

*Benjamin Franklin's Printing Network: Disseminating Virtue in Early America.*

By RALPH FRASCA. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006. ix, 295 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$44.95.)

Ralph Frasca's monograph joins many works that seek the meaning of Benjamin Franklin in his first vocation, as a printer. It is the first to focus on Franklin's network of printing establishments: the series of printers, many of them former apprentices, with whom he formed partnerships, from Newport to Antigua. It follows upon his April 1990 *PMHB* article, in which the author argued for the general success and benevolence of Franklin's partnerships as his protégés moved, as he put it in that article's title, "from apprentice to journeyman to partner."

Frasca has read his newspapers, Franklin's papers, and an impressive scattering of manuscript sources. He argues that Franklin intended his press to spread virtue and quotes Franklin's many comments to that effect. But in making the dissemination of virtue the central motive of Franklin's network, Frasca simplifies the complications printers faced and cannot go beyond earlier interpretations that take Franklin's words at face value.

There is a difference between asserting that Franklin wanted to convey his developing "ideology of virtue" to the masses and was sincere in his "zeal for the public good" and asserting that these were Franklin's main, central motives in establishing a printing network. Frasca cites Gordon S. Wood but seems unaware of Wood's elaboration of patronage as the central mechanism of power in late colonial America. Franklin's arrangements may have been relatively egalitarian, but this did not prevent the majority of his nephews and former apprentices from chafing, even rebelling, under their restraints.

Faced with the refusal or failure of Franklin's protégés, except for Peter Timothy and David Hall, to be little Franklins or succeed as completely as little Franklins, Frasca does exactly what Franklin did: he ascribes their failings to their characters. Franklin's moral judgments of his underlings may in fact be very good evidence of his morality. But they do not always do him credit. In any case, it hardly advances scholarship to accuse Benjamin Mecom of "financial bungling," James Parker of failure to "punish" other printers, or Benjamin Franklin Bache of scurrility, especially without noticing Franklin's similar moments or the deep strains of morality that led to these men's own struggles. Frasca underestimates the difficulties of the trade and conflicts among well-intentioned moral beings in different circumstances. It is unfortunate that other useful aspects of this book—descriptions of Franklin's gradually less sanguine attitude toward press freedom, for example—are consistently buried within justifications of whatever the great man said and did.

When Frasca must deal with the failings of the network by the 1760s, he slides more and more into assertions of Franklin's virtuous intentions, eschewing other explanations for what actually happened. The reason may be revelation. In *au courant* evangelical style, he asserts (in the last chapter!) that Franklin was a

deeply religious believer in “the active God of the Israelites, the prophets, and the apostles.” His laborious fashioning of an ideology and network for virtue had no conflict at all with contemporary religious structures, and “Franklin’s life was a monument to virtue tempered by pragmatism and ambition tempered by prudence.” Those who are looking to see Franklin’s career as a “call to serve God and humanity” may enjoy this denouement. Others will see it unworthy of Franklin’s winning skepticism, self-mockery, and sense of irony.

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*Dr. Franklin’s Medicine.* By STANLEY FINGER. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. xiii, 379 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95.)

Kudos to Stanley Finger and to the University of Pennsylvania Press—they have produced an attractive, readable, and well-researched account of Benjamin Franklin and medicine. The text is comprehensive, the endnotes are clear, the index is usable, and the illustrations are generous in number. Because Franklin is of tremendous interest to general readers, this volume would be a clever way to introduce eighteenth-century medicine to people who will follow the Franklin name into subjects they might not otherwise read about. For that reason, as well, the book would be a welcome addition to undergraduate courses on the history of medicine.

The book surveys, in roughly chronological order, the major topics in medicine that interested Franklin. These included inoculation against smallpox, the value of hospitals, medical uses for electricity, lead poisoning, medical self-help guides, gout, medical quackery (featuring Mesmerism), bifocals, and the education of doctors. Franklin’s range of interests was astonishing and Finger seems to have identified nearly all of them.

Scholars would have appreciated more analysis of Franklin’s contributions to medical thinking. Finger occasionally suggests that Franklin was ahead of his time, as with his writings that hint at a germ theory of disease long before Louis Pasteur formulated that theory. But it is impossible to tell what Franklin would really have thought about Pasteur. Nor is it clear what he thought about his contemporaries’ theories. Since his young adulthood, Franklin was determined to avoid argument and controversy, even over his own concepts of electricity. Bland to a fault, he can be assimilated to many points of view. That meant that most of his ideas about health did not propose or solve any medical debate at the time—they were almost designed not to do so. The exceptions would be inoculation and demography, though Finger gives those topics no more attention than he does any of the others.

Finger admits that his is a descriptive study, but points out the value of focusing on “a side of Franklin that has not been examined sufficiently” (p. xi). It is true that there has not been a recent study. The most recent were William Pepper,