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978-0-521-87134-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin

Edited by Carla Mulford

Excerpt

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CARLA MULFORD

Introduction

Benjamin Franklin is one of the best known but least understood of America's revolutionary generation. He is well known to schoolchildren around the world as one who dabbled in the arts and sciences so as to invent bifocals and glass armonicas, refine the draft pipes and dampers of stoves, and develop and foster public libraries, in addition to savings, insurance, and fire companies. Journalists and those who enjoy the craft of printing honor Franklin as a central figure in the formation of printing and communication networks that afforded communication among the British colonies of the eastern seaboard of North America. Numismatists celebrate Franklin as the first Postmaster General in the colonies. Graphic artists and those who like to collect coins and engravings value Franklin's work as an artist of political satire and an engraver of iconographic emblems representative of American materials and concerns. Indeed, Franklin has great significance in a long tradition, from medieval times, of emblem-makers. Farmers and those who read almanacs recognize Franklin as the founder of an almanac tradition in British North America. And scientists and those who study the thermodynamics of the atmosphere in order to make predictions of significant weather events honor Franklin for making the final determination regarding the positive and negative currents behind electricity, for measuring the ocean temperatures, for determining the impact of volcanic eruptions on the weather patterns in places far distant, and for charting the Gulf Stream.

Most people know Franklin for his individual accomplishments, including the creation of devices such as bifocals, stoves, the "grabber" for reaching objects placed on high shelves, and the flexible catheter for releasing bladder stones. Franklin is also commonly remarked about for his presumed sexual appetite and interest in women, a fallacious impression that comes down to us from several anti-Franklin pamphlets of his own day and from high-brows and anti-utilitarian writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹ Readers often know of his autobiography, but most do not know about the range of his writings nor the depth of his inquiries into political, economic,

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and natural philosophy. Few remember that he was the central diplomat in the 1783 Treaty of Paris that settled the war between Great Britain and the British North American colonies, and fewer still that he printed the original treaty on his own press at Passy, France. Specialists know about aspects of his career, but even scholars of his writings often do not address the plethora of his writings nor the complexity of his thinking. This is to say that despite the several hundred biographies of Franklin that have appeared since his death in 1790, Franklin remains as elusive today as he might have seemed to his associates in the eighteenth century.

Many readers who think they know Franklin tend to equate the speaker of “Father Abraham’s Speech” with the “real” Benjamin Franklin. Part of this is Franklin’s own doing. Some readers across the centuries have misunderstood Franklin’s adoption of pseudonyms, a common practice in the tradition of polite letters in Franklin’s day. Many of the speakers in Franklin’s writings are pseudonymous “characters” in the splendid eighteenth-century tradition wherein a speaker’s name is identified with his or her “kind” of person. Silence Dogood, for instance, the masterful mistress of her own youthful Franklinian prose, is not silent, and she would have us all do better than we currently do in our dealings with the world. Franklin adopted names that sometimes masked the seriousness of his content with a jesting or humorous undercurrent: Abigail Twitterfield (a-twitter over sermons condemning the presumed sin of women who don’t bear children), Alice Addertongue (who loves to “exercise [her] Talent at Censure” [P 1: 244]), Ephraim Censorious (who excoriates Silence Dogood for chiding men without attempting to reform women), and thrifty Anthony Afterwit (who, only after he was married, realized he had married a spendthrift) – among many others – offered reasonable advice on myriad topics related to daily living. These characters typically conveyed moral or financial or community-oriented advice, and they often, like Father Abraham, were taken simplistically to represent Franklin’s views and his approach to life. For this reason, the folksy, iconic voice of the *Poor Richard* almanacs overrode Franklin’s more serious and influential writings known best by the leading writers and philosophers of his day, and Franklin, British North America’s greatest, most sophisticated and cosmopolitan writer and political, economic, and natural scientist, paradoxically became the symbol of homespun Americanness.

