

## REVIEW ESSAY

### *Benjamin Franklin at 300: The Show Goes On A Review of the Reviews*

*Benjamin Franklin.* By Edmund S. Morgan. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002. xi, 339p. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95.)

*The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin.* By Gordon S. Wood. (New York: Penguin Press, 2004. xii, 299p. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95.)

*Benjamin Franklin: An American Life.* By Walter Isaacson. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003. 590p. Illustrations, appendices, notes, index. \$30.)

*Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution.* By David Waldstreicher. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004. xv, 315p. Illustrations, notes, index. \$25.)

*A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America.* By Stacy Schiff. (New York: Henry Holt, 2005. xvii, 489p. Illustrations, chronology, selected bibliography, notes, index. \$30.)

*The Life of Benjamin Franklin.* Vol. 1, *Journalist, 1706–1730.* By J. A. Leo Lemay. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. xiv, 549p.. Illustrations, appendix, sources and documentation, notes, index. \$39.95.)

**A**T THE DAWN OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM, Alan Taylor wrote off one of the greatest men of the old one. Or, at any rate, he insisted that the rest of us did. Presuming to know our minds, he main-

tained that, nowadays, “we know Ben Franklin mainly from an old advertising image: an elderly man in knickers, long coat, and spectacles, with a bald crown and long hair—a zealot foolishly determined to fly a kite during a thunderstorm.”

This Franklin seemed to Taylor to seem to us merely “eccentric, comic, antiquated, and harmless.” Incapable any longer of arousing “either controversy or adulation,” he could only provoke “laughter.” We had “reduced” him to “a kite-flying fool.” We could “only dimly sense his importance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the paragon of, and the pattern for, American middle-class values.” He “no longer matter[ed].”<sup>1</sup>

Taylor is an astute historian, but those were foolish things to say, even in 2001. In the quarter century before Taylor’s derisive dismissal, Franklin had already been the subject of more full-scale biographies than any of the other founding fathers and of a mounting host of specialized studies besides. In just the decade before, scholars had produced sophisticated monographs and anthologies on Franklin’s science, his religion, his enemies, his deviousness, his relations with women, his political career, his father, his son, his son-in-law, his place in the Enlightenment, and his role in American thought and culture.

If Taylor’s assessment was bad historiography, it was even worse prophecy. In the last five years, Franklin has mattered mightily. *Time* magazine put him on its cover. Major dance and musical companies commissioned pieces celebrating him. An exhibit that is arguably the most sumptuous piece of public history ever mounted in America is now traveling the country. And a host of books about him have appeared and continue to appear in a convergence unsurpassed since the centennial of the Civil War.

The authors of these books are neither hacks nor journeymen. A couple of them have won the Pulitzer Prize. One is a National Humanities Medalist. One of them is arguably the dean of American journalism. Another is inarguably the dean of Franklin scholarship. One is a distinguished historian at Harvard. Another is perhaps the most distinguished historian at Yale. And the works themselves include both sweeping biographies—one of them projected to run to seven massive volumes—and specialized studies. There are entire volumes on Franklin’s science, his medicine, his religion, his diplomacy, his racial thought, his electrical

<sup>1</sup> Alan Taylor, “For the Benefit of Mr. Kite,” *New Republic*, Mar. 19, 2001, 39.

experiments, and his epistemology.

Pace Taylor, not a one of these books is just for laughs. Some of them are, despite his disallowance, controversial or adulatory. And some of them are profoundly unsettling. One suggests that the great scientist of the eighteenth century never did his lightning experiments. A second argues that the most egalitarian of the founders was a lifelong racist. A third insists that the man Taylor took for a paragon and pattern of middle-class values was (or tried ardently to be) an aristocrat.

It is hard to fault a historian for his failure to see into the future, though no great prescience was required to anticipate a surge of interest in Franklin on the eve of the tercentenary of his birth. But it is equally hard to defend a historian who condescends to his subject and, worse, to his audience. Franklin has always mattered, and not just for the comic relief to which Taylor consigned him.

Franklin's memoir has been, for more than two centuries, the best-selling of all American autobiographies. Since its initial appearance, it has never been out of print. Today it is available in nineteen free-standing editions. Taylor tried to discount its persisting popularity, arguing that in modern times it is "rarely read"<sup>2</sup> except by college students who endure it as an assigned text. But eight of the nineteen editions are hardcover volumes, and college professors do not assign texts in hardcover. Seven others are inexpensive paperbacks aimed at the mass market, and college students in American history and literature classes are not a large mass. One is a large-type volume, and college students are too young to need assistance for failing eyesight. One is a CD-ROM, one a restoration of a fair copy, and one a paperback with accompanying audio compact disk. I do not know who buys these, but I doubt that many of them are college students.

And even if Taylor could somehow get around the continuing appeal of the autobiography, he would still have to deal with the work on which Franklin's currency in American culture has really always rested, *The Way to Wealth*. That pamphlet was reprinted at least 145 times, in seven different languages, before the eighteenth century was out.<sup>3</sup> In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was everywhere, and a remarkable array of merchant-princes and moguls testified to its inspiration.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, "For the Benefit of Mr. Kite," 39.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard W. Labaree et al., eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, CT, 1964), 164n.

In our own day, so far from being obsolete or risible, *The Way to Wealth* continues to turn up everywhere. Together with the autobiography, it animates the training seminars of the Dale Carnegie Institutes and their canonical text, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. It informs Stephen Covey's best-selling book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and its influence is acknowledged explicitly in that book's spin-off paraphernalia such as the "FranklinCovey Organizers" sold by one of the great national chains. When Walter Isaacson canvassed the self-help shelves of contemporary bookstores, he found them full of titles such as *Ben's Book of Virtues: Ben Franklin's Simple Weekly Plan for Success and Happiness*, *Ben Franklin's 12 Rules of Management: The Founding Father of American Business Solves Your Toughest Problems*, *Ben Franklin's Art of Virtue: His Formula For Successful Living*, *The Ben Franklin Factor: Selling One to One*, and *Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: Principles for Successful Living from the Life of Benjamin Franklin*.<sup>4</sup>

Publishers seem to know something about America of which Taylor is inexplicably if not willfully ignorant.

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Nonetheless, the very constancy of American attention to Franklin precludes any explanation for the rash of recent writing about him. What abides cannot account for what surges. And other explanations seem scarcely more satisfying. Founders chic only gives a name to the swell; it does not explicate it. Keenness to cash in on the tercentenary could only have motivated some of the exhibits and performances; it cannot account for the scholarship, where there is no comparable promise of a payoff. The veritable Franklin furor in recent writing remains puzzling. If we would make sense of it, we might do well to reckon with the Reagan ascendancy and its apotheosis in the presidency of George W. Bush.

At this extended moment, people with the power to do so, on Wall Street as well as on K Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, are redefining the very terms of American democracy and equality. Property fundamentalism is afoot and the free market is regnant as never before in our history or anyone else's. At this moment when the American Dream is being renegotiated, the man who first articulated it seems to speak to us with a

<sup>4</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York, 2003), 484.

special urgency.

And yet . . .

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No one in his right mind would write about Franklin. If the impulse to return to our roots and reexamine our traditions were driven only by despair of our current leadership, Franklin would not be the focus of recent research on the founders. He had a lifelong habit of secretiveness that makes him exceedingly hard to fathom, and not just because he wanted it that way. (His Poor Richard advised, "Let all men know thee, but no man know thee thoroughly.")<sup>5</sup>

The other founders are far easier to write about. They were men of more modest dimension. They lend themselves to implicit sermons and explicit sound bytes: Washington's stern rectitude, Paine's selfless devotion to the demos, Hamilton's farseeing economic vision. And they lend themselves to perennial questions that we never quite resolve: Was Washington a great general or a great political leader? Was Paine merely a great publicist or something more? What was Hamilton's fatal flaw? Jefferson excepted, their lives can be bounded, analyzed, and accounted for.

