Benjamin Franklin: the "thumb portrait," by David Martin
THE BACKGROUND OF BENJAMIN
FRANKLIN'S IMPERIAL APOSTASY 1751-1766

BY KIRK WILLIS*

FOR sixty years of his life Benjamin Franklin was a loyal British subject. He has been described as an "Anglo-American imperialist,"¹ as a man who possessed a "mystical attitude" toward England and "an almost reverent attitude" toward the progress of the Empire.² At first glance these descriptions seem paradoxically at odds with the modern image of Franklin as a leader and hero of the American Revolution. But the fact that Franklin became an outspoken proponent of American independence must not cause us to overlook that for most of his long life he regarded himself as an Englishman.³ Franklin's transformation from faithful subject to vigorous revolutionary was slow and difficult. It was repeated by thousands of American colonists. Yet Franklin's transition was unique in that his renunciation of Parliamentary sovereignty came quite early—as early as 1766.

The story of this evolution still awaits detailed study, despite the vast historical scholarship on Franklin's actions during the 1760s and 1770s. This scholarship deals mainly with Franklin's writings and activities during the Stamp Act crisis and the years immediately preceding the Revolutionary War,⁴ some-

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*The author is a graduate student in the History Department at the University of Wisconsin/Madison. The author wishes to thank Professor Wilbur Jacobs of the University of California/Santa Barbara and Professor Wendell Robert Carr of the University of Wisconsin/Madison for assistance in preparing the manuscript.

¹Verner W. Crane, "Franklin's Political Journalism in England," Meet Dr. Franklin (Philadelphia, 1943), 79.
³Conyers Read, "Dr. Franklin as the English Saw Him," Meet Dr. Franklin, 43.
times praising him for his diplomatic ability and sometimes criticizing him for vacillation. The main weakness of this literature (even of the two best biographies of Franklin by Aldridge and Van Doren) is that it fails to see the evolution of Franklin's view of the Empire. It also fails to explain that Franklin had a very personal notion of the imperial system. By examining this special view, and its evolution, it will be noted that Franklin during the 1760s held very advanced views as to the proper relationship between the American colonies and England.

Like the Roman god Janus, colonial America faced in two directions. Westward a virgin interior promised opportunity and prosperity. But the eastern seaboard looked toward England with strong emotional bonds of family and tradition as well as practical business ties. The colonists regarded themselves as Englishmen as well as Americans and were content to maintain that dual loyalty. In a letter of January 3, 1760, to his friend Lord Kames, Benjamin Franklin clearly expressed this dualism, "No one can rejoice more sincerely than I do on the Reduction of Canada; and this, not merely as I am a Colonist, but as I am a Briton." As the years passed, the colonists' economic and social roots had pushed deep into American soil, however much they might still regard Britain as home. Eventually, in the late 1760s and the following decade, these dual loyalties became irreconcilable. Until that time colonists, including Benjamin Franklin, were loyal to England and her Empire and worked for its preservation and improvement.

Franklin's participation in Philadelphia's civil affairs is well known. He was an active public figure busily involved in local affairs, an organizer with many ingenious ideas and projects. Franklin's contribution was not limited to public projects. By 1750 he became the most important printer in Philadelphia and


5 Alfred Owen Aldridge, Benjamin Franklin: Philosopher and Man (Philadelphia, 1965) and Carl Van Doren, Benjamin Franklin (London, 1939).


7 Franklin to Lord Kames, January 3, 1760. Leonard W. Labaree et al., eds. The Papers of Benjamin Franklin (New Haven, 1966), IX, 6-7.

