

Thrift

Thrift

A Cyclopedica

BEING AN EARLY ATTEMPT TO ASSEMBLE THE
BEST OF WHAT IS KNOWN FROM HISTORY AND
LITERATURE ABOUT ONE OF OUR MOST PRO-
VOCATIVE WORDS ~ FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT
ASHAMED TO THINK ANEW ABOUT HAPPINESS,
• EXTRAVAGANCE, AND THRIVING •

David Blankenhorn

TEMPLETON FOUNDATION PRESS
WEST CONSHOHOCKEN, PENNSYLVANIA

A COMPANION TO THE TRAVELING EXHIBITION, *THRIFT: IN SEARCH OF THE ART OF LIVING WELL*, AND THE REPORT
TO THE NATION, *FOR A NEW THRIFT: CONFRONTING THE DEBT CULTURE*. VISIT THE WEBSITE: WWW.NEWTHRIFT.ORG

Templeton Foundation Press
300 Conshohocken State Road, Suite 670
West Conshohocken, PA 19428
www.templetonpress.org

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Designed and typeset by Gopa & Ted2, Inc.
Printed in the United States of America

08 09 10 11 12 13 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Blankenhorn, David.

Thrift : a cyclopedia : being an early attempt to assemble the best of what is known from history and literature about one of our most provocative words for those who are not ashamed to think anew about happiness, extravagance, and thriving / David Blankenhorn.

p. cm.

“A Companion to the traveling exhibition, Thrift: In Search of the Art of Living Well and the Report to the Nation, For a New Thrift: Confronting the Debt Culture.”

Developed after a conference of scholars the author convened in October of 2005, at the request of the John Templeton Foundation, to discuss the history of thrift as an American value and practice.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59947-142-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-59947-142-6 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Consumption (Economics)—Social aspects—United States. 2. Saving and investment—United States—United States. 3. Social values—United States—History. 4. Conduct of life—United States—History. 5. Social values—United States—Quotations, maxims, etc. I. Title.

HC110.C6B57 2008

332.0240097303—dc22

2008006962

For Arthur and Joann Rasmussen—thrivers who help others to thrive

.....

“If a good man thrive, all thrive with him.”

—George Herbert

Contents

Introduction	3	PART 3 VISIONARIES	83
PART 1 WHAT IS THRIFT?	9	14. By Dint of His Thrift: Daniel Defoe (b. 1660)	85
1. Thrift as Growing	12	15. The More Treasure They Will Lay Up in Heaven: John Wesley (b. 1703)	90
2. Thrift as Good Fortune	15	16. The Art of Making Money Plenty: Benjamin Franklin (b. 1706)	93
3. Thrift as Prospering	18	17. Duncan of Ruthwell: Henry Duncan (b. 1774)	109
4. Thrift as Saving	23	18. Knox's Bank: James, Walter, and James Knox	115
5. Thrift as Hoarding	30	19. Those Rules of Thrift and Economy: Catharine Beecher (b. 1800)	118
6. What Thrift Is	37	20. Those Who Are Not Ashamed of Economy: Lydia Marie Child (b. 1802)	121
PART 2 THE CASES AGAINST THRIFT	55	21. The Prophet of Victorian England: Samuel Smiles (b. 1812)	124
7. The Ascetic's Case	56	22. Sikes of Huddersfield: Charles Sikes (b. 1818)	129
8. The Prophet's Case	57	23. Who Catches the Vision? Alonzo, Wilmot, and Wilmot Evans	133
9. The Gentleman's Case	58		
10. The Sensualist's Case	61		
11. The Economist's Case	68		
12. The Socialist's Case	73		
13. The Spendthrift's Case	79		

24. A Constant Lesson in Thrift: Clara Barton (b. 1821)	135	39. Friendly and Fraternal Societies	187
25. The Greater Thrift: Charles Pratt (b. 1830)	137	40. Mutual Savings Banks	192
26. Always Had a Broom in My Hand: John Wanamaker (b. 1838)	139	41. Producer and Consumer Cooperatives	210
27. A Day Labourer So Long: Edward Brabrook (b. 1839)	142	42. Building and Loan Associations	214
28. The Idea of Thrift: Orison Swett Marden (b. 1850)	144	43. Credit Unions	225
29. That We May Save the Greatest: Bolton Hall (b. 1854)	147	44. Public Libraries	234
30. A Person Who Makes Beautiful Things: Elbert Hubbard (b. 1856)	150	45. Thrift Shops	240
31. Character in the Highest and Best Sense: Booker T. Washington (b. 1856)	153	PART 5 MOVEMENTS	243
32. Beauty in Homespun: Martha Berry (b. 1866)	160	46. To Build International Solidarity	245
33. Creative Economy: S. W. Straus (b. 1866)	162	47. To Bring People Together	250
34. Take the Nickels and Turn Them into Dollars: Maggie L. Walker (b. 1867)	166	48. To Organize Sacrifice	260
35. Some Reflection of the Simple Virtues: Laurence C. Jones (b. 1882)	168	49. To Train Children	269
36. George Never Leaves Bedford Falls: Frank Capra (b. 1897)	172	PART 6 THRIFT WISDOM	277
PART 4 INSTITUTIONS	177	50. Proverbs and Maxims	279
37. Thrift Boxes	179	Conclusion: The Possibilities of American Thrift	291
38. Gardens	185	Acknowledgments	304
		Appendix A: Do You Know What Thrift Is? (A Quiz)	305
		Appendix B: Puritans and Quakers	306
		Notes	310
		Quote Citations	313
		Index	341

Thrift

Introduction

THIS BOOK is an extended reflection, and a preliminary bringing together of knowledge, on the English word “thrift.” In October of 2005, at the request of the John Templeton Foundation, I helped to convene a conference of nearly forty leading scholars to discuss the history of thrift as an American value and practice. The main thing I learned at the conference is that most leading scholars are not very interested in thrift. Moreover, among those who are interested, thrift is usually viewed as either mildly amusing, worryingly retrograde, or both.

The very word “thrift” tells its own tale, being derived from the word “to thrive.”

JOHN LUBBOCK, *THE USE OF LIFE*, 1894

A prominent professor of political philosophy from Harvard, who adamantly insisted that thrift is not a virtue, and whose commissioned paper did not contain even one mention of the word “thrift,” asked me pointedly: “Are you saying that

the word ‘thrift’ has to be on every page?” I told him I’d think about that.

So I went home and thought about it. I eventually decided that the answer to his question is “Yes.” A serious paper on the topic of thrift ought to contain the word “thrift” on every page. Or nearly every page. Or at least on one or two pages! This book contains the word “thrift” on nearly every page.

I’m grateful to that Harvard professor, because that conference, and in particular his question, greatly deepened my interest in the subject. What was this odd idea that they could barely be bothered to study and so clearly did not believe in? Moreover, the whole experience of that conference made me realize that leading scholars are not the only ones today who are actively disinterested in thrift. The word “thrift” has largely fallen out of our public conversation. As a result, the whole concept sounds quaintly old-fashioned, like something your great-grandparents might have talked about—but not you, and certainly not your chil-

PART ONE

What Is Thrift?

IN 1910, the U.S. National Bankers Association, at its annual meeting in Los Angeles, invited as a guest lecturer the noted humorist, journalist, and minister Robert J. Burdette. Burdette's lecture to the bankers was entitled "Thrift." His opening query, and the core question that Burdette sought to answer that evening, was "What is thrift?" He confessed that his task was not an easy one.

He began the lecture by reporting, by way of the dictionary, that thrift is "the condition of one who thrives," but admitted with a smile that such a definition was "not quite good enough." Then he offered another: "Luck, fortune, success." Still not quite right. And then another: "Frugality, economical management." Yes, maybe, but not really. And then one more try: "Good husbandry." Finally, Burdette simply gave up. He confessed to the bankers: "Now, after all, what is thrift? Just thrift." The bankers laughed, and Burdette went on his merry way, delivering charming descriptions and anecdotes of thrift, and ending

up by suggesting that the highest form of thrift is generosity, since in heaven, according to Burdette at least, they measure a man's thriftiness by "what he gave away."¹

What (if anything!) can we learn today from these long-forgotten quips delivered to long-deceased bankers after a dinner in Los Angeles nearly a century ago? Well, for starters, let's realize that, in 1910, it was not at all surprising for a well-known person to deliver a public lecture on "Thrift." Quite the contrary. I am focusing here on one such talk by Robert Burdette, but there are many others from this era that I could just as easily have chosen. That fact alone should tell us something. People in the United States used to spend quite a bit of time asking themselves, "What is thrift?" Today, we don't.

Second, earlier generations assumed that the answer to the question, while important, was not easy or straightforward. The topic was complex, not simple. They assumed, therefore, that the question called for some study and reflection,

STATICE Armeria.

Thrift.

PENTANDRIA *Pentagynia*.

GEN. CHAR. Cal. of one leaf, entire, plaited, filmy.
 Petals five. Seed single.
 SPEC. CHAR. Stalk simple, bearing a round head of
 flowers. Leaves linear.
 SYN. Statice Armeria. *Linn. Sp. Pl.* 394. *Hudb. Fl.*
Am. 132. *Wick. Bot. Arr.* 326. *Rehb. Cant.* 129.
Lichtf. Scot. 173.
S. montana minor. Rati Syn. 203.

"THE most humble and most lofty of plants," says Mr. Lightfoot; "it grows frequently upon the sea-horses, and upon the summits of the highest mountains." Neither is it less common in England and Wales than in Scotland, in both kinds of situations. We have examined it from both, and found no difference between the specimens. Its favourite maritime soil is of the muddy kind. The constitution of this plant indeed seems of a very accommodating nature, for it grows equally well in any garden, even in the smoke of London, and is much used for edgings. From its readiness to thrive in any situation, the English name has probably been given. It flowers about July and August.

Root perennial, woody, bearing many thick tufts of lax, linear, channelled, smooth, entire leaves. Stalks varying much in height, round, naked, each terminated by a globular head of several flowers, encompassed with a many-leaved involucre, whose base is attached to a singular cylindrical membranous sheath, about an inch long, which invests the top of the stalk, its lower end being loose and lacerated, so that it seems to have been torn off from the root, and carried up with the young growing stalk. Calyx small, erect. Petals rose-coloured. Crown of the seed fringed.



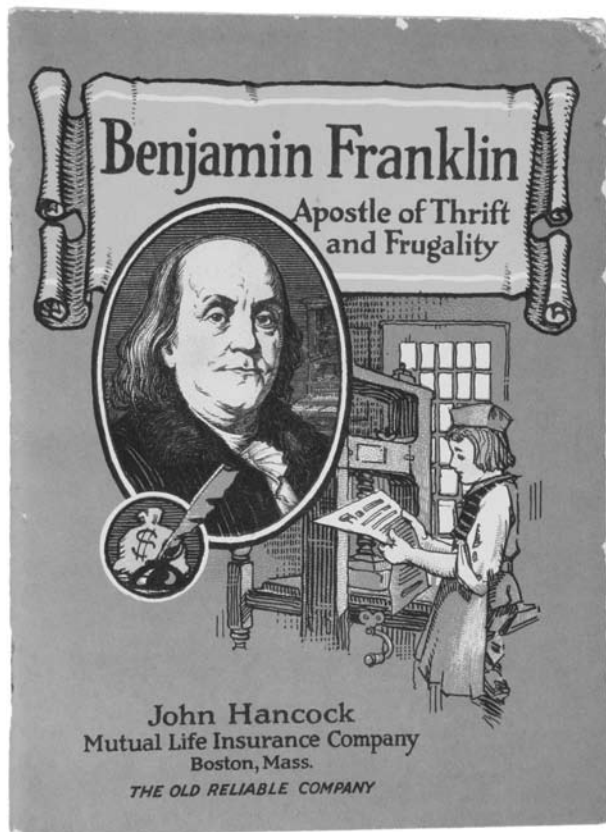
James Edward Smith,
English Botany, vol. 4, 1795

or at least some genuine mental effort. Today, we don't. Quite the contrary. To the degree that people speak of thrift today, they are probably quite certain that thrift means scrimping and saving, usually up to and including being unpleasantly cheap and stingy. So, after all, what is thrift? What to earlier generations of Americans had seemed a difficult, important question has largely become for our generation an easy, unimportant question. That's quite a shift! Burdette, for example, concludes that thrift can mean generosity. So have many other thoughtful people, from Lao Tzu writing in China in about 600 BCE, to the great British statesman William Gladstone in the 1890s, to Dr. John M. Templeton Jr., one of today's very few pro-thrift voices, in his 2004 book, *Thrift and*

Generosity. But is this proposition well known in the United States today? Are very many of us even thinking about it?

So just for the fun of it, and for any thrift (that is, good fortune) that it might provide us, let's try to look with fresh eyes, with innocence even, and ask our ourselves anew, "What is thrift?" When all is properly considered, we will end up with a definition of thrift that is fairly coherent and thrifty (that is, economical), but to get there honestly, we must first work through some complexity. The complexity is necessary for four reasons.

First, thrift is inherently a complex idea. It is a multifaceted philosophical concept for which there is no single precise synonym in the English language. Second, because of this multidimen-



Published 1921

sionality, thrift can mean, and virtually from the beginning has meant, different things to different people. Some tend to emphasize one dimension of the idea, and some another, with still others trying to synthesize. Third, the dominant meaning of the word has steadily evolved over time. “Thrift” in the fourteenth century typically meant something quite different from “thrift” in 1800, which in turn is quite different from the most common meanings of “thrift” in 1950, not to mention the dominant meaning of “thrift” today. To all of these turns and evolutions, due attention must be paid. And finally, unfortunately “thrift” is a word that, especially today, is often defined publicly by peo-

ple who don’t like it. (I learned this fact the hard way when I helped to convene that group of prominent scholars to opine on thrift.) The result is like asking a gun-control advocate to define “firearm,” or a die-hard Republican to tell you what Democrats truly believe—you are likely to get some nuggets of valid information, but you are unlikely to get the whole story, and often enough you will see streaks of bias infiltrating both the working definitions and the underlying assumptions.