Franklin is so much larger than the rest of them and, more to the point, than the rest of us. To write of him is inevitably to expose our own limitations and littleness. Yet historians, biographers, literary critics, journalists, and pundits are drawn to him like moths to a flame. Their passion to understand him dwarfs their interest in founders such as Washington, Hamilton, Adams, and Madison. It exceeds even their ardor to explicate Jefferson. But they have never paid him the attention that they do now.

I write here of half a dozen of their recent writings. I could have added more—I did add one and could as easily have added several others that appeared after I began—but I couldn't keep up. The Franklin literature was burgeoning even as I read and wrote. These six will suffice.

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<sup>5</sup> Poor Richard, 1743, Benjamin Franklin, *Writings*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (New York, 1987), 1229.

Edmund Morgan's interpretation of Franklin is the sunniest of these six and, quite possibly, the warmest, most evocative appreciation of the man in the entire Franklin canon. In its unabashed adulation, it is by Taylor's standard obsolete. But next only to *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), it may be the best book Morgan ever wrote.

Over the course of his distinguished career, Morgan focused often on New England and twice on Virginia. He never, until now, focused on the middle colonies. For all that, he is at home—or at least at ease—in Franklin's Philadelphia as he never was in Winthrop's Boston or Bacon's Chesapeake.

In his New England works, Morgan was at pains to defend the Puritans and their flinty successors. His assumption of the skepticism of his audience was palpable in those enterprises. He strained to persuade readers who suspected otherwise that early New Englanders were human beings and did not deserve the dismal reputation they had. The pedagogic effort showed.

In his great study of slavery and freedom in early Virginia, Morgan engaged some of the largest issues of American life, with truly transformative insight. But what he found, beyond the cozy confines of provincial New England, plainly troubled him. He was barely able to temper his aversion to the racist democracy he discovered at the heart of southern, and American, culture.

In his biography of Franklin, his one venture into a middle colonial milieu, Morgan has neither to humanize his subject nor disguise his distaste for him. He finds Franklin irresistible. At the age of eighty-six, Morgan at last lets down his scholarly guard.

He intuitively what Digby Baltzell set out more schematically. Building on a host of quantitative comparisons, Baltzell argued that Boston and Philadelphia epitomized two antagonistic American traditions. Puritan Boston inculcated arrogant, intolerant habits of command that prepared its elite to lead. Quaker Philadelphia fostered a rejection of hierarchical authority that prepared its citizens to enjoy a life worth leading.<sup>6</sup>

As if released from a lifelong confinement to regions where issues of doctrine, dogma, and racial degradation commanded the interpretive field, Morgan dwells on that life worth leading. In his portrait of Franklin, he exhibits an urbane geniality that he never exposed so evoca-

<sup>6</sup> E. Digby Baltzell, *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia: Two Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Class Authority and Leadership* (New York, 1979).

tively before. Perhaps, in pondering the man's life, he absorbed Franklin's spirit of acceptance. Perhaps he simply discovered in Franklin an expression of his own best ideals. Either way, he catches Franklin's inexhaustible energy, insatiable curiosity, and scientific temper more exactly and more endearingly than anyone else ever has.

If anything, he may be too captivated by the ease and expansiveness he admires in Franklin. In the most unsettling instance, he assures us that Franklin's marriage was "loving and happy," that Franklin's feelings for his family were like those of "any good father or husband," and that Franklin was "an averagely good family man."

No one else who has written of Franklin's family life finds it as untroubling, and indeed as satisfying, as Morgan does. It may be, as Tolstoy once said, that happy families are all alike. It may even be, as Morgan implied so implausibly in his studies of colonial New England and Virginia families, that all families are "averagely" good and "averagely" happy. But Franklin's other chroniclers are all more drawn to the other half of the Tolstoyan dictum, that every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.<sup>7</sup>

Never mind. Morgan traces Franklin's early life, economic rise, and scientific accomplishments with deft insight. He limns Franklin's later life with judgments as fresh as they are sure and with a mordant irony besides. He catches not only Franklin's impotence to avert the plunge toward destruction of the empire he "valued like life itself" but also his deep complicity in that plunge. He grasps not only Franklin's bedevilment by the band of pygmies who surrounded him in Paris but also the essential lunacy of his mission: to get the French to recognize the United States as a nation, not thirteen nations, as the Confederation Congress never did.

But neither his sagacious narrative nor his ironic analysis lies at the heart of Morgan's investigation. His account is not so much a recital of what Franklin did as it is a meditation on how Franklin saw and met the world. Again and again, Morgan makes clear that, for Franklin, public life and public service were more important than private life, the way to wealth, or even scientific curiosity itself.

Morgan makes Franklin's devotion to practical morality and civic usefulness more extravagant than it probably ever was. In his plan for the College of Philadelphia, to take just one example among a multitude of

<sup>7</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (1875–1877), pt. 1, chap. 1.

them, Franklin fretted that his collegians could not be “taught everything that is useful and everything that is ornamental.” As he said, “Art is long, and their time is short.” But he did not then propose that they confine themselves to the useful. On the contrary, he urged “that they learn those things that are likely to be most useful and most ornamental.”<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Morgan maintains that Franklin thought of rights and the right as “beneficial, or more specifically as ‘useful.’” In Morgan’s reading of Franklin’s lexicon, “usefulness and right were almost synonymous.” But Franklin never quite conceived things that way. He projected his United Party for Virtue as the party of the “free and easy,” and by that phrase he did not mean, as Morgan says, that virtue would be beneficial and therefore easy. He referred rather to the ease of mind that virtue would afford. Though he did not doubt that such ease would be beneficial, he never thought that it would be useful. He was not averse to utility—far from it—but he did not mistake it for contentment, either. And he did not doubt that contentment was the desideratum.

Morgan knows that. His Franklin was always more generous than selfish, more benevolent than ambitious or avaricious. He saw clearly enough that most men were actuated by self-interest. But he discovered at an early age, and tried to convince his countrymen all the rest of his life, that such self-seeking individualism did not lead to contentment.

Morgan’s Franklin therefore insisted on attending to others. He was more democratic than elitist, in his political thinking and in his personal carriage as well. He did not defer to his social superiors, and he did not demand deference from any. His benevolence and his democratic convictions converged in his belief in the ability of the people to govern themselves and his willingness to subordinate his views to theirs. As Morgan said, he meant to be useful and he meant by usefulness doing what the people wanted and thought good, even when it ran contrary to what he wanted and thought good.

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Where Morgan, like Franklin, turns from New England to the Middle Atlantic and makes himself at home, Gordon Wood turns from New England to the Middle Atlantic and makes no effort to settle in. He simply has no instinct for the pluralistic politics of Pennsylvania. He devotes less

<sup>8</sup> “Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania,” in Franklin, *Writings*, 329.



of his account of Franklin to the Philadelphia years than any other biographer ever has. So far from situating Franklin in his time and place, he subsumes the Philadelphian in patterns of prerevolutionary New England (or at least in patterns that he predicates of prerevolutionary New England).

Where Morgan's Franklin was a democrat in a raw city on the edge of a rough frontier, Wood's Franklin became an aristocrat in a settled society scarcely distinguishable from London itself. Where Morgan's Franklin became less provincial and more expansively American in the 1750s, Wood's Franklin became a fawning sycophant of empire in the same decade. Where Morgan's Franklin thought of America as "the future center of the greatest political structure in human history" for the last thirty-five years of his life, Wood's Franklin was ill at ease in America and pledged his allegiance to his native land only at the eleventh hour, as a last resort, after the impending rupture of the empire dashed his dreams of an elevated imperial identity.