8 "Franklin was Pennsylvania's most socially engaged citizen, its chief instrument of public progress, a preacher and practitioner of public virtue and service to society." Hanna, Franklin and Pennsylvania Politics, 24.
served as the postmaster. Beyond increasing his interest in community business, these occupations gave Franklin a unique perspective on the world. They expanded his orientation and turned his attention outward. This perspective was substantially sharpened by his appointment as deputy postmaster for North America in 1753. In his *Autobiography* Franklin commented upon his expanded vision due to the appointment as Philadelphia postmaster in 1737. “I accepted it readily, and found it of great Advantage; for tho’ the Salary was small, it facilitated the Correspondence that improv’d my Newspaper. . . .” Franklin’s attention, then, was directed outward to other colonies and to Britain. Carl Van Doren commented, “He wanted to bring more and more ingenious men in touch with one another, not only in Philadelphia but throughout the colonies. . . . No one man before him had ever done so much to draw the scattered colonies together.” Beyond this he had an unequaled access to information:

> He was educated by his trade to look beyond his city, and especially in the direction of England and Europe. It is significant that his *Pennsylvania Gazette* contained more news about Philadelphia, England, Europe and other colonies than about the rest of Pennsylvania. Because of this Franklin was undoubtedly better informed about affairs in London or in Boston than he was about those fifty miles west of Philadelphia. Publishing gave him an eastern orientation. . . .

His position as postmaster and his trade as printer expanded his interests from narrow provincial subjects to intercolonial and imperial matters.

One other element contributed to Franklin’s broad perspective, his scientific work. For many years Franklin worked alone, in virtual isolation from the main currents of European scientific research. After many years of independent experimentation and ignorance of recent discoveries and developments, interest in science led Franklin to look to other colonies as well as to

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*Franklin and William Hunter of Williamsburg were appointed Deputy Postmasters for North America on August 10, 1753. Papers, V, 18.*


*Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 209-211.*

England and Europe, the centers of scientific knowledge and inquiry. As an energetic writer, he rapidly built up a substantial correspondence with major members of the British and European scientific communities. He sent copies of his experiments overseas. As early as 1752 he had papers published in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society. His fame and recognition grew quickly and steadily. Thus, as printer, postmaster, and scientist Franklin had reason to expand his view of the world, to be interested in issues and questions of wide scope.

In politics this tendency to look outward manifested itself in Franklin's strong interest in intercolonial and imperial affairs. The constant threat posed by French and Indian encroachments concerned Franklin. They were a threat to existing settlements and an obstacle to further expansion. He recognized the need for an intercolonial defensive alliance to protect the long frontier from French and Indian raids. As early as 1751 he had suggested cooperative action. When the Board of Trade called for an intercolonial conference to be held at Albany, Franklin was appointed one of Pennsylvania's commissioners. Franklin took an active part in the proceedings. After the final draft of the scheme of union had been written, he vigorously supported its approval. To encourage its adoption by the colonial assemblies, he wrote a propaganda piece, "Reasons and Motives for the Albany Plan of Union," which presented answers to anticipated counterarguments and objections. It systematically defended each section of the plan.

Franklin's arguments in support of the Albany Plan demonstrate one of his constant concerns—his desire to improve the colonies and the Empire. He believed that the existing structure, in which each colony pursued its own programs in the areas of Indian affairs, defense, and planning for new settlements, was dangerously inadequate. This lack of united policy among the British colonies was wasteful and permitted colonies to work at cross-purposes in many cases. It was a potentially

13 Sachse, Colonial American in Britain, 157-158.
15 Franklin to James Parker, May 20, 1751, Papers, IV, 117-121.
16 "Reasons and Motives for the Albany Plan of Union," Papers, V, 397-416.
fatal weakness. As an alternative he offered a plan of union, the Albany Plan, which would establish a united colonial policy in regard to Indian relations, defense, and new settlements. Franklin viewed the Albany Plan as a means to increase imperial defense. He sought earnestly and sincerely to improve the imperial structure, not to challenge it.\(^{17}\)

Although the Albany Plan was not approved by any of the colonies or the royal government, Franklin's activity in local affairs and interest in imperial issues did not cease. Throughout the 1750s and early 1760s Franklin actively engaged in Pennsylvania politics. One major issue dominated all others: the right of the assembly to tax the Proprietor's estates. Franklin ardently supported the assembly's claim,\(^{18}\) and became a leading member of the anti-proprietary party. Finally, in 1757 the deadlock between Governor Robert Hunter Morris (appointed by the Proprietor) and the assembly paralyzed the government. The assembly appointed Franklin as its agent and sent him to London to negotiate directly with the Proprietor. Failing that, they asked Franklin to petition the Privy Council for a decision.

