

## Benjamin Franklin in London: The British Life of America's Founding Father

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*Benjamin Franklin in London* is a narrative biography of the American 'founding father' Benjamin Franklin. As the title suggests, the book substantively concentrates on Franklin in London between 1757 and 1775. During this time, Franklin was an agent advocating colonial interests in Parliament. His first official task was to help the Pennsylvania legislative assembly address its longstanding political impasse with the proprietary Penn family based in London. The Penn family still exercised close control over the province's executive and strenuously resisted the Assembly's attempts at taxing family lands. Franklin largely failed in reconciling the two branches of government, but regardless, his political remit continued to expand. At the apogee of his influence, he was the Deputy Postmaster General for North America and acted as an agent for Georgia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts as well as Pennsylvania. These roles made him such a prominent figure in British politics that many Britons blamed the American Revolution on Franklin's machinations. Ultimately, Goodwin shows Franklin operating in the centre of British politics in order to highlight the sincere attachment to Britain that preceded even the most ardent American patriotism.

*Franklin in London* is a comprehensive account of Franklin's life. It explores major events, daily life, and personal foibles. The book begins with a thematic prologue about the pivotal 1775 speech of William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham. Chatham's plan for compromising with the Americans demonstrated the passionate support that the colonies still enjoyed in Britain even on the eve of violent conflict, but it also showed that the ruling ministry under Lord North was committed to securing votes in Parliament to coerce the Americans into obedience. The Chatham episode showcases several key themes in the book. Firstly, before Chatham delivered his speech in the House of Lords, he met with Franklin and escorted him into the chamber, thereby showing the respect Franklin had earned during his time in Britain. Although Goodwin asserts that Chatham's gesture recognised Franklin as a consummate politician, the author continues that many other Britons saw Franklin as a world-leading scientist and it was his accomplishments in this field that gave him access to the great and good of British society. Goodwin explains the development of imperial politics by examining Franklin's association with the various ruling ministries and his personal connection to powerful figures. Goodwin implies these working relationships directed the course of the American Revolution. Secondly, the prologue shows that Franklin remained a loyal British subject until the moment he concluded that reconciliation would be impossible. Goodwin revisits Franklin's identity throughout the book in order to

stress Franklin's commitment first to Britain and then to America. For Goodwin, the anti-American prejudices of the British ministry precipitated Franklin's transition between the two identities. Finally, the prologue indicates that the book will primarily tell the story of Franklin's life. Goodwin focuses on relating the events surrounding the speech and forgoes formal historical conventions such as the discussion of methodology or historiographical intervention. Ultimately, the prologue makes Goodwin's intentions for the book clear from the outset, even though the author is not wholly explicit about his aims.

After the prologue, the chapters begin with Franklin's birth and follow chronologically, concluding in a summative epilogue of Franklin's later years between his departure from London in 1775 to his death in 1790. This final chapter reprises many of the same themes broached in the prologue and especially the close connections between Britain and America. The book moves at a brisk pace throughout. Goodwin largely abstains from detailed analysis of Franklin's society in order to develop a central narrative regarding Franklin's professional career advocating for American interests. However, it is clear that Goodwin's account is a synthesis of sophisticated material. The book draws from archival papers, edited collections, and other scholarship. Goodwin's implicit thesis is that the American Revolution rested on the fortunes of powerful figures such as Bedford, Chatham, and Rockingham. The factions that formed under these men dramatically affected the imperial relationship between Britain and America. Goodwin provides a detailed account of the political manoeuvring, but the differences between the three groups is usually described in terms of patronage, personality, and family relations, overlooking the more complex political and ideological distinctions. That said, as background, the brief descriptions of the factions still suffice to situate Franklin in the cut and thrust of the turbulent party politics of the 1760s and 1770s. *Franklin in London* focuses more on illuminating Franklin's life than the world around him. Goodwin includes an impressive range of topics and a wide cast of characters, but in service to the narrative, he summarises these issues rather than treating any one topic exhaustively.

In telling the story of Franklin, Goodwin still discusses scholarship, but he does so in order to clarify the character of Franklin rather than contributing explicitly to historiographical debates. It is Franklin's character that engenders the most discussion from Goodwin. Foremost, Goodwin's Franklin is intelligent. Goodwin includes the witty aphorisms of characters like Silence Dogood and Poor Richard and he frequently highlights the probing curiosity of Franklin as a natural philosopher. However, it is Franklin's shrewd political acumen that mainly advances the central narrative. In fact, the rare lapses in Franklin's judgement actually prove the general rule of his cunning. For example, Franklin was outwitted by Thomas Penn, patriarch of the Penn family, during the first meeting between the two in 1757. Franklin trusted Penn with an informal draft of the Assembly's complaints that did not include the deferential preamble expected of a formal complaint. Penn then used the document to discredit Franklin personally and delay any decision in Parliament. Goodwin suggests this lapse was due to naïveté exacerbated by a likely case of malaria. In general, Goodwin shows Franklin making clever political decisions. Perhaps Franklin's biggest vulnerability was his state of 'Franklin Furioso', Jonathan Dull's description of moments of irresponsible anger. Franklin Furioso wrote the 1775 letter to Lord Dartmouth, cabinet minister responsible for the colonies, raging about the contempt shown to the Americans during the debate in the House of Lords featured in the opening prologue. The intemperate and threatening language in the letter quickened the end of Franklin's political usefulness in London, though it also demonstrated his commitment to the American cause.