Franklin’s own words from his autobiography indicate his surprising beginnings: he essentially overcame the “Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred” to achieve “a considerable Share of Felicity . . . with the Blessings of God” (A 43). Franklin did indeed overcome obstacles in his youth, not the least being the absence of formal training beyond rudimentary letters and numbers. His educational plans for a school and a college,

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based on his own regimen of self-teaching, featured both traditional and more modern methods of education and subjects of inquiry. Of interest to us today is Franklin's recognition that students best learned by doing rather than by long recitations in Latin and Greek, "dead" languages. Franklin's plans called for training in contemporary languages – including Spanish, Dutch, German, French, Italian – in addition to English, and they featured contemporary writings by authors admired by the current generation. In the areas of science and mathematics, his plans likewise advocated inquiry into practical and mechanical arts that would complement pure research. This was revolutionary in his own day. Also revolutionary is that he sought education for the most talented people rather than those who could pay the most. His plans revealed his inquiring nature and inexhaustible fund of energy for improving the social, political, economic, and moral lives of everyday people. If Franklin did experience a share of the felicity in life, he wished also to ensure that others might have opportunity to enjoy the same happiness.

On Franklin's life

For our purposes, Franklin's life can be divided into three parts, each part marking a different emphasis of his life's career. Franklin achieved his first successes in Boston and Pennsylvania as a printer, so the first segment of his life, from his birth in 1706 until 1757, can be considered Franklin's major printing years, where his primary endeavor centered around his printing business and the local and regional problems faced in Pennsylvania and its environs. Except for a brief stay in London in 1724, Franklin during these years established himself as Pennsylvania's influential printer and postmaster and an efficient and admired leader in political and civic affairs. During these years, he created the Junto, a working man's intellectual club designed for self- and community improvement. And from the Junto arose many of the improvements he sought to implement for the city of Philadelphia. Also during these years, he began to see the unfair advantages in trade that Great Britain was using to keep the colonies (and colonial production) in check so as to favor the workers and livelihoods of those in England. Among the most important publications emanating from these years are Franklin's *Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper-Currency* (1729), a tract speaking to the benefits of moving beyond coinage for local transactions, with a money system based on land as collateral; his *Pennsylvania Gazette* and *Poor Richard* almanacs, which featured practical learning amid extracts ranging from politics to polite letters; and his *Observations concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries &c.* (written, 1751;

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printed, 1755), which offered strategies for keeping the Pennsylvania colony British in the face of immigrants from many areas, with a preponderance of immigrants from the Palatinate, then the poorest part of the country today called Germany. By 1748, Franklin had secured sufficient income and savings that he could leave his printing business in the able hands of his partner, David Hall, retaining the business in his name and centrally located quarters. At this time, he turned his attention more fully to scientific inquiry, specifically into determining the nature and effects of electrical charges, an inquiry begun much earlier in the decade of the 1740s. By the early 1750s, Franklin's *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* (first published in 1751) would ensure that Franklin's name would become one of the best known in the western world and would mark, for those of his own generation, the pinnacle of his achievements.

From the days when he used Silence Dogood as a mouthpiece to speak about supporting public projects, Franklin considered assisting others in his community one of the highest marks of humanity. His own contributions in this area – the Pennsylvania Hospital; savings, fire, and insurance funds; the English School and the Academy; the American Philosophical Society, for instance – are exemplary instances of public service by an individual who would accrue no personal financial gain from his labors. Among his many other endeavors in public projects from this era, Franklin became a leader who was proactive about the safety and security of the rich cultural and agricultural lands held as Pennsylvania territory. He engaged in treaty-making ceremonies with the Lenapes and Iroquois during these years, seeking a middle course in trade and social relations, and he assisted the British leaders, including General Braddock, by supplying from his own funds and friends' barns the materiel essential to securing western Pennsylvania against incursions from the French and their Indian allies. One of Franklin's favorite plans from his work on colonial unity was the Albany Plan of Union of 1754, a strategy whereby the British colonies could contract with one another for mutual benefit and security. The Plan failed to receive approval in both the colonies and Great Britain, the former conceiving it as smacking too greatly of British imperial prerogative, the latter considering it too permissive in its democratic principles, according to Franklin's account in the autobiography.

