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Finding Franklin

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The New Criterion

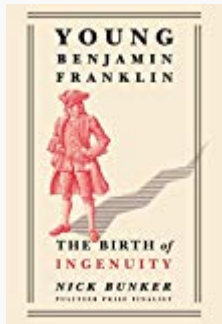
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Finding Franklin

by Marc M. Arkin

On the making of an American enigma, occasioned by a new biography of his early life.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Nick Bunker

Young Benjamin Franklin: The Birth of Ingenuity

Knopf, 464 pages, \$30.00

Benjamin Franklin is the most elusive, not to say protean, of the Founders, a man who remade himself so many times in the course of his eighty-four years that it is difficult to keep track of the identities he created and shed. Born to a devout Boston family and briefly educated for the Congregational ministry, Franklin moved from juvenile freethinker to deist and Freemason. Initially apprenticed to a candlemaker, Franklin trained as a printer and journalist. Geographically footloose, he sloughed off Boston for Philadelphia, then left that city for two years in London—leaving a young woman with whom he had come to an “understanding” in his wake—and only reluctantly returned to Philadelphia to pursue his trade. Once returned, he became the ultimate civic booster—organizing everything from fire companies to the colonies’ first lending library—held numerous appointive government offices, set up housekeeping with the woman whom he never formally married, and ended up one of the richest men in the American colonies.

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Then, at the age of forty-two, with half his life ahead of him, Franklin retired from business to pursue the classical ideal of a gentleman of leisure devoted to service and the public good. In no particular order, he turned himself into a scientist of international reputation, an inventor who refused to hold patents so that people could enjoy his innovations (bifocals, the lightning rod, and the Franklin stove, to name a few), an elected officeholder, a London agent for the colonial Pennsylvania Assembly, a diplomat of great skill, a drafter of the Declaration of Independence, and a Framers of the new American government. At times, he still acted the part of a man more comfortable in a leather apron (especially for the French, for whom he famously sported homespun and a fur cap); just as often, he preferred the role of gentleman who had dined with royalty — and sat above the salt.

Among the most deep-dyed of Englishmen and passionate believers in the British Empire, Franklin turned into one of the earliest proponents of American independence. Even as an ardent patriot, he was, arguably, the least American of the Founders. Franklin crossed the Atlantic seven times and spent most of his last thirty-three years abroad. At times, it

seemed he would never return. Renowned for his charm and sociability, he shed attachments with surprising ease, and his relationships with men often ended badly. While Franklin spent a decade in London consorting with the great and famous — as well as with his landlady, Mrs. Stevenson, and her daughter Polly — his common-law wife, Deborah, remained in Philadelphia. Despite the exchange of affectionate letters, he never saw her again; she died before he returned home. Devoted to his illegitimate son, William, whom he raised under his own roof, Franklin assiduously promoted the younger man's career, ultimately helping him to be appointed royal governor of New Jersey. But when Franklin returned to America in 1775, he and William broke decisively over the patriot cause. In 1783, after the war, Franklin rebuffed William's efforts at reconciliation. Two years later, Franklin met William in England for three days of hard bargaining over William's remaining property in New Jersey and New York, some of which would pass on to William's son, Temple. After the negotiations were over, Franklin never communicated with his son again.

As his old enemy John Adams summed him up, Franklin was “one of the most curious Characters in History.” Of all the Founders, it was Franklin who wrote the most about himself; even so, he remains the most difficult to know. His Autobiography recounts the first fifty-two years of his life. Begun in 1771 ostensibly as a letter to William, it was completed in three further installments, the last in 1790 shortly before Franklin's death. Much of the modern commentary has focused on Franklin's sophistication, humor, and sense of irony in presenting himself to the public. But even among his biographers and admirers, there is disagreement about the reliability of the

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narrative and the character it presented to the world, moving as it does between the perspectives of youth and maturity, observer and observed, always with an eye to the reader.

