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Jonathan R. Dull

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# Benjamin Franklin AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

JONATHAN R. DULL

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# Contents

Preface | vii

1. From Rebelliousness to Prosperity | 1

2. Two Missions to England | 17

3. Eighteen Months in Congress | 41

4. Franklin and the French | 65

5. Franklin and the British | 85

6. Franklin and His Fellow Americans | 107

Epilogue: Franklin Returns to Philadelphia | 119

Notes | 123

Recommended Reading | 147

Index | 163

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# Preface

I spent more than thirty years reading Benjamin Franklin's mail. From July 1977 until my retirement in June 2008, I helped to edit some 20 volumes of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, an ongoing 47-volume edition of his writings and correspondence. While doing research on the letters he sent and received during the American Revolution, I often was struck by how one-sided is the traditional picture of Franklin, particularly during the Revolution. Most readers are quite familiar with his softer side—his affability, his flirting with the ladies of Paris during a nine-year diplomatic mission to France, his sense of humor, and his conciliatory nature, which so smoothed the working of the Franco-American alliance. All of this is true about him, but it is only half of the picture. It tends to make Franklin a bystander to the violence, danger, and suffering of the Revolution. Franklin actually was a leader of that revolution; indeed, with the exception of George Washington, he was its most irreplaceable leader. He could not have made this contribution to American independence without a lesser-known tougher side from which he drew his strength. The traditional picture of Franklin does not adequately portray his confidence and self-righteousness about himself and the American cause, his almost fanatical

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zeal, his hatred of George III and the king's American supporters (particularly Franklin's own son), his disdain for hardship and danger, and, finally, his vanity, pride, and ambition. This two-sided Franklin is not as lovable as the kindly and avuncular person of legend, but he is more complex, more interesting, and in many ways more impressive. This book will introduce you to him.

I could not have written this book without other Franklin scholars. The one I have known the longest is Robert Middlekauff, who taught me historiography when I was a graduate student at the University of California–Berkeley in 1968 and whose friendship I have treasured ever since. Upon arriving in New Haven in 1977 I became a colleague and friend of another great Franklinist, Claude-Anne Lopez. Eventually Claude became the second of the four chief editors of the Franklin Papers with whom I served. I learned a great deal not only from her but also from her predecessor, William B. Willcox, and her successors, Barbara Oberg and Ellen Cohn, as well as from current associate editor Kate Ohno and dozens of other associate editors, assistant editors, administrative assistants, and interns. I have also had the good fortune to cross paths with such superb Franklin scholars as Ed Morgan, the late Leo Lemay, Gordon Wood, Jim Hutson, Sheila Skemp, Stacy Schiff, David Waldstreicher, and Alan Houston. I wish particularly to thank Thomas Schaeper, who commented on the book in manuscript. Those from whom I have learned deserve credit for much of what is worthwhile about this book; its mistakes are my responsibility.



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My greatest debt is to my family, particularly my incredibly supportive wife, Susan Kruger, my wonderful children, Veronica Lamka, Robert Dull, Max Kruger-Dull, and Anna Kruger-Dull, and my terrific sister, Caroline Hamburger, and nephews, Peter and John Hamburger. Through Susan I acquired an extended family who are very dear to me: Stan Kruger, the late Alice Kruger, Steven Kruger, Glenn Burger, Josh Kruger, Diane Bassett, David Kruger, and Jessica Kruger. I dare not forget those highly intelligent cats Big Spot and Little Spot, who can turn doorknobs and for all I know may be able to read this. To you all, love and thanks.

I dedicate this book in memory of two of the finest people I've ever known, my father, Earl Dull, and my mother-in-law, Alice Kruger.