Where Morgan's interpretation of Franklin is essentially conventional, Wood's account is fresh and original. But that is because Morgan grounds his reading in a comprehensive canvass of the evidence, while Wood grounds his on relentlessly selective quotation. Wood's Franklin is novel in the sense that we have never had one like him. He is not novel at all in any larger regard. He is cut to the Procrustean conception of colonial America which Wood enunciated in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992). He is Wood's monarchical American writ small.

Such a rendering requires some sleight of hand. *Radicalism* depicted colonial America as a deferential, hierarchical, and even monarchical society, by privileging New England and discounting the middle colonies. *Americanization* transposes this genteel imagination of the British outposts to the hurly-burly of provincial Pennsylvania, where the stark stratification that Wood postulated never prevailed.

Wood knows what he knows, and he knows a lot. His account ripples with a succession of glancing insights and provocative challenges to received wisdom. He has, here as in all his work, an eye for telling quotations and a way with words. But this study is a minor work of a major historian. Wood never essays a balanced engagement with Franklin. He never even struggles with him. He is so absorbed in vindicating a polemical position that he misses the man. Franklin was far too complicated for

Wood's tendentious agenda.

And so was colonial Philadelphia. Wood professes to rescue Franklin from the presentism that afflicts other biographies and return him to the eighteenth century. But the eighteenth century in which he imprisons Franklin is his own ideological fantasy of the era, not the time and place in which Franklin actually moved.

Wood is not entirely wrong. A few rich Philadelphians did demand deference, even if they rarely received it, and Franklin did eventually take on some trappings of gentility. But Wood mistakes minor elements of the colonial cultural configuration for the whole of it. The values that he pronounces hegemonic were, at very best, in tension with others at odds with them. Secure hierarchy and the acceptance of an inferior place in it by the lower orders were fond hopes of the well-to-do, not facts on the ground. And Franklin himself never forgot his origins among the lowly and middling and never doubted that he owed his power and influence to a continuing connection with them.

Wood's Franklin detached himself from the working people of the city when he retired. He was a wealthy man when he gave up his business in 1748 and a "full-fledged gentleman" by 1757. He identified with the aristocracy for the quarter century before his humiliation in the Cockpit. But all this is sheer nonsense.

In his autobiography, Franklin explicitly denied that he retired rich. As he said, and as the tax lists attest, he was nowhere near the apex of the social pyramid. He was not even affluent enough to take the lead in his own civic projects. He had no great retinue of servants, and he never even owned a home of his own before he left for London. Except for his last brief years in Philadelphia, he lived in rented quarters all his adult life.

Wood also maintains that Franklin lived in luxury at Passy. Stacy Schiff, who has a better idea of Parisian luxury, dismisses that description out of hand. Franklin's quarters were "shabby." John Adams's house nearby was far larger, his garden grander, and his staff more numerous. Adams was intensely conscious of, and competitive about, his social status. Franklin was, in the end, an incorrigible bourgeois.

Franklin bristled at assertions of social superiority. He had no patience with "idle gentlemen" who would "take no pains" for the public good. Wood says that he shed his identification with tradesmen and "thought like a genteel aristocrat" after 1748. But Wood has to ignore a lot of evidence—including a lot of his own evidence—to say so.

In his proposals for the academy and for the English school, Franklin expressed scorn for gentry pretensions. He pointedly prohibited the study of Latin and Greek, as an empty badge of gentility, and he made manual labor an integral part of the collegiate curriculum. In his memoirs, he inveighed against courtier culture and urged industry in an honest profession in its stead. In raising his children, he accepted his daughter's marriage to a shopkeeper and promoted his son's marriage to his London landlady's daughter. In everything, he disdained all claims based on blood. Wood never explains how he could have been both a gentleman and an inveterate enemy of hereditary aristocracy, when aristocracy was inherently hereditary.

Wood says that Franklin's retirement from business in 1748 "changed [his] life" and made him "a different person." Maybe it did. But it did not make him a gentleman, let alone an aristocrat. It only enabled him to turn his attention to science and politics.

Science was hardly the way to begin a career in gentility, and gentlemen disdained its democratic aspect. It depended on performance, not lineage or character. It demanded working with one's hands. And it conferred no enduring honor. As Franklin warned a friend, scientists and inventors were ridiculed if they failed and envied and abused if they succeeded.

Politics was certainly the province of the wealthy, even if not always of the well-born. And there was no shortage of *soi-disant* gentlemen in Pennsylvania politics. But Franklin did not advance in provincial affairs by allying himself with them. He made himself indispensable in provincial politics by mediating between the Quakers who controlled the assembly and the working people who dominated the city. Rather than repudiating his humble roots, he traded on them. He kept his credibility with commoners, and his power in Pennsylvania, by insisting upon his identity as a leather-apron. It was precisely because he did not identify with the provincial elite that the proprietor considered him such "a dangerous man." He was, as Thomas Penn said, a "tribune of the people."

Wood says scarcely a word of such things. More than that, he says scarcely a word about the ethnic and religious rivalries that were the crux of Pennsylvania politics. Public life in the province was not about gentlemen and commoners nearly so much as it was about antagonistic denominations and nationalities, and no one knew that better than Ben Franklin. Gentility is Wood's obsession. It was not Franklin's, or his city's or his

colony's.

Wood ignores all that because, unlike most biographers, he does not identify with his subject. He identifies his subject with himself, a child of the working class who became an Ivy League professor. But that is just a different version of the same mistake. Franklin did not become an Ivy League professor. He lived always in the hurly-burly. And exactly because he did, he could not afford Wood's darling illusions or his pathetic confusion of professors and eighteenth-century gentlemen.

Wood calls Franklin the least American and most European American of his age, and he was. But he was equally the most American American of his age. To hang on a few of Franklin's words and refuse to wrestle with the rest is a gross caricature of Franklin's creole ambivalence. And to treat Franklin as, for twenty years and more, "the king's man" and a "thoroughgoing" royalist with "no sense" of "disparity of interests between Britain and her colonies" is willfully obtuse. It was not for nothing that Franklin was believed by many at Whitehall to be the instigator of American separatism. Early in the imperial crisis, he warned the House of Commons that Parliament had no legitimate authority to tax Americans and that the colonies had "assemblies of their own, which are their parliaments." From "Rattlesnakes for Felons" in 1751 through a succession of savage satires after 1763, he penned the harshest attacks on Britain ever published by an American colonist. The premise that informs the title of Wood's work, that Franklin Americanized himself at the eleventh hour, sets all that aside. Franklin certainly made himself at home in London, but he remembered who he was, too.

Wood cherry-picks quotations to prop up his stick-figure Franklin. But a man is not a stick figure. A man is more than an artful assemblage of quotations. Wood is out of his depth in biography.

Near the end of his narrative, Wood takes up Franklin's fears about his reputation in America as he returned from France in 1785. Those fears were, in the event, groundless. Franklin came home to cannon salutes and cheering crowds. He was elected again and again to the highest offices in the commonwealth. But Wood brushes aside these accolades. He dwells only on Franklin's appetite for them, which he sees as pathetic. He thinks Franklin "out of his mind" to take on such responsibilities at such an advanced age. He sees Franklin's "emotional need to be elected to office in order to boost his morale" as "sad." He concludes that adulation had "gone to his head."

