

INTRODUCTION

"I am but a poor ordinary Mechanick of this city, obliged to work hard for the maintenance of myself, my wife, and several small children. When my daily labour is over, instead of going to the Alehouse, I amuse myself with the Books of the Library Company, of which I am an unworthy Member." This statement, which appeared in one of a series of anonymous letters in Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* in the spring of 1740, reflected admirably the character and use of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

The chances are that Franklin himself was the author of the letter, for in his Autobiography he says much the same thing about himself and the Library. The Company was an unique organization in colonial America at the time of its founding in 1731, unique because it was brought into being by a group of small merchants, tradesmen and artisans struggling to gain wealth and position. Benjamin Franklin, pragmatical and intellectually curious, was their leader and prototype. No other evidence reveals more clearly the cultural interests and, in a way, the aspirations of Franklin and his associates than the books they ordered for their common use.

Other libraries, to be sure, had preceded the Library Company on the American scene, but they were of a different nature. Three college collections—