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# BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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# Chapter One

## From Rebelliousness to Prosperity

### I

As many scholars have noted, Benjamin Franklin is perhaps the most challenging of the founding fathers to understand.[1] Even after thirty years of research I am not sure I really know him. He was very cautious about committing his feelings to writing and very good at keeping secrets. Relatively few of the letters he wrote during the first half of his life are extant, partly because British soldiers destroyed many of them. Franklin's parents and siblings provide us little evidence about his childhood and adolescence, so most of what we know about his early life is what he chose to tell us.[2]

One example of the difficulty this causes his biographers is how hard it is for us to account for his extreme distaste for direct confrontation and conflict. No doubt this was partly a matter of playing to his strengths. Much of his political success was based on his skill as a conciliator and consensus builder. His hatred of confrontation, however, sometimes led him to downplay genuine differences of opinion. He even claimed that he had no personal enemies.[3] Some of this undoubtedly was for the sake of public relations, such as his writing friends in Europe that the difficulties of America in the mid-1780s were not of importance.[4] His aversion

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to confrontation, however, seem to have been genuine. He reacted bitterly when his attempts to avoid conflict were thwarted; woe to those like Thomas Penn or King George III who rejected his peacemaking and thereby made themselves his enemies.[5] What, however, was the source of his feelings? They may have come from his being the fifteenth of his father's seventeen children (seven by his first wife, ten by his second). Members of large families have good reason to prize peace and quiet. We cannot know, however, if he had childhood memories too frightening or painful to confront or parts of himself he did not wish to acknowledge. What we do know is that he could be extremely defensive, perhaps even from himself.

## II

In spite of his reserve we can state some things about him based on what he said or, better still, what he did. First, like many people, he resembled his father in numerous ways. He revealed his similarity to his father, Josiah Franklin, in his love for the things of the mind, in his dedication to public service, in his concern for justice and for the feelings of others, and in his essential decency. His father made candles and soap, whereas he helped make a revolution and a new country, but they both demonstrated their worth by serving others. We know less of Franklin's mother, Abiah, but she, too, lived a life of service to others, particularly her husband, children, and stepchildren.

In spirit, Franklin never totally left Boston, where he was born in 1706. He left there for good at age 17,



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returning only for visits. Thereafter he lived for long periods in Philadelphia, London, and Passy, a village near Paris. He also traveled frequently. As deputy postmaster general for the British North American colonies, he made inspection trips up and down their Atlantic coastline. While living in England he made a number of trips for pleasure across the British Isles and western Europe. Nevertheless he never fully shed his roots in Puritan Boston.

Like all good Puritans, he dedicated himself to a calling. His was the calling of printer-publisher-writer. There was printer's ink in his veins until he died at age 84. He never lost his love for printing presses, paper and ink, and the chance to occupy his pen. He even left behind a grandson to carry on his work, Benjamin Franklin Bache, the crusading editor of the *Philadelphia Aurora* during the 1790s.[6]

Also like a good Puritan, Franklin extolled the virtues of hard work and treated prosperity as a proof of one's merit. Although he enjoyed the company of women and children and treated them with uncommon respect for the time, his views of the family were characteristically paternalistic. He saw himself as the head of the family and expected to be treated as such. He did not attend his son William's wedding when his son chose his own wife; worse still, when William, who had been appointed governor of New Jersey in 1762, elected to remain loyal to the king rather than join his father as a revolutionary, Benjamin treated it as a personal betrayal. On the other hand, his daughter Sally, a woman of extraordinary warmth, kindness,



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and generosity, apparently never stopped loving him; he spent the last five years of his life with her, his son-in-law, and his grandchildren in the house he had built for his wife. Sally, who knew him so well, is his best character reference.

He loved the sensual pleasures of the dinner table and the marital bed, but this was not unusual even for Puritan Boston. What made him rather unusual for a Bostonian were his radical religious beliefs, such as his belief in the basic equality of different religions. These beliefs, however, were not uncommon for members of the American upper class.[7] He did not much concern himself with the state of his soul, but he did preach the existence of an afterlife and the importance of leading a life of benevolence toward others.

Franklin had a very successful career. His first job was as an apprentice in his brother's printing shop, a job that made him so unhappy that he fled Boston. He lived by his wits and skills until he acquired his own printing shop and purchased a newspaper to print. Aided greatly by his industrious, talented, and loyal wife he became prosperous enough to retire from business just before his 42nd birthday. He dedicated himself thereafter to science, politics, and writing, passing much of the second half of his life abroad.

