in the preceding pages.

Dr. Penniman, presiding, introduced Dr. Craster, the present distinguished incumbent of the honored office of Bodley's Librarian, who gave a highly interesting and informative talk concerning the famous Oxford Library, its history, collections, building problems, position in the scheme of organization of the University, and service. He spoke also of the society of Friends of the Bodleian, the organization after which have been patterned a number of similar groups in this country, including the Friends of the University of Pennsylvania Library, telling briefly of its organization, its methods of operation, and its publications.

After Dr. Craster's address Dr. William Pepper was introduced, and told of the successful efforts which had been made to acquire the Franklin elegy for the Library; concluding his remarks by reading the "Receipt for making a New-England Elegy" and a few lines from the poem, illustrating its style. He then, on behalf of all the contributors, presented the precious manuscript to Dr. Penniman, who accepted it for the Library of the University.

Before adjournment Dr. Penniman spoke appreciatively of the large contribution which Mr. Cadwalader had made to the success of the Friends of the Library, serving as its president from the date of organization until his death, and giving generously of his time and interest.

After the meeting an informal reception was held in the Henry C. Lea Library, where the members and their friends had an opportunity to meet Dr. Craster and Mr. R. H. Hill, secretary to the Bodleian Library, who is accompanying him on his American tour.