The strength of the book, however, is that Goodwin looks beyond Franklin's career. More than just an assessment of Franklin as a political actor, Goodwin explores the intimate details of Franklin's personal life as well. Perhaps most interestingly, Goodwin references Larry Tise's edited collection *Benjamin Franklin and Women* (1) in his discussion of Franklin's private relationships. Tise's collection aimed to redress Franklin's perceived sexual lewdness. The essays show that Franklin enjoyed intellectual companionship with women, and *Franklin in London* also emphasises this part of Franklin's life. One of the most important relationships was Franklin's partnership with his wife Deborah Read Franklin, who never joined her husband in London and instead oversaw the family business in America. Goodwin includes an affecting description of Read's ailing health and Franklin's seeming unwillingness to acknowledge her terminal condition in the surviving correspondence. Franklin developed a similarly equal partnership with Margaret

Stevenson, the proprietor of Franklin's Craven street boarding rooms. Stevenson helped Franklin organise his busy affairs in London and hosted his social occasions. Finally, Franklin developed a more avuncular role with Polly Stevenson, daughter of Margaret. Benjamin and Polly shared mutual interests in natural philosophy and learning. The overall picture of Franklin's character is celebratory, but it is not two-dimensional. Goodwin presents Franklin as a sympathetic protagonist.

Alongside the development of Franklin's character, Goodwin includes rich detail about Franklin's daily life. Goodwin devotes significant attention to 18th-century diets. *Franklin in London* looks at both dramatic shifts in late 18th-century foodways, like the introduction of tea and sugar, as well as more local changes, such as the gradual movement of dinner, the main meal of the day, from one pm to the more fashionable five pm. Goodwin also shows Franklin's American palate. For example, Franklin's favourite meat was venison, which was relatively accessible in America but a notable delicacy in Britain because of the standing statutes on poaching. Similarly, Franklin frequently asked his wife to send him American nuts, grains, and fruits, including a special variety of apple called the Newtown Pippin. Moreover, the book includes illustrative accounts of the foods and drink served at the banquets and social occasions Franklin attended. Overall, Goodwin paints a vivid picture of both daily diets and special treats. Besides food, the narrative is interspersed with domestic scenes of Franklin's life in London. The most intimate chapter focuses on the *Cravenstreet Gazette*, a playful newspaper Franklin wrote for Polly Stevenson while her mother was on holiday in Rochester. The chapter provides insights into the easy intimacy that Franklin had created in London. Goodwin also uses the opportunity to discuss Franklin's attitude to his weight gain and the threat of gout. Ultimately, Goodwin creates an immersive world around Franklin and these diversions set the scene for Franklin's professional relationships rather than pull away from them.

While Franklin's politics drive forward the story, Goodwin devotes significant attention to his scientific side too. Franklin's discoveries and experiments established his niche in Britain. There are summaries of Franklin's renowned work on electrical experiments and the design of the glass armonica as well as summaries of the less familiar works such as mapping the Gulf Stream – Franklin's maps were the first attempts in the world – and the four-hour clock, which never became popular but demonstrated Franklin's mechanical abilities. Crucially, the summaries of Franklin's scientific life help explore 18th-century sociability in Britain. *Franklin in London* features many of Franklin's fellow Copley Medal winners. The medal was awarded by the Royal Society for outstanding scientific achievement, and recipients included John Pringle, William Hewson, Joseph Priestley and Benjamin Wilson. There were also a number of other important scientific figures including Peter Collinson, Lord Kames, David Hume, and John Fothergill. There was even a frustrated attempt at meeting Isaac Newton during Franklin's first visit to London between 1724 and 1726. Franklin did not meet Newton, but the meeting had been facilitated by Hans Sloane and Newton's collaborator, Israel Pemberton. Although not always situated in the fullest of historical context, *Franklin in London* introduces a number of important figures from 18th-century scientific circles and puts them into a social context. At times a little more about each person's contributions to science would have been welcome, but admittedly, this would have slowed the pace and increased the word count.

This focus on sociability is sustained in Goodwin's discussion of politics. Many important British and American politicians are featured in the book, but Goodwin often uses these characters to build dramatic tension rather than analyse their place in broader society. For example, Goodwin depicts Chatham as the great doyen of British politics; during the prologue Franklin is embarrassed and overawed by Chatham deigning to speak with him. The effect is to demonstrate both Franklin's humility and his elevated position in British society, but Goodwin does not explore Chatham's motivation for supporting the American cause. At times, this relatively opaque characterisation of prominent figures produces engaging plot moments, such as when Lieutenant Governor William Keith asked Franklin to travel from Philadelphia to London in 1724 to secure printing machinery and supplies. Even though I knew Keith had no credit in Britain and Franklin was being sent on a fool's errand, Goodwin revealed the deception dramatically and it is an entertaining anecdote, however, Goodwin offers no explanation for why Keith acted so strangely. This is a recurrent issue in *Franklin in London*. Occasionally, the people around Franklin seemed to act without purpose. Goodwin's omission of explanatory context is particularly noticeable for major antagonists like Thomas

Penn or Lord Hillsborough, the Secretary of State for the Southern Department, which included the colonies. Penn and Hillsborough help Goodwin demonstrate Franklin's political acumen in a dramatic way, but because their motivations do not receive much attention, then it can appear as if Franklin inhabited a slightly arbitrary world. These dramatic relationships prompt engaging literary moments that add to the verve of the writing style, but they do not always sufficiently explain the forces that challenged and supported Franklin throughout his life.

