

## The Legacy of Self-Made Men

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American society has long been enamored by the idea of one pulling oneself up by the bootstraps—the sought-after rags to riches story. Since people first began colonizing North America, individuals have fought for the chance to make *something* of themselves, taking incredible odds at the mere possibility of fame, fortune, and power. For those like Benjamin Franklin, the chance to move from lower middle class to timeless political figure was made through calculated risk and happened consciously. For others, born into the lowest status a human being can, enslaved like Olaudah Equiano, operating on his own merit and luck became a survival mechanism. Both men left a legacy of hard work, determination, and beating impossible odds to create a life worth reading about—regardless of embellishment, their legacies have left them perceived as self-made men. The perceptions of their lives are more important now than the actual lives they lived, since their autobiographies are what has a continuing impact today. *Even if* the Equiano and Franklin they wrote themselves to be are fabricated, their lasting impact as self-made are real, and the lessons they impose are valid.

Equiano had an insurmountable task when he wrote his narrative. Not only did he have to assure his audience that he was self-made, but he also had to convince them that he was even a man. The entire point of his narrative, as he put it, was not for “immortality or literary reputation... [but to] in the smallest degree promote the interests of humanity.”<sup>1</sup> As a black man in the eighteenth century, sold (or born) into slavery, he would have been immediately dehumanized, seen only in terms of the labor he could produce. Throughout his narrative, he told stories of enslavement and travelling under various people, in many unusual parts of the world. Equiano made sure the reader understood how much luck came into play, stating “I thought whatever fate had determined must come to pass; and therefore, if ever it were my lot to be freed, nothing could prevent me.”<sup>2</sup> He spoke about the will of God, and how he, as a Christian, would know that Christian love would never allow for the brutality of the slave trade. Throughout his narrative, he included tiny details to humanize himself and everyone enslaved, and to build compassion and a sense of connection between the upper-class white audience and enslaved black Africans. Even if his narrative was not the exact truth, or was a polished version of events, the persona he created and the effect of said persona are what leaves Equiano as a self-made man. The fact that he was able to write a narrative compelling enough to alter British policy on the slave trade makes him worthy of being described as self-made, even if his narrative was woven with embellishments and half-truth.

Where there is some plausible deniability about Equiano’s self-awareness surrounding his fame, Benjamin Franklin knew he was a star, and wrote his memoir accordingly. Where Equiano wrote that he does not seek fame or fortune in writing his book, and explicitly stated that he wrote for others, Benjamin Franklin admitted that he was “willing to ‘suppress’ publication if so advised”,<sup>3</sup> specifically so he could fabricate his public image perfectly. Franklin wrote mostly for himself, using his autobiography to connect with his future family, in the same way he found himself bound to his own ancestors. Throughout his autobiography, he built his persona, describing himself not as just one profession, or even just as one person. During his life, he made up names for his different writings, going by Benjamin Franklin sometimes, or Poor Richard Saunders, or quite a few others, quite literally becoming a “self-made” man. By creating different personas, and taking on different characters throughout his life, he made his own self-images, and when finally revealed to be Franklin, only added to his character. By switching professions, switching names, allowing himself to experiment with inventions, politics, and poetry anonymously, he gave himself the necessary

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<sup>1</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (reprinted, 2019), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Equiano, 43-44.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Franklin and Louis P. Masur, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: With Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016), 14.

space to create without fear of judgement and to accept what went well without the public scrutiny for what failed.

Franklin described the many travels, political battles, writings, and struggles he faced as he navigated through his life. However, the entire memoir is clouded with an air of self-approval, and smugness absent from Equiano's work. Where Equiano accepted that God's will, and luck, played a key role in building him as a self-made man, Franklin took most of the credit. For example, when describing how he skipped multiple grades in school, he did not say that perhaps he was born with a gift, or that he had been lucky to have had a family that emphasized education—no, Franklin did not allow for fate to decide anything—everything he created was a product of his own ingenuity and genius, and his autobiography was his way of showing it to future audiences.<sup>4</sup> This falls into the American myth of relying on oneself alone, with no outside help or support. Franklin did exactly that, and through his many stories, highlighted that. Because of how well-manicured the public's knowledge of Franklin was, and continues to be, it does not matter if he was "really" a self-made man. He is perceived, in a similar fashion to Equiano, to be a self-made man, so the character that is Benjamin Franklin simply is one.

Though Franklin leaned more heavily into vanity than Equiano, both recognized their vanity to a certain degree. Franklin went through periods of self-assured arrogance that ended with his own description as to why vanity was a fatal flaw, and why humility was the most important trait in a person, going as far as to shame his wife for buying silver. Equiano, pandering to the upper-class whites of Britain, could not afford to come across as disrespectful or disdainful, and was careful to appear almost pleading, begging his audience to relate to and have compassion for his humanity. Both works are extremely calculated, tailored to who they anticipate will be reading them. For Franklin, he himself wanted to read his life's events, and to connect with his future kin, so he wrote as if talking to a friend. Equiano knew his audience too and adjusted his writing style accordingly. By reading both narratives, one has a better understanding of two vastly different aspects of the eighteenth century and can better grasp the age-old idea of what it means to be self-made.

There are, however, many differences between the two. Equiano wrote to solve a specific problem: slavery. Franklin seemed to write for his own entertainment. He threw in a few lines here and there about wanting the memoir to help future generations, and while that may be true, having been regarded "as well known as the moon"<sup>5</sup> likely contributed to an inflated ego. The audience for each narrative was extremely different. Where Franklin tailored his autobiography to "fix" past mistakes and examine what he would have done differently (which was not much, according to him!), Equiano actively anticipated and prepared for public scrutiny and backlash. Because of this, the style and tone of each is vastly different, catering to the needs of the anticipated audience. When it comes down to it, Equiano wrote to humanize a brutalized group of people, and Franklin wrote because he felt important, and wanted to spread the message that any lowly person could become an important cultural and political figurehead, even without a revolution or general upheaval of the time. Where Equiano wrote to correct the wrongs he had seen throughout his life, Franklin wrote to cement himself as the cultural icon he is today through spreading messages about frugality, hard work, and self-reliance.

Neither of the narratives were the complete and accurate truth, and that is permissible. Their embellishments add to the characters they were manicuring, which is more important than the truth. Their public image as self-made was more important than exposing the half-truths and exaggerations propping said image up. It matters not whether they were *actually* self-made, but what people perceived them to be, and the ramifications of how the public perceived them. They were able to procure an image of self-sufficiency and were able to use that for their own means, whether it meant Equiano helping end the slave trade in Britain, or Franklin's shiploads of silk and china. The public did, and continues, to look at these men as all-American

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<sup>4</sup> Franklin, 42.

<sup>5</sup> Franklin, 11.

examples of drive and willpower, and even if that is not the whole truth, they live on as self-made. Even if the actual people themselves were not self-made, the images they created and decorated for the public absolutely were, and those facades have merit on their own.

### **Bibliography**

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