So, to tell our tale thriftily—that is, well, properly, suitably—let’s begin by considering four fairly distinct ways of understanding what thrift is.

1. Thrift as Growing

Planting of trees is England's old thrift.

ENGLISH PROVERB

....

*On sandy wastes, ere yet the frugal root
Of tender grass can feed the springing shoot
Fringing each sterile bank and rocky rift
Green grows the tufted cushions of the Thrift . . .*



THE TIME TO LEARN

Rollin Kirby, 1920

*Ah! well named flower, for of a thrift we sing,
Skilled like thyself, a fertile growth to bring
In barren wastes with Hope's sweet verdure rife
The pledge and potency of statelier life.*

WALSHAM HOWE, THE FIRST BISHOP OF
WAKEFIELD, "THRIFT—THE PLANT"

....

As we can see, one primary meaning of thrift is growing, blooming, or spreading with vigor, health, and efficiency, either as a part of nature, or as a metaphor stemming from the idea of natural, effective growth.

*And if it be asshe, elme, or oke, cut of all
the bowes cleane, and save the toppe hole.
For if thou make hym ryche of bowes,
thou makest hyme poore of thryfe . . .*

"HOW TO REMOVE TREES," FITZHERBERT'S *THE BOOK
OF HUSBANDRY*, 1534

....

*An Olde Thrift Newly Revived. Wherein is
declared the manner of Planting, Preserving, and
Husbanding Young Trees.*

TITLE OF A BOOK BY RICHARD MOORE, ABOUT 1612

2. Thrift as Good Fortune

PROBABLY the oldest meanings of “thrift” in the English language are good fortune, thriving, wealth, being blessed with luck and good favor, and being the best, the most proper, or the most suitable.

*For he does men evere schame: sorewe him
must bifalle
And lesser thrift [bad fortune] upon his heued . . .*
“A MIRACLE OF ST. JAMES,” ABOUT 1305

....

*I kan right now no thrifty [suitable, fitting]
tale seyn . . .*
GEOFFREY CHAUCER, *CANTERBURY TALES*, “THE MAN
OF LAW’S TALE,” (INTRODUCTION, 46), 1380S

....

*Now good thrift [good luck, good fortune] have he,
wherso that he be!*
CHAUCER, *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE* (II, 847), 1380S

....

*Of al this noble town the thriftieste [best, finest,
most attractive].*
CHAUCER, *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE* (II, 737)

*She took hire leve at hem ful thriftily [properly, in
the best way].*

CHAUCER, *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE* (III, 211)

....

In his generally excellent biography of Benjamin Franklin, Carl Van Doren suggests that thrift is a “prim, dry” idea, from which Franklin needs to be “rescued.”¹ Well, slog your way through the following bit of old English—“Her arms small, her hair straight and soft; her sides long, fleshy, smooth, and white; he began to stroke her, and good thrift came to him, from her snow-white throat and her round, light breasts”—and you’ll see that Chaucer’s view of thrift is almost anything but “prim and dry.”

*Hire armes smale, hire streghte bak and
softe,
Hire sydes longe, fleschly, smothe, and white
He gan to stroke, and good thrift [good luck,
good fortune] bad ful ofte
Hire snowissh throte, hire brestes round
and lite.*

CHAUCER, *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE* (III, 1247–50)

3. Thrift as Prospering

HERE IS one of my very favorite thrift sayings:

His thrift waxes thin, that spends before he wins.

“HOW THE GOOD WIFE TAUGHT HER
DAUGHTER,” ABOUT 1430

....

I love this saying because, on the one hand, it uses “thrift” in its classical sense of thriving, or being blessed with good fortune, while on the other, it concretely links the condition of thriving to a habit that one should cultivate within the economic sphere of life—that is, the discipline of living within one’s means. Which is not just any old habit! Indeed, of all the commonsense guidelines for thrift since the word first emerged in English, this one is certainly one of the most commonly repeated and urgently advised. For example, Robert Louis Stevenson’s “Christmas Sermon” from 1888, in which he beautifully adumbrates the “task” in life that requires “fortitude and delicacy,” sincerely hopes that each of us are able “to earn a little and to spend a little less.”¹

The idea is an old one. Here is another of my all-time favorite thrift sayings:

Cut my coat after my cloth.

GODLY QUEEN HESTER, ABOUT 1529

....

And here is another wonderful one, spelling out the guideline a bit more fully:

Be thriftie, but not covetous . . .

Never exceed thy income . . .

*By no means runne in debt: take thine own
measure.*

*Who cannot live on twentie pound a yeare,
Cannot on fortie: he’s a man of pleasure,*

....

A kinde of thing that’s for it self too deere.

*The curious unthrift makes his cloth too wide,
And spares himself, but would his taylor chide.*

GEORGE HERBERT, “THE CHURCH-PORCH,” 1633

....

When the “good wife” teaches her daughter in fifteenth-century England that “His thrift waxes thin, that spends before he wins,” and when George Herbert sits on “the Church-porch” in

4. Thrift as Saving

JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES was one of the greatest public intellectuals of his generation and arguably the most influential economist of the twentieth century. Probably his most respected book is *A Treatise on Money*, published in two volumes in December of 1930. Here is a famous portion of that book:

It has been usual to think of the accumulated wealth of the world as having been painfully built up out of that voluntary abstinence of individuals from the immediate enjoyment of consumption, which we call Thrift. But it should be obvious that mere abstinence is not enough by itself to build cities or drain fens . . .

If Enterprise is afoot, wealth accumulates whatever may be happening to Thrift; and if Enterprise is asleep, wealth decays whatever Thrift may be doing.

Thus, Thrift may be the handmaiden of Enterprise. But equally she may not. And, perhaps, even usually she is not.

JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES, *A TREATISE ON MONEY*, 1930

A few weeks after the book was published, struggling valiantly for ways to overcome the Great Depression that was casting such a blight on the

British economy (as well as on the U.S. and other economies), Keynes went on the radio to address the British people directly on this same subject:

There are today many well-wishers of their country who believe that the most useful thing which they and their neighbours can do to mend the situation is to save more than usual . . . Now, in certain circumstances, all this would be quite right, but in present circumstances, unluckily, it is quite wrong. It is utterly harmful and misguided—the very opposite of the truth . . .

The best guess I can make is that whenever you save five shillings, you put a man out of work for a day. Your saving that five shillings adds to unemployment to the extent of one man for one day—and so on in proportion. On the other hand, whenever you buy goods you increase employment—though they must be British, home-produced goods if you are to increase employment in this country. After all, this is only the plainest common sense. For if you buy goods, someone will have to make them. And if you do not buy goods, the shops will not clear their stocks, they will not give repeat orders, and someone will be thrown out of work.

Therefore, O patriotic housewives, sally out tomorrow early into the streets and go to the wonderful sales which are everywhere advertised.

5. Thrift as Hoarding

E. BELFORT BAX was a well-known socialist leader in Victorian Britain. A committed Marxist, he detested capitalism and also, and as a result, detested thrift, even thrift in the form of producer and consumer cooperatives.

As I have said, co-operative experiments reflect what are, from a Socialistic point of view, the worst aspects of the current order. The trade co-operator canonises the bourgeois virtues, but Socialist vices, “over-work,” and “thrift.” To the Socialist, labour is an evil to be minimised to the utmost. The man who works at his trade or avocation more than necessity compels him, or who accumulates more than he can enjoy, is not a hero but a fool from the Socialist’s standpoint. It is this necessary work which it is the aim of Socialism to reduce to the minimum. Again, “thrift,” the hoarding up of the products of labour, it is obvious must be without rhyme or reason, except on a capitalist basis. For the only two purposes which commodities serve are consumption and exchange. Now except under peculiar circumstances (arctic expeditions and the like), it is certain they would not be “saved” to any considerable extent merely for the sake of future consumption. Hence the object of “thrift,” or hoarding, must lie in exchange. And, in short, it is the increment obtainable by commodities or realised

labour-power when represented by exchange-value or money, that furnishes the only raison d’etre of “thrift.” The aim of the Socialist, therefore, which is the enjoyment of the products of labour as opposed to that of the bourgeois which is their mere accumulation with a view to “surplus-value” is radically at variance with “thrift.”

E. BELFORT BAX, “UNSCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM,” 1884

• • • •

Leave aside for now whether Bax was right or wrong in taking such a dim view of cooperatives. (Personally I’m a fan of these thrift institutions.) Let’s simply focus for a moment on the fact that, for Bax, “thrift” means “hoarding.” Period. To him, that’s entirely what the word means.

Despite the best efforts of thrift advocates everywhere to make clear that thrift and hoarding, far from being same thing, and far from being even remotely related, are in fact very close to being opposites, many people over the centuries have insisted otherwise. Especially in the case of people who dislike and distrust thrift anyway, it is common enough, and it has gotten increasingly common since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to hear that thrift basically means hoarding—being a miser, accumulating money for its

6. What Thrift Is

CAN THRIFT BE DEFINED? Notwithstanding the various historical shifts and the many and often conflicting usages, does there remain an underlying conceptual core, a set of enduring principles and an ethically coherent way of seeing the world that can legitimately, as if in a dictionary, be called “thrift”? Many learned people will tell you that the answer is no. I disagree. So let me briefly say what I think thrift is, and then to support my definition, let me present to you some formulations from others who (mostly) have thought carefully about thrift, who believe that thrift is a good thing, and who, like me, believe that they know what thrift is.

Thrift is a particular way of seeing the world—a set of principles and ethical guidelines intended to orient us toward certain goals. Thrift concerns not only the material world—the world of material goods and the money to buy them—but also the natural, spiritual, and aesthetic worlds.

Put most simply, thrift is the moral discipline of wisest use. The root of “thrift” is “thrive.” Thrift says: Use all that you have in the wisest way, to promote thriving.

To understand thrift’s scope, think in terms of “three.” Specifically, three groups of three.

Substantively, thrift is made up of three traits or norms: industry, frugality, and trusteeship. These are its pillars, its overarching principles.

INDUSTRY: hard work; the great value and necessity of persistent, diligent, careful, productive labor. (A thrift maxim: the reward for good work is more work.)

FRUGALITY: being sparing as regards using or spending for myself; the worth of conserving and reusing; and the importance of eliminating waste and avoiding extravagance.

TRUSTEESHIP: what is mine, I hold in trust; my wealth (my thrift) is ultimately for the purpose of helping others and contributing to the common good.

Operationally, thrift comes in three main forms, corresponding to three life domains: individual and household, commercial, and public.

INDIVIDUAL AND HOUSEHOLD THRIFT is close to home and largely private; it is reflected mainly in individual character traits and in household norms and practices. Examples of such thrift include mending torn clothing, recycling waste products, and allocating a fixed proportion of personal or household earnings to savings.

COMMERCIAL THRIFT concerns the operation of businesses and the production side of the marketplace. Examples of this form of thrift include changing the workplace to reduce waste or increase quality, forming a food co-op, or making sure that you have a deserved reputation for honest dealing.

PUBLIC THRIFT is, well, public—it involves collective decision-making and social and public institutions aimed at thrift. Examples of this form of thrift include building a public library, mobilizing for sacrifice in times of war or national emergency, or instituting reforms or passing laws to promote conservation.

Finally, thrift contains within it three main beliefs or assumptions about the human person.

The first is that **PRODUCTIVE WORK IS GOOD**. A thrifty person is anything but passive or idle. (One of the Scandinavian roots of the word means “to seize.”) Thrift openly embraces material prosperity, in the sense that thrift strongly values productivity and fruitfulness stemming from steady and good work. Thrift grows things. Where one blade of grass is now growing, thrift works to make two grow. Then three.

The second is that **WHAT WE HAVE IS NOT OURS**. The Christian doctrine of stewardship teaches us that everything we have, including our own lives, is a gift from God, and must be used for his purposes, not ours alone. Thrift secularizes this power-

ful idea, urging us to view ourselves not as owners, but as trustees, who are obliged (entrusted) to use what we have not for ourselves alone, but for the common good and to help those in need.

The third is that **GIVING PEOPLE THINGS IS NOT AS GOOD AS HELPING THEM TO HELP THEMSELVES**. Typically, thrift is deeply suspicious of handouts, or acts of charity that require little or nothing from the recipient. From top to bottom, thrift is a virtue tailor-made by, and for, those who want to lift themselves up, and for those who want to help others to do the same.

Things thriftie, that teacheth the thriving to thrive.

THOMAS TUSSER, *A HUNDRED POYNTE*
OF GOOD HUSBANDRY, 1557

....

This fatherly advise may be my all-time favorite thrift saying:

Wisedome is great wealth. Sparing, is good getting.

Thrift consisteth not in golde, but grace.

*. . . those that give themselves to be bookish,
are oftentimes so blockish, that they forget
thrift: Whereby the olde Saw is verified, that
the greatest Clearkes are not the wisest men,
who digge still at the roote, while others gather
the fruite . . .*

*. . . The stipende that is allowed to maintaine
thee use wisely, be neither prodigall to spende all,
nor covetous to keepe all, cut thy coat according*

PART TWO

The Cases against Thrift

THRIFT HAS many worthy enemies. For as long as people have been passionately praising thrift, people have been passionately condemning it. Thrift's enemies also tend to be highly articulate and fun to read. Let's find out who they are, and hear them out. Maybe they have a point.

7. The Ascetic's Case

THE GOAL OF MATERIAL PROSPERITY IS ILLUSORY, A DANGER, OR BOTH;
THRIFT EMPHASIZES THINGS THAT SHOULD NOT MATTER.

For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.

And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.

But they that will be rich fall into a temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.

For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

I TIMOTHY 6:7–10 (KJV)

....

Whoever buys a thing, not that he may sell it whole and unchanged, but that it may be a material for fashioning something, he is no merchant. But the man who buys it in order that he may gain by selling it again unchanged and as he bought it, that man is of the buyers and sellers who are cast forth from God's temple.

CORPUS JURIS CANONICI (CORPUS OF CANON LAW),
COMPILED ABOUT 1150

He who has enough to satisfy his wants and nevertheless ceaselessly labors to acquire riches, either in order to obtain a higher social position, or that subsequently he may have enough to live without labor, or that his sons may become men of wealth and importance—all such are incited by a damnable avarice, sensuality, or pride.