Consider Franklin's famous description of his arrival in Philadelphia as a bedraggled seventeen-year-old runaway apprentice, walking down Market Street with a puffy bread roll under each arm, while eating a third. He recounts that he passed by the house of his future wife, Deborah Read, and that, "she standing at the door, saw me and thought I made, as I certainly did, a most awkward ridiculous appearance." It is like entering a hall of mirrors: the sixty-five-year-old observer sitting in an English country house presenting the reader—supposedly the son who needed reminding of his roots—first with himself as a young man, next that young man as seen through the eyes of his older self, and then through memories later recounted by a third party, reaffirmed by his own sly self-deprecation that draws the reader's attention to how far he has come. Accurate or not, it is the self-conscious creation of a public persona that is strikingly modern in its sophistication and shifting perspective.

Franklin's other writings present even more unstable narratives and narrators. As the historian Gordon Wood points out in his own biography of Franklin, "[h]e was a man of many voices and masks who continually mocks himself." American schoolchildren may know Franklin through personae as various as Silence Dogood (female) and Poor Richard (male), but, as Wood notes, during Franklin's London years alone, he wrote some ninety pseudonymous items for the press using forty-two signatures and persuasively assumed a different voice for each. One of Franklin's most astute biographers, the late Edmund S. Morgan, once remarked that there is always a part of Franklin that is held back from the public gaze. Although Morgan argued for the essential accuracy of Franklin's narrative, even he suggested that, while never fabricating anything outright, Franklin knew when to remain silent. As Franklin himself advised, "Let all men know thee, but no man know thee thoroughly."

Perhaps as a result, Americans have not quite known what to make of Franklin. In his most familiar portraits, he is a portly, genial-looking old fellow with spectacles and a half-smile on his lips; he just seems more accessible than the austere Washington or the aristocratic Jefferson. Walter Isaacson, another recent biographer attempting to thread his way through Franklin's complex legacy, observed that Franklin has been lionized in entrepreneurial times and vilified in romantic ones. What Americans think about Franklin tells us much about the times in which they live. During the nineteenth century, Franklin was primarily viewed as the prototype of the classic American rags-to-riches story, a model of upward mobility. His Poor Richard sayings guided millions of Americans on the way to prosperity; he stood for industry, frugality, and the rise of those whom Franklin himself approvingly called "the middling people." People knew his writings as well as they knew the Bible. The only book Davy Crockett carried with him when he died at the Alamo was Franklin's *Autobiography*. By the twentieth century, those values had fallen into eclipse and Franklin was often treated as little more than a crass moralist, a Babbitt-like civic booster who worshipped at the altar of

wealth—even though he himself had said that it was better to have lived usefully than to die wealthy. In twenty-first-century America, as Isaacson noted, Franklin has a particular resonance—“a successful publisher and consummate networker with an inventive curiosity, he would have felt right at home in the information revolution.” His unabashed striving to join the meritocracy made him, in David Brooks’s discordant phrase, “our founding Yuppie.”

The three-hundredth anniversary of Franklin’s birth in 2006, coinciding with the availability of the vast Franklin papers on cd-rom through Yale University Press, occasioned a re-engagement with Franklin and a spate of new full-length biographies, most of which grappled with the creation of Franklin’s identity as an American, or in some cases, “the first American.” On my bookshelf alone, I count four recent lives—including the ones referred to in the preceding paragraphs—as well as numerous other works featuring Franklin in the context of the revolution and the founding era. Since the turn of this century, each year scholarly journals have published more than thirty articles with “Benjamin Franklin” in the title, without counting those in which Franklin merely makes a star turn. New specialist monographs about everything from Franklin’s literary achievements to his scientific experiments and his part in the diplomacy that financed the revolution and negotiated the end of the war continue to fall from the presses at an astonishing rate. And this only adds to the already considerable literature produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a testimony to the man that there is anything left to say about him.

