

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Robert F. Sayre, PhD

Early 18th Century: Great Awakening, New Individuals (1700-1775)

The seventy-five-year period from 1700 to the beginning of the Revolution is one which tends to be neglected in American history and American literature courses. The stories of exploration and discovery that came before seem more exciting, while what came after seems much more important to the actual development of the new nation.

In the development of American autobiography and the emergence of the concepts of self that are so essential to autobiographical, however, this country's major, full-length autobiographical classics: Benjamin Franklin (1706-90), John Woolman (1720-72), and J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur (1735-1813). Three short classics also come from this period:

The Journal of Sarah Kemble Knight, Johnathan Edwards's "Personal Narrative," and the more recently discovered *Some Account of the Fore Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ash bridge* (all included here). Adding further to the vitality of this period is the publication of *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro man, - Servant to General Winslow of Marshfield, in New-England* (1760), "the first black autobiography in America." (1)

What was going in first three-quarters of eighteenth century which inspired these people to write these autobiographies? The best way of answering this question may be to look at the autobiographies themselves, at the events they describe and how and why they describe them.

Sarah Kemble Knight's *Journal* describes a journey she made from Boston to New Haven and New York and back, starting in October, 1704, and ending in January, 1705. At first glance, this does not seem to be a very significant event or one worth writing about. But the very fact that an educated, middle-class woman was traveling alone at that time, and traveling to handle some matter of family business, tells us remarkable things.

New England culture now permitted a woman to undertake such a journey, a journey we cannot imagine Anne Bradstreet or Mary Rowlandson would have taken. She had the freedom, and travel conditions, though bad, as she vividly tells us, were not impossible. She could also look upon this as a practical, secular journey, not a spiritual one with all kinds of religious allegory to be packed in (or unpacked) at every point. Freed of this religious baggage, Madam Knight had all kinds of other things to do, observe, and report. She could describe the crude places she slept, the bad food, the manners of her guides and innkeepers, her nervousness sitting in a canoe, and so on. This makes her story earthy and amusing. Chances are, as a recent editor has suggested, that she kept her notes on the trip and wrote them up in order to read or show to friends. Thus the trials of her patience, strength, and taste bring out her character, to have it confirmed with the laughter and approval of an audience. (2) Her *Journal* is, in this sense, even an early illustration of one of the most basic types of American humor, in which a cultivated outsider ridicules the grossness of country bumpkins. For a New England woman, perhaps for any New Englander, this is both a new self and a new way of expressing it. It is secular, partially comic, sophisticated, and dramatic.

For most Americans, however, religion remained the dominant issue in their personal and social lives. This is very evident in the religious revival called the Great Awakening, which began in the 1730's and lasted through the 1740's. Prosperity and the beginnings of a scientific rationalism had cooled the religious fervor of early American Puritanism, as illustrated in the *Journal* of Madam Knight. But poorer, less educated people, such as the members of Jonathans Edwards' congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, remained attached to Puritanism and wanted more emotion in their religious faith and practice. They were also receptive to a more emotional style of preaching, that evoked their fears of God and made them anxious to renew their religious commitment.

But the Great Awakening was more than just a revival movement among latter-day Puritans. Although it can be said to have started in Jonathan Edwards' congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, it soon spread to many other denominations, from New England to Georgia. Indeed, there were concurrent expressions of emotional, popular piety in Germany, Switzerland, Holland, and France. The Wesleyan and Methodist movements were the major English expressions, and they had direct impact on the Awakening in the colonies. When George Whitefield, a follower of John and Charles Wesley, came to Philadelphia in 1739, he immediately drew such crowds, Benjamin Franklin recalled, that "the Multitudes of all Sects and Denominations that attended his Sermons were enormous." People "admired and respected him, notwithstanding his common Abuse of them, by assuring them they were naturally *half Beasts and half Devils*." Suddenly "it seem'd as if all the World were growing Religious; so that one could not walk thro' the town in an Evening without Hearing Psalms sung in different Families of every Street." (3)