A SCHOOLMAN (UNIVERSITY SCHOLAR IN EUROPE), 1300S

....

... truth and commerce cannot live together . . . it is impossible for you to serve God, that is, to serve the truth, and be a merchant . . .

STANISLAW ORZECOWSKI, *THE POLITY OF THE KINGDOM OF POLAND*, 1564

....

Thrift is care and scruple in the spending of one's means. It is not a virtue, and it requires neither skill nor talent.

IMMANUEL KANT, LECTURE AT KONIGSBERG, 1775

8. The Prophet's Case

THE MOMENT OF ULTIMATE MEANING IS NEARING;
AT SUCH A TIME, THRIFT IS INSIGNIFICANT.

Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls? . . .

Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

If then God so clothe the grass, which is today in the field, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O ye of little faith?

And seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind.

For all these things do the nations of the world seek after; and your Father knowest that ye have need of these things.

But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all of these things shall be added unto you.

LUKE 12:24, 27–31 (KJV)

Avaunt, you drudge! Now all may labour'd ends are at the stake. Is't a time to think of thrift?

PHILIP MASSINGER, *A NEW WAY TO
PAY OLD DEBTS* (III, 2), 1633

. . . .

O my friends, there are resources in us on which we have not yet drawn. There are men who rise refreshed on hearing a threat; men to whom a crisis which intimidates and paralyses the majority,—demanding not the faculties of prudence and thrift, but comprehension, immoveableness, the readiness of sacrifice,—comes graceful and beloved as a bride.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON, DIVINITY SCHOOL ADDRESS,
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, JULY 15, 1838

9. The Gentleman's Case

A GENTLEMAN OR A GENTLEWOMAN IS DEVOTED TO LEISURE, PLEASURE, AND THE PURSUIT OF HIGHER THINGS; THRIFT IS VULGAR AND COMMONPLACE.

An unmatched user of the English language, Shakespeare uses the word “thrift” in nearly every sense that it can be used, at times to suggest something good, and at times the opposite. In *Hamlet*, it's mostly the latter.¹

*The instances that second marriage move,
Are base respects of thrift, but none of love.*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *HAMLET* (III, 2), ABOUT 1600

....

*Woful profusion! at how dear a rate,
Are we made up! All hope of thrift and state
Lost for a verse.*

HENRY VAUGHN, DISCUSSING THE PRICE OF THE POET'S ART IN “TO HIS FRIEND,” 1651

....

*I have already computed the Charge of nursing
a Beggar's Child (in which List I reckon all
Cottagers, Labourers, and Four fifths of the
Farmers) to be about two Shilling per Annum,
Rags included; and I believe no Gentleman would*

*repine to give Ten Shillings for the Carcase of a
good fat Child, which, as I have said, will make
four Dishes of excellent nutritive Meat, when he
hath only some particular Friend or his own Family
to dine with him. Thus the Squire will learn to
be a good Landlord, and grow popular among
his Tenants; the Mother will have Eight Shillings
net Profit, and be fit for Work till she produceth
another Child.*

*Those who are more thrifty (as I must confess
the Times require) may flay the Carcase; the Skin
of which artificially dressed will make admirable
Gloves for Ladies, and Summer Boots for fine
Gentlemen.*

JONATHAN SWIFT, *A MODEST PROPOSAL*, 1729

....

If the letter below from Oliver Goldsmith in fact endorses thrift, it may be the saddest and most bittersweet endorsement of thrift in the history of the English language.

*Above all things, let him never touch a romance or
novel; these paint beauty in colors more charming*

10. The Sensualist's Case

NOTHING IS GIVEN TO US BUT TODAY, WHICH IS MEANT FOR US TO EXPERIENCE FULLY; THRIFT IS THE ENEMY OF JOY AND THE KILLER OF SPONTANEITY.

*Let the world slide, let the world go;
A fig for care, a fig for woe!
If I can't pay, why, I can owe,
And death makes equal the high and low.*

JOHN HEYWOOD, "BE MERRY, FRIENDS,"
PROBABLY 1570S

....

*These trifles birds, which spend the day
in needless notes.*

GEORGE GASCOIGNE, *THE COMPLAYNT OF PHILOMENE*,
1576

....

*WILL SUMMER: A small matter. I know one
spent, in less than a year, eight and fifty pounds in
mustard, and another that ran in debt in the space
of four or five year above fourteen thousand pound
in lute-strings and gray paper.*

*SUMMER: O monstrous unthrift, who e're
heard the like?*

*The sea's vast throat, in so short tract of time,
Devoureth nor consumeth half so much.*

How well mightst thou have liv'd within thy bounds!

*VER: What talk you to me of living within my
bounds? I tell you, none but asses live within their
bounds: the silly beasts, if they be put in a pasture
that is eaten bare to the very earth and where there
is nothing to be had but thistles, will rather fall
soberly to those thistles and be hunger-starved, than
they will offer to break their bounds; whereas the
lusty courser, if he be in a barren plot and spy better
grass in some pasture near adjoining, breaks over
hedge and ditch, and to go, ere he will be pent in,
and not have his belly full . . .*

*VER: Tell me, I pray, wherefore was gold laid
under our feet in the veins of the earth, but that
we should contemn it and tread upon it, and so
consequently tread thrift under our feet? . . . I will
prove it, that an unthrift of any comes nearest
a happy man, insomuch as he comes nearest to
beggary. Cicero saith . . . the chiefest felicity that
may be to rest from all labors . . . Who rests so
much? Who hath so little to do as the beggar?
Who can sing so merry a note, As he that cannot
change a goat? Cui nil est, nil deest: "he that hath
nothing, wants nothing." . . . All alchemists and
all philosophers are beggars: *Omnia mea mecum**

11. The Economist's Case

STEADILY GROWING CONSUMER SPENDING KEEPS THE ECONOMY
HEALTHY; PARADOXICALLY, THRIFT RETARDS GROWTH.

*Prodigality is a vice that is prejudicial to the Man,
but not to trade.*

NICHOLAS BARBON, *A DISCOURSE OF TRADE*, 1690

...

... prodigality,

That noble sin; whilst luxury

Employ'd a million of the poor . . .

The prodigality I call a noble sin is . . . that agreeable good-natured vice that makes the chimney smoke and all the tradesmen smile; I mean the unmixed prodigality of heedless and voluptuous men, that being educated in plenty, abhor the vile thoughts of lucre and lavish away only what others took pains to scrape together . . .

Frugality is like honesty, a mean starving virtue . . . It is an idle dreaming virtue that employs no hands, and therefore very useless in a trading country, where there are vast numbers that one way or other must be all set to work. Prodigality has a thousand inventions to keep people from sitting still that frugality would never think of. . .

The Dutch may ascribe their present grandeur to the virtue and frugality of their ancestors as

they please; but what made that contemptible spot of ground so considerable among the principal powers of Europe has been their political wisdom in postponing everything to merchandise and navigation, the unlimited liberty of conscience among them, and the unwearied application which they have always made use of the most effectual means to encourage and increase trade in general.

BERNARD MANDEVILLE, *THE FABLE OF THE BEES*, 1714

...

Excessive Saving a Cause of Commerical Distress

A COLLECTION OF ARTICLES BY THE ECONOMICS
WRITER URIEL H. CROCKER, 1884

...

The identification of depression in trade with insufficient consumption or excessive thrift is, we venture to assert, unassailable . . . This conclusion is of critical importance to the community: it means neither more nor less than the community could at once and permanently enjoy a larger

12. The Socialist's Case

THRIFT IS A FALSE PROMISE, MADE IN BAD FAITH, AIMED AT KEEPING THE POOR, POOR, AND THE RICH, RICH; THRIFT IS AN ENEMY OF RADICAL TRANSFORMATION.

One school [of economic thought] . . . advocates thrift and execrates luxury . . . [but] it advocates thrift in order to produce wealth—i.e., luxury . . . [It] advances earnest and detailed arguments to show that through prodigality I diminish rather than increase my possessions; but its supporters hypocritically refuse to admit that production is regulated by caprice and fancy; they forget the “refined needs” and forget that without consumption there can be no production . . .

*And you must not only be parsimonious in gratifying your immediate senses, such as eating, etc. You must also be chary of participating in affairs of general interest, showing sympathy and trust, etc., if you want to be economical . . . You must make everything which is yours venal—i.e., useful. I might ask the political economist: am I obeying economic laws if I make money by prostituting my body to the lust of another (in France, the factory workers call the prostitution of their wives and daughters the *n*th working hour, which is literally true), or if I sell my friend to the Moroccans (and the direct sale of men in the form of trade in conscripts, etc., occurs in all civilized countries)?*

His answer will be: your acts do not contravene my laws . . .

KARL MARX, *ECONOMIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL MANUSCRIPTS*, 1844

. . . .

Political economy, this science of wealth, is therefore at the same time the science of denial, of starvation, of saving, and it actually goes so far as to save man the need for fresh air or physical exercise. This science . . . is at the same time the science of asceticism, and its true ideal is the ascetic but rapacious skinflint and the ascetic but productive slave. Its moral idea is the worker who puts a part of his wages into savings . . . the denial of life and of all human needs, is its principal doctrine. The less you eat, drink, buy books, go to the theatre, go dancing, go drinking, think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save and the greater will become the treasure that neither moths nor maggots can consume—your capital . . . Everything which the political economist takes from you in terms of life and humanity,

13. The Spendthrift's Case

WHAT I WANT IS WHAT I DESERVE; THRIFT DENIES ME,
AND PREVENTS ONE FROM HAVING THE BEST.

*Yet above al thinges, new fashions I love well,
And to were them, my thryft I wyl sell.*

THE FYRST BOKE OF THE INTRODUCTION
OF KNOWLEDGE, 1542

....

*I reckon few will have good Malt in Scotland; as
thrift will make them mix heated Barley with good.*

LETTER OF JOHN COCKBURN OF ORMISTOUN, SCOTLAND,
TO HIS GARDENER, OCTOBER 9, 1739

....

*I suppose you design little poor Windows and Doors
that nobody can go in or out without breaking their
head except they remember to duck like a goose. It is
a common wise practice which proceeds from their
wise heads and noble way of thinking in Scotland,
that if any thing is made look ugly, or if neat is
spoiled in dressing, it is thrift. Losing a hog for a
halfpenny worth of Tar is with them a mark of
judgement . . .*

COCKBURN TO HIS GARDENER, 1742

*It was not his idea that he could get rich by saving.
From the first he had the notion that liberal
spending was better, and that somehow he would
get along.*

THEODORE DREISER, *THE FINANCIER*, 1912

....

*In fact, the whole town grew prosperous, extremely
prosperous, by heeding Father Thrift's advice.*

*You would suppose that the queer little old man
would be well rewarded. Not so! For when these
people became very, very prosperous, they felt that
the queer little old man was only in their way.*

*What further need had they of his advice? He had
taught them to live simply, to spend wisely, and
to waste nothing. He had taught them to enjoy
simple pleasures and to form simple habits . . .*

*But the townspeople would not listen to him now.
Young Mr. Spendthrift had come to town and they
followed him. They only laughed at Father Thrift.*

JOSEPH C. SINDELAR, *FATHER THRIFT AND HIS ANIMAL
FRIENDS (CHILDREN'S BOOK)*, 1918

PART THREE

Visionaries

THRIFT IS MADE prominent in society in three main ways. The first is through **individual leaders**—those gifted people who, through their words and deeds, make a compelling case for why thrift matters. The second is through **institutions**—those relatively stable societal structures conveying behavior-guiding rules that are intended, at least in large part, to advance the ideals and practices of thrift. And the third is through **social movements**—those larger and

comparatively fluid groupings of individuals and organizations working together over periods of time to achieve pro-thrift social changes.

All three are important. Together, they embody our society's thrift tradition. Because the foundation on which the others are built is individual leaders, let's start with them. I often think of them, affectionately, as thrift nuts. But maybe in this book we should be more dignified. Let's call them thrift visionaries, and visit with a few.



*From a painting by
HERBERT PAUS*

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14. By Dint of His Thrift

DANIEL DEFOE

DANIEL FOE was born in London in the late summer of 1660, the son of James and Alice, both of whom, in their religious convictions, were strong Dissenters, or Puritans. James Foe earned his living as a butcher. In midlife, Daniel changed his last name to “Defoe.”

Defoe is one of the most influential pamphleteers, journalists, and novelists in British history. His first important work was his *Essay on Projects*, published in 1697. The novel *Robinson Crusoe*, his most famous achievement and the first and greatest thrift novel in the English language, was published in 1719. Throughout his writings, Defoe is a passionate, articulate advocate of thrift. He died on April 21, 1731, and is buried in London.

European thrift really began with Daniel Defoe. His essays marked the first crystalization of public thrift impulses.

S. W. STRAUS, PRESIDENT, AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR THRIFT, 1920

.....

... Daniel Defoe, the renowned author of *Robinson Crusoe*, published a work entitled *Essay on*

Projects, in which he advocated a plan for the formation of societies “formed by mutual assistance for the relief of the members in seasons of distress,” and there is no doubt that his essay led to the formation of life insurance companies, and also had its influence in regard to Friendly Societies.

RICHARDSON CAMPBELL, *RECHABITE HISTORY*, 1911

.....

It is but a small matter for a man to contribute, if he gave 1s. 3d. out of his wages to relieve five wounded men [seamen] of his own fraternity; but at the same time be assured that if he is hurt or maimed he shall have the same relief, is a thing so rational that hardly anything but a hare-brained fellow, that thinks of nothing, would omit entering himself into such an office.

... Suppose [also] an office to be erected, to be called an office of insurance for widows, upon the following conditions . . .

I have named these two cases [seamen and widows] as special experiments of what might be done by assurances in way of friendly society; and I believe I might, without arrogance, affirm that the same thought might be improved into methods

15. The More Treasure They Will Lay Up in Heaven

JOHN WESLEY

JOHN WESLEY, the famous Anglican preacher (significantly influenced by Puritanism) who became the primary founder of the Methodist Church, was an almost exact contemporary of Benjamin Franklin. Wesley was born in 1703, three years before Franklin was born, and died in 1791, one year after Franklin died.