Franklin accepted his appointment enthusiastically.\(^{19}\) He wrote excitedly to his friends that he was “to go home,”\(^{20}\) “to go immediately home,”\(^{21}\) “home to England.”\(^{22}\) He arrived with great optimism, hopeful that an amicable settlement could be reached. In his dealings with the Proprietor he hoped for concessions and reforms to clear the atmosphere of distrust and hard feelings. But Thomas Penn and Franklin became intransigent foes, dashing all hopes of reconciliation.\(^{23}\) The Privy Council was forced to determine the proper rights of the assembly and the proprietor. On September 2, 1760, it announced the decision. Although the major issue in dispute was the assembly's right to tax proprietary estates, ten other issues were also involved. The council decided in favor of Franklin and the assembly on five issues and in favor of Penn on six, but “The primary issue that


\(^{18}\) Franklin to Sir William Johnson, August 11, 1755, *Papers*, VI, 139.

\(^{19}\) *Papers*, VII, 111.


\(^{21}\) Franklin to Richard Partridge, February 1, 1757, *Papers*, VII, 118.


\(^{23}\) Franklin to Joseph Galloway, September 16, 1758, *Papers*, VIII, 150.
had taken Franklin to England was now settled by the highest authority in his and the Assembly's favor: It was proper that the proprietary estates should be taxed, as the Assembly had been insisting for several years."

Although the fundamental question had been answered in Franklin's favor, his first agency ended in mixed success. These five years, however, meant much more to Franklin than the favorable decision he obtained. As a consequence of his prolonged residence and extended travels, his ties with England became stronger and more personal. His disagreement with the Proprietor changed his opinion about the proper nature of Pennsylvania government. He genuinely enjoyed these years in England. They may have been the happiest in his life. As a member of the Royal Society he met and spent time in the company of the greatest men of English science, men like Joseph Priestley. He also met distinguished men of letters such as David Hume. Franklin's interest in science flourished as he came abreast of the latest currents in the English scientific community. He and his son traveled widely in England and Scotland, meeting and becoming close friends with men he had hitherto known only through correspondence. Franklin was strongly attracted by the amenities of the Old World. As a consequence of the visit, he came to love England more—love her from personal knowledge and experience. He became more aware of his English heritage and loyalty as well as equally conscious of his American loyalty. This dual loyalty, when translated by this visit from an abstract intellectual attachment to a concrete emotional experience, became an agonizing dialectic. This, indeed, was to agonize many colonists. The phenomenon of the American expatriate, especially during and after the Revolutionary War, stems from this cause. The attraction of the Old World was too great. Loyalties were too deep for many hundreds, even thousands, of colonists. In a series of letters written to friends in England upon leaving the country, Franklin clearly stated this dualism. He expressed it best in a letter to Lord Kames on August 17, 1762:

I am now waiting here only for a Wind to waft me to America, but cannot leave this happy Island and my

24 Editor's note, Papers, IX, 200.
Friends in it, without extrem Regret, tho' I am going to a Country and a People that I love. I am going from the old World to the new; and I fancy I feel like those who are leaving this World for the next; Grief at the Parting; Fear of the Passage; Hope of the Future; these different Passions all affect their Minds at once; and these have tender'd me down exceedingly.

This personal love of England was one legacy of his first agency. The other was more practical and equally long-lived. Franklin, as a consequence of his dealings with the proprietor, became a strong advocate for converting Pennsylvania from a proprietary to a royal colony. The first serious indications of a change in attitude by Franklin occurred while he was in England. Upon returning home he became an outspoken supporter of royal government for Pennsylvania. His pamphlet, "Cool Thoughts on the Present Situation of Our Public Affairs," written in April, 1764, was an urgent call for an end of proprietary rule and the beginning of royal government. "There seems to remain but one remedy for our Evils, a Remedy approved by Experience, and which has been tried with Success by other Provinces"; Franklin said, "I mean that of an immediate ROYAL GOVERNMENT."