The Great Awakening crossed boundaries between "Sects and Denominations," spread throughout the diverse and separate colonies, and had a mass appeal. With people everywhere experiencing what Edwards called "surprising conversions," it also challenged the authority of the established churches. The clergy in Philadelphia soon resented Whitefield so much, wrote Franklin, that they "refus'd him their Pulpits and he was obliged to preach in the Fields." (4) The older, more conservative clergy in Boston also came to resent the uproar which Jonathan Edwards had started in the Connecticut Valley, as eventually did leaders of Edwards' own congregation, which dismissed him in 1750. But the disputes which the Great Awakening caused also led to the breakup of many denominations and the founding of new ones. The Presbyterians split briefly into the "Old Side Presbyterians," who opposed revivalism, and the "New Side Presbyterians," then later into the "Old Light" and "New Light." Methodist and Baptist churches grew. (5) The autobiography most directly related to the Great Awakening is Jonathan Edwards' "Personal Narrative," although circumstantially or metaphorically nearly all the autobiographical writing of this period can be related to it. Franklin, as we have just seen, wrote about it. Charles Woodmason, when he went to preach in the interior of the Carolinas in the 1760's, competed with different sects of Baptists and various forms of "New Lights" who vigorously carried on the emotional styles of the Awakening. In a broader way, the Awakening led to or stood for a discovery of the egalitarian individual.

As a leader of the Great Awakening, Edwards seems to have written the "Personal Narrative" as a way of studying in himself the religious affections which were exerting such a powerful influence in the members of his Northampton church. Many of them, by the late 1730's and early '40's, had told him the stories of their conversions-so many that he had come to question his own conversion and perhaps question the sincerity of theirs. He writes towards the end: "That my sins appear to me so great, don't seem to me to be, because I have so much more conviction of sin than other Christians, but because I am so much worse, and have so much more wickedness to be convinced of." The sentence urgently reflects the sense of sin that was so powerful in driving the revival and urging people to repent. Yet it also reflects the paradox that being convinced of one's "wickedness" was therefore beneficial. Caught in this paradox, Edwards alternated between confessions of his wickedness and confessions of his "dependence on God's grace," between weeping and rejoicing, and the "Narrative" breaks off unresolved. It has no true ending, and, without a resolution, none is possible.

Edwards' "Narrative" also has a brilliant, lyrical side, however, as in his descriptions of his innocent, early love of God and his delight in the physical world as God's creation. In this sense, it expresses another kind of "awakening" that is closer to the scientific revolutions of the eighteenth century and to his contemporaries like Franklin, Woolman, and even the dowdy humorist Sarah Kemble Knight. Indeed, some people have seen a much finer sensibility and true love of nature in Edwards and Woolman than in the practical Benjamin Franklin. Nature and the world, for Franklin, seem just stuff to experiment on and turn into instruments for human comfort and progress.

"The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole," written between 1740 and 1765, makes a very instructive contrast with Edwards' "Narrative." As a farmer and carpenter with no higher education and no degrees in divinity, Cole was the kind of person whom the Awakening empowered to think for himself and protest against the pride and complacency he saw in the mid-century Congregational establishment. Once "born

again," Cole became far more conscious of his sins and his precarious spiritual life. In this sense, the Awakening brought him some of the same inner insecurity it gave Edwards. But his new found piety also led him, as he says, "to see the Old Standing Churches wee not in a gospel order." So he and his friends formed a separate fellowship on which they felt more comfortable and in which, inevitably, they had more control over church services and governance. At the same time, Cole's diary gave him a means of recording his "spiritual travels" and so examining himself and maintaining his resolution and purpose. He learned, he spoke, and he kept a record what he said and thought. The diary helped him to become the kind of Christian he believed he should become. In the process, it also contributed to his and his fellows' partial overthrow of those "Old Standing Churches" which were in many respects the most powerful governments in eighteenth-century America. Cole's diary is a record and an agent of the revolution the Awakening had set off. Yet, in being a revolution of diarists and autobiographers, it was also one that stressed piety, humility, and self-control.