There are two other dramatic inclusions that support Goodwin's narrative. Firstly, Goodwin creates a strong sense of London as the *mise-en-scène* for the book. Goodwin often takes the time to set the action of Franklin's life in the environs of the London cityscape. The author makes a series of interesting observations about the development of London in the 18th century. He discusses the building of the bridges across the Thames as well as the development of the roads and markets that helped Londoners access fresh food in the city, including a dairy herd in St James's Park. The sense of place and culture that Goodwin creates neatly underscores the London element of Franklin's life in Britain. Goodwin's paratexts also include a list of places to visit in London and Philadelphia that further emphasise the important presence of the city in the book. I also appreciated the added expense of the 39 full colour illustrations in 16 glossy pages. Many of them are famous portraiture from a number of important collections throughout the Atlantic, but there is also a caricature from James Gillray, a Wedgwood Jasperware medallion of Franklin's son William Franklin, and photographs of Craven Street and Franklin's glass armonica. I think the best addition is the scene of Chatham's death facing an annotated sketch of the same portrait. The two pictures help readers connect names to faces. Collectively, the glossy sections help vivify the action and while Goodwin focuses narrowly on Franklin, sometimes at the expense of others in his life, the book gives a strong sense of the lived experience that surrounded Franklin's contribution to imperial politics.

*Franklin in London* is an immersive biography, and I think the book would be useful for a student struggling to connect with 18th-century material. Goodwin introduces a range of important topics and uses the story of Franklin to move quickly through the issues. *Franklin in London* helps populate the world of imperial politics and science with engaging characters. The narrative can help to draw connections between more analytical or in-depth material. Similarly, *Franklin in London* could be useful for anyone interested in 18th-century sociability. The book introduces a broad cast of characters that a researcher can follow through the notes and bibliography. Overall, it is a meticulous and engrossing book.

Before I conclude though, I would like to use this review to pose two questions, especially because Goodwin prioritises the book's narrative above explicit commentary. Firstly, I am curious about the strengths of biography as a genre? Initially, my question may seem impossibly open, but I believe it is worth periodically revisiting genre definitions as historical writing responds to broader social change. Discussion about biography and the 'Founding Fathers' has renewed relevance since the success of the Alexander Hamilton musical, based on Ron Chernow's biography, reignited debate over 'Founders Chic'. Andrew Schocket provides a thorough summary of the critiques of Founders Chic (2), but in essence, the complaint is that disproportionate focus on the lives of elite men like Franklin distorts the historical perspective of the American Revolution by marginalising the experiences of more populous groups such as poor people, women, Native Americans, black people, and enslaved people. Significantly, biographies have been a prominent genre for authors contributing to this 'Founders Chic', but rather than dwelling on the culture war aspect of the question, I am more interested in the peculiar advantages that biography enjoys over other ways of exploring the past. I think that Franklin is a useful prompt to reflect on biography as a genre because of the importance of his autobiography in the literary canon.

The second question is more narrowly focused on understanding the 18th-century world. I wonder how representative is the story of Franklin and his transition to becoming American? *Franklin in London* is a reminder that Americans considered themselves British for a long time before the Revolution, but it is also important to note that there was a popular commitment to being American that preceded outright rebellion or discussions of independence. My concern is that Franklin was exceptional. Unlike most, he left a rich documentary record. He was extraordinarily conscientious about understanding his relationship with Britain

and even left his thought process, or ‘Prudential Algebra’, to posterity. Yet his story may misrepresent the way others experienced this crucial transition. I suspect that for many colonists becoming American was staggered, uncertain, and for some it may have been imperceptible. Ultimately, what can we understand about the 18th-century British Empire from this singular man? Again, Franklin is a useful prompt for thinking about the relationship between elites and ordinary people because Franklin clearly intended to become a gentleman, yet he remained proud of his association with leather-apron men, the artisans of early America, throughout his whole life. Clearly, Franklin did not have a typical experience, but was he in any way representative of becoming American?

## Notes

1. *Benjamin Franklin and Women*, ed. Larry E. Tise (University Park, PA, 2000).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A. M. Schocket, *Fighting over the Founders: How we Remember the American Revolution* (New York, NY, 2015), pp. 49–84.[Back to \(2\)](#)

### Other reviews:

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<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/mar/9/book-review-benjamin-franklin-in-london-the-britis/> [2]

Guardian

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