Franklin of Philadelphia. By Esmond Wright.

The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Volume 25: October 1, 1777 through February 28, 1778.
Edited by William B. Willcox.

Esmond Wright has undertaken a formidable task: namely, the writing of a biographical synthesis of Benjamin Franklin which will supersede the comprehensive volume of Carl Van Doren. This prominent British scholar, who is quite familiar with eighteenth century America, has written a persuasive account of Franklin. The book contains 13 chapters, lauds Franklin as being the most eminent of the American founding fathers, and offers illuminating depictions of his multifaceted career. Wright impressively argues that Franklin was a successful printer and businessman, a pragmatic political leader and imperial agent, a discreet diplomat, and an energetic booster. Moreover, the author suggests that Franklin was a transatlantic enlightener; Wright well explains how Franklin contributed to deism, to technology, to Newtonian science, and ultimately to the varying enlightenment environments of Philadelphia, London, and Paris.

In the first six chapters of the book, the author effectively assesses the major developments and ideas emerging during the career of Franklin between 1709 and 1764. The first three chapters focus on his early life in Boston and Philadelphia; there are detailed and interpretive accounts regarding Franklin's rearing and family life in Boston, his printing apprenticeship and quarrels with his brother James, the ideas in his "Silence Dogood" essays, and the impact of Puritan beliefs upon his thinking. Wright maintains that the Puritan doctrines of reason, natural revelation, hard work, and civic improvement were enduring and that Franklin applied these ideas in a secular way to his activities in early eighteenth century Philadelphia. The book presents a vivid profile of Franklin as a civic enlightener: the development of the largest printing business in the colonies, the popularity of his Autobiography with its emphasis on Masonic ideals, and his leadership roles in the fire company, the Junto, the Pennsylvania Academy, and the American Philosophical Society. The biography, which frequently cites the studies of Cohen about Franklin as a Newtonian, is especially
strong on science and technology. It describes Franklin's lightning rod and stove, explains mechanistic concepts resulting from his electrical experiments, and comments on his correspondence with British and European scientists. The chapter regarding "The Old England Man" is quite suggestive, for it effectively portrays Franklin in London between 1757 and 1762 in terms of his association with British scientists, of his intensive participation in coffeehouse and club life, and of his political activities as a colonial agent.

Colonial political problems, the American Revolution, and Franklin's Parisian diplomatic mission are major issues examined in chapters in the last part of the book. The biography contains stimulating accounts about Franklin's involvement in Pennsylvania politics; Wright demonstrates that Franklin favored western expansion and a strong defense system, that he encountered opposition from Quakers in the assembly over these issues, and that he supported the Albany Plan in order to promote an intercolonial defense system. Moreover, the author lucidly explains Franklin's reasons for denouncing the Stamp and Townshend Acts, his role in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, and his enlightenment arguments for embracing the cause of the American Revolution. Franklin's diplomatic mission to Paris is well discussed in chapters 10 and 11. Wright describes the secret commercial activities for the American cause of the Roderique Hortalez Company, explains the diplomatic motives for and the importance of the treaties between America and France, and vividly depicts Franklin as a revolutionary propagandist. In the final chapters, the author briefly examines Franklin's role during the Constitutional Convention and ultimately perceives him as being the "Father of All the Yankees."

This work is a first-rate biography. It is well written and contains suggestive theses. Wright is at his best in explaining the major achievements of the multifaceted Franklin in relation to the varying environments of Philadelphia, London and Paris. The author astutely assesses Franklin's public career, but might have probed more extensively into his private life. The biography is meticulously documented, contains many materials from the Franklin Papers, and refers to standard biographies and monographs about the Philadelphia sage. In sum, Wright's study, which is vastly more interpretive than the Van Doren work, is a masterful synthesis of Franklin's life and should be consulted by general readers and scholars.

Franklin's stay in Paris between October 1777 and February 1778 is the focus of the most recent volume of the Yale edition of the Franklin Papers. This volume contains a fine introduction about the
significance of this five-month period in Franklin’s career. Throughout this work, the editors include helpful annotations to provide readers with additional and needed information about cited letters and other primary materials. The papers in this work suggest that Franklin was a very busy person. He devotes much attention to diplomatic issues, meets and corresponds with many individuals, and still finds time to engage in cultural activities.

The primary sources in this volume reveal much about the diplomatic behavior and activities of Franklin. The many descriptive letters from members of the American Committee for Foreign Affairs inform Franklin about the results of battles, about naval activities, and about financial matters. The most illuminating letters from this committee, of course, describe in great detail the American victory at Saratoga. As the correspondence suggests, Franklin, after this battle, quickly reacted, working intensively through La Rouchefoucauld and other French friends to negotiate in early February of 1778 the two treaties with Vergennes. The volume contains the American and French versions of the two negotiated treaties and the reactions of numerous individuals to these accords. There, also, are significant letters about the feud between Arthur Lee and Silas Deane, about the naval operations of John Paul Jones, about military and financial assistance to America from other European states, and about the intelligence activities of the British. The correspondence seems to suggest that as a diplomat, Franklin was aggressive, discreet, and shrewd.

The papers in this volume offer vivid insights into the cultural activities and private life of Franklin. Electrical experiments, natural history observations, medical discoveries, and sculpture are discussed in letters to and from Franklin. La Rouchefoucauld emerges as one of Franklin’s close friends, writing to him about natural liberties and state constitutions in America. This French aristocrat also seemed to play a major role in Franklin’s social life, for he frequently dined with the American diplomat and undoubtedly introduced him to prominent individuals in Paris. Partially because of his friendship with La Rouchefoucauld, Franklin at a later time would be admitted into the Parisian Lodge of the Nine Sisters and would be asked to serve as the master of this Masonic learned society. Finally, the letters in this volume demonstrate the connections between Franklin and Madame Brillon and support the findings of Claude-Anne Lopez about the American enlightener and the ladies of Paris.

This volume is a fine piece of scholarship. Its letters cogently confirm the interpretations of Aldridge, Echeverria, Dull, and Lopez about
Franklin's career in Paris. The work is masterfully edited, presents detailed information in footnotes about many obscure individuals with whom Franklin corresponded, and contains a comprehensive index. This work is essential reading for individuals interested in the diplomacy and the cultural activities of the American Revolution.

R. William Weisberger  Department of History  Butler County Community College  Butler, Pennsylvania


Myra Fehlen has written a brilliant and beautiful book. Its focus is the fate of American individualism. Its thesis is that American individualism is unique despite the fact that both American and European variants of it had a common origin in the Renaissance and the Reformation. In Europe, individualism's liberal proponents were forced, in spite of their appeals to nature, to recognize that the new societies which they were making had arisen out of pre-existing ones and were therefore "historically contingent." In America, however, "The European immigrant...saw himself not as entering a better society but as leaving society altogether." These new Americans conceived of themselves as "...building their civilization out of nature itself" as the direct expression of natural law. In America, then, "...the ideology of liberal, democratic individualism reached maturity as no longer the historical dispossessor of past rulers but the natural possessor of its own world." This is the incarnation of which Fehlen writes.

American incarnation was tied from the beginning to the land of the new continent so that, in a sense, Americans transformed time into space. But time cannot be ignored. Nor does Fehlen do so. The time which appears in her account, however, is not the time in which an American War for Independence was fought, fundamental institutions were constituted, and a continent was conquered. It is, rather, the time in which Americans discovered and reflected upon the meaning of their incarnation. Fehlen follows this story, which she bases on a sure