Quakers such as John Woolman and Elizabeth Ashbridge were not directly involved in the Great Awakening. They had never subscribed to the Calvinist doctrines of election and predestination, and by the seventeenth century, the wealthier Quakers of Philadelphia had ceased to be enthusiasts. They did not believe in the "new lights" of sudden salvation but "the inner light"- the light of conscience which burned, brightly or obscurely, in all people. Their earthly pilgrimages were long, careful efforts to follow this light themselves and discern it in others, and they held aloof from the frenzies of revivalists like Whitefield. This is humorously illustrated by Benjamin Franklin's story of being at a service where Whitefield appealed for funds for an orphanage in Georgia. Franklin had been so moved that he contributed all the money he had wit him. A Quaker friend, who had anticipated such an appeal, had left his own money home. But this man, too, was moved and "apply'd" to a Neighbor who stood near him to borow some Money for the Purpose." But that man, also a Quaker, answered, "At any other time, Friend Hopkinson, I would lend to thee freely; but not now; for thee seems to be out thy right Senses." (6)

Quakers could avoid the frenzy of the Great Awakening because they had already had their own private awakening, or awakenings. They had already established more independence from church authority and doctrine than any of the other churches, and they already acknowledged the individual "inner light." Thus their concepts of self were already implicitly egalitarian.

Readers of John Woolman's *Journal* (1774) can see this on almost every page. For Woolman thinks as independently as any man who ever lived. His very choice of words is independent: based on profound exacting consultation of the inner light. Yet he is respectful of other people's rights and scrupulously avoids being vain or inflammatory. As the *Journal* testifies, he campaigned calmly but effectively against the social injustices which most men of his time took for granted. He persuaded other Quakers to free their slaves, simplified his dress and diet so as to avoid exploiting laborers, called attention to the hardships of sailors, opposed military conscription, and defended the interests and actions of Indians. The Quaker concept of the "inner light" as a divine light within all persons led to the concept of all persons being equal in their political rights and human needs.

Woolman's attention to Indians grew not only from Quaker pacifism but also from the nearly constant conflict in this period between the British American colonists, the Indians, and the French. Following King William's War (1689-97), there was what Americans called Queen Anne's War, from 1702 to 1713, during which the French and Indians destroyed several towns in northern New England - and took more captives, some of whom wrote captivity narratives. King George's War, 1744-48, was not so long or so consequential, but the French and Indian War of 1755-63 definitely was. It was the war in which General Braddock was defeated in 1755 trying to capture Fort Duquesne (at the site of present-day Pittsburgh), demonstrating to Americans such as George Washington that British power in America was invincible. There were other major battles in the north and in Canada - at Fort William Henry (on Lake George in 1757), Ticonderoga (on lake Champlain in 1759), and Montreal, in 1760. These battles brought about the ceding of Canada to England. They also led to greater unity among the American Colonies, while leaving the British government so much in debt that taxation of the colonies was increased - two additional factors leading to the American Revolution.

Warfare, therefore, was another major influence in the shaping of the American life of the period. We see Franklin finding a way to raise money for forts and gunpowder, serving in the Militia, and helping

to supply Braddock's army. We also see Charles Woodmason's awareness of how frontier Carolinians were used by coastal Carolinians as a buffer against Indian attacks.

All through the period, in the midst of the Great Awakening and the recurrent border wars, the population of the American colonies continued to grow. In 1700 it had been a quarter of a million. By 1760 it was 1,600,000. In New England, new fortunes were made in shipbuilding, lumbering, and the slave trade. In Virginia, tobacco became the great cash crop, employing ever larger numbers of enslaved Africans. Much of the growth in the white population, too, was in the form of indentured English and Irish servants (who were in some ways like slaves until their indentures were paid), of prisoners sent to Georgia, and of German and Dutch immigrants. The colonies were growing in diversity as well as just numbers of people, and this is also illustrated in the autobiographies.

In addition to being a Quaker convert, Elizabeth Ashbridge was an indentured servant. She had run away from home, married, lost her husband, gone to Ireland, and then signed a contract to go to America. There she served three years with a cruel master and was on the verge of suicide. She "bought off the remainder of my Time," but soon afterwards lost her freedom again by marrying an oppressive, unreliable man she met while dancing in an alehouse. He was a restless schoolteacher and took her to Boston, then Long Island. He drank too much, abused her, and resented her attraction to the Quakers, especially because Quakers allowed women to preach. She does not go into all this in great detail, because her religious history is the primary subject of her narrative, yet we can imagine that there were many women and men in America in this period who were like Ashbridge and her husband. Even though only a comparatively small number joined the Quakers and an even smaller number became woman preachers, the pattern of finding one's fulfillment and also finding one's freedom through a religious experience and commitment was very common. The dislocations of immigration, settling, and resettling encouraged many people to take up new religious faiths. Even where people did not change religions, the religions themselves changed, accommodating their members' new conditions. In that way, religious "awakenings" and the other awakenings of immigration, new cultures, and new ways of life were related.