In calling for royal government for Pennsylvania, Franklin bared some of his assumptions about the nature of the Crown and the imperial system. He also raised some questions about his own motives. Some historians have found it difficult to believe that Franklin admitted all his reasons for supporting a change in government. Perhaps his intense personal dislike for Thomas Penn, developed during the years in England, was a reason. In addition, Franklin may have thought that under royal government the colony would be more or less left alone, continuing Walpole's policy of beneficent neglect. Franklin's motives, at their worst, seem simply to be naïve despite his political experience and maturity. From his years in England Franklin came to trust the wisdom of England and her leaders. It was easy for him to have been overawed, standing on strange ground, by the imperial dignitaries, not to say majesty itself.

25 Franklin to Lord Kames, August 17, 1762, Papers, X, 147.
27 Hanna, Franklin and Pennsylvania Politics, 115-117.
Under these circumstances Franklin's confidence in the positive blessings of royal government can be understood: "... instead of self-interested Proprietaries, a gracious King! His Majesty who has no Views but for the Good of the People will henceforth appoint the Governor, who, unshackled by Proprietary Instructions, will be at liberty to join with the Assembly in enacting wholesome Laws."28 That Franklin failed to see the possibility for equivalence in proprietary instructions and royal governors' instructions, and that he did not perceive that the Crown was no closer to the colony's interests and problems than the proprietor had been, may be attributed to his naiveté and previous experiences with royal governors. His former dealings with royal governors had been with reasonable and sympathetic men like William Shirley and Thomas Pownall. Franklin viewed Shirley as an example of the type of man appointed by the King. Robert Hunter Morris he saw as the type appointed by the proprietor. All of these factors, his deep faith in the beneficence of the Crown, his naiveté, and his prior experience led him to believe in royal government as a solution to the old problems of his colony.

A petition calling for an end to proprietary government and the conversion of Pennsylvania to a royal colony was circulated and in late 1764 was approved by the assembly. Because of his support of the measure and previous experience in London, Franklin was sent back to England to petition the Crown to change the status of Pennsylvania from a proprietary to a royal colony. Upon arriving in London, however, Franklin's interest and energy were occupied by the Stamp Act imbroglio.

Franklin's actions and writings during the Stamp Act crisis have been treated by many authors. Almost all of these studies concentrate on Franklin's role as agent and propagandist. His London quarters became a sort of publicity office for disseminating colonial information and propaganda.29 Franklin emerged between 1765 and 1770 as the chief agent of American propaganda in England.30 Yet virtually none of the studies tried to identify the evolution of Franklin's personal beliefs in regard to the issues involved. If there is any reference at all, it is usually

29 Sachse, Colonial American in Britain, 102.
oblique. Edmund Morgan, for example, states in The Birth of the Republic that other Americans reached the position that Parliament had no authority in the colonies whatever in other ways and at other times. "Benjamin Franklin got there as early as 1766 and waited quietly for his countrymen to catch up." Although Morgan does not substantiate this claim, there are sources which reveal Franklin's personal views of the issues involved in the Stamp Act controversy.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the considerable amount of extant writings by Franklin, it is extremely difficult to identify his personal opinions regarding the issues involved. This difficulty stems from two sources: (1) Franklin's personality and (2) Franklin's special position during the crisis. Franklin's intensely practical personality was one of his most outstanding qualities. Carl Becker stated, "His mind, essentially pragmatic and realistic, by preference occupied itself with what was before it, with the present rather than with the past or the future, with the best of possible rather than the best of conceivable worlds." Franklin was not a man to engage in abstract political philosophy or speculative constitutionalism. He became concerned with specific problems and issues and addressed himself to finding the solutions.

The position as agent also affected his writings. He regarded his position in England as essentially that of a reporter and propagandist. By writing to the British press, Franklin sought to report American opinions to the British public and government. He also acted as a lobbyist for the American colonies, seeking to influence British officialdom into a change, or at least a modification, of policy. In this role he was answering specific questions and objections that were posed by British officials, not giving his own views. He sought to make the American position temperate and conciliatory. As Professor Verner Crane stated, "... he was more concerned to make ideas effective in action than to clarify the issues with ultimate precision." Both his personality and position combined to make his writings

"Verner W. Crane, Benjamin Franklin's Letters to the Press 1758-1775 (Chapel Hill, 1950), xxxvii.
highly prudent, not speculative. Thus, to analyze his letters to the press, his testimony before Parliament, and even his letters to political allies in Pennsylvania as if they give the key to his own feelings is highly questionable, if not inaccurate.

