

Classic Poetry Series

**Philip Freneau
- poems -**

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Philip Freneau(1752 - 1832)

Philip Freneau was born in New York of Huguenot ancestry in 1752, and died near Freehold, New Jersey, in 1832.

Well versed in the classics in Monmouth County under the tutelage of William Tennent, Philip entered Princeton as a sophomore in 1768, but the joy of the occasion was marred by his father's financial losses and death the year before. In spite of financial hardships, Philip's Scottish mother believed that her oldest of five children would graduate and join the clergy. Though he was a serious student of theology and a stern moralist all his life, Freneau found his true calling in literature. As his roommate and close friend James Madison recognized early, Freneau's wit and verbal skills would make him a powerful wielder of the pen and a formidable adversary on the battlefields of print. Freneau soon became the unrivaled "poet of the Revolution" and is still widely regarded as the "Father of American Literature". Although Freneau had produced several accomplished private poems before college, it was the intense experience of pre-Revolutionary-War Princeton that turned the poet's interest to public writing. Political concerns led Madison, Freneau, and their friends Hugh Henry Brackenridge and William Bradford, Jr., to revive the defunct Plain Dealing Club as the American Whig Society. Their verbal skirmishes with the conservative Cliosophic Society provided ample opportunities for sharpening Freneau's skills in prose and poetic satire. Charged with literary and political enthusiasm, Freneau and Brackenridge collaborated on a rollicking, picaresque narrative, *Father Bombo's Pilgrimage to Mecca in Arabia*, which presents comic glimpses of life in eighteenth-century America. This piece, recently acquired by Princeton and published by the University Library (1975), may well be the first work of prose fiction written in America.

During their senior year Freneau and Brackenridge labored long on another joint project to which Freneau contributed the greater share. Their composition was a patriotic poem of epic design, *The Rising Glory of America*, a prophecy of a time when a united nation should rule the vast continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific. At the commencement exercises of September 1771, Brackenridge read this poem to a "vast concourse of the politest company," gathered at Nassau Hall. The poem articulated the vision and fervor of a young revolutionary generation.

After he graduated from Princeton in 1771, he was author, editor, government official, trader, and farmer. He tried teaching and soon found that he hated it. As regards the genesis of his poems, two facts in his life are especially important.

His newspaper work encouraged a fatal production of the satirical and humorous verse that gave him reputation; and his trading voyages inspired poems descriptive of the scenery of the southern islands, and made possible what is perhaps his most original work, his naval ballads.

He felt a deep obligation to perform public service, and his satires against the British in 1775 were written out of fervent patriotism. At the same time he distrusted politics and had a personal yearning to escape social turmoil and war. The romantic private poet within him struggled against his public role. Thus, paradoxically, in 1776 the "poet of the revolution" set sail for the West Indies where he spent two years writing of the beauties of nature and learning navigation. Suddenly in 1778, he returned to New Jersey and joined the militia and sailed the Atlantic as a ship captain. After suffering for six weeks on a British prison ship, he poured his bitterness into his political writing and into much of his voluminous poetry of the early 1780s.

By 1790, at the age of thirty-eight, with two collections of poetry in print and a reputation as a fiery propagandist and skillful sea captain, Freneau decided to settle down. He married Eleanor Forman and tried to withdraw to a quiet job as an assistant editor in New York. But politics called again. His friends Madison and Jefferson persuaded him to set up his own newspaper in Philadelphia to counter the powerful Hamiltonian paper of John Fenno. Freneau's National Gazette upheld Jefferson's "Republican" principles and even condemned Washington's foreign policy.

After another decade of feverish public action, Freneau withdrew again in 1801, when Jefferson was elected president. He retired to his farm and returned occasionally to the sea. During his last thirty years, he worked on his poems, wrote essays attacking the greed and selfishness of corrupt politicians, and sold pieces of his lands to produce a small income. He discovered that he had given his best years of literary productivity to his country, for it had been in the few stolen moments of the hectic 1780s that he found the inspiration for his best poems, such as *The Indian Burying Ground* and *The Wild Honeysuckle*.