What does Nick Bunker hope to add to this already crowded field? In his new biography, *Young Benjamin Franklin*, Bunker focuses on something that fascinated Franklin as well: the Franklin family’s background in the English dissenting tradition and their defining virtue of “ingenuity.”¹ “Ingenuity,” Bunker tells the reader, was Franklin’s favorite noun; he used it to describe his father, uncles, and “all the other people he respected.” In the 1660s, we learn, “ingenuity” was the height of fashion in England; it defined a mindset that linked Isaac Newton to upwardly mobile tradesmen like the Franklins. According to Bunker, “ingenuity” involved intellect, imagination, and skills with hand and eye, drawing on diligence and learning, as well as playfulness and sociability; everyone wanted to meet ingenious people because of their wit, variety, and flair, which eased their way to economic and social success. Ingenuity defined Britain’s leading place in an era of progress and invention. Indeed, Bunker asserts, “the pursuit of ingenuity became the guiding theme of Benjamin Franklin’s life.”

Bunker’s focus on America’s British roots echoes his 2015 Pulitzer Prize–finalist work, *An Empire on the Edge: How Britain Came to Fight America*—although it might be noted that Franklin himself analyzed the causes of the impending conflict with rather more panache in his 1773 pamphlet *Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One*, dedicated in a nice touch to Lord Hillsborough, then the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Bunker’s reading of British colonial policy—and the mutual incomprehension of the colonists and the mother country—illustrates the fact that American

society was, to a great extent, no longer governed by the rigid norms of hierarchy and deference that continued largely to define life in England, even though neither side recognized the transformation. In his biography of Franklin, Bunker returns to this Anglo-American relationship and, largely forgoing the diplomatic and political world, he explores the cultural and personal connections of a figure who embodied the transition from Englishman to American, from colonial seeking British recognition and Crown offices to American nationalist.

Bunker presents a remarkably detailed account of Franklin's roots in the dissenting Whig tradition of the English midlands, descending from a talented family of blacksmiths and cloth dyers who sought the patronage of local Whig gentry and rose into prosperity as surveyors, secretaries, and even clockmakers and amateur scientists, exemplifying Bunker's much-vaunted "ingenuity." After 1683, the story shifts to Boston, where Josiah Franklin, Benjamin's father, emigrated in the face of Charles II's suppression of the "conventicles." Bunker painstakingly chronicles the ups and downs of the Franklin family—including Josiah's eleven-year wait before he was admitted to full communicant membership in Samuel Willard's Old South Church, his downgrade from dyer of silk to maker of candles and occasional seller of slaves, his friendship with Judge Samuel Sewall of the Salem witchcraft trials—to paint a picture of life in a colonial outpost where smallpox vaccination was a political issue. From here Bunker follows the familiar path, laid out in Franklin's own *Autobiography*, as this youngest son in a family of seventeen learned the crafts of printing and journalism as an apprentice to his brother James, fled to Philadelphia to make his own way after a falling-out with James, spent two years in London after his plan to obtain English equipment to open his own printing shop fell through when his benefactor failed him, and returned to Philadelphia to establish himself as a prosperous businessman, a mover in Pennsylvania politics, and a civic booster whose increasing wealth allowed him to begin to dabble in science, fulfilling what Bunker seems to see as his genetic propensity for "ingenuity."

Throughout, Bunker provides, in almost Biblical elaboration, the genealogy of personal connections that helped Franklin to forge his way. Thus, we learn that Governor Samuel Shute of Pennsylvania was the nephew of the Shute who led the guild of dyers to which Josiah Franklin had belonged in England. And that the mother of Samuel Kreimer, the eccentric printer who first employed Franklin in Philadelphia, followed the same English nonconformist preacher as Franklin's namesake uncle Benjamin. For Bunker, the detail seems to be an end in itself, rather than a detour from a linear narrative. He uses it to create a picture of a very small world where everyone knew everyone else, and in which chance encounters—Pennsylvania Governor William Keith offered to sponsor Franklin after being shown a letter the young man had written in response to a brother-in-law's effort to persuade him to return to Boston—could lead to great opportunities. For better or for worse, the book is an antiquarian's dream, with its loving digressions about eighteenth-century country innkeepers, detailed descriptions of manuscript account books and original indentures happily discovered and deciphered, and tales of personally visiting remote byways that formed part of Franklin's life and travels.

