Review Essay:

Approaching His World (New): Benjamin Franklin Enters the Twenty-First Century

By Claude-Anne Lopez. *My Life with Benjamin Franklin.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. Pp. 288. $25.00 Cloth.)

By H. W. Brands. *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin.* (New York: Doubleday, 2000. Pp. vi, 759, notes, index. $35.00 Cloth.)

Benjamin Franklin speaks to us today and his life continues to impact ours in some unexpected and yet pleasant ways. Claude-Anne Lopez's book, *My Life with Benjamin Franklin,* is such an example. It is a collection of eighteen essays and articles written in the course of several decades when the author was an editor of the *Papers of Benjamin Franklin.* A sense of personal triumph runs through the book and readers shall share the joy. As the title suggests, the book reflects a rare dualism for each article can be viewed both as an earnest quest for the ever intriguing Dr. Franklin and as a small step in the author's own transformation of identity from a European immigrant, a faculty spouse, and a part-time transcriber, to a nationally and internationally known scholar. Lopez has found her destiny working on the Franklin papers project; her years of hard work and discoveries have shed fresh light on a wide array of issues about Franklin's life, personality, and legacy.

What Lopez has achieved in this and her other writings is especially significant because back in the 1950s and early 1960s professional female historians were few while women's departments studies had yet to become a specialized field in any university history. Her highly acclaimed book *Mon Cher Papa* was first published by Yale University Press in the mid-1960s when an increasing number of female students began to pursue the doctorate in history. Her second book, collaborated with Eugenia Herbert, *The Private Franklin* (1975) won several prizes.

A carefully reconstructed case study of colonial domestic life, it brought out neglected details from everyday experience, which helped to fill gaps in the essential readings on the topic of domestic relations, such as Edmund S. Morgan's *Puritan Family* (1944; 1966) and John Demos's *Little Commonwealth* (1970), two classics, one emphasizing the influence of religion and the other the role of material culture and condition.

Among her colleagues Lopez is best known as a leading expert on the French connections in Franklin's life. She has demonstrated once again in this new volume that diplomatic activity, social life, and intellectual discourses in eighteenth-century France were frequently intertwined. Any attempt to unravel those interlocking connections, therefore, would require a methodical dissection extremely sensitive to the minute nuances and protocols in the French tradition, expression, and polite culture. Her expertise often provided the English-speaking readers with vivid illustrations of such a European context, reminding us that Franklin's activity as the American minister to the court of Louis XVI ought to be understood within the confines of the French way of life and cultural background. Her gift to present those delicate but alien circumstances to the reader allow the latter's imagination to travel to that foreign land and to come back with a better sense of the complexities that Franklin's mission involved and of the frustrations and disappointments he experienced.

Much has been written about Franklin and many tend to think the subject exhausted. Lopez's charm lies in her ability to expand our horizons in subtle ways. She tells us little-known stories: his sickness due to poison, his mishandling of frontier information to prospective immigrants, his changing attitude toward slavery under Condorcet's influence, his failure to realize the deception behind a chess-playing machine called "Big Turk," and more. Each episode might not seem to be such a shocking revelation at first glance; collectively, they point to a new way to look at Franklin's world.

It is true that Franklin's diplomatic duties, intellectual activity, and domestic life have long been the subject of intensive studies involving his relations with public figures, friends, colleagues, admirers, and relatives. What Lopez has presented here is a rather fluid domain where Franklin had to cope with many diverse characters on a regular basis, such as total strangers, occasional visitors, profit- or office-seekers, and transients in want or in desperate need of help. None of them ever became prominent in history and most remained in the footnotes of Franklin's official documents. Lopez, however, has the instinct of a good

historian, follows ephemeral clues, and gathers valuable information about his varied encounters with this peripheral world. Neither political skills nor philosophical capabilities could have prepared him to deal with those peculiar personalities and their unpredictable requests and circumstances. Lopez's frank discussions of his fallibility, his miscalculations, and his credulousness do not trivialize him, but only enhance our understanding of the human side of Franklin, whose palpable naivete sometimes came from his inner compassion. The simple story of his effort to help relocate the Reverend William Dodd's daughter in America was pertinent, which showed that small deeds could reveal the man, his beliefs, and his heart as well as big ones.

Lopez wrote her essays with passion, scholarly rigor, and enchanting wit. Beneath the elegant style, readers can also find that she is nonetheless tentative in tone and cautious in assertions. She mentiones difficulties in producing some of the articles and offers only suggestions not conclusions in others. But few readers will fail to realize that whereas Lopez has indeed found her calling and mission for her life-long career, they will find in her work Franklin's ever-enlarging world presented by his affectionate proponent in the role of a venerable historian.

H. W. Brands's book *The First American* is a full-length biography of Franklin. The lively, lucid, and seamless style is one of its principal strengths. Although the book has more than seven hundred pages, the general public will find it a pleasure to read from beginning to end, a real feast reminiscent of Carl Van Doren's masterful biography of Franklin some sixty years ago. Brands is a fantastic story-teller. He has carefully combed through hundreds of details, and successfully arranged them in such an orderly and apt manner that the protagonist's long, complex, and versatile career is in no place difficult to follow, a highly impressive and laudable accomplishment in its own right.