Wesley's famous formulation—"Gain all you can, Save all you can, then Give all you can"—is one of the most concise, important, and influential thrift sayings in the English language. Wesley's teachings on the uses of money also constitute one of the purest examples of what scholars would later call "the Protestant ethic." Moreover, while Franklin, as we'll see, largely secularized the philosophy of thrift, detaching it from much of its Christian theological context, Wesley most emphatically did not. Finally, Wesley's moving reflections on the core irony of thrift—religiously informed thrift produces affluence, which can produce worldliness and dissipation—are, for my money, much better than Max Weber's, and quite deserving of our consideration today.

1. *Be frugal. Save every thing that can honestly be saved.*
2. *Spend no more than you receive. Contract no debts.*
3. *Have no long accounts. Pay every thing within the week.*
4. *Give none that asks for relief either an ill word or an ill look. Do not hurt them if you cannot help them.*

JOHN WESLEY, RULES FOR THE "STEWARDS" (OR ADMINISTRATORS) OF THE METHODIST MOVEMENT, 1748

...

Wesley was a gifted organizer. Early in his ministry, he started a school for children and a rest home for "feeble, aged widows." He also organized what he called a "lending stock," which foreshadowed the creation of what thrift advocates more than a century later would call credit unions.

A year or two ago [in 1746] I observed among many a distress . . . They frequently wanted, perhaps in order to carry on their business, a present supply of money. They scrupled to make use of a pawnbroker; but where to borrow it they knew not. I resolved to

16. The Art of Making Money Plenty

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN may be the most important American. He is almost certainly the most famous American. He is without doubt America's, and the world's, most important and famous thrifter. Every American who has ever worked in the field of thrift has worked, at least to some degree, in Franklin's capacious shadow. He was born in 1706 in Boston. He died in 1790 and is buried in Philadelphia.

He was the greatest of all teachers of industry and thrift.

WAYNE WHIPPLE, *THE STORY OF YOUNG BENJAMIN FRANKLIN* (CHILDREN'S BOOK), 1916

....

Ben Franklin is our greatest example of thrift. He wrote more on it and wrote better about it than any man we know.

ELBERT HUBBARD, *LET THRIFT BE YOUR RULING HABIT*, 1917

....

Remember that TIME is Money . . .

Remember that CREDIT is Money . . .

Remember that Money is of a prolific generating Nature. Money can beget Money, and its Offspring can beget more, and so on . . .

Remember this Saying, That the good paymaster is Lord of another Man's Purse. He that is known to pay punctually and exactly to the Time he promises, may at any time, and on any Occasion, raise all the Money his friends can spare. This is sometimes of great Use . . .

Beware of thinking all your own that you possess, and of living accordingly. 'Tis a mistake that many People who have Credit fall into. To prevent this, keep an exact Account for some Time of both your Expences and your Incomes. If you take the Pains at first to mention Particulars, it will have this good Effect; you will discover how wonderfully small trifling Expences mount up to large Sums, and will discern what might have been, and may for the future be saved, without occasioning any great Inconvenience.

In short, the Way to Wealth, if you desire it, is as plain as the Way to Market. It depends chiefly on two Words, INDUSTRY and FRUGALITY; i.e. Waste

17. Duncan of Ruthwell

HENRY DUNCAN

HENRY DUNCAN, the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers, was born on October 8, 1774, in Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland. He attended a grammar school in Dumfries, studied briefly at the University of St. Andrews, and, for a short while, worked as a clerk in a Liverpool bank—an experience that led him to decide to study for the ministry.

At the University of Edinburgh, Duncan imbibed some of the spirit of the Scottish Enlightenment, studying with the famous professor of moral philosophy, Dugald Stewart, and joining the celebrated Speculative Society. In 1799, at age twenty-five, he was ordained minister of Ruthwell, a rural, and very poor, parish in Dumfriesshire, in the Scottish border country.

Duncan was a man of many gifts and pro-
tean interests. When the French appeared poised to invade, he organized, captained, and wrote an anthem for the “Ruthwell Volunteers.” Using his own money, he imported Indian corn from Liverpool to help feed the poor. He worked to increase employment opportunities for his parishioners. He revived the previously dormant local friendly society. He organized a Bible society. He joined the antislavery movement. He founded, and for seven

years edited, a weekly newspaper, the *Dumfries and Galloway Courier*. (The young Thomas Carlyle was a contributor.) He wrote a series of short tracts—the *Scotch Cheap Repository*, in some ways a precursor of penny magazines—as well as short stories and other popular publications intended to convey moral lessons to the young. He wrote an extremely popular devotional book, *The Sacred Philosophy of the Seasons*. He greatly improved the parish manse (the minister’s house). He was an avid gardener and an accomplished geologist. He discovered, buried and in fragments in the churchyard, what turned out to be an eighth-century Runic Cross—the cross had been cast down by church authorities in 1642 as being too suggestive of Catholicism—and spent decades, at considerable personal expense, studying and restoring this priceless piece of Christian heritage. (It stands in the Ruthwell parish church today.) Over the course of his ministry, he became steadily more devout, gradually shifting from the “moderate” to the “evangelical” wing of the church. During the “disruption” of 1843, the culmination of years of intrachurch disputes, in large measure precipitated by the state’s insistence upon the exercise of patronage in the selection of pastors, Duncan left the established church, becoming one of

18. Knox's Bank

JAMES, WALTER, AND JAMES KNOX

THE HAT AND CAP manufacturer James Knox was a founder of the Savings Bank of Airdrie, Scotland, in 1835. He became a bank director in 1838, the bank's president in 1848, and served as the bank's treasurer from 1861 until his death in 1866. His son, Walter—a devoted missionary for the Free Church of Scotland, one of whose founders was Henry Duncan—succeeded him as treasurer. Walter was president of the bank when he died at age forty-five in 1878.

Walter's precocious son, James, was appointed secretary of the bank on January 26, 1876—at the age of fourteen! Twenty years later, in December of 1896, James Knox II was appointed to the position of bank manager, the bank's first-ever salaried position.

James Knox II loved thrift. His 1927 book, *The Triumph of Thrift*, a wonderful homage to thrift and a richly detailed history of the Airdrie Savings Bank and of the three generations of Knox men with which that history is intertwined, is in my view far and away the best book of its kind.

The next name I would mention as prominent amongst the "old brigade" who founded the bank is that of my grandfather, James Knox, hat and

cap manufacturer . . . until his death on 10th November, 1866, he was universally regarded as one of the principal mainstays of the institution. No better evidence can be adduced than the fact that, the bank in his day became popularly known as "Knox's Bank"—a term it has never lost.

JAMES KNOX, RECALLING HIS GRANDFATHER

• • • •

My father succeeded my grandfather in the Treasurership [in 1866] . . .

Another new feature introduced by my father, was the distribution of thrift literature on a more extensive scale. I recall on one occasion when I was yet a boy being requisitioned by him to search through his bookcase for a certain volume which contained a collection of Scottish proverbs. Having found it, I was then told to put a pencil mark opposite the proverbs which I thought had a bearing on the subject of thrift. Afterwards he made his own selection, and though I did not venture to say it, I thought in my young mind that my list had not got full justice. The extracts were utilized in a series of cards setting forth the value of saving habits and the advantages offered by the Bank. A door to door

19. Those Rules of Thrift and Economy

CATHARINE BEECHER

THE EDUCATOR and author Catharine E. Beecher was born on September 6, 1800, in East Hampton, New York, into one of the most impressive American families of the nineteenth century. Her younger sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Her father, the Rev. Lyman Beecher, was a prominent writer and religious leader, as were her two brothers, Henry Ward Beecher and Charles Beecher.

In 1823, Catharine Beecher founded the Hartford Female Seminary, where she taught until 1831. She went on to found the American Women's Educational Association in 1852, aimed at creating new educational opportunities for women, and to help found educational institutions for women in Ohio, Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin. She wrote many books. Probably her two most important are *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1842) and, coauthored with her sister Harriet, *The American Woman's Home* (1869).

Catharine Beecher took thrift very seriously. From its higher purposes—for Beecher, training women to thrive as individuals and to cultivate high morals in the home—to its smallest details, such as eating healthful foods and the proper care of yards and gardens, the topic interested Beecher

greatly and helped to orient her overall work as an educator and as a public intellectual. Catharine Beecher died in Elmira, New York, on May 12, 1878.

. . . young girls, especially in the more wealthy classes, are not trained for their profession. In early life, they go through a course of school training which results in great debility of constitution, while, at the same time, their physical and domestic education is almost wholly neglected.

. . . When young ladies are taught the construction of their own bodies, and all the causes in domestic life which tend to weaken the constitution; when they are taught rightly to appreciate and learn the most convenient and economical modes of performing all family duties, and of employing time and money; and when they perceive the true estimate accorded to these things by teachers and friends, the grand cause of [their suffering] will be removed. Women will be trained to secure, as of first importance, a strong and healthy constitution, and all those rules of thrift and economy that will make domestic duty easy and pleasant.

A TREATISE ON DOMESTIC ECONOMY, 1842

20. Those Who Are Not Ashamed of Economy

LYDIA MARIE CHILD

THE POET and novelist, scholar, editor, anti-slavery leader, champion of women's rights, and popular thrift advocate Lydia Marie Child was born in Medford, Massachusetts, on February 11, 1802. Speaking of Child, the poet John Greenleaf Whittier in 1886 wrote: "It is not too much to say that half a century ago she was the most popular literary woman in the United States."¹ She died in Wayland, Massachusetts, on October 20, 1880.

Child believed deeply in thrift, and throughout her life remained, as she put it, "not ashamed of economy." Yet few of her biographers, it seem, can make the same claim! Quite the contrary. Child's advocacy of thrift, these later admirers regularly imply, was done mainly to get herself published as a young woman, or because writing on such themes was expected of literary women of Child's generation, or in order to pay the debts run up by her loving but hopelessly improvident husband, David Child. But wait a minute. Child herself, as far as I can determine, says exactly the opposite! In the opening pages of her most popular book, *The American Frugal Housewife*, first published as *The Frugal Housewife* in 1829, she writes:

*The writer has no apology to offer for this cheap little book of economical hints, except her deep conviction that such a book is needed. In this case, renown is out of the question, and ridicule is a matter of indifference.*²

Interestingly, Child some years later says exactly the same thing about the antislavery cause that she by then had fervently embraced—that she was writing what she deeply believed, and cared not a fig whether the world criticized her for it—and her biographers seem to take her at her word. Similarly, when she still later says the same thing once again about her study of the world's religions and her plea for religious tolerance and understanding—few are likely to read this book, she (accurately) predicted, but no matter, I write about what I think is important—no one coming after her seems to have doubted that she was telling the truth. But for some reason, Child's advocacy of thrift is treated as an exception: an odd, slightly embarrassing and out-of-place facet of her personality and work that we today should either ignore, or explain away, or try to diminish—perhaps even be ashamed of.

21. The Prophet of Victorian England

SAMUEL SMILES

THE TITLES of some of Samuel Smiles's most famous books—*Self-Help*, *Character, Thrift, Duty*, *Men of Invention and Industry*—convey his message quite well. He was one of the most influential authors and reformers of his generation, both in Britain and around the world. As the poet W. H. Auden put it when describing the death of Sigmund Freud, Smiles's impact on his era was so pervasive that, after he died, he became “no more a person” but “a whole climate of opinion.” Samuel Smiles was born on December 23, 1812, in Haddington, Scotland, and died in London on April 16, 1904.

The man who thinks at all of his own future and of social conditions generally, will be found, through his Friendly Society, his Co-operative Store, or his Savings Bank, to be paying some homage to those arts of thriving of which Dr. Smiles will always be regarded as a foremost panegyrist.

THOMAS MACKAY, PREFACE TO *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SAMUEL SMILES*, 1905

I know that the cost will be objected to. I only speak of the extreme desirableness of our having a Town Hall, with a Public Library, and accommodation for a Public Museum. What was the cost of our jail? What of our pauper training schools? We have built these irrespective of the question of cost . . . Is not the founding of a Public Library as creditable, as necessary, and as beneficial a work as the erection of a jail?

SMILES, LETTER TO THE *LEEDS MERCURY*,
NOVEMBER 1850

. . . .

Although Smiles is often described as (and frequently criticized for) exclusively promoting individual or personal thrift, here the young Smiles is advocating a public library based on a vision of public thrift. Championing individual thrift need not, and in this case does not, prevent one from also championing public thrift.

Such progress as was made in thrift propaganda and practice in the last quarter of the 19th century owed not a little to Samuel Smiles.

H. OLIVER HORNE, *A HISTORY OF SAVINGS BANKS*, 1947

22. Sikes of Huddersfield

CHARLES SIKES

CHARLES WILLIAM SIKES was born in 1818 in the town of Huddersfield, in Yorkshire, England. In 1833, he began working for the Huddersfield Banking Company, becoming a cashier in 1837, and the company's managing director in 1882.

Charles Sikes loved thrift. He became a tireless advocate of penny savings banks, establishing rules and procedures for these institutions and helping to spread them across Yorkshire. More than any other individual, he originated the idea, and made possible the establishment, of the national system of postal savings banks in Britain—that is, turning every post office in Britain into a place where people can open savings accounts. His work on this issue with the then-chancellor of the exchequer (and later prime minister) William E. Gladstone, culminating in Parliament's passage of the Post Office Savings Bank Act of 1861, ranks as arguably the most fruitful partnership in the history of British thrift movements. For his work in the area of thrift, Charles Sikes was knighted in 1881, upon Gladstone's recommendation. He died in 1889.

Sikes promoted penny banks and helped to create post-office savings banks because philosophically he had embraced two big ideas. The first is self-help. Thrift institutions are not charities that

give things away; they can only benefit people who are willing and able to help themselves. The second is localism. For most people, opportunities to save need to be immediate, familiar, and close by—not in another part of town, or in another county, too far away to reach conveniently by walking. For Sikes, then, character matters most, but character can also be shaped by institutions. Both are important.