Fortunately, clues to the secret of Franklin's private opinions in the winter of 1765-66 exist. These clues are found in marginal comments he wrote in his copies of the most controversial pamphlets printed at that time. The most important of these pamphlets, which Franklin heavily annotated, were William Knox's "The Claim of the Colonies to an Exemption from Internal Taxes Inforced by Authority of Parliament, Examined" (1765) and the two "Protest against the Bill to Repeal the American Stamp Act, of the Last Session" (1766).

Professor Crane has convincingly argued that Franklin's comments were written immediately upon his receipt and reading of these pamphlets, not months or years later. Crane calls them Franklin's "private musings." This judgment appears to be correct for two reasons. First, these comments were not intended for anyone's sight except his own. He frequently sent home copies of the most controversial and popular pamphlets. In these he did not make similar personal comments, not even in those intended for his political allies or close friends. The really remarkable fact about his marginalia is the nature and scope of the issues to which Franklin addressed himself. In the comments he passed over the major issue of the day, the internal-external taxation distinction and, instead, argued about Parliamentary sovereignty over the colonies—in any case whatsoever. If he was gathering information for pamphlets and debates, these debates did not occur until 1768 and after. The issues he discussed had not yet been seriously raised. The ideas in the marginalia were clearly those which Franklin held in the spring of 1766.

These ideas were very radical. They concerned the doctrine of Parliamentary sovereignty. The argument Franklin developed in these marginalia centered around the assertion that the colonies were not a part of the realm of England. As such they were not

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subject to any authority, specifically Parliament, that was operative only within the realm. Even in testimony before the House of Commons he had remarked, "The Colonies are not supposed to be within the realm; they have assemblies of their own, which are their parliaments, and they are in that respect, in the same situation with Ireland." In his marginalia this distinction was repeated again and again: "Subject in America only. America not in Realm of England or G.B. No Man in America thinks himself exempt from the Jurisdiction of the Crown and their own Assemblies—or has any such private Judgment." When the protesting Lords claimed to have legislative authority over all subjects, Franklin wrote, "over the Subjects within the Realm you have it." When they stated that taxation of the colonies was not tyrannical or oppressive, Franklin made this note, "They are such when extended beyond the Realm to take Money without Consent." In his pamphlet Knox contended that the British constitution "acknowledges no authority superior to the legislature, consisting of king, Lords, and commons." Franklin wondered, "Does this Writer imagine that wherever an Englishman settles, he is Subject to the Power of Parliament?" He denied Knox's claim that the colonists were subjects of Great Britain. "The People of G. Britain are Subjects of the King. G.B. is not a Sovereign. The Parliament has Power only within the Realm." Parliament was not an imperial institution, but the monarchy was. Franklin felt strongly that the colonies owed allegiance to the Crown, if not to Parliament. He explicitly stated the colonists' and his own loyalty to the King: "All acknowledge their Subjection to his Majesty"; "I am a Subject of the Crown of Great Britain, have ever been a loyal one, have partaken of its Favours." For Franklin, the colonies were subject to the King as well as to their own assemblies. These assemblies, in which the colonists were directly represented, were equivalent to Parliament. "They have assemblies of their own, which are their

36 "Examination Before the House of Commons, 1766," Papers, XIII, 153.
37 Marginalia in "Protest against the Bill to Repeal the American Stamp Act, of the Last Session," ibid., 221.
38 Ibid., 230.
39 Ibid., 231.
40 Crane, "Benjamin Franklin and the Stamp Act," 73.
41 Franklin marginalia, Papers, XIII, 212.
42 Ibid., 225.
parliaments."\(^{43}\) "We are different States, Subject to the King."\(^{44}\) But he was determined, in the winter of 1765-66, "that the Parliament of Great Britain, hath not never had, and of Right never can have without our Consent, given either before or after Power to make Laws of sufficient Forces to bind the Subjects in America in any case, whatever and particularly in Taxation."\(^{45}\)