Wood cannot fathom Franklin's concern for his reputation because he never notices that in America reputation mattered mightily. America may have been, in some modest measure, the hierarchical society that Wood idealizes. It was also assuredly the jealous democracy that Franklin understood as well as anyone. The egalitarian wish to cut down great men was bred in the bone in the New World. Wood may deride Franklin's worry about "what people thought of him," but Franklin knew better. He knew that in America reputation was both fundamental and fleeting. No one could claim an inviolate position at the pinnacle of society. Assured status was a fantasy dependent on a deference that did not prevail.

Attached as he is to that fantasy, Wood spurns the insights of the surest, shrewdest guide to America who ever lived. He understands America no better than he understands Ben Franklin.

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To turn from Wood to Walter Isaacson is to escape from an ideological cage into the open air. Isaacson actually engages Franklin. He evokes him in some fair measure of his fullness. And more often than not he gets the proportions right.

Where Wood deals with Franklin's scientific interests in a quarantined corner of a solitary chapter, Isaacson makes place for them in almost every chapter. He explicates the famous experiments in electricity with verve and clarity, but he also elucidates Franklin's pioneering contributions to meteorology, demography, oceanography, and the study of refrigeration and heat. For the last four or five decades of his life, Isaacson's Franklin corresponded as a peer with men of consequence in almost every science of the eighteenth century; he was the first to determine the size of a molecule, one of the first to advance a contagion theory of colds, one of the first to appreciate the effects of lead poisoning, and much, much more. Isaacson follows Franklin wherever the Philadelphian's scientific curiosity carried him. He is comfortable with the substantive details of Franklin's scientific discoveries and conjectures, and he writes of them with zest and ingenuity. (It is symptomatic of Wood's perfunctory interest in these Franklinian preoccupations that he does not even have an index entry for science.)

Where Wood rarely deals with Franklin's religious ideas or activities, Isaacson never loses sight of them. If anything, he makes insupportable

claims for Franklin's persisting Puritanism. But, that excess aside, he captures clearly Franklin's continuing concern for religion, from his boyhood to his dying days. His Franklin is embroiled in the politics of his own Presbyterian church and in the religious politics of his city and province. Isaacson takes Franklin's religious ruminations and speculations seriously, even if he doesn't take them as seriously as Lemay does. (Wood has no index entry for religion, either.)

Isaacson simply follows Franklin, wherever Franklin went: to the chess table, the coffeehouse, the boudoir, the bathtub. He is insatiable for what made Franklin tick. His is a life of Franklin as Franklin lived it, not a high history of Franklin in public life. Even as he recounts Franklin's revolutionary role or discusses Franklin's diplomatic endeavors, he remembers that Franklin had a family that also impinged incessantly on him.

In fact, Isaacson has penetrating and poignant things to say about Franklin's family. His most striking insight may be that Franklin saw the family only as a site of domestic comfort, not of deep emotional commitment. But he understands Deborah wonderfully well, and he appreciates what very few have: that she was as independent in her way as Franklin was in his, and that Franklin let her be. He pays extended and sometimes sympathetic attention to Franklin's son and grandson, and he delivers a stinging indictment of Franklin's treatment of his daughter. He does not blink Franklin's patent preference for the Stevensons to his own wife and children, but he manages an oddly moving evocation of Franklin's final meeting with his estranged son William.

Isaacson sees surely and shrewdly into other aspects of Franklin's personal life. His assessment of Franklin's brother James is as fresh as it is generous. Rather than follow the autobiography, where Franklin complains of his older brother as a harsh master exercising arbitrary authority, Isaacson celebrates James as the first American journalist to assail such authority. Isaacson's judgment of Franklin's relations with women is equally original and astute. He observes that Franklin compartmentalized his friendships with men, as either convivial or intellectual, but not his friendships with women, whom he saw whole. He also points out that Franklin lost more than a few male friendships but never a single female friendship.

Isaacson is often arrestingly perceptive about Franklin's public life, too. He notices that Franklin established the first vertically integrated media conglomerate in American history. He sees that, so far from serving

the British Empire as adoringly as Wood avers, Franklin's adherence to the empire was anything but absolute. Even before the imperial crisis, and repeatedly in the course of it, Franklin warned Whitehall that colonial loyalty was contingent and that the Americans would rebel if they were not accorded full citizenship in the empire. Even before the confrontation in the Cockpit, Franklin stole British industrial secrets to help American entrepreneurs promote colonial self-sufficiency. Even as late as 1775, when other colonists were coming to positions he had held for two decades, Franklin was still more radical in sentiment and more advanced in practical planning for independence than any of them.

But Isaacson's achievement is not primarily in the novelty of his insights. *Benjamin Franklin* is not a brilliant book. It is a sane and surpassingly judicious one. It covers everything, and it gets most everything right. It is, for the foreseeable future, the one-volume introduction to Franklin's life and works with which to begin: the most encompassing, the most stirring, the most worldly wise, and maybe even the most wise.

If it has a failing, it is its very balance and sagacity. Isaacson engages every issue with genial good sense. Like a shrewd local magistrate, he splits every difference. Franklin was and was not a Puritan. He did and did not believe in a God who was and was not present. His project for moral perfection was and was not a spoof. Such even-handed agnosticism stands as a sobering rebuke to those who would have Franklin more simple than he was, but it precludes new understanding of the man.

Again and again, Isaacson declines to press a point. More than once, he seems not even to notice that there is a point to press. He no sooner recounts Franklin's reminiscence of his abandonment of vegetarianism for the pungent aroma of frying fish—the sage's slyest satire on reason—than he pronounces him “an exemplar of the Enlightenment.” He no sooner calls Franklin “a loyal Briton” keen to prevent a split between the mother country and its colonies than he quotes him on the imminence of that very rupture.

Isaacson sees Franklin's social philosophy as an uneasy mix of liberal, populist, and conservative ideas. He makes Franklin mistrustful of both the elite and the rabble, keen for both the common weal and individual endeavor. Such characterizations are sensible enough, but they do not get us far. They portray a man devoted to doing good and doing well, which is well and good as long as the two run in tandem. But they do not provide any purchase when the two can not be so readily reconciled and when



we would know the man's priority when he had to choose.

Often, Franklin did have to choose. In 1755, he chose to risk his own financial ruin to avert public ruin. He saw that Braddock could not commandeer the horses and wagons he had to have for his western campaign, because Pennsylvania farmers put no faith in the Briton's promises to pay for them. Franklin stepped into the breach. He gave those farmers his personal bond that they would receive full payment for all that they loaned the expedition. They then responded so strongly that he ended up guaranteeing twenty thousand pounds, a sum that would have wiped him out had the British disavowed his pledge. Isaacson calls Franklin "selfless" on that occasion, but he never sums such occasions or pauses to assess their implications for Franklin's social philosophy.

Indifference to implications enables Isaacson to maintain the momentum of his narrative. But it also causes him to miss analytic opportunities and even to miss his man. He is so wedded to his conviction that Franklin was a man of the golden mean that he fails to give due weight to the sage's departures from such moderation.

Take, among many, Franklin's bitter polemic against the Paxton Boys and the proprietor who made common cause with them. Franklin was appalled by the savage racism of the frontiersmen and by Penn's embrace of it. He was prepared to risk both the favor of the electorate and his influence with the proprietor to register his revulsion. But Isaacson cannot conceive a Franklin willing to imperil his political career for moral principle. He is so sure of Franklin's prudence and mastery of his emotions that he can only conceive of his ire as a temporary taking leave of himself. Isaacson tells the tale of the Paxtons better than anyone, but he cannot credit what his account makes clear: that Franklin could put ethical outrage before both rational control and his own advantage.