His first idea [in 1850] was to institute a system of penny banks to act as feeders to the savings banks. To carry out his object he proposed to enlist the help of the Mechanics' Institutes, which by this time were common in most industrial areas . . . If each Institute set up a Savings Bank Committee . . . they could conduct "Preliminary Savings Banks" once a week and help their members accumulate in small sums the pound which could later be deposited in the nearest Trustee Savings Bank.

H. OLIVER HORNE, *A HISTORY OF SAVINGS BANKS*

. . . .

If a committee at each [Mechanics'] institution were to adopt this course, taking an interest in

23. Who Catches the Vision?

ALONZO, WILMOT, AND WILMOT EVANS

ALONZO H. EVANS was born in Allenstown, New Hampshire, in 1820. He began working for the Boston Five Cents Savings Bank in 1854, the year the bank was founded, serving as its founding treasurer. He was elected president of the bank on April 14, 1874. His son, Irving, who later became a stockbroker, worked at the bank as a teller. Alonzo Evans was also the first mayor of Everett, Massachusetts, represented Everett for a number of years in the Massachusetts legislature, and, in 1892, ran unsuccessfully for the post of Massachusetts state auditor on the Prohibition Party ticket. He died on May 27, 1907.

In the month of November, 1853, the writer . . . with a few other persons, met to consult upon the expediency of establishing an additional savings-bank in the city of Boston, to induce the young and the industrial classes to make a beginning to save by encouraging deposits as small as five cents.

ALONZO H. EVANS, "HISTORICAL ADDRESS,"
MAY 2, 1904

Whenever any deposits shall be made by any minor, the trustee of said corporation may, at their discretion, pay to such depositor such sum as may be due to him or her, although no guardian shall [be present].

CHARTER, BOSTON FIVE CENTS SAVINGS BANK, 1854

• • • •

At the annual meeting of the corporation in 1907, Mr. Evans, in his eighty-seventh year, and after fifty-three years of continuous service with the bank, declined election as president. He survived but a short time, his death occurring in May of that year. None who ever saw Mr. Evans will forget his appearance—old-fashioned, we might call it now, but always distinctive: high silk hat, black broadcloth, Prince Albert coat with trousers to match, and boots—yes, boots that were always carefully polished. And none can forget his punctuality . . . nor can they forget his forceful character and competent service.

Alonzo H. Evans was succeeded in the presidency by his son, Wilmot R. Evans.

A HISTORY OF THE BOSTON FIVE CENTS SAVINGS
BANK, 1926

24. A Constant Lesson in Thrift

CLARA BARTON

THE EDUCATOR, battlefield nurse, and humanitarian reformer Clara Barton, who in 1881 founded the American Red Cross, was born on Christmas Day, 1821, in Oxford, Massachusetts. She was one of the greatest Americans of her generation. She died in Glen Echo, Maryland, on April 12, 1912.

“Miss Barton, where did you get your money? They are going to ask this, and I had better know. I want no surprises sprung.”

“Surely,” said Miss Barton, “it is right that they should know. I was brought up in New England, and I have the New England thrift. I began teaching school when I was fourteen and taught for a number of years. I saved my money and invested it successfully. I had a government position in Washington, being the first woman clerk. I saved my earnings and invested them well. I lectured for several years. The people wanted to hear what I had to say, and I received one hundred dollars for every lecture I could give, and this money I saved . . .”

. . . Clara Barton’s New England thrift caused her to be able to do consummate work with the money and means that many waste. She has given us a constant lesson in thrift. There was not a woman in that great audience at the Memorial

Service [for Clara Barton, on May 14, 1912, in Philadelphia] who did not feel the crime of waste. We realized the economies which Clara Barton lived and practiced, that she might give life and aid to those who were in dire need. Her herculean work was done with means that most men would scorn as too trivial to begin a work with.

Alice Hubbard, Tribute to Clara Barton, July 1912

. . . .

At first I used to be shocked over her penuriousness but when I discovered the motive, that it was to save for others in need, no words could describe my conscience-stricken feeling and my admiration of that self-sacrificing woman.

General W. H. Sears, a member of the Board of Directors of the American Red Cross

. . . .

The main interest of these reports [of Red Cross activities in 1893 in the wake of a hurricane that devastated much of the Sea Islands, off the coast of South Carolina] will consist in showing the methods of work adopted, not only to preserve so

25. The Greater Thrift

CHARLES PRATT

CHARLES PRATT was born on October 2, 1830, in Watertown, Massachusetts. His father was a cabinetmaker who had come to the United States from Britain. Charles began work at age ten, on a neighbor's farm. He also worked as a grocery store clerk and an apprentice in a machine shop as a young man in Boston. He saved his money from these jobs to pay for several years of education, during which time, he recalled, he lived on a dollar a week.

He developed an innovative method of refining crude oil and organized a refinery business. A major competitor of Pratt's was John D. Rockefeller. In 1872, Charles Pratt & Co. became a part of the Standard "alliance" (formally the Central Association of Refiners), and, ten years later, became one of the founding entities of what would become Standard Oil. Charles Pratt had become a very rich man. He died on May 4, 1891, in New York City.

Pratt Institute was established in 1887 by Mr. Charles Pratt, of Brooklyn. Its object is to promote manual and industrial education, as well as literature, science, and art; to inculcate habits of

industry and thrift, and to foster all that makes for right living and good citizenship.

AMERICAN ART ANNUAL, 1898

••••

Mr. Pratt was a firm believer in economy and thrift and was greatly interested in inculcating the habits of thrift in all with whom he came into contact in the Institute, and especially among children. He early formulated a plan for saving by the purchase of stamps. A desk and a small safe, with one person in charge, were located in the General Office. This plan of teaching thrift rapidly developed into a Savings and Loan Association call "The Thrift" . . .

PRATTONIA, 1921

••••

The Thrift, organized with a membership of 349 had, in 1915, a total of 8,701 members and deposits amounting to \$ 4,287,755.52. Today this organization occupies a solid position among the financial institutions of Brooklyn.

CYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY, 1918

26. Always Had a Broom in My Hand

JOHN WANAMAKER

JOHN WANAMAKER was born near Philadelphia on July 11, 1838. His parents' financial condition was modest—John's father, Nelson, was a brickmaker and his mother, Elizabeth, was a homemaker. John attended school for only a few years and, at age fourteen, began working full-time as an errand boy in a Philadelphia publishing firm at a salary of \$1.25 per week. John's favorite book as a boy was Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. During those years as an errand boy, he began a small magazine, *Everybody's Journal*, full of maxims and practical advice, patterned in part on Franklin's "Poor Richard."

In 1858, he became the first full-time secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association, an organization that Wanamaker supported his whole life. That same year, he founded the Bethany Mission Sunday School, which eventually became the largest Sunday School in the nation. In 1861, when he was not yet twenty-three years old, he and his brother-in-law, Nathan Brown, using only money they had saved from their earnings, opened a clothing store in Philadelphia.

John Wanamaker became one of the most successful merchants of his generation. A number of key merchandizing concepts that are familiar to us today—the everything-under-one-roof "depart-

ment store," the standard of one fixed and easy-to-see price per item (as opposed to individual bargaining with customers), and the money-back guarantee—were originated by John Wanamaker. He also appears to have been a genius at advertising. He worked very hard, and became very rich.

Wanamaker loved thrift. He practiced it his entire life and preached it constantly. He was one of the nation's most committed and creative philanthropists.

For his employees, he created first a benefits association, and then a foundation, to provide health, retirement, and death benefits. He also set up innovative savings programs for employees, including one in which employees' deposits into their savings accounts were matched by contributions from the company.

In 1887, he instituted a profit-sharing plan for employees. In 1891, he created a school for young employees, with courses focusing on thrift and industrial education. In 1896, he opened a free library for employees. In 1888, he founded, and for many years afterward served as president of, the Penny Savings Bank of Philadelphia, intended originally to serve the low-income children attending Bethany Sunday School and their families, but even-

27. A Day Labourer So Long

EDWARD BRABROOK

EDWARD BRABROOK was born on April 10, 1839, in Cornhill, England. He began his career working in an insurance company. In 1869, he was appointed assistant registrar of friendly societies, a civil service post. He served as chief registrar of Friendly Societies from 1891 until his retirement in 1904. He was also active in the Society of Antiquaries, the Folk-Lore Society, the Royal Society for Literature (whose history he wrote), the Royal Anthropological Institute, and the Charity Organization Society. In 1904, he served as president of the economic section of the British Association. Late in life, he received the honor of knighthood. Sir Edward Brabrook died in Surrey at the age of ninety-one on March 20, 1930.

His great accomplishment in the area of thrift is detailing the structures and legislative and legal histories of British thrift institutions, particularly friendly societies and building societies. His books include *Institutions for Thrift, Provident Societies and Industrial Welfare* and *The Law of Building Societies*. His knowledge of these institutions was extensive, and he was deeply committed, over many decades, to their purposes. He lectured frequently on the subject of thrift and was a strong advocate of teaching thrift in the schools.

In 1908, when Britain began providing old age pensions to all its older citizens, Brabrook unsuccessfully advocated for a pension scheme that would require financial contributions to the pension fund from all British citizens during their younger, higher-earning years—a requirement that would have made the program more similar in structure to the friendly societies that Brabrook knew and loved so well, and that, as he put it, “would be an assertion and enforcement of the doctrine that the right way to provide for old age is by thrift, self-denial and forethought in youth.”¹

28. The Idea of Thrift

ORISON SWETT MARDEN

ORISON SWETT MARDEN was born on a farm in Thornton Grove, New Hampshire, in 1850. Both of his parents died before he was eight years old; he began working to support himself at about that time. As a young person, he was greatly inspired by the book *Self-Help* by Samuel Smiles.

His first book, *Pushing to the Front*, published in 1894, was a phenomenal success. Many more books followed, including *Thrift*, *Economy*, and *Cheerfulness as a Life Power*. In 1897, he founded *Success* magazine, which had a large circulation. Marden died at age seventy-four in 1924.

In his writings, Marden strongly emphasized what Norman Vincent Peale would later call “the power of positive thinking”—the idea that, as Marden put it, “he can who thinks he can.” In my view, his assertions in this area go too far. But Marden wrote carefully, sensitively, and often about thrift. He clearly cared deeply about the topic, appreciated more than most its complexity as an idea and its serious moral anchoring, and wanted others to benefit from it, as he had done in his own life.

The term thrift is not only properly applied to money matters, but to everything in life—the wise use of one’s time, the wise use of one’s ability, one’s energy, and this means prudent giving, careful habits of life. Thrift is scientific management of one’s self, one’s time, one’s money, the wisest possible expenditure of what we have of all of life’s resources.

ORISON SWETT MARDEN, *THRIFT*, 1918

• • • •

The art of saving is essentially the art of wise spending.

MARDEN, *THRIFT*

• • • •

The great thing in making expenditures is to spend upward, to invest in oneself. . . . If one is after the largest, completest possible manhood, well-rounded, full-orbed, broad, then he will regard any expenditure to this end as the best kind of paying investment, and he will not be held back by a false sense of economy or deceptive notions of extravagance . . . Stuffing

29. That We May Save the Greatest

BOLTON HALL

BOLTON HALL was born in Armagh, Ireland, on August 5, 1854. He and his parents, John and Mary, moved to the United States in 1867, when his father was called to become pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. Bolton Hall died in Georgia in 1938.

Bolton Hall was a complex, multifaceted man. He spent a few years in business. He became a lawyer who specialized in defending unpopular causes. He wrote many books, both fiction and nonfiction. He was a founder of the American Longshoreman's Union. He was a major-league agitator. He was a long-time follower of Henry George, the single-tax reformer. He got arrested for handing out literature supporting Margaret Sanger, the birth control advocate. He befriended and assisted various anarchists as well as the prominent socialist leaders Eugene V. Debs and Emma Goldman—in 1905 he provided Goldman with a farmhouse retreat in Ossining, New York. He strongly disapproved of traditional charities.

Hall believed fervently in subsistence farming, gardening, and simple and rural living. He used his resources and connections to help organize the “Little Land League”—a philanthropy that purchased farmland near cities and then resold the

land to the working poor at reduced prices. He championed school gardens, urban playgrounds, and camping programs for city children, and “was one of the promoters of the movement to utilize the vacant lots in and about cities for the benefit of the industrious poor.”¹

In 1910, he donated about seventy-five acres of land to, and helped to found, a community called Free Acres, a rural commune located near Watchung Hills, New Jersey, about thirty-five miles from New York. Based on philosophical principles including Henry George single-taxism, racial and sexual equality, participatory democracy, environmental conservation, and getting back to the land, Free Acres attracted a steady stream of reformers and political radicals and artists such as Paul Robeson, James Cagney, Michael Gold, and Alexander Calder. The place still exists.

Bolton Hall loved thrift. He wrote about it insightfully and at length, and thrift is a theme running through almost all of his otherwise quite disparate vocations and enthusiasms.

If you have a back yard, you can do your part and help the world and yourself by raising some of the food you eat. The more you raise the less you will

30. A Person Who Makes Beautiful Things

ELBERT HUBBARD

ELBERT HUBBARD was born in Bloomington, Illinois, on June 19, 1856. As a young man he worked on a farm, in a printing office, in the West as a cowboy, and in a soap factory, of which he later became manager, and, several years later, partner. He sold his interest in the soap factory in order to attend Harvard College. On a trip to Europe in 1892, he met the artist, writer, printer, and socialist leader William Morris, whose ideas deeply influenced Hubbard.

In 1895, seeking to emulate Morris and inspired by the larger arts and crafts movement of the period, Hubbard founded the Roycrofters in East Aurora, New York—a residential community built around a cluster of cooperative businesses, including a printing press, a publishing house, a bookbinding business, a lecture program, blacksmithing, carpentry, and basket weaving. From this base in East Aurora, Hubbard wrote many books, pamphlets, articles, and “preachments” and in the early years of the twentieth century became one of the most popular lecturers in the United States.

