

Enlightenment and Revolution

ENLIGHTENMENT (also referred to as the Age of Reason) was characterized by a faith in the powers of human reason and a devotion to clarity of thought. The Age of Reason manifested a realistic conception of man, stressed the principles of equality and social justice, and encouraged the belief that man might assume greater control of nature without offending the majesty of God. During this era great challenges (presented by scientists and philosophers, e.g. Isaac Newton, John Lock) to 17th century beliefs appeared. Their inquiries made the universe seem more rational and benevolent than it had been represented by Puritan doctrine. And because the world seemed more comprehensible, people paid less attention to religion.

REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD was the great age of the newspaper and the moral essay. By the time of the Revolution there were almost fifty papers and forty magazines. There was also a cry for „national literature“, meaning anti-British literature, and the political events were advantageous for a career in writing and journalism. The most distinguished political writings of the period are the essays written by Alexandr Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay (collectively known as *The Federalist Papers*).

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)

printer, writer, diplomat, scientist. He started with nothing and became a great archetype of the self-made man. In Philadelphia he established his own press from which he issued The Pennsylvania Gazette. Franklin was active throughout his whole life. He initiated projects for establishing city police, for paving, cleaning and lighting streets, and for the first public library. He founded the American Philosophical Society, a city hospital, and the University of Pennsylvania. At the age of 42 Franklin retired from business and devoted himself to public affairs (he helped to draft the Declaration of Independence, he was appointed Ministr to France, he signed the Treaty of Paris, which brought the revolutionary war to an end) and to the science (Franklin made many scientific experiments, including the famous kite experiment to show the identity of lightning and electricity. He invented a new kind of clock, the lightning rod and the Franklin stove.) When Franklin died, he was one of the most beloved Americans. Twenty thousand people attended his funeral.

Poor Richard's Almanach (1733-58)

Autobiography (Franklin did not finish it, it was published after his death)

St. Jean de Crevecoeur (1735-1813)

born in France; moved to Canada; then bought some land in the colony of New York; lived the life of a farmer

Letters from an American Farmer (1782) – a series of 12 essays about the education, employment, manners and customs of Americans

Thomas Paine (1737-1809)

political philosopher; he brought radicalism to the USA

Common Sense – a pamphlet which urged an immediate declaration of independence. Paine claimed in it that the American colonies received no advantage from their mother country, that Britain only exploited them, and that common sense called for the colonies to become independent of Great Britain and to establish a republican government of their own

During the Revolution Paine wrote a series of 16 pamphlets in support of the revolutionary war, entitled *The American Crisis*.

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)

the third American president; an agrarian aristocrat; founded the University of Virginia; drafted the *Declaration of Independence*

The 18th century was the century of optimism and idealism. Americans believed that man is a perfect creature and they also believed in man's future progress. The belief in the universal sense of right and wrong made possible to overthrow the British rule.

In many ways it is Benjamin Franklin who best represents the spirit of the Enlightenment: he was self-educated, social, ambitious, speculative about the nature and the universe, never dogmatic about religion. What is also symptomatic is the fact that Franklin signed all four documents that were most closely associated with the formation of the USA: the Declaration of Independence, the treaty of alliance with France, the Treaty of Paris, and the Constitution.