For ordinary American readers, this may be a rather perplexing journey. *Young Benjamin Franklin* spends roughly as much time on Franklin's British ancestors as it does on his scientific career; it follows him to just before his famous experiment flying a kite in a thunderstorm in the spring of 1752 that proved lightning was an electrical phenomenon. In other words, much of what makes Franklin important to Americans lies far in the future, and the connection with a remote past is far from clear. Instead, we see Franklin advancing from the leather-apron world in which he was born, forging connections among the grandees of Philadelphia, working at hard physical labor aided by Deborah who kept the books, making shrewd investments, forming civic organizations—in other words, a fairly conventional, albeit granular, account of Franklin's early career and the people who surrounded him that lacks the sense that Franklin is going anywhere particularly special. When Bunker's book concludes, the reader is hard-pressed to understand why Franklin did not end up in the same category as his friend and fellow American Cadwallader Colden—a minor government functionary and a footnote to the history of eighteenth-century science. Presumably, Bunker's answer to Franklin's future greatness is "ingenuity" in the sense of charm, native wit, and energy, but that seems to explain both too much and too little at the same time.

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What is more, the book's tightly focused portrait of a society on the verge of momentous change is undercut by the author's apparent tin ear for American religious life. It is true the adult Franklin felt that the only important thing about religion was its instrumental value in upholding morality—as

Poor Richard said, "Sin is not hurtful because it is forbidden, but it is forbidden because it's hurtful." Nevertheless, since the colonies were awash in religion and the book stresses the importance of the dissenting tradition in creating the Benjamin Franklin we recognize, it might do for Bunker to be a bit more watchful, if not sympathetic to religious forces.

For example, Franklin himself was a close observer of the revival campaigns of the evangelist George Whitefield, which took the British preacher from Massachusetts to Georgia in the late 1730s and 1740s, preaching to crowds that numbered in the thousands throughout the colonies. Historians generally agree that this Great Awakening played an important role in creating an American identity that transcended the local interests of individual colonies. Whitefield first reached Philadelphia in 1739. As Franklin recounts in the *Autobiography*, he was riveted by what he saw—even to the point of digging into his pocket and making a sizeable donation. He also recognized that Whitefield was newsworthy. Franklin published accounts of Whitefield's appearances in forty-five issues of his newspaper and devoted its entire front page to reprints of Whitefield's sermons eight times. Franklin

also arranged to be the primary publisher of Whitefield's sermons and journals on this side of the Atlantic, helping to secure Whitefield's celebrity throughout the colonies. The two men ultimately became friends with a somewhat bemused Franklin drawn by Whitefield's charisma and good works, if not his religious message. Yet Bunker treats Franklin's relationship with Whitefield as dominated by pecuniary motives and is hostile to Whitefield personally — "gifted but troubled," rarely able to finish what he started, "arrogant," and, possibly worst of all for Bunker, critical of the Anglican tradition in favor of Calvinism. Bunker's final verdict stresses the social discord sown by the Great Awakening even among Franklin's circle; he seems oblivious to the significance of Whitefield's broad geographic appeal as well as Franklin's role in creating it.

As to the American incarnation of the dissenting tradition, Bunker seems to have conceived a serious dislike for the Bay Colony, calling it "that peevish land of piety and violence." As in his treatment of Whitefield, Bunker displays a preference for the more latitudinarian views of the Anglican Church. In fact, Bunker explains, all Calvinists are the same and thus he is free to call them all "Presbyterians," a rather troubling homogenization of colonial religious life. Although the adult Franklin described himself as "religiously educated as a Presbyterian," that description might have come as a huge surprise to Samuel Willard as well as the rest of the Boston clergy of Franklin's childhood, all of whom were staunchly devoted to the principle of congregational independence (hence the name Congregationalism) rather than the hierarchical polity of the largely Scottish Presbyterian Church, which was dominant in the middle Atlantic colonies. These distinctions made a difference to the people who lived them and should make a difference to the historian who writes about them as well.

At the close of *Young Benjamin Franklin*, the reader knows far more about Franklin's family, friends, connections, and day-to-day life. Yet, in the end, Benjamin Franklin remains as much of an enigma as ever, which is exactly as he would have preferred it.

¹ *Young Benjamin Franklin: The Birth of Ingenuity*, by Nick Bunker; Knopf, 464 pages, \$30.

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