Isaacson never quite takes seriously the sense of social justice that sometimes emboldened Franklin beyond immediate interest, the impractical optimism that occasionally made him a visionary, or the banked rage that made him a rebel. Isaacson reports the radicalism, but he never lets it touch his essential apprehension of his man. He knows that Franklin considered the concentration of wealth "a danger to the happiness of mankind." He knows that, for four long years, Franklin saved the coat he wore in the Cockpit to "give it a little revenge" when he signed the Treaty of Alliance with the French. He knows that Franklin was ready for independence earlier and more avidly than any other American. But he never



lets such knowledge color his conception of Franklin as a man of modest and manageable passions, and he thereby leaves himself powerless to explain how his Franklin could have been our most revolutionary firebrand.

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Where Isaacson's *Benjamin Franklin* is ingratiating rather than analytic, David Waldstreicher's *Runaway America* is interpretive rather than ingratiating. Where Isaacson collects what others have seen and said about the man, Waldstreicher goes a solitary way, with a keen eye for what others have missed. His is the freshest and most challenging study of this tercentenary season, and in many ways the most brilliant.

Waldstreicher is the first of Franklin's biographers to take slavery for a crucial or even a significant part of his story. Carl Van Doren gave the subject just four paragraphs and some scattered sentences in the eight hundred pages of his magisterial work. Esmond Wright dealt with the issue in a single page, and with the fact of Franklin's ownership of slaves in a single subordinate clause.<sup>9</sup> Even in our own day, scholars such as Morgan and Wood confine their consideration to a few pages that do not impinge consequentially on the rest of their account.

Waldstreicher sets slavery at the center of Franklin's life and of his forging of the American mythos. He follows Franklin's every encounter with bondage with a dogged ingenuity and fierce urgency that call to mind his truest predecessor as Franklin's prosecutor, Alexander Wedderburn. He is as determined to destroy Franklin's reputation as the most racially enlightened of the revolutionaries—"the jewel in the founders' crown"—as the solicitor general was determined to ruin Franklin's reputation more largely. *Runaway America* is his Cockpit.

By indefatigable digging, Waldstreicher extends the span of Franklin's encounters with slavery from his boyhood to his dying days. He discovers that, when Ben was just seven years old, his father, Josiah, kept six slaves on view for prospective purchasers. He finds that Franklin himself had a "negro boy" before he was thirty and that he had a "man"—perhaps the same person, perhaps not, perhaps a slave, perhaps a servant—a few years later.

<sup>9</sup> Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), 128–29, 197–98, 216, 393–94, 479, 557, 727, 774–75; Esmond Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), 344.

More broadly, Waldstreicher demonstrates in damning detail how a young printer's advancement depended on the labor of others and how his opportunity depended on the unfreedom of others. Indeed, he does some of his most striking work in retrieving those others. He traces the bewilderingly sordid stories and the sad fates of several of Franklin's apprentices. He bids us reconsider James Ralph as a thwarted Franklin, and Samuel Keimer as another, who failed less from a lack of ability than from an excess of integrity.

But unearthing such details, of Franklin's life and of the lives of those around him, is merely a means to Waldstreicher's ends. The concern that consumes him is to unravel the craft and craftiness of Franklin's explanation of "the paradox of American slavery and American freedom to a skeptical world—and to America itself." His obsession is to elucidate and to indict Franklin's artistry in fabricating the enduring legend of middling liberty by which the United States still understands itself and still slips slavery under the rug. He writes with the fevered intensity that pervades his pages precisely because he thinks so much still at stake, even now.

Waldstreicher's Franklin is the least true to his experience and his ideals of all the founders. The only one of them who himself was ever the property of another, he became a libertarian and a radical freethinker with a lifelong loathing of all that made a man subject to another. But he also became a wealthy printer who held property in others and profited handsomely by their labors.

Unlike Jefferson, who was intellectually paralyzed by his plight, Waldstreicher's Franklin came to a vivifying creativity in order to deal with it. He did not escape the dilemma of slavery. He redefined it. The ways in which he championed freedom enabled his countrymen to forget and deny bondage, in the era of the Revolution and ever since. His rhetorical gifts made his legacy of evasion and amnesia the most dangerous element of the entire revolutionary inheritance.

Waldstreicher insists that, to understand Franklin, we must examine not only what he said but also what he avoided saying or said less often. And no one reads what is not on the record, or only on the record in private correspondence, more revealingly than Waldstreicher. He does not depict Franklin primarily as a man deliberately complicitous in the exploitation of unfreedom. He does depict the Philadelphian as a man infinitely adroit in deflecting attention from such unfreedom: now attacking slavery in the West Indies and celebrating free labor in the North; now

assuring that slavery was unimportant in the mainland colonies; now shifting from the labor theory of value of his pioneering political economy to a land-based logic that could treat the colonists as simple farmers feeding the empire; now gratifying the physiocrats by representing the colonies as rural and egalitarian; now appealing to the followers of Adam Smith by portraying the young republic as a virtuous trading nation.

At his most subtle and illuminating, Waldstreicher takes apart the tricks by which Franklin appropriated the cause of antislavery to justify America's slave economy. At his best, he shows us Franklin's "dream" of "independence untainted by coercion," and how much had to be suppressed to follow it, and how much harm the isolation of the practice of slavery from the principle of liberty did to that principle. Franklin imagined America as a land of free white people who prospered by their own industry in a land of opportunity. His imagination of such an America was, Waldstreicher suggests, the only way to bring it into existence. But the liberty he enshrined—the liberty to acquire property, even property in people—was for Waldstreicher as much a warrant for oppression as for opportunity.

All of this and much more in *Runaway America* is challenging and even revelatory. But where Isaacson presses too lightly, Waldstreicher presses too hard. Again and again, in what *he* says and what *he* avoids saying, Waldstreicher betrays his hostile animus, and his hostile animus betrays his argument.

It leads him to make simple mistakes. Among too many, Franklin did not overpay the men who rowed him on his way to Philadelphia. The schism in Pennsylvania in the 1690s was not about taxes and defense. The Hemphill affair was not about moral absolutes or Franklin's ambition.

More than that, it leads him to misreadings and special pleadings. In Franklin's protest of the Paxton massacre, Waldstreicher concedes that the rebuke of racism was "real." But he undoes the concession by describing Franklin's assault on the frontiersmen's homicidal bigotry as "subtle and even double-edged." He castigates Franklin's critique of white racial prerogative as "muted and ineffectual," directed to "other ends," and ultimately an affirmation of racial differences. No one at the time saw things that way. Franklin sided so clearly with Indians against whites that it cost him the only election he ever lost in his life. But Waldstreicher derides Franklin's courage and dismisses his palpable, and impolitic, outrage at racial injustice.

When Franklin opened the possibility of fusing assertions of colonial rights and assaults on slavery in his tract against the Revenue Act of 1764, Waldstreicher explains it away in convoluted arguments too clever by half. But Waldstreicher cannot explain away why Franklin “leaped down that rhetorical road” almost alone or why so few other Americans were daring enough to go there. Waldstreicher never notices how often Franklin—“the ever-cautious Franklin”—was the first to throw caution to the winds, sometimes even for the sake of principle. Principle is never a temptation for Waldstreicher’s Franklin.

When Franklin did take stands that seem, to the naked eye, morally grounded, Waldstreicher invariably argues that they were nothing of the sort. If Franklin did not resort to racial reasoning in the last decades of his life, it was only because of “the enlightened company he kept.” If he began with increasing frequency to assert overtly antislavery arguments, it had “less to do with conscience” than with “politics.” Even his apparently principled stances were nothing more than acquiescence to social pressure or calculation of political expediency. Waldstreicher literally never allows that Franklin figured out an ethical issue for himself. Indeed, he never allows that the company a man keeps is itself a choice the man makes. And he never explains what political advantage Franklin could possibly have found in keeping company with Woolman and Benezet, who had no political power at all.

