

# Our Founding Grandfather

*On the enduring value of practical benevolence, tolerance, and service to society*

by DUDLEY R. HERSCHBACH

**B**ENJAMIN FRANKLIN, himself a prolific writer of exceptional grace and vigor, would surely be delighted with the vivid accounts of his life that are appearing as his 300th birthday draws nigh. Just in the past three years, these include five books and a three-part PBS series (see page 29). Each has a

distinctive focus, and—as Franklin recommended—depicts his flaws and errors as well as his virtues and accomplishments. As much as he would enjoy the grand sweep of the television series and H.W. Brands's book, or the astute, insightful wit of Claude-Anne Lopez and Edmund S. Morgan '37, Ph.D. '42, I expect Franklin might well deem as his favorite the latest and most comprehensive biography, by Walter Isaacson '74.

Now president of the Aspen Institute, Isaacson wrote most of his book during a decade while he was managing editor of *Time* and then CEO of CNN. He chose Franklin as “the founding father that winks at us...that genial urban entrepreneur...made of flesh rather than mar-

ble.” The book is an admirably crafted, chronological narrative that briskly explores the incredible variety and scope of

Franklin's activities, offering balanced, sensible assessments of historical evidence and events. Isaacson finds “the lessons from Franklin's life are more complex than those usually drawn.... His morality was built on a sincere belief in...good works. That led him to make the link between private virtue and civic virtue.” Indeed, as Isaacson shows, Franklin was much less interested in acquiring personal wealth than in creating social capital to benefit his community and nation.



Walter Isaacson '74,  
*Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*  
(Simon and Schuster, \$30)

Isaacson's book was launched just before July 4, with an extensive synopsis by him and accompanying articles by others in a special issue of *Time*. His synopsis can be recommended for its succinct exposition, illustrated by apt episodes, of "seven defining virtues and traits that [Franklin], more than anyone, helped to imprint onto our national fabric." These include an aversion to tyranny; advocacy of an unbridled free press; wry, homespun humor; humility, or at least the appearance of it, in dealing with others; idealism as well as realism in foreign policy; willingness to compromise; and tolerance of contrary views, particularly in religion. Such traits enhance social capital and should "distinguish America...in the messy struggles that confront a new century." Here I aim to entice prospective readers by sampling other aspects, including a few pertaining to Harvard.

FRANKLIN WAS BORN in Boston on January 17, 1706, the fifteenth child among 17 and the youngest of 10 sons in an immigrant family. He attended school only two years, but became an avid, life-long stu-

dent of literature, philosophy, science, and languages. At 10, he began assisting in his father's candle- and soap-making business; at 12, he was apprenticed to his half brother James, a printer. When James launched a weekly newspaper, Benjamin at 16 began contributing a series of anonymous articles in which he critiqued many aspects of society under the guise of a poor young widow, "Silence Dogood." In his fourth article, Mrs. Dogood lampoons Harvard College, asserting that many students emerge "after abundance of trouble and charge, as great blockheads as ever, only more proud and self-conceited." Resentful of beatings by his brother, Benjamin at 17 ran off to Philadelphia. Thus began his extraordinary odyssey.

Just 25 years later, Franklin retired from his prosperous printing business, turning it over to a partner for a share of the profits. He was 42—only midway in his life. His stated purpose was "to have leisure to read, study, and make experiments...uninterrupted by the little cares and fatigues of business." By then, his skill as editor and chief reporter had made his *Pennsylvania Gazette* the most widely read paper in the colonies, and he was the public printer for several of the colonies. His *Poor Richard's Almanack*, launched in 1732, was a bestseller for 25 years and fostered his reputation for wit and wisdom. He had also become a bookseller, established a circulating library, organized the Junto—a discussion club that developed into the American Philosophical Society—and was soon to help found an academy that evolved into the University of Pennsylvania, all while promoting a hospital and many other civic projects.

