

The Man Who Invented Himself

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, edited by Leonard W. Labaree, Ralph L. Ketcham, Helen C. Boatfield, and Helene H. Fineman (Yale, 351 pp. \$12.50), reveals for the first time exactly how the eighteenth-century inventor wished to appear to his public and posterity. Lewis Leary, who edited "American Literary Essays," is a professor of English at Columbia University.

By LEWIS LEARY

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN invented many things—a stove, bifocal glasses, volunteer fire departments, and a clustering of little balloons that could be fastened to his shoulders to ease the weight on gouty feet. But his principal invention was himself. He was in the truest sense a self-made man.

The image of Benjamin Franklin has been with us a long time, and it is not likely to change. He began to write the story of his life in 1771, in his late sixties, and continued it at intervals until his final illness in 1790. It appeared almost immediately, first in an incomplete and apparently unauthorized French translation in 1791, then two years later, twice, in retranslations to English of the French versions. Not until almost twenty-five years later was it officially issued by Franklin's grandson, and then in what seems to have been a carelessly put together and truncated edition, which for half a century, however, was considered standard.

A year after Franklin's original manuscript became available in 1867, John Bigelow triumphantly published what he considered to be a correct and full reading of the text. But scholars since have found even this version inaccurate. In 1949 Max Farrand's posthumously issued "Parallel Text Edition" appeared, containing four versions of the text, each of which might be thought, in one degree or another, to represent something of Franklin's intention. At his death in 1945, Farrand was at work on a restoration of what he believed Franklin must have meant to be the public version of his life. Finished by other hands, and not always, we are told, with complete accuracy, it was published four years later as "the first authoritative text."

For more than a century then, Franklin had been presented to thousands of readers in words at times rather different from what he seems to have intended. Minor bibliographical mysteries were involved. Who gave what manuscript to whom, and when? How much of a tinkerer was the aging Franklin? Are the differences between the surviving manuscript version and the edition issued by Franklin's grandson, for example, the result of changes the older man had directed, or was the grandson merely improving grandfather?

Such considerations may seem small perhaps, for variations among the versions do not measurably distort the image of the sage and meticulously successful man who has been familiar to so many generations. But something is to be said for accuracy and complete respect for exactly what Franklin intended to reveal of himself.

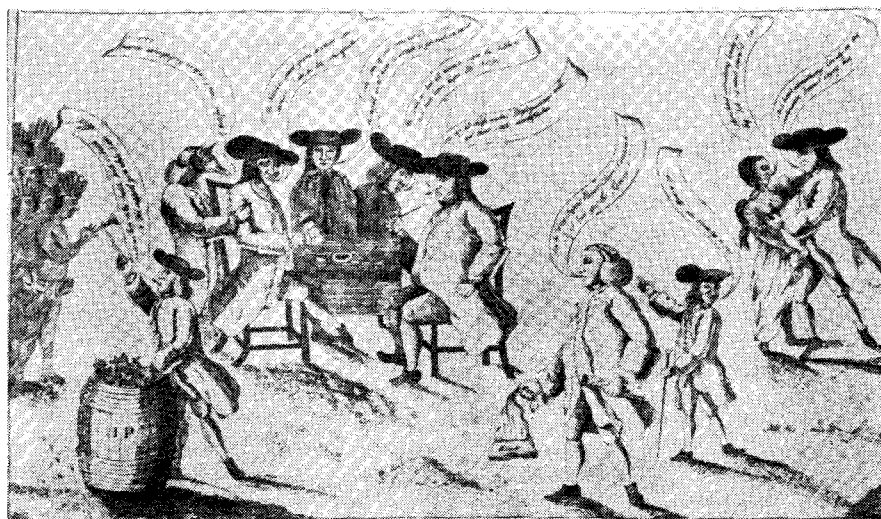
Leonard W. Labaree and his associates in editing the multivolumed *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* have therefore prepared a new text, based exclusively on the surviving manuscript, because that is certainly, and with no mysteries involved, exactly what Franklin wrote and at one time must have intended. The result is that now, for the first time, the *Autobiography* is available just as Franklin set it down. After almost 175 years, it seems about time.

For there are reasons to think of the *Autobiography* as our first influential native book, a book which has been

parent to hundreds like it because it presented the portrait of a man to whom thousands have reacted—some like D. H. Lawrence and Mark Twain in contempt or humorous derision, but others in such fervent admiration that it has directed the course of their lives.

As the story of a young man's search for his place in the world and of what good he might do when he found that place, it has been both guide and inspiration. Poor boys can make good, and do good also. Even people like Henry Adams and Henry James, who were not poor, admired things about it, as Robert F. Sayre explains in his study of *The Examined Self* (Princeton, \$4.75). Autobiography, he suggests, is a genre peculiarly congenial to the American's desire to explain himself. Whether a picaresque narrative such as Franklin's, or a tendentious probing like Henry Adams's, or a musing on how he came to be what he has become like Henry James's, they testify, says Mr. Sayre, "to the necessity that every American author be, somehow, a character."

Perhaps it is possible to speak, as Tocqueville did, of an autobiographical urge among Americans, who, like Thoreau, "require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life"—or, at least, the essence of it, or what the writer believes that essence to have been. We are not particularly concerned that Franklin may not have always told the whole truth about himself. Choosing what he chose to tell, he told it with such directing force that it seems inevitably nothing but the truth. The image which he projected was so carefully devised a portrait of so careful a man that it is appropriate now to have it available in a version as carefully prepared as the one which Mr. Labaree and his associates now present.