Professor Crane stated,

Franklin, it is clear, had come by 1766 to reject in principle the idea of the imperial character of Parliament as then constituted, and was certainly aware that the implication of this denial extended far beyond the immediate debate over taxation. To be sure, he recognized that in these private views he was ahead of his time, ahead, indeed, of most American sentiment.\(^{46}\)

Despite his private denial of Parliamentary authority over the colonies, Franklin in 1766 was not urging independence. He was urging reform to pave the way for an amicable settlement.

That Franklin should support structural change in the Empire and reconciliation between the colonies and England is not surprising. He had been an active supporter of imperial structural reform many times in the past—at Albany, over the retention of Canada and with the conversion of Pennsylvania from proprietary to royal colony. The Empire was still "the greatest Political Structure Human Wisdom ever yet erected."\(^{47}\) Its problems were due to institutional malfunctioning. From 1766 to the mid-seventies Franklin attempted to change the system so that it would work. In his own view he saw the best chance of doing so through the colonies' allegiance to the Crown. Parliament's interests, for Franklin, were too parochial. The politicians were interested solely in England's welfare, not the colonies. The King had the welfare of all his subjects in mind. In this sense Franklin envisaged something like the present-day Commonwealth, wherein each nation legislates for itself but joins together when their interests coincide and in support of projects of mutual

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 153.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 215.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 232.

\(^{46}\) Crane, "Benjamin Franklin and the Stamp Act," 73.

\(^{47}\) Franklin to Lord Kames. January 3, 1760, Papers, IX, 7.
benefit. In 1766 Franklin was too modern, too radical. As Sir Lewis Namier stated,

Franklin's thesis was correct, but the constitutional ideas and practice of Great Britain hardly allowed as yet of its application. The King in Parliament and the King as first magistrate—the head of the executive—had to become well-nigh a fiction, a shadow, before he could acquire a free symbolic existence, outside the British Parliament and apart from it. But in eighteenth-century England, the King was still a real factor in Administration.48

In 1766 and after Benjamin Franklin hoped to preserve the imperial system through reforms in its structure. He had a sanguine attitude regarding the outcome of the imperial controversy. He had long been a loyal subject of Great Britain and had worked for over twenty years for the improvement of the imperial structure. Even in the crisis of 1766, the healthy energies of the organism were to be seen at work and provided for Franklin a focus of hope and encouragement. After all, he was in London, the capital of the nation of which he had always been a subject. He appeared before the Commons, talked to ministers, tried to lay the foundation for a new amity, and attempted to effect a satisfactory modus vivendi within the Empire.

In the years following the repeal of the Stamp Act Franklin continued to seek a salutary and peaceful solution to the imperial controversy. Franklin's trade and years of political involvement had injected into him a deep faith in the Crown, a strong love of the Empire, and a genuine concern for its future—a definite work of inoculation. These concerns had also led him to strike out in new directions, to seek innovative and radical alternatives to the present imperial structure. A perceptive and probing intellect drove him to examine and then to reject the very foundation of the existing imperial system—the right of Parliamentary sovereignty over the colonies. After having denied Parliament's sovereignty, he was driven by the relentless logic of his own argument to challenge the existing imperial structure. By 1766 he had pushed far ahead of the overwhelming majority of American colonists. He was striking at the very roots of the Empire.

Franklin was well aware that his private opinions were much too radical for most Americans. It was only after many years of political turmoil that Franklin's personal views of the need for fundamental reform became shared by the colonists. By then it was too late. The current of revolutionary agitation was too strong. It even swept up Franklin. As the years passed, gnawing doubts and conflicting loyalties perplexed him and many colonists. He came to believe that Englishmen, however sympathetic, and Americans, however dutiful, were not one people. The knowledge that each passing month widened the gulf between the two peoples finally led Franklin and most colonists to seek independence.