A Political Litany

Libera Nos, Domine.—Deliver us, O Lord, not only
from British dependence, but also

From a junto that labour with absolute power, Whose schemes disappointed have
made them look sour, From the lords of the council, who fight against freedom,
Who still follow on where delusion shall lead them. From the group at St.
James's, who slight our petitions, And fools that are waiting for further
submissions— From a nation whose manners are rough and severe, From
scoundrels and rascals,—do keep us all clear. From pirates sent out by command
of the king To murder and plunder, but never to swing. From Wallace and
Greaves, and Vipers and Roses, Whom, if heaven pleases, we'll give bloody
noses. From the valiant Dunmore, with his crew of banditti, Who plunder
Virginians at Williamsburg city, From hot-headed Montague, mighty to swear,
The little fat man with his pretty white hair. From bishops in Britain, who
butchers are grown, From slaves that would die for a smile from the throne,
From assemblies that vote against Congress proceedings, (Who now see the fruit
of their stupid misleadings.) From Tryon the mighty, who flies from our city, And
swelled with importance disdains the committee: (But since he is pleased to
proclaim us his foes, What the devil care we where the devil he goes.) From the
caitiff, lord North, who would bind us in chains, From a royal king Log, with his
tooth-full of brains, Who dreams, and is certain (when taking a nap) He has
conquered our lands, as they lay on his map. From a kingdom that bullies, and
hectors, and swears, We send up to heaven our wishes and prayers That we,
disunited, may freemen be still, And Britain go on—to be damned if she will.

Philip Freneau

Eutaw Springs

At Eutaw Springs the valiant died;
Their limbs with dust are covered o'er;
Weep on, ye springs, your tearful tide;
How many heroes are no more!

If in this wreck of ruin, they
Can yet be thought to claim a tear,
O smite thy gentle breast, and say
The friends of freedom slumber here!

Thou, who shalt trace this bloody plain,
If goodness rules thy generous breast,
Sigh for the wasted rural reign;
Sigh for the shepherds sunk to rest!

Stranger, their humble groves adorn;
You too may fall, and ask a tear:
'Tis not the beauty of the morn
That proves the evening shall be clear.

They saw their injured country's woe,
The flaming town, the wasted field;
Then rushed to meet the insulting foe;
They took the spear--but left the shield.

Led by thy conquering standards, Greene,
The Britons they compelled to fly:
None distant viewed the fatal plain,
None grieved in such a cause to die--

But, like the Parthian, famed of old,
Who, flying, still their arrows threw,
These routed Britons, full as bold,
Retreated, and retreating slew.

Now rest in peace, our patriot band;
Though far from nature's limits thrown,
We trust they find a happier land,
A bright Phoebus of their own.

Philip Freneau

On A Honey Bee

Thou born to sip the lake or spring,
Or quaff the waters of the stream,
Why hither come on vagrant wing?--
Does Bacchus tempting seem--
Did he, for you, the glass prepare?--
Will I admit you to a share?

Did storms harrass or foes perplex,
Did wasps or king-birds bring dismay--
Did wars distress, or labours vex,
Or did you miss your way?--
A better seat you could not take
Than on the margin of this lake.

Welcome!--I hail you to my glass:
All welcome, here, you find;
Here let the cloud of trouble pass,
Here, be all care resigned.--
This fluid never fails to please,
And drown the griefs of men or bees.

What forced you here, we cannot know,
And you will scarcely tell--
But cheery we would have you go
And bid a glad farewell:
On lighter wings we bid you fly,
Your dart will now all foes defy.

Yet take not oh! too deep a drink,
And in the ocean die;
Here bigger bees than you might sink,
Even bees full six feet high.
Like Pharaoh, then, you would be said
To perish in a sea of red.

Do as you please, your will is mine;
Enjoy it without fear--
And your grave will be this glass of wine,
Your epitaph--a tear--

Go, take your seat in Charon's boat,
We'll tell the hive, you died afloat.

Philip Freneau

On Retirement

A HERMIT'S house beside a stream
With forests planted round,
Whatever it to you may seem
More real happiness I deem
Than if I were a monarch crowned.

A cottage I could call my own
Remote from domes of care;
A little garden, walled with stone,
The wall with ivy overgrown,
A limpid fountain near,

Would more substantial joys afford,
More real bliss impart
Than all the wealth that misers hoard,
Than vanquished worlds, or worlds restored-
Mere cankers of the heart!

Vain, foolish man! how vast thy pride,
How little can your wants supply!-
'Tis surely wrong to grasp so wide-
You act as if you only had
To triumph- not to die!

Philip Freneau

On The Death Of Dr. Benjamin Franklin

Thus, some tall tree that long hath stood
The glory of its native wood,
By storms destroyed, or length of years,
Demands the tribute of our tears.

The pile, that took long time to raise,
To dust returns by slow decays:
But, when its destined years are o'er,
We must regret the loss the more.

So long accustomed to your aid,
The world laments your exit made;
So long befriended by your art,
Philosopher, 'tis hard to part!--

When monarchs tumble to the ground,
Successors easily are found:
But, matchless FRANKLIN! what a few
Can hope to rival such as YOU,
Who seized from kings their sceptered pride,
And turned the lightning darts aside.