Franklin became a leading spokesperson for the party interested in taxing the Pennsylvania Proprietary (the Penn family entity that held the charter for Pennsylvania territories). The Proprietary had claimed that, according to charter, the extensive lands claimed as the Penns' estate were free of taxes for local maintenance. His efforts to secure a better tax arrangement for the colony took him to England, at the Pennsylvania Assembly's request, to attempt to negotiate with the Penn descendants and, failing that,

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with the Crown, regarding the situation of Pennsylvania. These years in Great Britain, roughly 1757 to 1775 (with a break between 1762 and 1764, when he returned to Pennsylvania) mark the second major part of Franklin's life, when he became the prime negotiator between the colonies and Great Britain. Franklin's return to London in 1764 occurred as Pennsylvania continued to try to find workable solutions for the perpetual problems caused by absence of tax revenues from the Proprietary estates, by lack of hard specie, by increased population (and the problems in infrastructure that increased population causes), and by border difficulties. He remained in London because, eventually on behalf of all the colonies, Franklin entered into protracted negotiations with the Crown and Parliament in an effort to secure an imperial compromise enabling the colonies to develop their own internal and intercolonial systems of trade, taxation, labor, and money.

These years of negotiation and compromise were tense for Franklin in the political arena, but they were enjoyable ones for him, as well, for he began to recognize that all Europe perceived the benefit to humanity of his scientific discoveries, particularly the discovery of the positive and negative charges of electricity. He saw his *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* reach a wider and wider audience of readers, and he was awarded honorary degrees from many major European institutions, thus marking the caliber of his achievement. He joined a number of the chief London clubs, dined with the most renowned philosophers of his day, and generally enjoyed a level of celebrity like none he had known in the colonies. He traveled extensively throughout much of Europe, and he joined several societies that elected him to their prestigious membership.

Yet none of the respect accorded Franklin nor the honors bestowed on him would assist his difficult efforts to secure a lasting imperial agreement between Great Britain and the colonies of North America. Even his most important writings from these years – his long pamphlet, *The Interest of Great Britain Considered with Regard to her Colonies, And the Acquisitions of Canada and Guadaloupe* (1760) and *Causes of the American Discontents before 1768* (1768) – while they worked to inform Britons of the situation in North America, failed to convince those in power that Franklin had developed viable and workable imperial analyses from which Great Britain could profit. Franklin turned his humorous pen of the earlier years into a pen wielding occasionally acerbic wit, satirizing Britain (from Crown to hatmaker) and the obtuseness of Britons, even those in Ireland and Scotland, for refusing to acknowledge the oppressions being foisted on Britons in North America. The Franklin who had published “Rattlesnakes for Felons” in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1751 reemerged with a more sardonic and biting tongue in these years. Several of his most bitter satires – “Rules by

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Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One” and “An Edict by the King of Prussia” – arose in 1773, the year Franklin faced increasing hostility on both sides of the Atlantic, in North America for seeming to continue to conciliate Great Britain and in Great Britain for being too radically opposed to British imperial prerogative. He even mocked his own troubled situation in the public press, with a letter to London’s *Public Advertiser*, berating himself for his own presumed ingratitude to Crown and Parliament. Having to accept that he had finally failed in his mission to convince Britain to change its imperial project and facing potential charges of treason, Franklin sailed for North America, where local skirmishes were breaking out.

In the last period of his life, 1775 through his death in 1790, Franklin was an elder statesman and diplomat, facing some of the most difficult of the many challenges in a long and celebrated life. Upon his arrival back in the colonies, he was elected by the Pennsylvania Assembly to serve as Pennsylvania’s representative in the Second Continental Congress. As a result of his many years’ diplomatic service in England and Europe, Franklin well understood the political, social, and fiscal means by which the colonies could secure their future: recalling his Albany Plan of 1754, he drafted plans for what later became the Articles of Confederation; he submitted resolutions to Congress for unrestrained and untaxed internal and external trade; and he developed a series of emblems and devices that could be printed on Continental paper bills.