For Waldstreicher, Franklin’s glass is always half empty, one way or another. When the Philadelphian established schools for black children in America, under the auspices of Dr. Bray’s Associates, Waldstreicher writes them off. Black education was, he says, neither new nor radical. “Keimer had proposed it thirty years before.” But an empty proposal is not a precedent. There had never been schools for blacks before Franklin’s. There would not be another such school before Benezet’s pioneering endeavor a decade later. Franklin was far ahead of his time, and he was successful besides. All the schools he organized lasted the fifteen years from their founding to the disruptions of the Revolution. The one in Philadelphia had enough endowment, raised by Franklin, to survive the war and continue in the new republic.

When Franklin visited the school in 1763, he was “much pleas’d” to find its students the equal of white children in “natural capacities.” Yet Waldstreicher refuses even to recognize, let alone credit, this momentous change of mind. “Franklin still held back,” he insists. Faced with

Franklin's mighty enlargement of spirit, and with his explicit apology for his former "Prejudices," Waldstreicher can only muster a mean-spirited insinuation that Franklin still clung to his old views. He did nothing of the sort. He held to the lesson he learned that day. A decade later, he would assure Condorcet that the negroes of Pennsylvania were "not deficient in natural understanding." They merely lacked "the advantage of education."<sup>10</sup>

It is not clear why Waldstreicher willfully misconstrues Franklin's motives and meanings in these instances and in so many others. It is not clear why a historian as extravagantly intelligent as Waldstreicher cannot get the words and the facts right in the Somerset case, the Phillis Wheatley episode, the antislavery politics of France, or Franklin's dying days as president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. It is not clear why Waldstreicher has to hound Franklin so tediously and tendentiously.

Franklin had a capitalist side, and capitalism is inimical to moral values. Who ever doubted that? Franklin was not a saint. Who ever doubted that? Franklin could rationalize to justify his desires. Who ever doubted any of that? Franklin told us so himself.

Too often, Waldstreicher seems offended by Franklin because Franklin was not single-mindedly devoted to the cause of antislavery, like Benjamin Lay, say, or Anthony Benezet. But Franklin was not single-mindedly devoted to anything. This is *the* central problem in our unavailing attempts to fathom the man and figure out what made him tick. It is hard to see what is gained by damning Franklin for being Franklin.

The remarkable thing, which *Runaway America* repeatedly shows and Waldstreicher never quite sees, is that Franklin let himself get so close so steadily to the cutting edge of antislavery. For half a century and more, he imperiled his reputation and his career by speaking out, acting out, and encouraging and enabling others to do the same. As early as the 1730s, he published the antislavery tracts of Ralph Sandiford and Benjamin Lay, when the Quakers themselves would not. As late as his last months, he put pen to the most radical antislavery petition to come before the first Congress of the new nation, when Washington, Hamilton, and Adams themselves were working assiduously to bury it.

Race was the third rail of American politics in the era of the Revolution. Franklin touched it again and again and again, for more than fifty years, when hardly anyone else would. *This* is what begs explanation:

<sup>10</sup> Franklin to Condorcet, 1774, quoted in Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 479.

that a man preoccupied with his own image would endanger that image so often for what he thought was right.

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Stacy Schiff is a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer, and it is easy to see why. *A Great Improvisation* is easily the most scintillating book ever written about Franklin. Its pages teem with pungent, penetrating characterizations and memorable turns of phrase that transport the reader to the Parisian salons in which a fair measure of this irresistible narrative takes place. Franklin was the only colonist with the “sleek charlatanism known as social grace.” He “was honest, but not too honest, which qualifies in France as a failure of imagination.” Silas Deane was “stranded in Paris, sick with anxiety, and nearly out of invisible ink.” Vergennes, “in his crusade to restore Versailles to its rightful position at the center of the universe, . . . put America on the map.”

Taking Franklin as her vantage, Schiff evokes the conniving and corruption of the Old World as vividly—and endearingly—as anyone ever has. Her account of the machinations of Beaumarchais and Vergennes and the Paris police chief Lenoir makes luminous what a babe the worldly Philadelphian was in those woods: how much he would have to learn, how much he would never know. As she says, “charade is a word of French origin.”

Schiff’s artistry is atmospheric. She establishes the milieu in which Franklin moved and makes it matter as she traces what he did. But she does not do so by the shimmering brilliance of her prose alone. She has paid her dues. She has done her research, in the European archives as well as in the American sources. She probably knows the Paris police records of the era better than anyone. She certainly knows more than Franklin ever knew of what was going on. Vaguely aware of the extent of the espionage everywhere about him, he threw up his hands at trying to plumb the leaks. Ransacking the reports of the spies who made Paris the Casablanca of the eighteenth century, she comes as near to omniscience as a narrator can.

She sorts out what Franklin and his fellow commissioners did behind each others’ backs. She sifts the divergent designs of a vast cast of French, British, and Spanish players whose positions depended in no small part on their ability to deceive. And she untangles the ways in which all those

cross-purposes came together. *A Great Improvisation* is not just a joy to read. It is also a genuine contribution to scholarship: the most informed as well as the most delicious account of Franklin's embassy we have ever had.

Schiff calls that embassy an improvisation because she sees Franklin teaching himself diplomacy on the job and literally inventing American foreign policy as he did. She calls it great because she sees the two French treaties he secured—of amity and commerce and of military alliance—as the finest triumph of his career, and the most astounding. Alone, in a foreign land, in a language with which he struggled at best, he outmaneuvered both Vergennes and Stormont. The naïf from the New World proved more subtle than the shrewdest diplomats of the Old, playing them off against each other with such virtuosity that neither knew till the deeds were done.

Schiff's assessment of the qualities that enabled Franklin to achieve the treaties is seasoned and sure. She acknowledges that his popularity was "a priceless asset." Indeed, she follows his celebrity as avidly as the French themselves did: ecstatic crowds that carried the American aloft from the law courts to his carriage, a Parliament erupting in cheers at his appearance, the "Enlightenment apotheosis" when Franklin and Voltaire embraced, the Fragonard allegory in which Franklin appeared as Zeus, chief of the gods.

But she knows that his ability to secure the money and material that America had to have could never have rested on his popularity alone. It was his character that was crucial, especially as it bore on his capacity for the delicate diplomacy that his mission demanded. And Schiff sounds his character—the deposit of a lifetime of good living and deep learning—with an astuteness that is radiantly revealing.

He had about him, she says, a *joie de vivre* that the French thought impossible for Anglo-Saxons. Yet he was at ease with silence in a city of chatter. He listened, and he could hear more than merely what he wanted to hear. He sometimes indulged his impudence, because he grasped that in Paris "impertinence was admissible so long as it was clever." He had not only a natural poker face but also "nerves of steel and the patience of an old man." He was "comfortable with a lack of clarity," and his disinclination to say yes or no played perfectly with Vergennes and the French court. He could content himself with a common-law marriage to France as he had accommodated himself to one with Deborah.

These gifts made him at once the only American who could have



gained the rebel colonies access to the French treasury and the only one who could have maintained it for longer than a month. When Franklin tried to resign as minister plenipotentiary in 1781, Vergennes instructed his minister to the United States to do all in his power to prevent John Adams's succession to the post. When Franklin's enemies in Congress appointed John Laurens to supersede him in Paris, Vergennes arranged both a new loan and an outright gift of six million livres—"the greatest single gift of the war"—before Laurens could make his way to Paris. "Let them judge by my gesture," the minister of foreign affairs declared, "if the behavior of this minister has endangered the interests of his nation, and if any other than he could have obtained the same advantages."