Philip Freneau

The American Soldier

Deep in a vale, a stranger now to arms,
Too poor to shine in courts, too proud to beg,
He, who once warred on Saratoga's plains,
Sits musing o'er his scars, and wooden leg.

Remembering still the toil of former days,
To other hands he sees his earnings paid;-
They share the due reward—he feeds on praise.
Lost in the abyss of want, misfortune's shade.

Far, far from domes where splendid tapers glare,
'Tis his from dear bought peace no wealth to win,
Removed alike from courtly cringing `squires,
The great-man's Levee, and the proud man's grin.

Sold are those arms which once on Britons blazed,
When, flushed with conquest, to the charge they came;
That power repelled, and Freedom's fabrick raised,
She leaves her soldier—famine and a name!

Philip Freneau

The Indian Burying Ground

In spite of all the learn'd have said;
I still my old opinion keep,
The posture, that we give the dead,
Points out the soul's eternal sleep.

Not so the ancients of these lands --
The Indian, when from life releas'd
Again is seated with his friends,
And shares gain the joyous feast.

His imag'd birds, and painted bowl,
And ven'son, for a journey dress'd,
Bespeak the nature of the soul,
Activity, that knows no rest.

His bow, for action ready bent,
And arrows, with a head of stone,
Can only mean that life is spent,
And not the finer essence gone.

Thou, stranger, that shalt come this way.
No fraud upon the dead commit --
Observe the swelling turf, and say
They do not lie, but here they sit.

Here still lofty rock remains,
On which the curious eye may trace,
(Now wasted, half, by wearing rains)
The fancies of a older race.

Here still an aged elm aspires,
Beneath whose far -- projecting shade
(And which the shepherd still admires
The children of the forest play'd!

There oft a restless Indian queen
(Pale Shebah, with her braided hair)
And many a barbarous form is seen
To chide the man that lingers there.

By midnight moons, o'er moistening dews,
In habit for the chase array'd,
The hunter still the deer pursues,
The hunter and the deer, a shade!

And long shall timorous fancy see
The painted chief, and pointed spear,
And reason's self shall bow the knee
To shadows and delusions here.

Philip Freneau

The Republican Genius Of Europe

Emperors and kings! in vain you strive
Your torments to conceal--
The age is come that shakes your thrones,
Tramples in dust despotic crowns,
And bids the sceptre fail.

In western worlds the flame began:
From thence to France it flew--
Through Europe, now, it takes its way,
Beams an insufferable day,
And lays all tyrants low.

Genius fo France! pursue the chace
Till Reason's laws restore
Man to be Man, in every clime;--
That Being, active, great, sublime
Debas'd in dust no more.

In dreadful pomp he takes his way
O'er ruin'd crowns, demolish'd thrones--
Pale tyrants shrink before his blaze--
Round him terrific lightnings play--
With eyes of fire, he looks then through,
Crushes the vile despotic crew,
And Pride in ruin lays.

Philip Freneau

The Vanity of Existence

In youth, gay scenes attract our eyes,
And not suspecting their decay
Life's flowery fields before us rise,
Regardless of its winter day.

But vain pursuits, and joys as vain,
Convince us life is but a dream.
Death is to wake, to rise again
To that true life you best esteem.

So nightly on some shallow tide,
Oft have I seen a splendid show;
Reflected stars on either side,
And glittering moons were seen below.

But when the tide had ebbed away,
The scene fantastic with it fled,
A bank of mud around me lay,
And sea-weed on the river's bed.

Philip Freneau

The Wild Honey-Suckle

Fair flower, that dost so comely grow,
Hid in this silent, dull retreat,
Untouched thy honied blossoms blow,
Unseen thy little branches greet;
...No roving foot shall crush thee here,
...No busy hand provoke a tear.

By Nature's self in white arrayed,
She bade thee shun the vulgar eye,
And planted here the gaurdian shade,
And sent soft waters murmuring by;
...Thus quietly thy summer goes,
...Thy days declinging to repose.

Smit with those charms, that must decay,
I grieve to see your future doom;
They died--nor were those flowers more gay,
The flowers that did in Eden bloom;
...Unpitying frosts, and Autumn's power
...Shall leave no vestige of this flower.

From morning suns and evenign dews
At first thy little being came:
If nothing once, you nothing lose,
For when you die you are the same;
...The space between, is but an hour,
...The frail duration of a flower.

Philip Freneau

To A New England Poet

Though skilled in Latin and in Greek,
And earning fifty cents a week,
Such knowledge, and the income, too,
Should teach you better what to do:
 The meanest drudges, kept in pay,
 Can pocket fifty cents a day.

Why stay in such a tasteless land,
Where all must on a level stand,
(Excepting people, at their ease,
Who choose the level where they please:)
 See Irving gone to Britain's court
 To people of another sort,
 He will return, with wealth and fame,
 While Yankees hardly know your name.