On some matters, such as slavery, his attitudes evolved over his lifetime.[8] On many others he continued in the same beliefs in spite of the many changes in his life.[9] He was a lifelong supporter of population growth as the key to America's prosperity. So, too, was he an advocate of free trade and, a rather different



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proposition, of a plentiful supply of paper money to encourage economic growth. He never liked bicameral legislatures, believing that they led to political paralysis; he was particularly opposed to legislative upper houses reserved for the wealthy.[10] He was a lifelong supporter of prison reform, and he devoted enormous effort to helping American prisoners of war being held in England or Ireland.

His views were a mixture of what today we would call liberalism and conservatism, which helps account for his political success at the time and his almost universal popularity today. This in part was because he sometimes considered himself an outsider and sometimes an insider, as good a way as any to differentiate liberals from conservatives. He had a strong dislike of mobs, whether they were formed of London workers, embittered frontiersmen like the Paxton Boys of 1762, or angry farmers like the 1786 Massachusetts followers of Daniel Shays.[11] He had little sympathy for the unemployed, not understanding that there might be reasons beyond their control to account for their joblessness. On the other hand, Franklin never forgot that he was the son of a tradesman. He despised the idle rich as much as he scorned the idle poor, although he enjoyed the company and hospitality of those he believed had earned their fortune; he even argued that unneeded private property rightly was the property of the public.[12] Like Thomas Jefferson he praised the common man and maintained lifelong friendships with people who worked with their hands as he once had done and hence were not gentlemen (although such friendships



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gradually became less common). Unlike Jefferson, however, Franklin always lived in or near cities. His support for those who worked the land was mostly theoretical and was not unrelated to his involvement in land speculation. One of his strongest prejudices was against uncouth and uneducated farmers and frontiersmen, particularly those of German origin. In a 1782 note he composed for himself, he described frontiersmen as the most disorderly of people and criticized them for committing offenses against their neighbors and occasioning disputes between the states.[13] On the other hand, he was remarkably free of religious prejudice; according to John Adams, Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Quakers all considered him one or virtually one of their own.[14]

For Franklin, the American Revolution was the culmination of a long process of finding where he truly belonged. He discovered easily enough that he was not just a Pennsylvanian but a British American. It took many years for him finally to accept that he would have to choose between being British or American. To his great sadness he learned that to the wealthy and powerful of Great Britain he was an outsider. His own subsequent rejection of Britain was not merely personal; Franklin did not become a revolutionary out of spite. The British government rejected the social class from which he had come, the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania political institutions he had served, and the ideals of self-government and reasoned compromise to which he had devoted his life. Franklin lived in England from 1724 to 1726, 1757 to 1762, and late 1764 to 1775. He



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so loved the country and its people that he considered spending his retirement there, but it is highly unlikely the British government could ever have won or purchased his support in its attempts to weaken American self-government.

Franklin spent his last year in London attempting to prevent revolution, but once he returned to America he became as zealous a revolutionary as anyone. The Loyalists (those Americans who remained loyal to the king) considered him the arch-conspirator.[15] To America's good fortune, Franklin's experiences turned him into an exceptionally useful revolutionary. Both his virtues and his vices proved serviceable: his political acumen, his genius for public relations, his secretiveness, his deviousness, his unshakable confidence in himself and in the American cause, his willingness to sacrifice for the cause, and, when necessary, his ruthlessness. Before examining further his contribution to the Revolution, let us examine how his experiences helped prepare him to be a revolutionary.

## III

Franklin's father inadvertently pushed him toward becoming a rebel, the first stage of becoming a revolutionary. In 1714–15 Benjamin attended the South Grammar School (now Boston Latin). The 8-year-old was a bright student and seemingly was destined for Harvard College and a place among the elite of Massachusetts. Josiah Franklin prevented it. Although a respected member of the community and his church, he was only a tradesman with a large family to support.



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After his son completed his first year of school, Josiah Franklin decided he could not afford the academic education that was a prerequisite for entering Harvard. Instead he gave him a year of training in mathematics and other practical skills before putting him to work in his own business, helping to turn animal fat into soap and candles. He was not unkind, however. When he saw how much Benjamin hated the unpleasant work, he allowed the young man to choose his own apprenticeship in which he would be taught a trade in exchange for years of service to a master.