The role of immigration in building up both the number and character of eighteenth-century Americans is most brilliantly developed in St. Jean de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, published in 1782. As a French military officer who had traveled around both French and British America, then finally bought land in Orange County, New York, in 1769, Crevecoeur had lived a life which may have been like a number of other people's of the period, which was not appropriate for an autobiography, as autobiography was then practiced.

He had not been an expedition leader and had not experienced a religious conversion. In composing his *Letters*, however, he seized upon new conceptions of himself as *immigrant* and *farmer* which fitted in with the experiences of tens of thousands of other Americans and which both Europeans and Americans were glad to read about. Generalizing his experiences, he turned himself into a spokesman for the new American. The "American Farmer" was a figure from old-world literary pastoralism coming out of a new-world melting pot. The "American," said Crevecoeur, is a "strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country." He had also "[left] behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, [and received] new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds." (7) The "Farmer" received the best of these new influences. People living on the coasts, in Crevecoeur's vision of the country, "see and converse with a variety of people; their intercourse with mankind becomes extensive." They develop from "bold and enterprising" fishers and fish-eaters into traders and then into merchants. "Those who inhabit the middle settlements," he went on, "must be very different; the simple cultivation of the earth purifies them." They have just enough government and religion to shelter them and restrain them. They will be proud "freeholders" - sharp bargainers, litigious, informed, and critical of government. As farmers and tradesmen they will also be thrifty and independent. Finally, said Crevecoeur, as "we arrive near the great woods, near the last inhabited districts," we will find men who are "beyond the reach of government," left to themselves, and therefore idle, wasteful, quarrelsome, and wild. (8) In Making the "Farmer" from "the middle settlements" the ideal figure, Crevecoeur was appealing to the sentiments of most European-Americans of his time. He was also giving birth to a kind of geographic-

historic account of American character which has been reshaped and extended by many later scholars, publicists, artists, and political leaders. The frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner is latent in what we might call Crèvecoeur's autobio-geography.

But the most influential new American concept of self to come from this period may be Benjamin Franklin's concept of the prudent, industrious, successful tradesman. His awakening may be the greatest of all. His life spans nearly the whole period. There is a legend, though undocumented, that Sarah Kemble Knight was one of his school teachers. He himself tells of visiting Cotton Mather, the heir to the early Puritan theocracy. As we have noted, he also knew George Whitefield and helped Pennsylvania Quakers build defenses against Indians. His business and other interests reached throughout the colonies. His *Autobiography* was begun in 1771, at a time when he was living in England but could also see the signs of an eventual break between the two countries. (9) The character of the benevolent but also shrewd self-made man that he celebrated in those "Memoirs," as he called them, was his own vision of the representative American and the vision enlarged upon by his followers. In the *Autobiography*, he also drew upon nearly all of the earlier traditions of American autobiography which we have noted. The religious conversion narrative, in his handling, became a secular one, "from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the World." (10) Nominally, at least, he wrote the *Autobiography* as a letter to his son, just as Anne Bradstreet had written to her children. Franklin's work included accounts of his own travel, beginning with his journey from Boston to Philadelphia, a journey necessitated by his running away from his apprenticeship to his older brother.

The importance of the autobiographies of this period, then, is enormous. Before them, autobiography was still bound to its early Christian past, going back to St. Augustine, and to its classical and early Renaissance traditions of governors' or travelers journals. In these early eighteenth-century autobiographies, women write about their travels while away from their husbands, and celebrate their independent immigration to America. They also celebrate religious experiences which are quite separate from their husbands' lives and demands. Men, at the same time, begin to describe and celebrate their lives as tradesmen and farmers, their work, and their careers. In Charles Woodmason's *Journal*, even religious autobiography takes a new turn, as he narrates not his conversion but his career as an itinerant, backwoods preacher. After these autobiographies, therefore, modern autobiography is possible. In them is the discovery of the modern individual life.