From a scholarly viewpoint, the book presents certain weaknesses that may disappoint Franklin specialists. In the first place, Brands divides his work into thirty chapters and each covers a period of a few years in Franklin's life. This is a sensible structure based on a strict rule of chronology, giving the reader clear guidance for the progression of the long biography. Yet this structure is restrictive when some major topics, such as science and electricity, that require extensive discussions that go beyond the limits of this periodization. Most Franklin biographers in the past faced the same challenge; Van Doren, for example, solved the problem by adding a substructure which grouped several chapters under some topical heading. His biography, longer than Brands's and more

tightly constructed, thoughtfully balanced the reader's need for a smooth reading with the biographer's need for flexibility in presentation. Brands's literary talent is as great as that of Van Doren's. It was only a pity that a lack of more thought-out organization leaves his work with a fragmented impression, even each individual chapter is very well written.

A second weakness comes from the author's enthusiasm to tell stories; sometimes his overwhelming interest in the practice curtails his desire to analyze. To be sure, the eighty-four years of Franklin's fruitful life are full of tales and anecdotes, which could be readily adopted into a popular biography. But tales and anecdotes themselves cannot deliver any deeper message unless the biographer puts them in perspective. Early portions of Brands's biography in particular show this tendency. For instance, Brands mentions Cotton Mather, but demonstrats a limited comprehension of Puritanism. From Franklin's escape from Boston to Philadelphia he detects a dichotomous influence of the two cities (one restrictive and the other liberating) on the printer, overlooking the bourgeois values and moralism common to both Puritanism and Quakerism that Franklin inherited. He compars Franklin's father Josiah with the Quaker merchant Thomas Denham and cast the father in an unfavorable light for not financing the young Franklin, without further consideration of how difficult it was for the father to support a large family by making and selling candles and soaps in Boston. Brands tells in detail how General Edward Braddock suffered his fatal defeat near Fort Duquesne, including the horrible scene of the English captive soldiers being tortured by Indians, but provides scant information and analysis about the profound impact of the Seven Years' War on the colonies as a whole. Brands entertains the reader with images of how an electric shock could run through a human body or could kill a turkey, but makes little effort to illuminate the incipient science of electricity. He reminds the reader at least twice of the difference between the Old and the New Style Calendars, but is apparently unaware of another difference between the Ecclesiastical Calendar (beginning the New Year on March 25) and the Historical Calendar (beginning the same on January 1), and thus offers a confused statement of the year of Franklin's birth.

Perhaps still more important is the point that most of the stories in Brands's biography have been told and retold many times, and that does not provide significant new insights. Best are Brands's skilled portrayals of British politics from the mid-1760s to the early 1770s, which not only reveals a cautious Franklin including, but also enlivens a series of

imperial figures including George III, Lord Chatham, Lord Dartmouth, Lord North, Lord Hillsborough and Solicitor General Wedderburn. Yet Brands's claim that Franklin, a loyal subject for most of his life, only reluctantly became a revolutionary confirms the consensus among historians concerning a general stand taken by many Americans during colonial time. Brands devotes much space to show Franklin's willingness to help expanding the British empire in North America, while combining his personal interest in various land speculation schemes. The same issue, was extensively explored by Cecil B. Currey in *Road to Revolution* in 1968, and was again reexamined in Esmond Wright's award-winning *Franklin of Philadelphia* in 1986. Brands makes a good, though not exhaustive use of the Franklin papers; his lack of originality seems to come from an insufficent familiarity with many fine expert works in Franklin studies. A closer consultation with the following might have further benefited his undertaking: David Levin's perceptive piece on Franklin and Puritanism ("The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: The Puritan Experimenter in Life and Art"), Frederick B. Tolles's seminal discussion on Quakers, Quakerism, and Quaker businessmen (*Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Philadelphia*), I. Bernard Cohen on Franklin and electricity in his introduction to *Benjamin Franklin's Experiments*, and Jonathan Dull's excellent study of European politics and American diplomacy (*A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*).

Brands's book is one of several single-volume biographies of Franklin in recent years and will remain a very delightful one for those who like to peruse the lives of famous Americans. His impressive command of material, his literary gifts, his knack for depicting human drama in life and politics, his succinct and witty narrative, all had the great potential to produce a truly landmark biography of Franklin. Regrettably, this potential did not materialize due to an absence of original thought and refreshing observations. If history is said to be a dialogue between the past and the present, one is reminded of Edward Carr's advice that history is a dialogue between the past and the present *through the historian* (amateur, professional, or otherwise). History needs to be written and rewritten not only because an audience exists but also because that each individual historian has an uncommon opportunity to share with the world a new message and a new understanding. Readability in style and originality in thought do not have to become mutually exclusive; they do only when a historian are perceives them as irreconcilable.

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