

Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution.

By DAVID WALDSTREICHER. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004. xv, 315p. Illustrations, notes, index. \$25.)

Runaways and fugitives populated early America. Native Americans retreated westward; immigrants fled economic, political, and religious tribulations in the Old World; the "strolling poor" roamed from place to place in search of a livelihood. Simultaneously, people of various ethnic and racial origins who were apprentices, indentured servants, and slaves often made desperate attempts to escape bondage in the New World. Benjamin Franklin was one of the very few famous founding fathers who numbered among those escapees. Ironically, tellingly, Franklin's personal experience in taking flight did not subsequently deter him from profiting by publishing hundreds of advertisements in his newspaper for fugitives who, like him, merely attempted to gain liberty.

David Waldstreicher's remarkably insightful, beautifully written book focuses primarily on Benjamin Franklin and racial bondage in early America, telling the "story of slavery and freedom's meeting in the life, thought, and politics" of the "first American" (p. ix). Waldstreicher grapples with the crucial paradox of slavery and freedom initially popularized by Edmund Morgan three decades ago. In the process, Waldstreicher admirably illuminates not just Franklin, not just slaves, not just bond and free people, not just runaways, but also the nature of early America itself.

Waldstreicher significantly modifies or entirely rejects much of what historians have written about Franklin lately, especially in the slew of biographies that have made Franklin studies almost a cottage industry. On the issue of slavery, most recent biographers depict an appealingly "embraceable Franklin" (p. 229) little affected by racial bondage yet who nevertheless grew morally during his life, ending it by becoming the president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in 1787. Gordon Wood, H. W. Brands, Joseph Ellis, Walter Isaacson, and Edmund Morgan all generally minimize the importance of slavery to Franklin and focus instead on his conversion to the crusade against slavery at the end of his life.

Waldstreicher's analysis of Franklin and slavery is more sophisticated, nuanced, and, ultimately, convincing than these more traditional interpretations. The issue of slavery was continually present in all aspects of Franklin's life, Waldstreicher contends, since it was such a fundamental part of his world. Franklin, in turn, "had a talent for being present at precisely those moments when slavery was being challenged—and a knack for eloquently finessing the issue" (p. xiii). Born into a society that largely accepted racial bondage, Franklin nevertheless must have been aware of the emerging antislavery sentiments in his native Boston and his adopted home, Philadelphia. On arriving in the City of Brotherly Love, Franklin worked for Samuel Keimer, who volunteered to teach black males

to read in the house of John Read, the father of Franklin's future wife and the house where Franklin initially boarded. Questions about slavery thus could hardly have escaped the young Franklin's attention. Throughout his early life, however, Franklin seemingly rejected antislavery ideas and behavior. Between 1735 and 1781, Franklin owned a series of slaves, and he never deliberately divested himself of them. He became a non-slave master almost unconsciously when his bondpeople eventually died or escaped.

Franklin interrogated his own "Prejudices" in 1763 when, after visiting a school for black students, he revised upward his opinion of "the natural capacities of the black Race" (p. 195). Yet, he did not completely relinquish racist ideas. As tensions between Britain and its colonies grew, Franklin used the slavery issue both to interpret the empire and to wield a weapon against it. He concurred with Thomas Jefferson's original charge in the Declaration of Independence that the king and Parliament were responsible for American slavery. Moreover, Franklin publicly apologized for slaveholding rebels and tried to rationalize the fundamental contradiction between slavery and freedom during the American Revolution.

Supporting his interpretation, Waldstreicher brilliantly reconstructs Franklin's activities at the Constitutional Convention. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society asked its president, Franklin, to present an antislavery petition to the convention. Engaged in secret negotiations in a committee from which eventually would emerge both the infamous three-fifths compromise and the agreement about representation in the two houses of Congress, Franklin decided not to present the petition. Instead, he suggested that it be allowed to "lie over for the present," effectively emasculating the antislavery appeal. The book ends with an epilogue about another self-made man and ex-slave, Venture Smith. The story reiterates how important race and slavery were in early America. Franklin might be seen as a "white Venture Smith," Waldstreicher concludes, a "rare run-away who got away," but a person whose antislavery was "compromised, and compromising" (p. 244).

Rather than note my own questions about this fine book, which are very few, let me close with two serious observations from Franklin that seem so pertinent to our own times: "There never was a good war nor a bad peace." "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

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