Schiff devotes one vivid vignette after another to the details of Franklin's dealings with his fellow commissioners and other key "friends" of America in France. She treats the lot of them—the Lees, Adams, Izard, Beaumarchais, Chaumont, John Paul Jones, and more—with acuity and with a remarkable measure of sympathy, considering that each was crazier than the next, and more spiteful and malicious toward Franklin. She makes clear how dysfunctional the American commission was, how much aggravation Franklin bore from the other commissioners, how remarkably he kept his composure as they attempted to undermine him, and how routinely he repaired the damage they did. Even in the splendid success of the separate treaty of peace with Britain, Adams and Jay left Franklin to pick up the pieces. It was Franklin who had to mollify Vergennes after the Americans violated the obligation of the military alliance with France. It was Franklin who had to plead—successfully—for a further French loan after betraying France. Franklin could maintain cordiality with rivals as Adams and Jay could not, and Franklin could do a sting as Adams and Jay could not. They just burned bridges behind them and left the man they mistrusted to rebuild them.

Schiff captures all that, in compelling tales that never lose sight of Franklin's sunny and delicious dealings with women or of his difficult and doleful dealings with his failing body. She reminds us repeatedly that he was a man in his seventies—almost eighty by the time he left at last for Philadelphia—and that he was beset by aches and pains every day of his decade in the City of Light. He had kidney stones and other "urological ills." He had a bad case of psoriasis. He had trouble with the chill of winter. Sometimes he was in too much distress even to climb to his second-floor office at Passy.



But Schiff does much more than merely evoke the personal and the rivalrous in spellbinding stories. She presents us with a rich succession of new interpretations of Franklin's diplomacy and of his character.

She shows, for example, that Franklin often worked twelve-hour days in Paris. Contrary to the claims of his enemies that he spent his days abed and his evenings carousing, he worked longer hours in his old age than he ordinarily did in his prime. It is true that John Adams, who complained incessantly of Franklin's lassitude, was up at five doing paperwork, while Franklin did not take breakfast till eight. But the self-absorbed Adams defined the working day as *his* working day. He never grasped that Franklin worked through the day and far into the night. Adams's inability to take the perspective of another was the condition of his priggish self-righteousness. In fact, at half Franklin's age, he worked markedly less than the older man. It was Adams, not Franklin, who was early to bed and early to rise, though it made him neither wealthy nor wise.

The irony ran deeper than the obvious one that the man whose Poor Richard persona exalted industry worked harder in Paris than he had in decades. In Philadelphia, as he confessed in his memoir, he had worked hardest at seeming to work hard. In Paris, where the Protestant ethic had no purchase and where an apparent effortlessness was the mode, he had to hide his labors.

More fundamentally, Schiff develops in damning detail the ineptitude of the Continental Congress with which Franklin had to deal. The bickering and the inability to work together of the commissioners in France mirrored the squabbling, the financial improprieties, and the incompetence to accomplish anything of the government at home. None of this is unfamiliar in itself, but its import is ironically resonant. In the scene that Schiff paints, there are only two giants in the land. The rest of the founding fathers do not stand on pedestals. Aside from the courageous commoners who served as soldiers, Franklin and Washington alone emerge as heroes. Franklin in Paris rises above the small men in his delegation. Washington in the field rises above the inept politicians in Congress and the scheming generals in the army. Time after time, their government fails them. Time after time, they hold the Revolution together anyway. In the end, even the French see it. When Vergennes engineers the great gift of 1781, he stipulates that the money not go to Congress. It is to be drawn on directly by Washington and spent only by Franklin in France. The French have no faith in any Americans but those two.

Exactly as John Adams always feared, Franklin and Washington would have all the credit for the Revolution.

Most fundamentally of all, and most startlingly, Schiff shows that Franklin did not think his diplomatic accomplishments as monumental or decisive as everyone else has thought them ever after. Lord Stormont, the British ambassador to Versailles, was sure that Britain would destroy the rebellion before the French could make up their minds to intervene. Franklin was equally convinced that the colonists would win their war for independence before the French made up their minds. When no one else was, he was sublimely confident of the American cause. He believed that his countrymen could and would win without the French alliance, so long as he secured for them the supplies the soldiers needed. In 1778, as Schiff discovers, Vergennes wanted the alliance more than Franklin did. The farseeing American fretted that it would prove as undesirable as it was unnecessary, keeping the infant republic from sharing his own faith in its ability to sustain its independence at the moment of its birth.

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J. A. Leo Lemay is the undeniable dean of Franklin scholars. In volume 1 of his *Life of Benjamin Franklin*, he launches what may well be the most lavish biography ever accorded an American. Projected to run to seven volumes, Lemay's work will surpass Schlesinger's three volumes on Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Link's five on Wilson, Malone's six on Jefferson, and Freeman's six on Washington. It is tempting to think that Lemay can count and that seven is meant to make a statement about Franklin's surpassing importance to America.<sup>11</sup>

In his preface, Lemay cautions that his enterprise will be a literary biography. That would not be much of a limitation even if it were true. Reading and writing were, more than anything else, what Franklin did and how he made his way in life. To be "a tolerable English writer" was the only ambition he confessed explicitly in his autobiography. Even in his youngest years, the ones of this first volume, which runs from his birth

<sup>11</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Age of Roosevelt* (Boston, 1957–60); Arthur S. Link, *Wilson* (Princeton, NJ, 1947–65); Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time* (Boston, 1948–81); Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1926–39); Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography* (New York, 1948–57). The Washington biography ultimately ran to seven volumes, but Freeman neither wrote nor even researched the final volume, which was taken up after his death by John Alexander Carroll and Mary Wells Ashworth.

in 1706 to his marriage in 1730, he read voraciously and wrote brilliantly. In a few years, he would be recognized as what he already was: early America's most prolific and most important man of letters.

But the truth is that Lemay's interests range far beyond what would conventionally be considered literary. As he says, accurately, his biography has "far more detail about Franklin's life than any previous study."

More than a little of the detail is, of course, excessive. Lemay's discussions of the effluvia of the day—a Boston sermon the week before Franklin was born, say, or a newspaper report of a naval engagement the week after—are just displays of surplus pedantry. His recurrent assurances that Franklin "must have known" or "probably read" or "would have been aware of" this book or that are just exercises in antiquarian erudition.

Yet some of the detail is tantalizing. It turns out, for example, that Franklin's grandmother was a servant who married one of the leading men of Nantucket. Rising above humble origins seems to have run in the family. It also turns out that Franklin's father remarried just five months after the death of his first wife. Marriage as a functional relationship rather than a love match seems to have run in the family too.

And some of the detail is truly transformative. Lemay looks searchingly into the little world of the *New-England Courant*, the newspaper that Franklin's brother James edited and published. He finds more than Franklin wanted us to know.

In the autobiography, James appeared primarily as Franklin's abusive brother. Franklin never admitted any debt to him beyond the resentment of tyranny that he said James unwittingly aroused in him. Lemay thinks that James taught his young apprentice most of what he knew about newspapers. Like both Waldstreicher and Isaacson, but much more extensively and effusively, Lemay hails James as the pioneering journalist of the provinces. With the *Pennsylvania Gazette* very much in mind, he pointedly calls the *Courant* "the most literary, audacious, and humorous newspaper of colonial America."

