

Franklin's crowning achievement in almanacs in its original edition

Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard Improv'd, Being an Almanack ... for the Year of Our Lord 1758*. Philadelphia: B. Franklin and D. Hall, 1757. 6 3/8 inches x 4 inches (162 x 102 mm), 36 pages with woodcut illustrations throughout.

“He’s a Fool that makes his Doctor his Heir” “The poor have little, beggars none, the rich too much, *enough* not one.” A smattering, at least, of the wit and pith of Benjamin Franklin is known to almost everyone. Its chief repository is the most famous of American almanacs, *Poor Richard*, published by Franklin in Philadelphia between 1733 and 1758. Franklin produced his first almanac at the age of twenty-six, writing as “Richard Saunders.” He wrote or adapted lapidary proverbs, verses, and snippets of homespun advice with a shrewd yet folksy persona that exerted a profound influence over the moral and mercantile climate of the developing nation. Franklin’s proverbs range over the vast variety of topics seen in traditional proverbs, and they reflect his multiple interests and character.

Though wildly popular in their day, the almanacs were ephemeral productions, and surviving copies are rare. After the first fifteen almanacs, Franklin increased the length from 24 to 36 pages, these later issues designated as *Poor Richard Improv'd*. The most famous among Franklin’s almanacs is the 1758; in that year he sold the rights to the title, publishing in his final issue “Father Abraham’s Speech.” This valedictory potpourri of the maxims, rhymes, and proverbs is frequently reprinted as *The Way to Wealth*, a title that reflects its focus on the virtues of honesty, thrift, and industry as exemplified in “Early to bed, early to rise....” The 1758 *Poor Richard* contains Franklin’s most insightful and charming prose.

The original almanacs present Franklin’s very American humor in all its facets, recalling at once Voltaire and Mark Twain, and anticipating such memorable remarks as (on the signing of the Declaration of Independence) “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” They are essential for understanding of the man and delightful reading in their own right. Like a newspaper, an almanac is more than ordinarily dependent for its effect upon its form: such texts are truly only appreciated when presented in all their rustic popular irregularity. The original issues of *Poor Richard’s Almanac* have long been collectors’ items and they are much the best way of enjoying the most entertaining of the Founding Fathers. This copy of Franklin’s 1758 *Poor Richard Improv'd* is from the Rare Book and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress.

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