He did not drink or smoke. He told everyone who would listen that at Roycrofters, “fresh air is free, and outdoor exercise is not discour-

aged.” Most of the money he made as a lecturer and author, he gave to Roycrofters, which operated financially on share-and-share-alike, cooperative principles. Hubbard and his wife Alice died on May 7, 1915, in the Irish Sea when the ship on which they were passengers, the *Lusitania*, was sunk by German torpedoes.

Hubbard understood thrift and wrote about it eloquently. He also practiced thrift in multiple and interesting ways, both personally and in his conception and leadership of the Roycrofters.

He valued every cent of every dollar for what it would do, for the good it could be made to accomplish. He was thrifty, and that he had once endured poverty his abstemious habits clearly betrayed. He wasted nothing, and wanted nothing wasted.

FELIX SHAY, *ELBERT HUBBARD OF EAST AURORA*

• • • •

An employee may subscribe for as many shares [of the Roycroft Press] as he desires, but if he leaves the service of the company he must sell the shares to Mr. Hubbard at the price paid. This is a

31. Character in the Highest and Best Sense

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

AS THE UNITED STATES entered the twentieth century, two charismatic men, advocating sometimes overlapping and sometimes clashing strategies for social change, had emerged as key leaders of African Americans. One was W. E. B. DuBois. The other was Booker T. Washington. Historians in recent decades have been kinder to DuBois than to Washington, in part because most recent historians have been either indifferent or hostile to thrift, which was near the very center of Washington's personality and mission. If Benjamin Franklin was the first truly great American champion of thrift, Booker T. Washington was the second.

Booker T. Washington was born a slave in Hale's Ford, Virginia, in about 1856. In 1881, he became the leader of the newly formed Tuskegee Institute, where he served for the rest of his life, and in 1900 he wrote *Up from Slavery*, one of the most important books in U.S. history. He died in Tuskegee, Alabama, on November 14, 1915.

The slave system on our place, in large measure, took the spirit of self-reliance and self-help out of the white people. My old master had many boys and girls, but no one, so far as I know, ever mastered a single trade or special line of productive industry.

The girls were not taught to cook, sew, or to take care of the house. All of this was left to the slaves. The slaves, of course, had little personal interest in the life of the plantation, and their ignorance prevented them from learning how to do things in the most improved and thorough manner. As a result of the system, fences were out of repair, gates were hanging half off the hinges, door creaked, window-panes were out, plastering had fallen but was not replaced, weeds grew in the yard. As a rule there was food for whites and blacks, but inside the house, and on the dining-room table, there was wanting that delicacy and refinement of touch and finish which can make a home the most convenient, comfortable, and attractive place in the world. Withal there was a waste of food and other materials which was sad.

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON, *UP FROM SLAVERY*, 1900

• • • •

But, of course, when I saw how all the other boys were dressed, I began to feel quite uncomfortable. As usual, I put the case before my mother, and she explained to me that she had no money with which to buy a "store hat," which was a rather new

32. Beauty in Homespun

MARTHA BERRY

WHAT BOOKER T. WASHINGTON did for rural poor black children in Alabama, Martha Berry decided to do for rural poor white children in Georgia. Martha Berry was born on October 7, 1866, and grew up in relative privilege near Rome, Georgia, at Oak Hill, her parents' plantation. Her father, Thomas, fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War. In about 1900, in her mid-thirties, Martha Berry began teaching Bible stories on Sundays to illiterate mountain children from the region. The woman whom these children called "the Sunday Lady" had found her life's mission. In 1902, she founded the first of what later became the Berry Schools. In 1926, she founded Berry

Junior College, and in 1930, she founded Berry College, which today is still going strong. Martha Berry died on February 27, 1942. Her understanding of thrift, and in particular its role in educating children who lack privilege and wealth, reminds me strongly of Booker T. Washington and (see below) Laurence C. Jones.

He [my father] never allowed me to waste even an apple peeling, and I had to save the bread crumbs for the birds. He made me feel that if I wasted anything that a living creature could use it was sinful.

MARTHA BERRY, REMEMBERING HER FATHER,
THOMAS BERRY



33. Creative Economy

S. W. STRAUS

THE BANKER and realty financier Simon William Straus was born in Ligonier, Indiana, on December 23, 1866. He attended public schools in Chicago and later attended the Hughes High School in Cincinnati. He entered his father's Chicago-based business (F. W. Straus and Co.) in 1884, and two years later, when his father retired, took over the management of the firm and changed its name to S. W. Straus and Company. The company for many years exerted a strong influence on the U.S. building industry. By 1922, in Chicago alone, Straus had financed more than four thousand buildings. In New York, Straus and Company financed the Chrysler Building, at the time the tallest building in the world.

Straus was a major thrift leader and visionary—and one who generously put his money and time at the service of his convictions. To encourage thrift among his employees, he added bonuses to their savings accounts. In 1913, he founded the American Society for Thrift, and for years wrote, spoke, and organized tirelessly on behalf of thrift. His book, *History of the Thrift Movement in America*, was published in 1920. S. W. Straus died at age sixty-four in New York City on September 7, 1930.

My first thrift efforts arose in my own business experience . . . nearly all of our employees became members of [our company's] Profit-Sharing and Thrift Society.

S. W. STRAUS

. . . .

The American people as a nation dislike to be told that they are unthriftly, and yet it is true that they are unthriftly in the extreme. They boast of their money-making powers, and the facts justify them. American know how to make money, no doubt about it, but they don't know how to spend it—and that is equivalent to saying they don't know how to save it—for money gets its chief value from its use.

. . . Thrift is not a mere forced rule: it is a virtue; it is a principle. Thrift is not an affair of the pocket, but an affair of character. Thrift is not niggardliness, but wisdom. Thrift is not so much a matter of money as an attitude of mind . . . My friends, thrift is creative economy.

STRAUS, ANNOUNCING THE FORMATION OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR THRIFT, NOVEMBER 1913

34. Take the Nickels and Turn Them into Dollars

MAGGIE L. WALKER

MAGGIE L. DRAPER was born in Richmond, Virginia, on July 15, 1867. At age fourteen, she joined the Independent Order of Saint Luke, an African American fraternal society that had been formed in Baltimore after the Civil War. She was a devoted (and lifelong) member of the Baptist Church. She graduated from high school in 1883, and became a teacher. In 1886, she married Armstrong Walker, a brick contractor. She resigned from teaching, had the first of their three children in 1890, and began to devote more time to the Order of Saint Luke. In 1899, Maggie L. Walker became grand secretary, the Order's highest leader.

Under her leadership, the Order grew rapidly and undertook a wide range of initiatives centering on thrift and economic cooperation and empowerment. Walker's vision for the Order in part reflected the influence and legacy of William Washington Browne, some eighteen years older than Walker, and, until he died in 1897, the leader of another Richmond-based African American fraternal society, the United Order of True Reformers. (Browne is discussed further in the next part of this book, under "Friendly and Fraternal Societies.")

In 1903, the Order of Saint Luke under Walk-

er's leadership founded the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank, making Walker the first African American woman in U.S. history to serve as the president of a bank. By 1920, the bank had financed 645 black-owned homes, and its assets by 1924 had reached \$3.5 million. The Order during Walker's tenure as grand secretary also founded a newspaper, the *St. Luke Herald*, a printing press, and a department store, the St. Luke's Emporium. The Order's juvenile auxiliary, which had been founded in 1895, had enrolled up to 20,000 children by the 1920s. As early as 1909, children constituted about one-third of the approximately 300,000 depositors of the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank.

Maggie L. Walker died at the age of sixty-seven on December 15, 1934.

In my view, few if any calls to cooperative thrift are more compelling than this one from 1901 from Maggie Walker:

Let us have a bank that will take the nickels and turn them into dollars. Then, as our patron saint went about doing good, how easily can this great organization now start and do good in our ranks. Who is so helpless as the Negro woman? Who is so circumscribed and hemmed in, in the race of life,

35. Some Reflection of the Simple Virtues

LAURENCE C. JONES

LAURENCE C. JONES was born on November 21, 1882, in St. Joseph, Missouri. His mother, Mary, was a seamstress, and his father, John, worked as a porter in a local hotel. As a child, Laurence shined shoes and sold rabbits and pigeons until he had saved enough money to buy a paper route from an older boy. He attended public schools in St. Joseph and later (while living with relatives) in Marshalltown, Iowa. In 1907, he graduated from the University of Iowa, where he had become deeply interested in industrial arts education and was particularly inspired by the mission and success of the Hampton Institute (founded in Virginia in 1868 by Samuel C. Armstrong) and the Tuskegee Institute (founded in Alabama in 1881 and led by Armstrong's student, Booker T. Washington). In the spring of 1909, at the age of twenty-four and with \$1.65 in his pocket, Jones moved to the Piney Woods region of Mississippi to become an organizer and educator. He taught the first class of what would become the Piney Woods School outdoors, sitting on a log beneath a cedar tree, with three pupils. The school's first building was completed in 1910.

As an African American starting a school for the children of rural black Mississippians, Jones faced

numerous and formidable obstacles, not least of which was the fervent racism of white Mississippi political leaders of that era such as James K. Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo. But he overcame, and succeeded. Dr. Jones died in 1975. Today the Piney Woods School is the largest, as well as the longest continually operating, African American boarding school in the United States. As it was for Booker T. Washington, the concept of thrift is central to Jones's thinking and mission.

[My father gave] me a penny and a nickel—the penny, according to established custom, to be spent for candy or chewing gum, while the nickel was to go into the iron pig on the shelf at home to be used at some distant day when I might be starting out for college, or when I might want to be an expressman and buy a big span of Missouri mules.

LAURENCE C. JONES, *PINEY WOODS AND ITS STORY*, 1922

• • • •

His childhood hero, Robinson Crusoe, had made a deep impression because he had “made things to suite his needs” and in imitation of him the boy had built many back-yard coops and shelters, raised

36. George Never Leaves Bedford Falls

FRANK CAPRA

Through the grammar school years I sold papers—mornings, evenings, and Sundays. I gave every penny to Mama . . . At college, I still managed to pay my own way and contribute several hundred dollars a year to my family.

FRANK CAPRA'S MEMOIRS

. . . .

FRANK CAPRA is my favorite film director. And Capra's 1946 movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, is by far the best movie that anyone has ever made about thrift. Not only the best, but also the most nuanced, appreciative, and well-rounded. It contains tragedy and inner conflict as well as hope and resolution. Nearly every aspect and every scene of the film—the Building and Loan helping ordinary people in Bedford Falls gain financial independence and own their own homes; George's unsought-after fate of giving up his dream of world travel and expansive living, along with Mary's spur-of-the-moment decision to give away their honeymoon money ("How much do you need?") in order to save the Building and Loan during the Great Depression; George's and (mostly) Mary's decision to move into and conserve and restore the

decaying old Granville home; the eerie dystopia of Pottersville, in which libraries and other thrift organizations such as the Building and Loan have been supplanted by pawn shops, saloons, and gambling establishments (Does any of that sound familiar?); and many others besides—are deeply connected to the theme of thrift. It's almost as if Capra told himself, "I'm going to make an entire movie about, and in favor of, thrift." And to top it all off—for Capra clearly understood that the word "thrift" in the 1940s was often abused and misunderstood—it's only the movie's villain, Mr. Potter, who actually utters the word "thrift!" Perfect.

Capra confected *It's a Wonderful Life* from a slender short story—really not much more than an extended Christmas card greeting—written by Philip Van Doren Stern called "The Greatest Gift." In Stern's version, by the way, George works at a commercial bank, not a building and loan, and Mary is a spendthrift. It's clear that Capra did not inherit what is arguably the movie's core theme, the theme of thrift, from the writer. Capra put in that part himself.

Frank Capra was born in Sicily, Italy, on May 18, 1897. He died in California on September 3, 1991.

PART FOUR

Institutions

For better or worse, individuals really do share their thoughts and they do to some extent harmonize their preferences, and they have no other way to make the big decisions except within the scope of institutions they build.

THE ANTHROPOLOGIST MARY DOUGLAS,
HOW INSTITUTIONS THINK



THRIFT
BANK
HOLDS
\$2.50
IN DIMES

EAGLE PENCIL CO. NEW YORK, U.S.A.

37. Thrift Boxes

SOME THRIFT INSTITUTIONS are quite complex. But let's start with a simple idea: take some thrift, put it in a box, and call it a thrift box. Thrift boxes may be the oldest and simplest institutional expression of the thrift idea in English-speaking societies.

. . . *the thrift-box of St. Cuthbert.*

A SMALL, LOCKED BOX WITH A NARROW SLIT IN THE LID, CONTAINING THE INSCRIPTION "PRAY REMEMBER THE POOR," LOCATED IN THE FERETORY OF THE SHRINE OF ST. CUTHBERT, IN DURHAM, ENGLAND, FROM AT LEAST AS EARLY AS 1378 TO ABOUT 1514

. . . .

In the British Museum are specimens of "Thrift Boxes," small and wide bottles with imitation stoppers, from three to four inches in height, made of thin clay, the upper part covered with green glaze. On one side is a slit for the introduction of money . . .

ALL THE YEAR ROUND, 1887

. . . .

Thrif or Thrift-box: an earthen pot or box in which money is kept by young persons.

A GLOSSARY OF NORTH COUNTRY WORDS, 1825

[In] the Barber Shops . . . a thrift-box, as it is called, is put by the Apprentice boys against the wall, and every customer according to his inclinations puts in something . . .

THE HISTORY OF RICHMOND IN THE COUNTY OF YORK, 1814

. . . .

The Thrift Box

TITLE OF A PAMPHLET ON THE BEST WAYS TO ACHIEVE "HEALTH, WEALTH, AND COMFORT" FOR TEXTILE WORKERS AND OWNERS, ON THE ADVANTAGES OF "INSTITUTION [FRIENDLY] SOCIETIES," AND ON MORAL ADVICE FOR THE YOUNG AND FOR PARISHIONERS, ABOUT 1804

. . . .

They that know how to mend, and are not too proud to wear old clothing at work, nor too slothful to keep them well washed, shall the longer deny disorder to their habiliments, and likewise have shillings a plenty for the greengrocer, as the saying goes, with pennies to spare for the thrift-box.