From his boyhood onward, Franklin recorded observations and speculations about natural phenomena and conducted many experiments. However, it was only during the first five years or so after his retirement that he was able to focus primarily on science (then termed "natural philosophy"). Toys and lecture demonstrations employing static electricity had then come to enjoy a popularity comparable to that of sporting events today. But "electrical fire" seemed more mysterious than gravity had in Newton's time, and lightning was looked on as the wrath of God. Franklin devised incisive experiments that led to key concepts as well as to his invention of the lightning rod. He reported his discoveries in letters to an Eng-

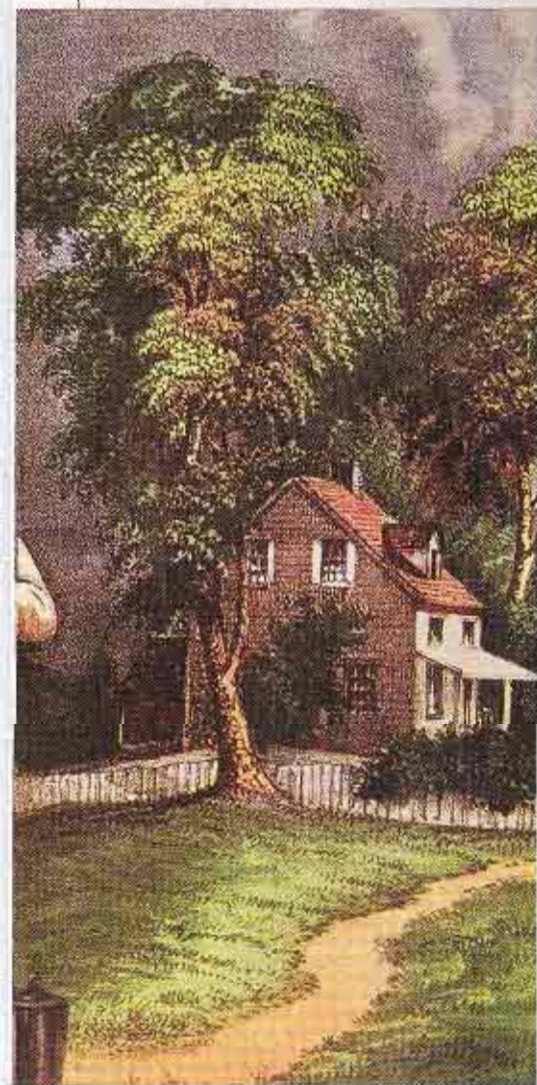
OTHER RECENT EXPLORATIONS OF  
FRANKLIN'S LIFE  
H.W. Brands, *The First American*  
(Doubleday, 2000)  
Claude-Anne Lopez, *My Life with  
Benjamin Franklin* (Yale, 2000)  
Edmund S. Morgan, *Benjamin Franklin*  
(Yale, 2002)  
Middlemarch Films, *Benjamin Franklin*  
(PBS series, 2002)

ON FRANKLIN'S SCIENCE AND  
ITS POLITICAL IMPACT  
I Bernard Cohen, *Benjamin Franklin's  
Science* (Harvard, 1990)  
I Bernard Cohen, *Science and the Founding  
Fathers* (Norton, 1995)  
Tom Tucker, *Bolt of Fate: Benjamin Franklin  
and his Electric Kite Hoax*  
(Public Affairs, 2003)

lish colleague; these were soon published as a book that went through five editions in English (1751-1774) and was translated into French, German, and Italian.

When an experiment Franklin had proposed to draw electricity from clouds was done in France, followed soon by his variant using a kite, he became an international scientific hero. Among the honors that rained down on him was the first honorary degree awarded by Harvard (1753). Yet he also had to weather some thunderous attacks against lightning rods as interfering with a prerogative of God. To one such attack, Franklin replied calmly, "Surely the thunder of Heaven is no more supernatural than the rain, hail or sunshine of Heaven, against the inconveniences of which we guard by roofs & shades without scruple." This summer, 250 years later, a different charge was generated by Tom Tucker in a book that argues that Franklin did not actually fly his electrical kite. Tucker's polemic is fun to read, but I do not find his case at all convincing, nor does Isaacson. I'll just say that the shocks Tucker intends to deliver lose force because they are not well enough grounded (the opposite to what electricity does).