Lo! he has kissed a Monarch's--hand!
Before a prince I see him stand,
And with the glittering nobles mix,
Forgetting times of seventy-six,
While you with terror meet the frown
Of Bank Directors of the town,
 The home-made nobles of our times,
 Who hate the bard, and spurn his rhymes.

Why pause?--like Irving, haste away,
To England your addresses pay;
And England will reward you well,
 Of British feats, and British arms,
 The maids of honor, and their charms.

Dear bard, I pray you, take the hint,
In England what you write and print,
Republished here in shop, or stall,
Will perfectly enchant us all:
 It will assume a different face,
 And post your name at every place,
 From splendid domes of first degree
 Where ladies meet, to sip their tea;

From marble halls, where lawyers plead,
Or Congress-men talk loud, indeed,
To huts, where evening clubs appear,
And 'squires resort--to guzzle Beer.

Philip Freneau

To Mr. Blanchard, The Celebrated Aeronaut In America

Nil mortalibus ardui est
Caelum ipsum petimus stultitia
Horace

FROM Persian looms the silk he wove
No Weaver meant should trail above
The surface of the earth we tread,
To deck the matron or the maid.

But you ambitious, have design'd
With silk to soar above mankind:-
On silk you hang your splendid car
And mount towards the morning star.

How can you be so careless- gay:
Would you amidst red lightnings play;
Meet sulphurous blasts, and fear them not-
Is Phaeton's sad fate forgot?

Beyond our view you mean to rise-
And this Balloon, of mighty size,
Will to the astonish'd eye appear,
An atom wafted thro' the air.

Where would you rove? amidst the storms,
Departed Ghosts, and shadowy forms,
Vast tracks of aether, and, what's more,
A sea of space without a shore!-

Would you to Herschell find the way-
To Saturn's moons, undaunted stray;
Or, wafted on a silken wing,
Alight on Saturn's double ring?

Would you the lunar mountains trace,
Or in her flight fair Venus chase;

Would you, like her, perform the tour
Of sixty thousand miles an hour?-

To move at such a dreadful rate
He must propel, who did create-
By him, indeed, are wonders done
Who follows Venus round the sun.

At Mars arriv'd, what would you see!-
Strange forms, I guess- not such as we;
Alarming shapes, yet seen by none;
For every planet has its own.

If onward still, you urge your flight
You may approach some satellite,
Some of the shining train above
That circle round the orb of Jove.

Attracted by so huge a sphere
You might become a stranger here:
There you might be, if there you fly,
A giant sixty fathoms high.

May heaven preserve you from that fate!
Here, men are men of little weight:
There, Polypheme, it might be shown,
Is but a middle sized baboon.-

This ramble through, the aether pass'd,
Pray tell us when you stop at last;
Would you with gods that aether share,
Or dine on atmospheric air?-

You have a longing for the skies,
To leave the fogs that round us rise,
To haste your flight and speed your wings
Beyond this world of little things.

Your silken project is too great;
Stay here, Blanchard, 'till death or fate
To which, yourself, like us, must bow,
Shall send you where you want to go.

Yes- wait, and let the heav'ns decide;-
Your wishes may be gratified,
And you shall go, as swift as thought,
Where nature has more finely wrought,

Her Chrystal spheres, her heavens serene;
A more sublime, enchanting scene
Than thought depicts or poets feign.

Philip Freneau

To The Memory Of The Brave Americans

Under General Greene, in South Carolina,
who fell in the action of September 8, 1781

AT Eutaw Springs the valiant died;
Their limbs with dust are covered o'er-
Weep on, ye springs, your tearful tide;
How many heroes are no more!

If in this wreck or ruin, they
Can yet be thought to claim a tear,
O smite your gentle breast, and say
The friends of freedom slumber here!

Thou, who shalt trace this bloody plain,
If goodness rules thy generous breast,
Sigh for the wasted rural reign;
Sign for the shepherds, sunk to rest!

Stranger, their humble graves adorn;
You too may fall, and ask a tear;
'Tis not the beauty of the morn
That proves the evening shall be clear.-

They saw their injured country's woe;
The flaming town, the wasted field;
Then rushed to meet the insulting foe;
They took the spear- but left the shield.

Led by thy conquering genius, Greene,
The Britons they compelled to fly;
None distant viewed the fatal plain,
None grieved, in such a cause to die-

But, like the Parthian, famed of old,
Who, flying, still their arrows threw,
These routed Britons, full as bold,
Retreated, and retreating slew.

Now rest in peace, our patriot band,

Though far from nature's limits thrown,
We trust they find a happier land,
A brighter sunshine of their own.

Philip Freneau