WHEN MAYFLOWERS BLOSSOM, A 1914 HISTORICAL NOVEL OF EARLY AMERICA

38. Gardens

THERE'S SOMETHING about the thrift ethic that likes a garden. If a core metaphor for thrift is making two blades of grass grow where only one had grown before, then planting and growing your flowers, or raising your vegetables, either on your own or cooperatively, takes us to the very heart of the thrift ideal. Find a thrift person and, more likely than not, you are also looking at a garden person. Beautiful gardens are institutions of thrift.

Robinson Crusoe “by the dint of his thrift” famously cultivated a garden on his island.

Two centuries later in the United States, the thrift ethic was helping to inform and inspire organizations such as the School Garden Association of America and the Women's National Farm and Garden Association. So, by all means put your spare coins in a thrift box. But also, go outdoors and grow something!

There is nothing better fitted [than gardening] for the healthy development of children. It affords opportunity for spontaneous activity in the open air, and possibilities for acquiring a fund of interesting and related information; it engenders habits of thrift and economy; develops individual responsibility, and respect for the rights of others;

requires regularity, punctuality, and constancy of purpose.

LOUISE KLEIN MILLER, *CHILDREN'S GARDENS FOR SCHOOL AND HOME*, 1904

....

The first school garden was established, in 1891, at the George Putnam School, Roxbury Massachusetts . . . Probably some fifty of the larger cities [today] are equipped with school gardens . . .

HAROLD WALDSTEIN FOGHT, *THE AMERICAN RURAL SCHOOL*, 1910

....

The school garden should be a sort of outdoor laboratory, a place for the outdoor study of growing plants, soil, insects, weeds, etc., and for the application of the facts learned in in-door nature study . . . It can be made one of the best means to develop in the pupils thrift and responsibility, gentleness, and a love for the beautiful and for growing things.

FREDERICK L. HOLTZ, *NATURE-STUDY*, 1908

40. Mutual Savings Banks

TO UNDERSTAND the role of savings banks as a driver of social change and both a shaper and reflection of key cultural values, particularly during the nineteenth century, let's begin with three powerful statements—the first, from a local savings bank leader, noting the intellectual origins of the savings bank movement; the second, from a scholar, describing that movement's remarkable success over the course of the nineteenth century in promoting its core idea; and the third, from a famous writer, vigorously denouncing that same idea.

. . . the idea of making the advantages of saving and investment available to all people, as well as the dream of making the ownership of homes open to all, sprang from the intellectual revolution achieved by the great liberal philosophers and writers of the 18th century . . . the whole force and significance of our thrift movement derives from this revolution in thought . . .

LEVI P. SMITH, BURLINGTON SAVINGS BANK, 1952

. . . .

The promotion of thrift, at the end of the 18th century an experiment by a few far-seeking individuals, was by the 20th century almost

universally adopted, and was regarded practically as an adjunct to the institutions of every civilized community.

ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA, 11TH EDITION, 1911

. . . .

He was a mere sign, a portent. There was nothing in him. Just about that time the word Thrift was to the fore. You know the power of words. We pass through periods dominated by this or that word—it may be development, or it may be competition, or education, or purity or efficiency or even sanctity. It is the word of the time. Well just then it was the word Thrift which was out in the streets walking arm in arm with righteousness, the inseparable companion and backer up of all such national catch-words, looking everybody in the eye as it were. The very drabs of the pavement, poor things, didn't escape the fascination . . . However! . . . Well the greatest portion of the press were screeching in all possible tones, like a confounded company of parrots instructed by some devil with a taste for practical jokes, that the financier de Barral was helping the great moral evolution of our character towards the newly-discovered virtue of Thrift. He was helping it by all these great establishments of his, which made the moral merits of Thrift manifest to the most

41. Producer and Consumer Cooperatives

IN PRODUCER COOPERATIVES, members join together to increase thrift and reduce waste by cooperatively marketing and selling their goods, in the process eliminating middle men and, by becoming their own bosses, effectively abolishing the distinctions between worker and owner. In consumer cooperatives, members join together to facilitate saving and improve purchasing power by cooperatively buying their consumer goods, again eliminating the middle men and, by becoming owners of their own stores, erasing distinctions between store owner and consumer. Both of these types of cooperative endeavors advance what many progressive reformers have called industrial or economic democracy.

Unlike the cases of countries such as Britain (with its consumer cooperatives) or France or Denmark (with their producer cooperatives), producer and consumer cooperatives have never emerged as mainstream components of the U.S. economy. But these organizations are nevertheless still a part of our national story, visible to anyone curious enough to look, serving partly as standing reminders of roads not taken in the U.S., and even more, as evidence of some significant, if seldom noticed, efforts in our history to promote particular forms of thrift.

Husbands who never knew what it was to be out of debt, and poor wives who, for years never knew what it was to have a sixpence unmortgaged in their pockets, now possess little stores of money sufficient to build them small cottages; they can now afford to go to their own market with money in their pockets. And in that market there is no adulteration, no distrust, no deception.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE FAMOUS ROCHDALE COOPERATIVE STORE, FOUNDED IN ENGLAND IN 1844, IN A PAMPHLET ANNOUNCING THE OPENING OF "THE PHILADELPHIA SAVINGS STORE, ON THE ROCHDALE PLAN," A COOPERATIVE STORE SPONSORED BY THE PHILADELPHIA SAVINGS SOCIETY, 1859

• • • •

First, I learn the folly of being a slave, when I may be free. Secondly, I learn to save my money, and well as to earn it. And, Thirdly, I learn how best to spend it.

"CO-OPERATIVE CATECHISM," FROM THE BRITISH JOURNAL *CO-OPERATOR*, 1860S

• • • •

Co-operators have from the very beginning been proud of the essentially voluntary character of their

42. Building and Loan Associations

BUILDING AND LOAN associations—later typically called savings and loan associations—are cooperative thrift organizations in which members pool savings and finance homes.

Building and loans are one institutional expression of a larger idea, and at times also of a social movement, centered on the principle of cooperative (or mutual) economic endeavor. As we've seen, in both Europe and the U.S., advocates of cooperation have focused on three key areas—production (e.g., dairy farmers joining together to sell their milk cooperatively), consumption (e.g., a food co-op in which members organize ways to buy fresh food at good prices), and credit (e.g., a cooperative bank or credit union, in which members pool their savings and are eligible to take out loans). Building and loans are examples of this third type of cooperative, focusing on the average consumer's access to credit—in this case, particularly the ability to borrow money to build a home.

Democratically organized, reaching into all areas of the country, and linking the virtue of saving one's money with the classic American dream of owning one's own home, building and loans stand out as our society's paradigmatic thrift institutions—probably the most important and influ-

ential thrift organizations in U.S. history. So it's no accident that the greatest thrift movie ever made in America, Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, centers on . . . a building and loan association!

It is not an organization for a few to make large profits at the expense of the many; or one wherein the borrower pays a large interest for the benefit of the shareholder who does not borrow. All stand upon equal footing. It does not encourage speculation, but steady savings; and to attain them, there must be industry and frugal habits. It encourages home-building and all the blessings that naturally flow from it.

SEYMOUR DEXTER, *A TREATISE ON CO-OPERATIVE SAVINGS AND LOAN ASSOCIATIONS*, 1889

. . . .

A building association is a mutual, co-operative financial institution . . . Building associations provide the ideal facilities for the practice of thrift. The members save money together. They lend money to each other. They divide the profits with each other. They work together to help each other. . . . a building association is the practical example,

43. Credit Unions

LIKE BUILDING AND LOAN associations, credit unions are cooperative thrift organizations in which members pool their savings and provide one another with access to credit. The modern credit union movement originated in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century, led by pioneers including Herman Schultze-Delitzsch and Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen, and it is in Germany that this movement has enjoyed its greatest influence. Raiffeisen's 1866 book, *The Credit Union*, for many years was the unofficial bible of the international credit union movement. In Britain, Henry W. Wolff, who wrote the 1893 book *People's Banks*, became an internationally known advocate of cooperative credit. In Canada, the great turn-of-the-century credit union pioneer was Alphonse Desjardins, from Quebec, who also helped to spread the credit union idea south of the border, in the United States.

In the United States, due to the dedicated work of reformers such as Edward Filene, the Boston department-store magnate, and Roy F. Bergengren, the Massachusetts attorney turned national organizer and thrift visionary, the credit union movement took root in the early decades of the twentieth century. The movement's goal was to encourage saving and to provide people of modest means with access to affordable credit, particu-

larly in response to the spread during these years of pawn shops, loan-sharking, and other predatory credit operations, including salary loans, or what we today call payday lending.

. . . a cooperative association formed for the purpose of promoting thrift among its members.

THE DEFINITION OF A CREDIT UNION CONTAINED IN THE MASSACHUSETTS CREDIT UNION ACT, THE NATION'S FIRST GENERAL STATUTE FOR THE INCORPORATION OF CREDIT UNIONS, APRIL 15, 1909

. . . .

. . . loans [by credit unions] shall be made only for the purposes which promise to result in a saving or a profit to the borrower. Each applicant for a loan must state the object for which he desires to borrow, in order that the credit committee, which passes on all loans, may rigidly exclude thriftless and improvident borrowing.

. . . As personal knowledge of the character of the members is essential, the membership in an association must be restricted to citizens of a small community, or of a small subdivision of a large city, or to a small group or organization of individuals.

. . . the principle that loans may be made only for purposes which promise to benefit the borrower, introduces an element of education as to



Credit Union vs. Salary Loans (Notice which ad says “thrifty”!)

Though the salary-loan business is one of great risks, every city in the country is infected with so-called loan sharks. Innocent borrowers must suffer equally with those for whom little social sympathy need be felt.

SAMUEL MCCUNE LINDSAY, “LOANS ON SALARIES AND WAGES,” 1908

“But I can’t possibly raise the money,” cried the unfortunate clerk. “And if you notify my company I’ll be fired—and then I can’t pay the notes at all.”

“Why not fix it this way,” suggested [the salary-loan operator], who was aware of both contingencies. “You take out another loan to-day and pay the \$14.09, and that will give you two

44. Public Libraries

HERE'S SOMETHING INTERESTING I discovered: lovers of thrift tend almost invariably to be lovers of the public library. Once you think about it, it's not hard to see why. Thrift leaders are deeply attracted to the idea of efficiently sharing books and therefore of spreading fruitful knowledge on a mass scale at a relatively low cost. The old-fashioned aristocrat or the gentleman might want to build himself a fine private library. The progressive thrift visionary, on the other hand, wants to use his resources in order to go public and democratic—to build a huge book temple in the middle of the town and invite everyone to join. And keep the fees low! Thrift leaders advocate the cooperative lending of books via public libraries with the same fervor and for exactly the same reasons that they advocate the cooperative lending of money via building and loans and credit unions—both types of institutions are paradigmatic expressions of the thrift idea. Both types of organization are generative, or oriented to thriving. One promotes thrift of money. The other promotes thrift of knowledge. Once you think about it, the two go together naturally.

In the roll call of thrift-loving builders of public libraries, who in the United States is first on the list? Take a guess.

The Junto led to the establishment, by [Benjamin] Franklin, of the Philadelphia Public Library, which became the parent of all public libraries in America.

ELBERT HUBBARD

••••

When the fervent thrift advocate Andrew Carnegie wasn't busy making yet more money, or writing essays with titles such as "Thrift as a Duty," to what form of philanthropy was he devoting the greatest share of his time and fortune? Take a guess.

The result of my own study of the question, What is the best gift which can be given to a community? is that a free library occupies the first place, provided the community will accept and maintain it as a public institution . . .

ANDREW CARNEGIE, "THE GOSPEL OF WEALTH," 1889

••••

Carnegie chose libraries as his primary philanthropy in large part due to his firm conviction—a belief that has always been central to the thrift

45. Thrift Shops

WINSTON CHURCHILL once reportedly said, a dog looks up at you, a cat looks down at you, but only a pig looks you directly in the eye. That's how I feel about thrift shops. Of all the thrift institutions, the thrift shop looks you most directly in the eye, revealing simply and with complete transparency nearly all that thrift is. That's probably why they are called . . . thrift shops!

Thrift shops are probably the thriftiest of all the thrift institutions. Recall from part one the three lodestars of the thrift concept—industry, frugality, and trusteeship. Thrift shops are about one-third of each, without an ounce of fat. Industry: thrift shops historically and still typically encourage work and self-help by providing jobs in the stores for low-income people. Frugality: thrift shops stand front and center for conservation, reuse and repurposing, low and affordable prices, and the toning down of consumerism run amok. Trusteeship: thrift shops are nonprofit charities that seek to give back to the community and serve people in need.

And to top it all off, thrift shops today are . . . kind of cool.

As for us, we wear avant-thrift.

LISA ROBERTSON, *SOFT ARCHITECTURE: A MANIFESTO*, 1999

. . . .

Besides the look, there are substantive justifications for thrift store shopping. For starters, where else can you get a wardrobe for under five dollars? Arrive on a blue tag day with a five-spot, and you'll walk home with two pairs of pants, three shirts, a clip-on tie, and between five and ten hit cassette singles . . .

And of course, if overflowing landfills or sweatshop labor stresses you out, thrift stores are a healthy way to release your craving to consume without actually compelling new production. So you get that phatty new outfit without the guilt . . .

. . . the stuff has been loved and then tossed, and somewhere in the pile, there is treasure waiting to be created, with no model to tell you it was "in" this season. Used clothes come with more than just image; they have history. And while critics would say that thrift-shopping has largely become as trendy as the mall, there remains a certain inevitably creative element to assembling an outfit that is indeed unique to you, not mass produced . . . thrift stores have become beacons for people trying to avoid the general plague of consumerism

PART FIVE

Movements

IN JULY OF 1950, about forty savings bank leaders from a dozen or so countries spent a week together in Oxford, England. They were the first participants in what eventually became an annual summer school convened by the International Savings Bank Institute, an organization that had been formed in 1925 as the International Thrift Institute. During one portion of that week, the students traveled north to the little village of Ruthwell, in the Scottish border country, to visit the Parish Hall where, in 1810, the Rev. Henry Duncan (whom we met in part three) had established the world's first modern savings bank. The students stood or knelt in front of the old building and smiled—mostly men, but a few women as well, many wearing overcoats for a crisp Scottish summer day—to have their picture taken.