The leading scholar of Franklin's science was the late I Bernard Cohen '37, Ph.D. '47, Thomas professor of the history of science emeritus, who taught at Harvard for more than 60 years. I warmly recommend two of Cohen's books. The scope of Franklin's scientific adventures was re-



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markable. His lively curiosity led him to write major papers on population growth and on meteorology, do experiments on heat conduction and evaporation, measure ocean temperatures and chart the Gulf Stream, study bioluminescence and the stilling of water waves by a surface layer of oil, and advance arguments in favor of the wave theory of light. He also compiled evidence about the danger of lead poisoning and lamented "how long a useful truth may be known before it is generally received and practiced on." (Laws against lead poisoning were not enacted until 200 years later.)

Franklin lived overseas for more than half of his pseudo-retirement. Crossing the Atlantic then took four to six weeks, a voyage he made eight times. In London as agent for several of the colonies (1757-62, 1764-75), he much enjoyed intellectual exchanges with kindred spirits. He also happily oversaw the purchase of many scientific instruments that now reside in Harvard's Collection of Historical Instruments. His mission ended in abject failure, however. He wanted the colonies to remain part of the British empire, but could not persuade the mother country's ruling elite to ease oppressive trade restrictions or to allow the colonists to have representative government.

After long straining to remain astride an ever-widening political gap, Franklin returned home, reluctantly but fully committed to working for independence. He became one of the most ardent and effective advocates for revolution, although he was deeply hurt when his son William, then the royal governor of New

Jersey, remained loyal to the crown. Franklin personally arranged for the first printing of the Declaration of Independence, using the elegant Caslon typeface he had long before imported and championed. (In homage, the type Isaacson selected for his book is a modern descendant.) Soon thereafter, at 70, Franklin undertook his most crucial overseas

role—of minister to France (1776-85). To obtain vital aid for a rebellion against the world's greatest military power—with dubious prospects for success or ability to repay loans—was an incredible challenge. Like other historians, Isaacson notes that Franklin's success stemmed not only from his charm and diplomatic skill, but also from his already legendary

status as the conqueror of lightning.

Back home at last, after intricate negotiations to conclude the peace, Franklin sagely helped to fashion the major compromises enabling the Constitution. Again, science had a significant role: Cohen in his *Science and the Founding Fathers* provides a close analysis of the scientific perspectives, metaphors, and analogies in-



Franklin as fashionable scientist, a 1762 mezzotint by James McArdell based on an earlier painting by Benjamin Wilson

FRANKLIN COLLECTION, YALE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

and his post-retirement labors, he ought to be regarded as our Founding Grandfather.

In describing Franklin's influence on the Declaration of Independence, Isaacson extols "the most important of his edits [as] small but resounding." Jefferson had written at first, "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable"; Franklin replaced the last three words with "self-evident"—thereby changing this key portion of

corporated in the Constitution, the *Federalist Papers*, and other major political statements from the Age of Reason. Franklin was 26 years older than George Washington and more than 40 years older than Alexander Hamilton and James Madison. By virtue of that seniority, his wisdom,

the Declaration from "an assertion of religion...into an assertion of rationality."

But Cohen has pointed out that Franklin may have also contributed a key phrase pertaining to religion. During the recent fuss about the Pledge of Allegiance, politicians who urged including the words

"under God" stressed that the Declaration of Independence refers to God. This occurs in a quaint phrase: "the laws of nature and of nature's God." The closest antecedent yet found by scholars actually appears in Franklin's fable of Polly Baker, widely reprinted before the Revolution. His mythical Polly, an unwed mother of five children, each with a different father, asserted at her trial for fornication that she had merely obeyed the "great command of nature, and of nature's God." The phrase may not have been original with Franklin, but he must have been amused to see it invoked to assert the legitimacy of the birth of a new nation. This twist should give pause to those who advocate a literal interpretation of our political scriptures!

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Isaacson concludes with an insightful chapter assessing the character and legacy of Franklin and tracing, over the past two centuries, the waxing and waning of his iconic status as a barometer of changing cultural and political attitudes. He finds that Franklin "represents one side of a national dichotomy...the side of practical

benevolence versus moral crusading...of religious tolerance rather than evangelical faith...of social mobility rather than an established elite." This side of the dichotomy needs more consideration today.

In his will, Franklin established a trust to encourage young men to undertake public service, expressing the wish thereby "to be useful even after my death." The new explorations of his life have now strongly amplified his abiding wish. ♡

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