As the central negotiator during the years prior to the war, Franklin was called upon again and again to work on committees public and secret, and he became the chief congressional representative to Great Britain when Britain sought to meet with representatives from the colonies. His existing relationship with French intellectuals and the French court was perceived as a crucial means by which the colonies might gain the support of France in their war against Great Britain, so Franklin was again asked to set sail across the Atlantic, this time for Paris, and to serve as chief negotiator in accords Congress sought with France. Joined by John Adams and several others sent for diplomatic reasons, Franklin was instrumental in securing funding and material support from the French in the delicate negotiations. He drafted the treaty articles securing the peace of 1783 in Paris, and he printed the treaty on his own press at Passy, where he resided during his diplomatic mission to France.

But he was aging, and he appealed to Congress more than once to be relieved of his duties, so that he might sail home one last time. Congress finally granted his appeal in 1785, and he returned to Pennsylvania to found the Society for Political Enquiries and to be named President of

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the Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. It was Franklin who recommended the representational structures of the House and Senate and Franklin who argued against the traditional property qualification for voting, urging instead that voting be extended to the widest possible number of persons. His last public actions related to chattel slavery, which he sought to have abolished in the new American system. He worked tirelessly in this regard, and was disappointed when Congress determined in 1789 that the federal government had no jurisdiction to authorize abolition in the individual states. His last public writing, a satire, mocks a defense of slavery that, couched as if from a leader in the Middle East, speaks to the problems of slavery around the known world.

Approaching the study of Benjamin Franklin

Beginning in the 1990s, Franklin studies have been undergoing a tremendous reconfiguration. With the exception of a few noted historians and others writing for the popular reading market (and thus offering fairly standard twentieth-century biographical interpretations of Franklin), scholars – including authors of the chapters in this volume – have begun to examine Franklin’s writings and his life with a new sophistication, and they are articulating for the first time views of Franklin that reveal the complexities of his intellectual, literary, social, and political views. Such scholarship assures us that the Franklin who is emerging in the twenty-first century will be more cosmopolitan, better informed, more sophisticated, and much more highly articulate than the relatively jingoistic Franklin-the-great-American whose character dominated the twentieth century.

Over the past fifteen years there have been roughly five books on Franklin every four years, biographies mostly. Some studies have examined particular aspects of his life or work, but most have examined the life in the general context of eighteenth-century American politics and culture. The interest in Franklin derives from a sense, among many historians whose interest lies in social history, that this is the one “founder” whose reputation has stood up under scrutiny by a negative press. In addition, compared to other American “founders” such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, Franklin is, in effect, less “faulty” with regard to the important question of slavery: although Franklin held slaves, he also by midlife embraced the message of emancipation and eventually became President of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. The biographies have evoked interest in Franklin among general readers, and they have also prompted a few dissenting opinions. The biographies have also made readers curious about who might be the “real” Franklin behind the mask of the autobiography.

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The figure of Franklin in the twentieth century served, to some extent, a nationalist front for international purposes: Franklin became a supreme representative of the greatness of American possibilities in the frenzy of publicity about the proverbial American way shortly after the conclusion of the second world war.² This is the era when the Franklin papers project was conceived and later implemented (the first volume was published in 1959) and when the United States Information Agency, an independent agency supported by the US government, began its program of explaining and supporting American foreign policy outside the United States. Franklin, whose life was taken to represent the promise proffered by US culture, would become a staple of the agency.

