

Benjamin Franklin

Edwin S. Gaustad

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

LIVES AND LEGACIES

Larzer Ziff

MARK TWAIN

David S. Reynolds

WALT WHITMAN

Edwin S. Gaustad

ROGER WILLIAMS

Gale E. Christianson

ISAAC NEWTON

G. Edward White

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR.

Edwin S. Gaustad

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

B E N J A M I N F R A N K L I N

Edwin S. Gaustad

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2006

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that
further Oxford University's objective of excellence
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 2006 by Edwin S. Gaustad

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.

198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gaustad, Edwin S. (Edwin Scott)

Benjamin Franklin / Edwin S. Gaustad.

p.cm. — (Lives and legacies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-19-530535-7

ISBN-10: 0-19-530535-3

1. Franklin, Benjamin, 1706–1790.

2. Statesmen—United States—Biography.

3. Scientists—United States—Biography.

4. Inventors—United States—Biography.

5. Printers—United States—Biography.

6. I. Title.

7. II. Series

E302.6F8G379 2005 973.3'092—dc22 2005033906

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

In gratitude for great marriages:

Scott and Mimi

Peggy and Stuart

This page intentionally left blank

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FOR THE WRITING OF THIS BOOK, Nancy Toff, vice president of Oxford University Press, served as catalyst, cheerleader, and perceptive critic. I owe her much. Others at the Press who have labored faithfully include the researcher for illustrations, the copy editor, and the project editor. Bringing it all together at the end, Helen Mules, senior editor in the trade division, utilized her talents and her experience most effectively, the final product bearing solid evidence of her judicious labors. I owe all of them much as well.

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	1
----------	---

One

THE IMPROPER BOSTONIAN	5
------------------------	---

Two

B. FRANKLIN, PRINTER	15
----------------------	----

Three

DOCTOR FRANKLIN	33
-----------------	----

Four

PENNSYLVANIA POLITICS	52
-----------------------	----

Five

THE ROAD TO SEPARATION	70
------------------------	----

Six

WAR AND PEACE	88
---------------	----

Seven

NEW NATION AND AGED PATRIARCH	110
-------------------------------	-----

NOTES	127
-------	-----

FURTHER READING	133
-----------------	-----

INDEX	137
-------	-----

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

This page intentionally left blank

Prologue

AMONG BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S MANY TALENTS WAS HIS GIFT FOR satire: making fun of the noble and the mighty, of the proud and pretentious, and on occasion even of the British Empire itself. But those who live by the satirical sword may die by it as well. In American literature, the only real competitor to Franklin in boundless, bubbling humor is Mark Twain. Both men had a built-in funny bone, so to speak, and for both no subject was too sacred, too solemn, to escape the bite of satire. Among the many subjects that Twain enjoyed making fun of was none other than Franklin himself.

Pretending to have been raised by a father who had read Franklin's *Autobiography* and to have been fatally infected by it, Twain bitterly complained, in a brief sketch from 1890 called "The Late Benjamin Franklin," that his boyhood had been ruined by having the model of Franklin held up to him day after day. Whenever Twain wanted to play, he was reminded of work that needed

to be done, for Franklin was never idle. Whenever he spent a few pennies on a toy or a treat, he was sternly told that “a penny saved is a penny earned.” And should he be so lazy as to stay in bed until 9 or 10 in the morning, then that perverse proverb was drilled into him:

Early to bed and early to rise

Makes a man healthy and wealthy and wise.

Twain scornfully adds, “As if it were any object to a boy to be healthy and wealthy and wise on such terms.”

Franklin lived and wrote as he did, Twain declared, just so he could serve as a model to torment all future generations. Twain added that Franklin’s simplest acts were contrived with a view to their being held up for the emulation of boys forever—boys who might otherwise have been happy. It was in this spirit, Twain jested, that he became the son of a soap-boiler; and probably for no other reason, he wrote, than to cast suspicion on the efforts of all future boys who tried to be anything who were not also the sons of soap-boilers. Twain observed, moreover, that Franklin would work all day and then sit up nights and pretend to be studying algebra by the light of a smoldering fire, so that all other boys would have to do the same or else have Benjamin Franklin thrown up to them.¹

And so the master satirist was himself satirized. Twain’s comments came long after Franklin’s death, of course; otherwise, one can imagine a duel of satires that would forever enliven and enrich the literature of 19th-century America. But Franklin himself might well have sympathized with that imaginary boy who was forced to bow down before young Franklin as a Hero (with a capital *H*). In his best-selling *Almanack*, Franklin spoke of the three great destroyers of mankind as being “Plague, Famine, and Hero.” The

first two destroy people only, but the last “takes life and goods together.” Heroes (think of a king on his throne or a Napoleon on his horse) infect and inflame the whole world, Franklin wrote, and are able to do so just because so many follow them passionately, if blindly.²

Like most men, Franklin appreciated praise more than blame. And like most men, he preferred to have his actions and thoughts looked at in their best light. But, unlike many men, Franklin kept himself and his deeds in perspective. His sense of humor helped him do that, as did his sense of proportion and of the transitory nature of life on this earth. Franklin had only a certain time on this world’s stage: 1706 to 1790. But he made the very most of that time: in service to politics, to science, to literature, and—one might be so bold as to say—to the welfare of humankind.

Mark Twain’s fears notwithstanding, one takes no great risk in getting to know Benjamin Franklin much better. The risk, rather, is in missing the opportunity to walk beside so amiable, so generous, so wise a companion.