Cartoon of 1764 describing Franklin and the Pennsylvania politicians.

A Wonderful Friend of the Czar

The Letters of Alexander Pushkin, translated, with preface, introduction, and notes, by J. Thomas Shaw (Indiana and Pennsylvania. 3 vols. 880 pp. \$25 the set), reveals the richly textured personality of the great Russian poet. Ernest J. Simmons's latest work is "Chekhov: A Biography"; his next will be a critical study, "Introduction to Russian Realism."

By ERNEST J. SIMMONS

AMONG cultured Russians it is the great poet Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) and not Dostoevsky or Tolstoy who shines as the brightest star in their literary firmament. Unfortunately, his claims to an artistic stature equal to that of the foremost contemporary poets of the West evade foreigners who are compelled to evaluate his genius solely through verse translations. And much of it has been done in English. There are six renderings alone of one of his masterpieces—the long narrative poem *Eugene Onegin*. But rarely do these translations suggest the real essence of Pushkin's poetic art. Though writing in the nineteenth century, the qualities of his mind and art were formed largely by the eighteenth. He was a classicist in literary taste and in his habits of thought and feeling. Irony appealed to him more than direct criticism, subtle satire more than forthright denunciation, and his touchstones were objectivity, restraint, simplicity, and impeccable form. To attempt to reproduce this simplicity in verse translations often results in renderings that are simple in the worst sense of the word.

However, some real measure of the man—his intellectual brilliance and wit, his mind and spirit, and his remarkable gifts of expression—is communicated through the medium of his letters. That is why J. Thomas Shaw's handsome, three-volume edition of all Pushkin's letters worth preserving is not only a monumental scholarly achievement, but also a significant contribution to our understanding of Pushkin's artistic capabilities.

Professor Shaw's task has been greatly aided by fine Soviet editions of Pushkin and by the wealth of learned investigations on nearly every aspect of his life and works. A close familiarity with this material has imparted to Pro-



—Culver.

Alexander Pushkin—a master of the epistolary art.

fessor Shaw's English edition of the letters the authoritativeness that belongs to the eminently scholarly editions in Russian. He has scrupulously and repeatedly acknowledged indebtedness to his Russian sources, but behind these modest disclaimers is an original editorial contribution of considerable value. The extensive commentary, expertly adjusted to the needs of English readers, provides rich reference material on the biography and writings of Pushkin, as well as on the political, social, and cultural history of Russia during his lifetime.

With some awareness of the problems involved, Pushkin remarks in one of his letters that the task of translation "is the most difficult and the most thankless." This is not exactly an original observation, but in effect Professor Shaw courageously challenges it by stating that, though his first consideration in the translation of the letters is with Pushkin's thought, "an effort has also been made to convey to the reader of English his rhythms, tonalities, and styles, including the official, the literary, the familiar, and all gradations among them; and also to retain Pushkin's constant word-play, including puns, allusions, parodies, and play on folk expressions." This is a large order, and testing its fulfillment in sample comparisons with the originals only leads one into those familiar statements

of arguable opinion and personal taste which serve to turn a translator's labor of love into a love of labor, perhaps fully justifying Pushkin's comment on the difficulty and thanklessness of the art of translation. It is sufficient to say that in general Professor Shaw is a careful and faithful translator and achieves, with some success, the goals that he set for himself.

Though a number of Russia's famous authors were indefatigable letter writers, no one of them possessed Pushkin's mastery of the epistolary art. For example, Chekhov's absorbing letters are comparable in human interest, but they lack the depth, variety, and stylistic finish of Pushkin's. In one place in his comprehensive and perceptive introduction Professor Shaw correctly points out that Pushkin was willing to publish his letters to Delvig after the death of this close friend, but it would be a mistake to conclude from this decision, which was prompted by special circumstances, that he wrote his letters with publication in mind. Their uninhibited frankness of language, spontaneity, and naturalness, qualities that contribute so much to their charm, argue the contrary. If he prepared more than one draft of many of his Russian and French letters (a number were written in French), it was because his artistic conscience compelled him to take almost the same care with his correspondence as with his poetry. We see evidence of this not only in the form and language of his letters, but also in the subtle manner in which he variously adapted the content and spirit of replies to the different personalities of his correspondents. In fact, his letters helped to create an all-purpose modern Russian prose just as his verse inaugurated modern Russian poetry.

Professor Shaw's fourteen chronological divisions of the 674 letters admirably highlight the thematic breakdown of Pushkin's life from his earliest days "as Precocious Poet" to the final and fatal duel as "Sole Defender of His Honor." And what a life it was! More dramatic than Byron's, more tragic than Shelley's. A constant struggle against two emperors—Alexander I, who exiled him, and Nicholas I, who pardoned him and then became his personal censor and murderer of his art—poisoned Pushkin's existence but at the same time steeled a character in which pride and honor dominated. In one of his moments of frustration he wrote a correspondent: "The devil prompted my being born in Russia with a soul and with talent." Yet there is more brightness than bile in these letters written to relatives, friends, and prominent persons, for his temperament was essentially a kind and ebullient one; from his correspondence Pushkin's personality emerges as vividly