With the scholarly information offered by the Franklin papers project and the significant new work being done on Franklin as a result, the study of Franklin reached a new level of sophistication during the latter half of the twentieth century. Readers today have available to them much more information and analysis than readers of previous generations. They are fascinated with a number of new qualities of Franklin's life and writing that had been submerged beneath the homespun "patriot" message of the middle twentieth century. Newer studies of Franklin are revealing a number of complicated issues that had before been passed over: the sheer "literariness" of Franklin's writings; Franklin's interest in social matters such as women's education and slavery; Franklin's constructions of personal "virtue" in a culture driven by marketplace inequities fueled by a slave and artisan economy; the political and philosophical matters that this significant natural philosopher debated among many of his generation's major philosophers, including Joseph Priestley, Adam Smith, David Hume, Voltaire, and Rousseau; the art and craft of self-conscious self-reflection evident in his own life-writing; and the sheer range of satiric voices one cosmopolitan Briton in North America could create. Franklin attached himself to the culture of Enlightenment only to invoke enlightened self-consciousness in order to call British imperialism into question. Today we can admire the facility with which Franklin managed to circulate in a global environment while retaining his own core set of values fostering community amid diversity.

The *Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin* offers some of the best existing work on Franklin alongside newer interpretations that take advantage of Franklin's transatlantic engagements with the arts and letters, with natural philosophy, and with politics. The essays in this collection delve into some of the questions that previous generations have asked about Franklin, his "Americanness," his literary talent, and his philosophical views, but they also attempt to reveal Franklin as the world-renowned intellectual figure he was understood to be during his own lifetime. Franklin's world and his

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intellectual milieu were transatlantic and expansive rather than insularly provincial. In this regard, the essays contained in this volume are restoring Franklin to his just place as a leader in the more globalized study of the British Empire.

The volume's opening series of chapters on Franklin's library (Hayes), his philosophical approach to the concept of virtue (Anderson), his crafting of satire (Kerry), and his circulation in the British and European world of the learned and distinguished (Shields) reveal how the complexity of Franklin's thinking and writing was fashioned from the complexity of his reading and experiences throughout his life. Franklin's library and his writings, especially his public writings in the satiric mode, the mode most popular during the eighteenth century, form a central foundation from which we might best understand his place in British North American and British and European culture of his era. The next sequence of chapters captures the rich intellectual society in which Franklin circulated and made his greatest contributions in the contemplative and hard sciences. These chapters provide a conversation about the many different facets of Franklin's beliefs regarding the natural and supernatural worlds of his day. Whether Franklin believed in the Christian God or not, to what extent he might have believed in a supreme being, how his interest in science and Enlightenment might have contradicted any religious impulses, leading instead to philosophical pragmatism – all are questions that these chapters fruitfully explore.

Franklin's views on the events taking place at the conclusion of the American Revolution are highlighted next (Olson), because his mature views on the revolutionary events and their aftermath evince a depth and perspective that few today acknowledge or attempt to understand. Franklin was pro-colonist, finally, in his revolutionary endeavors, and once he turned against the aristocracy in Britain, he would work tirelessly to keep such static social attitudes from taking shape in the new United States. The volume concludes with a series of three chapters that treat Franklin's reputation across time, whether among the nineteenth-century theorists about capitalism and the American Dream (Moses, Huang and Mulford) or among those who have found, across the centuries after his death, sustenance from repeated reading of his iconographic autobiography, the most frequently read of Franklin's extensive corpus of writings.

Notes

1. See Carla Mulford, "Franklin, Women, and American Cultural Myths," in *Benjamin Franklin and Women*, ed. Larry E. Tise (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 104–28, 161–66, and for background on Franklin's interest in seeing women become more than men's pretty playthings (a common

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view held about Franklin's attitudes about women), see "Benjamin Franklin, Traditions of Liberalism, and Women's Learning in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," in *Educating the Youth of Pennsylvania: Worlds of Learning in the Age of Franklin*, ed. John Pollack (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Library, [2009]).

2. See Carla Mulford, "Figuring Benjamin Franklin in American Cultural Memory," *New England Quarterly* 71 (1999): 415–43, and "Benjamin Franklin and the Myths of Nationhood," in *Making America / Making American Literature: Franklin to Cooper*, ed. A. Robert Lee and W. M. Verhoeven (Amsterdam and Athens, GA: Rodopi, 1996), 15–58.