More than that, he maintains that James assembled a stable of writers, the Couranteers, who had more influence on Franklin's writing than anyone else he ever read. In doing so, Lemay advances a daring argument and intimates an even more daring one. Where other scholars see Bunyan, Defoe, and the *Spectator* as sources of Franklin's style, Lemay insists that Franklin learned first and foremost from American authors. And where other scholars—Wood and Morgan among them—see England as the

object of Franklin's desire, Lemay insists that the Philadelphian's formation and attachments were always more American than British.

Some of Lemay's most arresting insights concern the young Franklin's politics. Though scholarly consensus holds that Franklin remained aloof from partisan activity until the 1750s, Lemay argues compellingly that Franklin imbibed the Couranteers' antiprерogative politics in his adolescence in Massachusetts and identified with the popular party in his early adulthood in Pennsylvania. From the first (and to the last), he resented the readiness of imperial authorities to impose on Americans who knew their own needs better than British "strangers" did. As Lemay puts it, Franklin was never the impartial printer he professed to be. He was always a bold political printer. He never truly practiced the freedom of the press that he preached. When he leveled partisan attacks, his targets rarely replied in the pages of the *Gazette* that he alleged were open to them. They answered instead in the newspaper aligned with the proprietary interest, where they expected a more sympathetic reception than they could have had with the *Gazette*'s readership. Franklin's willingness to use his paper for partisan purposes was so palpable that Lemay thinks he ran a subtle shakedown, obliging leading Philadelphians to subscribe to the *Gazette* to avert his criticism.

More of Lemay's most arresting insights concern the young Franklin's religious ideas and interests. Lemay points out, as no one has before, that Franklin wrote more theological essays than any other colonial layman and indeed that he wrote more about religion more largely than any other early American, clerics and a few individuals like Woolman aside. Lemay takes Franklin's views on religion seriously, and none more seriously than the ones expressed in the essay he published at the age of nineteen, *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*.

Morgan ignores that remarkable work entirely. Wood writes it off as "sophomoric." Isaacson dismisses it as a youthful indiscretion, so "tangled" in its logic and so "shallow and unconvincing" in its substance as to be "embarrassing." Lemay makes no such mistakes. His discussion of the *Dissertation* is sophisticated, penetrating, and original. It is not the last word on that fascinating composition. It is the richest and most searching that we now have. And its conclusions will have to be conjured with: that Franklin never gave up the materialism and skepticism he espoused in that first formulation, that his deism was just a cover for the depth of his infidelity, and that his thinking changed only to the extent that he became

more prudent in exposing his beliefs and more considerate of the sensibilities of others he did not wish to shock.

Lemay does not doubt that Franklin was in earnest about the "Articles of Belief" he set forth for himself in 1728. He merely doubts that Franklin ever believed them. The epistemological radicalism that the young man never outgrew precluded the place to stand that the articles presupposed. It forbade the certainty and the emotional security that religious faith afforded others. Lemay knows as well as anyone that it is "difficult, perhaps impossible," to pierce the veil with which Franklin shrouded his religious views. But he suspects with reason that Franklin pulled the veil aside a bit in his obituary for his skeptical friend Andrew Hamilton: "If he could not subscribe to the Creed of any particular Church, it was not for want of considering them All; for he had read much on Religious Subjects."

Franklin's bleak view of religion was, for Lemay, very like his larger notions of human nature and the human prospect. Where Isaacson emphasizes Franklin's geniality, Lemay catches a "savage note" in his sensibility, evident from the first. If anything, Lemay insists, it was his dark disenchantment with life, not his moderation, that was rare in early American writing and set Franklin apart from his contemporaries. Franklin was never as sunny as Morgan and Isaacson suppose. Poor Richard said "9 Men in 10 are suicides." The *Dissertation* "defined life as suffering and death as the absence of pain." Even in the bloom of youth, Franklin ridiculed the eighteenth century's cosmic optimism and derided its belief in an ordered universe ordained by a clock-making deity. If there was a God at all, he was more likely a mad craftsman whose "intense Application had disturb'd his Brain and impair'd his Reason."

Between John Locke's relatively optimistic view of life and Thomas Hobbes's darkly pessimistic outlook, Franklin considered Hobbes's position truer. Against Locke's assertion that people were pulled by pleasure as well as pushed by pain, Franklin maintained that pain was the only motive. "We are first mov'd by *Pain*, and the whole succeeding Course of our Lives is but one continu'd series of Action with a View to be freed from it." Lemay is as relentless about this as Franklin was. His Franklin saw life as "a series of unsatisfied desires" and "all ostensible satisfactions [as] mirages." He could conceive just one surcease from such pain: "the sweet *Sleep* of Death."

Lemay's young Franklin put no more stock in rationality than he did

in pleasure. Where Isaacson treated Franklin as a man of reason and treated his episodes of infatuation as departures from his nature, Lemay reminds us that Franklin himself thought reason the slave of the passions. Rarely missing an opportunity to mock the pretensions of dispassionate logic, the sage simply took for granted that reason was a tool of the emotions and had little to do with reality.

Taken all in all, Lemay's is an astonishing portrait of the artist as a young man, and the more astonishing for all that the young man accomplished despite his despair of the human plight. At sixteen, he wrote the *Silence Dogood* essays, which set a new standard in American letters. At nineteen, he published the *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity*, which anticipated the inner logic of the Marquis de Sade's most advanced ideas by more than half a century. At twenty-three, he produced *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper Currency*, which devastated mercantilist doctrines and set out a labor theory of value half a century before Adam Smith did.

None of this but the *Dissertation* was done in obscurity. Adam Smith knew the pamphlet on paper money. Karl Marx knew it too, and he explicitly cited Franklin as the first person to reduce exchange value to labor time deliberately and clearly. Even at twenty-three, Franklin did everything lucidly. He spoke of money as a "medium of exchange" a decade before the first listing of the phrase in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

His popular politics, his skeptical outlook on religion, his a-foundational epistemology, and his parochial allegiance to America were all ingredients in a precocity that was more than merely personal. Lemay sees their larger significance in his brilliant rendering of Franklin's rendering of his youth in his autobiography. As Lemay observes, the world that Franklin evoked in his memoir was as fictive as any other world of the eighteenth century. It was a world of imagination as much as of experience. It was an idealized democratic world, not a feudal, aristocratic, or religious one. It was the most modern world in all of Western literature when he conceived it. And his persona was, in Lemay's lovely phrase, "the first citizen in literature who [lived in that] democratic, secular, mobile" society.

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These six books do not begin to exhaust the bounty of the tercentenary. But they do suggest that, no matter what Alan Taylor once said, we are far from done with Franklin. He still stirs controversy and elicits adulation. He still, as Isaacson says, winks at us.

We can be grateful for that. We now have, in Morgan's *Franklin* and in Isaacson's, our best brief and our best extended introductions to the man. We now have, in Waldstreicher's *Runaway America*, our most unsettling analysis of his duplicity. And we now have, in Schiff's *Great Improvisation* and Lemay's *Life*, our most sparkling and our most mordant evocations of his character.

Yet he eludes us. He remains as inscrutable as ever, and as alluring. In the vigorous spring of his youth, Lemay tells us, he dwelt darkly on suffering and welcomed release from it in death. In the pain-wracked winter of his old age, Schiff shows, he was undaunted by disappointment and undeterred by the imminence of death. If character is the crystallization of attitude and experience, it is hard to see how Lemay's somber young man became Schiff's joyous old one.

That is Franklin, dying buoyantly in Schiff's masterpiece, born again bleakly in the commencement of Lemay's monument. Carl Van Doren once pronounced him "a harmonious human multitude."<sup>12</sup> The more we learn about him, the easier it becomes to appreciate the multitudinousness and harder to hear the harmony.

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<sup>12</sup> Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 20