

*Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement.* By ALAN HOUSTON. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. 336 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, glossary of names, index. \$35.)

In his youth, Benjamin Franklin drafted the epitaph for his imagined tombstone: "The Body of B. Franklin, Printer; Like the Cover of an Old Book, Its Contents torn out, And stripped of its Lettering and Gilding, Lies here, Food for Worms. But the Work shall not be wholly lost: For it will, as he believed, appear once more, In a new and more perfect Edition, Corrected and Amended By the Author" (70). Alan Houston's new book on Franklin captures the wit and wisdom of this American founder, writer, printer, statesman, and scientist by exploring "five areas" of his thought: "political economy, associational life, population growth, political union, and slavery" (221).

Houston's thesis is that Franklin's ideas concerning these five matters gravitate around a central theme of improvement. Whether in his project to cultivate virtue, the discussion club for mutual advantage (or Junto), the Library Company, the Union Fire Company, or the Association for the defense of Pennsylvania, Franklin was committed to initiating public-spirited activity that improved both the quality of his own and his fellow citizens' lives. However, collective improvement is not without its challenges. Deftly bringing contemporary theory into conversation with historical facts, Houston notes that Franklin's project to organize the colonies as a political union in the Albany Plan confronted a collective action problem. If any of the colonies suspected that the others would defect, then all would quickly opt out, and the plan would fail (150–51).

On the topic of population growth, Houston connects Franklin's thoughts to the theories of two later thinkers: Thomas Robert Malthus and Charles Darwin. The relationship between population growth and subsistence, which Franklin revealed in his treatise *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, etc.* (1751), became the basis for Malthus's famous theory in *Essays on the Principle of Population* (1798). Malthus posited that population will eventually outstrip subsistence demands given the wide gap between the ratios of population growth and increase of food supply. Historians suspect that Charles Darwin crafted his theory of natural selection, which would become the centerpiece of *The Origin of Species* (1872), while reading Malthus's *Essay*. Consequently, subsistence for Darwin was another limit on the ability of species to reproduce and adapt through the natural selection of random genetic mutations. "We need note only that one of Malthus's readers—Charles Darwin—took him seriously," Houston writes, "and precisely on the issues over which Franklin had exercised such influence" (143).

Failure to treat Franklin's ideas on their own terms, that is without the filters of Lockean liberalism, classic republicanism, and Protestantism, has limited the appreciation for their distinctive place in the annals of modern political and eco-

conomic thought. Although his witticisms are widely known and repeated (e.g., “A penny saved is a penny earned”), his insights about politics and economics, in Houston’s words, remain “virtually invisible” and “obscured” (219–20). This book sheds light on these underappreciated ideas. Although not a comprehensive biography, it is nevertheless a meticulously researched theoretical-historical work that selectively examines Franklin’s views on political economy, public associations, slavery, and population. Overall, Houston’s *Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement* contributes significantly to the growing literature on the life and writings of an extraordinary American founder who we could only wish would reappear “[i]n a new and more perfect Edition” (70).

*Pennsylvania State University-Hazleton*

SHANE RALSTON

*Frontiersman: Daniel Boone and the Making of America.* By MEREDITH MASON BROWN. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. 424 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical note, index. \$34.95.)

Few men from the American past have captivated historians as much as Daniel Boone. Explorer, Indian fighter, Indian lover, scout, expert woodsman, revolutionary, pioneering long hunter—Boone’s protean character seems the perfect embodiment of the restless, ambitious American temperament.

While recent notable Boone biographers, such as John Mack Faragher and Robert Morgan, have deftly deciphered the elusive, legendary image of Boone the American icon, Meredith Mason Brown focuses on a more prosaic, practical Boone, an historical figure who helped transform the precarious world of the Kentucky frontier. Indeed, Brown’s Boone, though a conflicted man with sometimes divided loyalties between native and white, served as an important agent of change to the American west. Boone’s example, we are told, propelled massive migration in Kentucky and Missouri, a movement of people that not only decimated game and weakened Indian power in the area, but one that also spurred the growth of slavery and contributed significantly to the growing sense of American national identity.

Generally well-researched and carried by an often vivid narrative, *Frontiersman* offers good, evocative details of life on the frontier, from discussions of over-killing of game in Kentucky to the filth and squalor of settlers “forted up” in crowded places like Forts Boonesborough and Harrodsburg. A descendant of one of Boone’s fellow long hunters, Brown is at his best when detailing the drama and excitement of the many violent conflicts and skirmishes in which Boone often found himself. The book effectively explores the close-range fighting with tomahawks, knives, and clubbed rifles that uniquely characterized frontier warfare during the American Revolution. And Brown knows how to convey a