In 1718 Benjamin made his choice, one that eventually would lead him to prosperity, an early retirement, and then fame. He was apprenticed to his 21-year-old brother James, who had just returned from England with a printing press. The best route to success for a printer was to begin a newspaper, and in 1721 James Franklin launched the *New-England Courant*. James was not exactly a crusading journalist, but his paper was lively and controversial. James became in some ways a role model for his younger brother, but their relationship had serious problems, as relationships between brothers often do. In the case of the Franklins a good part of the difficulty was that James had the legal power to enforce his apprentice's obedience, but Benjamin was equally ambitious, more intelligent, and a far better writer than was his older brother. In April 1722 he slipped a newspaper essay signed by an obviously fictitious Silence Dogood under the door of his brother's newspaper office, the first of fourteen essays published over the course of the year. The essays were a



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success, and James did not guess that their author was his 16-year-old brother. Not surprisingly, the fourth of the essays was a satire on the education of Harvard students.[16]

Franklin's mocking of elitist Harvard students was not just sour grapes. He took a serious interest in the content and purpose of higher education. In 1749, now living in Philadelphia, he drafted a prospectus for an academy or college (a college that eventually became the University of Pennsylvania). His *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania* were revolutionary. They called for students to be taught useful subjects like arithmetic, accounting, geometry, history, and geography, a curriculum different from the traditional one centered around the study of Greek and Roman authors.[17]

Benjamin eventually confessed to writing the Do-good essays. Having such a talented, devious, and cocky younger brother and apprentice was not easy for James, either. He beat Benjamin, and their relationship deteriorated. In 1723 Benjamin ran away from his brother and thereby violated the terms of his apprenticeship contract, a serious breach of the law. (Apprentices were considered servants by the law; if they were caught running away, their term of servitude was extended.)[18] He first fled to New York, but failing to find work he proceeded to Philadelphia. Although he arrived virtually penniless, he had training in a skilled craft, his wit, and his self-confidence. It did not take long for him to find a job and then an influential patron, Sir William Keith, the lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania. Keith



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promised to lend him the money to set up his own printing shop. Confidently, Franklin sailed to England to purchase printing supplies. He arrived only to find that Keith had not provided the money he had promised. Again Franklin, forced to live by his wits, found work as a printer. After nearly two years in London he returned to Philadelphia in 1726.[19]

The experience was a lesson about not putting too much trust in those in power. Its immediate influence can be overestimated, however. Franklin retained his trust in the kings of England, if not their government officials, for almost another half-century. He continued to depend on the patronage of the powerful and wealthy and eventually extended his own patronage in turn to his relatives and apprentices, setting them up in their own printing shops in exchange for a share of their profits. After being appointed deputy postmaster general, he again used his patronage on behalf of relatives and clients.

To be dependent on others does not seem to have been very pleasant for him, however. He constructed for an English and American audience (and perhaps for himself) an idealized America where such dependence was unnecessary. In 1751 he wrote an essay entitled "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind" in response to an act of Parliament restricting expansion of the American iron industry. Franklin portrayed the British colonies in North America as a land of small farmers in which abundant cheap land permitted universal financial independence, if not prosperity.[20] Like Thomas Jefferson's later vision of America, this was



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an eloquent statement of what has become our core belief about ourselves, "the American dream." Franklin's essay was splendid propaganda, but it ignored not only the social turbulence of American seaports like Philadelphia and the ever-present possibility of slave revolts but also pockets of social conflict that would spread during the next twenty-five years throughout the colonies, from the Green Mountains of what today is Vermont to the manors of the Hudson River valley to the backcountry of North and South Carolina.[21] Nothing could shake Franklin's vision, however. In 1784 he wrote a similar essay for prospective American immigrants, "Information to Those Who Would Remove to America."[22]

Seeing America not just as a prospective utopia but as one already in existence made Franklin sensitive to those in Britain who would despoil it. An example of Franklin's protectiveness about America is a short newspaper article he wrote in 1751, "Rattle-Snakes for Felons." Outraged at a proposal to deport convicted English criminals to the American colonies, Franklin proposed returning the favor by sending rattlesnakes in exchange, particularly to St. James's Park in London and to the gardens of prime ministers, members of the Board of Trade, and members of Parliament.[23]

This article did not raise what would become a critical issue for Franklin, the right of Parliament to legislate for the American colonies. It did, however, challenge the notion that the colonies were subordinate to Great Britain itself. In contrast, Franklin's "Observations" were both imperial and mercantilist. The



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British Crown and its instruments, such as the British navy, held the empire together, but the American colonies were a vital and growing part of that empire. In particular, their trade with the home island was vital to its prosperity and hence to the power of the Crown; Franklin especially stressed the American contribution to British naval power.