Sixty-seven years later, in July of 2007, I too traveled to the village of Ruthwell to visit that Parish Hall. I went with my mother. We opened the creaky door, walked in, and saw that we were the only visitors present. A manager emerged from a

side room. He asked my mother, “Just traveling through?” She said, “No, my son came all the way from New York City to visit with you.” We spent several delightful hours talking to this fellow, Mr. Robert Vallance, who, it turns out, is a scholar and a remarkable authority on Duncan, on Ruthwell, and on the Scottish savings bank movement.

I too had my picture taken in front of that old building. Standing there, posing while my mother adjusted the camera, I thought very intently, and perhaps a little wistfully, of that photograph from 1950 of the summer school students. Are any of those people still living? I'm standing here as one person, I thought, just a tourist. *Those people were part of a movement.*

A few years before 1950, in April of 1945, a terrible world war is ending. There are plans for a United Nations and hopes for a more cooperative, peaceful world in the future. And that spring, Roy F. Bergengren, the credit union organizer, publishes a little book called *I Speak for Joe Doakes*. Even if you are not a thrift nut, the book is worth

46. To Build International Solidarity

I have met credit union people in Switzerland, Holland, Germany, and Belgium. I have talked credit union with men who had the same point of view I had in England and the best informed man I know on all matters pertaining to cooperation is my deeply and highly respected and beloved friend, Dr. G. Fauquet of Paris. When I think of the future, I think of the identity of interest of tram drivers in London and motor men in Kansas City. I think of a universal language, the language of cooperation which will one day do away with passports and customs regulations and invisible lines separating men who have common interests and supercede in quite orderly fashion all of the demagogues and dictators and political bosses of the world, substituting cooperative effort, properly understood and successfully applied.

I shall be dead long before that happens but the catholicity of the cooperative movement is the one hope of the world.

ROY F. BERGENGREN, 1935

....

Thrift Propaganda, especially among the working and middle classes.

AGENDA ITEM, FIRST INTERNATIONAL THRIFT CONGRESS, MILAN, OCTOBER 1924

Asking for the most beautiful and efficacious words written on thrift in the language of each country.

A REQUEST SENT TO DELEGATES ATTENDING THE MILAN CONGRESS

....

That, in this ideal, Thrift finds no place as a theory of self-denial to be practiced solely by the poorer classes, but as a discipline imposing upon all a better social and individual usage of all wealth.

A RESOLUTION ADOPTED BY THE MILAN CONGRESS

....

The claim of “first” almost always becomes complicated. As we’ve seen, in Edinburgh, Scotland, on June 8–10, 1910, British savings bank leaders had organized what they called an International Thrift Congress to commemorate the centenary of the founding by Henry Duncan of Ruthwell of the first modern savings bank. That Edinburgh conference was attended by delegates from a number of countries, including the United States. In addition, as we’ve also seen, S. W. Straus and the American Society for Thrift organized what they too called an International Thrift Congress, as a part of the Panama-Pacific International Expo-

47. To Bring People Together

IN BOTH BRITAIN and the United States, generations of thrift leaders have sought to build broad national coalitions capable of putting thrift high on the public agenda.

A society called the National Thrift Society is now in the course of formation at Oxford, having for its chief object the encouragement of thrift among school-children, the working-classes, servants and artisans.

LORD JOHN MANNERS, 1877

.....

The National Thrift Society got started in Oxford in 1878. Apparently the principal founder was T. Bowden Green, who also authored a short biography of Samuel Smiles (*Samuel Smiles, His Life and Work*, 1904). The Society's chairman for some period of time was Dr. Greville Walpole, and its vice president for a number of years was Sir Hugh Owen (1804–81), a Welsh educational reformer and philanthropist who was also a leader for many years of the National Temperance League.¹



A penny bank, established by the National Thrift Society, was opened last Monday evening at the Board Schools, Portobello-road. There were a large number of depositors, and more than 500 accounts were begun . . .

THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS, MARCH 12, 1881

.....

We hail the appearance of this excellent periodical with pleasure. It is calculated to do much toward the cultivation of habits of thrift and economy . . .

REVIEW OF THE FIRST ISSUE OF *THRIFT*,
THE PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL THRIFT
SOCIETY, IN *THE PRACTICAL TEACHER*, MAY 1882

.....

Arrangements are now being made by the National Thrift Society for holding a large number of thrift

48. To Organize Sacrifice

THERE HAVE BEEN only two instances of war-time crisis in American history—the escalation of the Vietnam War by President Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s, and the war in Iraq under President George W. Bush—in which, apart from those serving in the military, there have been effectively no appeals to the citizenry to make sacrifices to win the war. I believe that in all other cases, starting of course with our war for independence in the late eighteenth century, our citizens have been asked, in time of national emergency, to make important sacrifices. And in both Britain and the United States, when those appeals are, one of the most important words by far is “thrift.”

A Call to Thrift

THE TIMES (LONDON) HEADLINE, DESCRIBING A MANIFESTO CALLING FOR SACRIFICE AND SAVING TO WIN THE WAR, DECEMBER 23, 1915

....

45,000 Join Army of Thrift Recruits

NEW YORK TIMES HEADLINE, DESCRIBING SPREAD OF U.S. WAR-SAVINGS SOCIETIES, JUNE 25, 1918

WORK HARD . . . SPEND LITTLE . . . SAVE MUCH

BILLBOARD AND NEWSPAPER AD, UNITED KINGDOM, DURING THE GREAT WAR

....

ARE YOU HELPING THE GERMANS?

You are helping the Germans when you use a motor car for pleasure: when you buy extravagant clothes: when you employ more servants than you need: when you waste coal, electric light or gas: when you eat and drink more than is necessary to your health and efficiency. Set the right example, free labour for more useful purposes, save money and lend it to the Nation and so help your Country.

BILLBOARD AND NEWSPAPER AD, UNITED KINGDOM, DURING THE GREAT WAR



49. To Train Children

ALMOST ALL BROADLY BASED social movements make special efforts to persuade and recruit the young. In the case of thrift, not only do the main “adult” thrift institutions such as fraternal societies, savings banks, and building and loans typically reach out to children by forming youth departments and offering special services to children, but many thrift leaders commit themselves directly, as the main focus of their work, to passing on the thrift ethic to children, either through community-based thrift education programs, or by seeking to introduce and expand thrift education in the schools.

If this be not enough to vindicate for social economics, or, in a word, “the Art of Thrift and Providence,” a claim to be taught to all of our national school-children, I will offer one further argument in this direction. This art must be learned in youth, in early youth, and put in practice from the beginning. A man of thirty may learn to sing, to study mathematics, to make machinery, to write books, to make speeches; but if he wait til then to study thrift he has lost his chance of providence.

WILLIAM L. BLACKLEY, *THRIFT AND INDEPENDENCE: A WORD FOR WORKING MEN*, 1885

A prominent thrift advocate, whom we met briefly in part one, the Rev. William Lewery Blackley was the rector of North Waltham. One of his thrift papers from this period was “Scheme for National Insurance,” in which, on grounds of greater thrift, he argued for a national insurance program in Britain—thus in this instance strongly making the case for social (as compared to individual) thrift.

An Act to Provide for Compulsory Instruction in Thrift in the Public Schools.

A BILL PASSED BY THE MASSACHUSETTS LEGISLATURE, 1910

••••

Thrift may, therefore, be assumed as a virtue which the schools are to teach.

J. O. ENGLEMAN, *MORAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOL AND HOME*, 1918

PART SIX

Thrift Wisdom

MORE THAN ANYTHING else, thrift wisdom is proverbial wisdom. As we've seen, thrift ideas link to almost all of life's domains and can be articulated in many different ways, from high-brow poetry, to elementary school math textbooks, to lengthy after-dinner speeches delivered at credit union conferences. Yet despite this delightful diversity, the fact remains that apparently in all societies, the paradigmatic thrift statement is the proverb or maxim—those little droplets of common sense intended to entertain and instruct ordinary people.

Surely a part of Benjamin Franklin's genius, and a key to his enduring popularity, was his grasp of this basic fact. Probably for more than anything Franklin ever said or did—and he said and did quite a lot—he is remembered and loved for his brilliant retrofitting of the thrift wisdom of the ages into the maxims of Poor Richard. In the United States, in particular, and of course in part due to Franklin's influence, generations of thrift leaders have delighted in compiling and disseminating

thrift proverbs, maxims, and short sayings. I began this book by collecting them and have never found research so enjoyable.

The fact that thrift wisdom is ultimately proverbial wisdom ought to tell us several things. First, it suggests that thrift is a democratic virtue. No one is excluded from its prospective reach; no one is denied the right to participate in the ways of thrift. That's why none of these sayings suggest that to be thrifty, you need to be a male or come from a prominent family or be a certain color or have certain accent or religion or be physically powerful or even be particularly smart. Thrift principles can be difficult to live by, but they are almost never difficult to understand. Work hard. Don't waste. Exercise care. Give back. These are ultimately simple ideas, and they are open to everyone.

Second, proverbs and maxims typically urge us to live a certain way. They give us direction. Almost by definition, they counsel. With wit and brevity, they remind us of what is ethically good, often by also reminding us of what works best

50. Proverbs and Maxims

*Always taking out of the meal-tub and never
putting in, soon comes to the bottom.*

.....

Ask thy purse what thou should spend.

.....

The bless'd source of lib'ral deeds is wise Economy.

.....

*The best throw upon the dice,
is to throw them away.*

.....

Better to go to bed supperless than get up in debt.

.....

Better to say here it is than here it was.

.....

Beware of little expenses.

.....

The borrower is servant to the lender.

.....

*Buy what thou hast no need of, and ere
long thou shalt sell thy necessaries.*

Buying a thing too dear is no bounty.

.....

*By sowing frugality, we reap
liberty, a golden harvest.*

.....

*Charity gives itself rich, covetousness
hoards itself poor.*

.....

Charity is the chief and most charming beauty.

.....

Creditors have better memories than debtors.

.....

Cut your Coat according to your Cloth.

.....

*Debt is a heavy Burden to an honest Mind;
but thievish Borrowers make light of it.*

.....

Debt is the worst Poverty.

.....

Debtors are liars.

CONCLUSION

The Possibilities of American Thrift

BEGINNING IN EARNEST in the eighteenth century, people from around the world—mostly from Europe and Africa, but soon enough from nearly everywhere—came or were taken to the North American continent, whereupon they took the land from its native people and established across that land a European-influenced, English-oriented, but ultimately distinctive civilization. From this mix, something new emerged. “What then is the American, this new man?” asked the immigrant J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur in his 1782 book, *Letters from an American Farmer*.¹ It’s a great question. With respect to thrift, let’s try to answer it.

THE INHERITANCE

The main American idea is freedom. We move west, we go where we please, we do what we will. We do not have to bend the knee. We do not have to obey our fathers. We are slow to recognize

limits. Listen to Walt Whitman, the great poet of American democracy:

*From this hour I ordain myself loos’d of limits
and imaginary lines,
Going where I list, my own master total and
absolute.*²

Must I bend the knee? Is there something larger than individualism? For many of us, of course, still significantly shaped by biblical culture and the old ideas, the main answer to these questions is “Yes.” We bow before God. We disavow the notion that we own ourselves. We recognize, and try not to eat, the forbidden fruit. But for growing numbers of us, and in some respects now for the country as whole, the main answer is “No.” Whitman again:

*Whimpering and truckling fold with powders for
invalids, conformity goes to the fourth-remov’d,
I wear my hat as I please indoors or out.*

Why should I pray? why should I venerate and be ceremonious?

*Having pried through the strata, analyzed to a hair, counsel'd with doctors and calculated close, I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.*³

Surveying the origins and content of core American values today, Everett C. Ladd describes “a uniquely insistent and far-reaching individualism—a view of the individual person which gives unprecedented weight to his or her choices, interests, and claims.” Ladd concludes: “The American idea of freedom is of the ‘leave me alone’ variety.”⁴ Even the ideal of equality, the other master value of American culture, is most frequently understood to mean equal opportunity, or equality of freedom.

In this sweet land of liberty, one part of our inheritance—one outgrowth of our biblical culture, one of the old ideas—is thrift. As we’ve seen, the concept of thrift in English-speaking societies is more than anything else a restatement, in secular terms, of the Judeo-Christian concept of stewardship.

Recall the three related lodestars of this thrift ideal. *Industry*: Work hard. *Frugality*: Don’t waste. *Trusteeship*: Give back. What have we Americans done to date with this ideal, this little jewel from our inheritance? What might we decide to do with it in the future?

Do you recall, from part one, the views in 1920 of Edward Bok, who as a child had emigrated to the U.S. from Holland? Bok was shocked and dismayed by American extravagance and wasteful-

ness, and rightly called it a lack of thrift. But at the same time, he was moved and inspired by what he called “the American spirit of initiative”⁵—which of course is also an aspect of thrift.

Industry is the part of thrift at which Americans typically excel. Americans are almost always up and doing. We take lots of initiative and risks. We work very hard and, compared to the other rich countries, take few vacations and put in very long hours. Much of this work turns out to be quite creative. All of this initiative and industry, of course, has paid off for us materially. We are a fabulously rich country—a gaudy, over-the-top society in which, as Tom Wolfe puts it, the guy who cleans swimming pools in East Hampton is wearing a Rolex watch and is on his third wife. Americans are industrious!

On trusteeship—what we have is not ours alone, but is held by us in trust, for the benefit of others—Americans overall can point to much that is good. By many measures, we seem to be a generous people. Our system of private philanthropy is probably the most robust in the world. A recent British study, for example, finds that U.S. charitable donations in 2005 amounted to about 1.7 percent of the nation’s gross national product (GNP)—a significantly higher proportion than in any of the other surveyed nations.⁶

One important reason for our comparative generosity, of course, is our affluence. Giving a lot is easier for people who have a lot. Another key reason is that our tax laws encourage private giving. A third reason is that among the rich modern societies, we are the most religious, and religiosity tends