

American Revolution. To hear Franklin's lightning rod most vigorously defended by Robespierre or by the guardians of the store of gunpowder at the Royal Arsenal in London (it was not always God's thunder that was at stake) is to strain the notion that the lightning rod was a "model for human liberation" (p. xviii). Nonetheless, the book draws much-needed attention to the importance of natural science in the tolerant, reasonable, and plainly constructed version of the American Enlightenment that Franklin did so much to shape.

Less convincing is the book's declaration that the lightning rod symbolized the Enlightenment triumph of reason over faith. For its interpretation of the intellectual and religious history of the period, *Stealing God's Thunder* relies, to bizarre effect, on Andrew Dickson White's pique-laden *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, published in 1895. A Victorian caricature of eighteenth-century religion emerges, and there is no discussion of those who responded from the middle ground. Rev. John Wesley, for instance, was inspired rather than alarmed by Franklin's *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* (1751) and had no theological scruples about "electrifying" patients with his own electrical apparatus in an effort to treat physical as well as spiritual affliction. Nonetheless, in its overstating the simplicity of the relationship between science and faith in the enlightened world of Franklin, *Stealing God's Thunder* is in venerable company. Now it is up to those who want to tell a more nuanced story of science, faith, and the American Enlightenment to write with as much skill as Dray has done in this engaging portrait of Franklin and his enduring invention.

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Benjamin Franklin's Humor. By PAUL M. ZALL. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. ix, 186p. Notes, sources, index. \$27.95.)

Benjamin Franklin is everywhere this year in Philadelphia, the three hundredth anniversary of his birth. In University City (the neighborhood surrounding the University of Pennsylvania, which he helped found), where I live, one cannot bung half a brick (to steal from P. G. Wodehouse, another very funny writer) without risking bruising something Franklinish. Van Pelt Library had an exhibit devoted to his education schemes, there appear to be more statues than usual on the campus, elsewhere in the city the National Constitution Center presented an excellent exhibit on Franklin's life and work. Books over the past two years have presented him as a loyal subject of the empire, a statesman, a brilliant diplomat, a quintessential American, weak on slavery, and a founder second to none, except perhaps Washington. Yet before he was any (or all?) of these things, long before his adulthood, his early retirement, his spectacular rise, and his international

fame, at least in print as early as the age of thirteen, Ben Franklin was very funny.

Paul M. Zall explores Franklin's use of humor from his days as a child apprentice until almost his last public statement, registering his concern about American slavery. Along the way, Zall suggests that humor was a leitmotif in Franklin's life and career. Franklin deployed humor in different ways at different times to accomplish varying goals, but usually, in all the important issues of his life, one did not have to wait too long to find Franklin being funny.

During the period of his dependence Franklin the apprentice used humor to puncture the self-importance of those with power over him and to poke fun at his chief competitors. He drew inspiration by imitating the real wits of his age, chiefly Defoe and Addison and Steele and later Swift. His *Silence Dogood* essays, published when he was in his teens, challenged the pretensions and claims of, among others, Cotton Mather and his own master, brother James.

Zall's is an odd book. By my estimate approximately 60 to 70 percent of the writing is Franklin's. The book approaches becoming short, editorial commentary punctuated by long quotations. In general this method works since it is no shame to write prose less enjoyable or inspired than Franklin's was. Yet at times I wished Zall had simply provided a good editor's introduction and a properly annotated collection of Franklin's humorous writings rather than intersperse short paragraphs of his own among much longer passages (often pages long) of Franklin's writing. I suggest that readers approach the book as a species of *Portable Franklin* so as not to be surprised at having to hunt for Zall's contributions.

But reading Franklin is a delight and at every important stage of his career he found something funny to say. I was happy to find two of my personal favorites, "Rules by Which a Great Empire May be Reduced to a Small One" and "Edict by the King of Prussia," liberally excerpted. In the latter piece Franklin presented almost verbatim British laws concerning the American colonies as an edict from Frederick the Great regarding Prussia's policy towards its colony Britain. After all, how could Frederick not claim dominion since

it is well known to all the World, that the first German settlements made in the Island of Britain were by colonies of people, subjects to our renowned Ducal Ancestors, Hengist, Horsa, Hella, Uffa, Cerdicus, Ida, and others; and that the said Colonies have flourished under the Protection of our August House, for ages past. . . ." (p. 107)

Out of context it's humorous, in context hilarious. I laugh as loudly reading Franklin as I do reading P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster ridiculing Roderick Spode for his black shorts and bare knees. The other founders almost never make us laugh. Franklin did and, with some assistance from Zall, goes on doing so.