## IV

By the time Franklin wrote his 1751 essay and article, he was no longer a struggling tradesman but a wealthy, recently retired printer and newspaper editor. His success began with two wise decisions early in his career. The first was in 1729, when he took over a failing newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, which he turned into the most influential journal in the British colonies. The second was in 1730, when he entered a common-law marriage with Deborah Read, the daughter of his former landlord. She proved not only an affectionate and loyal wife but a key part of Franklin's financial success. Extremely hardworking, she ran the hugely successful stationery and bookstore on the ground floor of their house, while he ran the newspaper and print shop upstairs.[24]

Owning a print shop and newspaper permitted Benjamin to publicize a number of civic improvement projects he helped to establish, as well as aiding him to enter into Pennsylvania politics. He had an extraordinary gift as an organizer, being able to cajole associates, disarm potential opposition, and hide his powerful ambition and vanity behind compliments and good



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fellowship. The organizations he helped to found are a testament to his civic spirit and concern for the common good. He founded or helped to found a fraternal organization to discuss practical and ethical questions (the Junto), a volunteer fire company, a lending library, a fire insurance company, a college, a scientific society, and a hospital.[25] This hardly seems the work of a revolutionary, but in a number of ways his civic projects helped prepare him for his role in the American Revolution. First, they taught him not to rely on established governments like that of Britain or Pennsylvania. Most of his various voluntary associations were, at least at first, outside of government interference, particularly the interference of the descendants of William Penn. As proprietors of Pennsylvania acting as deputies of the British Crown, the Penns had the right to appoint a governor with veto power over the acts of the Pennsylvania Assembly. Eventually Franklin turned to the governor, assembly, or city of Philadelphia for assistance with such major projects as the hospital and college, but with results that were not totally satisfactory. In contrast, his purely voluntary associations taught him that the common people could be entrusted with organizing common affairs. They also reinforced the egalitarian side of his personality. Finally, they helped give him confidence and vital experience in organizing institutions from scratch, a central task of the American Continental Congress after the Battles of Lexington and Concord. One of his civic institutions even helped prepare for another key part of the Continental Congress's task, that of supervising the revolution's



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military operations. In 1747–48, the last years of King George's War (known in Europe as the War of the Austrian Succession), the port of Philadelphia was threatened by French and Spanish privateers (privately owned but state-sanctioned warships used mostly to capture merchant ships). When the Pennsylvania Assembly, dominated by Quaker pacifists, failed to respond to the threat, Franklin helped organize a voluntary militia called the Association to defend the city.[26] During the next war, the so-called French and Indian War of 1754–60 (part of the Seven Years' War, which lasted until 1763), he helped obtain wagons for General Braddock's 1755 expedition against Fort Duquesne. The following year he was in command of building several forts in Northampton County, Pennsylvania.[27] Thus it is not surprising that in October 1775 Congress sent him as part of a committee that met with General Washington in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to devise regulations for the Continental army.[28]

Franklin's success as a revolutionary was grounded, of course, not only in his experiences in civic enterprises but also in his political experience. It was a natural evolution to move from civic activity to political activity, but it was Franklin's work as a printer that gave him an entry into politics. He was appointed printer to the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1730. An enthusiastic advocate of paper currency, he obtained his first contract to print currency (for New Jersey) in 1736. Later that same year he was selected as clerk to the Pennsylvania Assembly. He served for fifteen years, performing a number of important administrative functions,



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including printing the votes and acts of the assembly. He also publicized its activities in his newspaper.[29] His services to the assembly brought him friends, his conciliatory nature made him acceptable to all parties, and his retirement from the printing business gave him the leisure to devote himself to politics. It is not surprising that in 1751 he was elected to the assembly and resigned as its clerk. What is surprising is that politics soon would take him away from Philadelphia and back to England.



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