Assessing "Founder's Chic": An Examination of Recent Studies of Benjamin Franklin for Insights into the Resurgence of the Founders in American Historiography

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Introduction

The most prominent members of the revolutionary generation of the United States, known as the Founding Fathers, have been thoroughly studied by historians and enthusiasts for nearly two centuries. Beginning in the early nineteenth century with the first biographies of George Washington by John Marshall and Mason “Parson” Weems, the publishing of Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography, and continuing to the dawn of the twenty-first century, biographies of the Founding Fathers have been a continued source of interest for the American public. Recent biographies such as David McCullough’s John Adams (2002) have been at the top of the bestseller lists, and have won numerous awards. That McCullough’s rendition of the life of Adams was also adapted into an award-winning HBO miniseries in 2008 indicates that the Founding Fathers have experienced a surge in recent years. The trend has been loosely labeled “Founders Chic.”

The reactions to the surge of the founders in historiography have been mixed. Some have seen the trend as positive. In 2001, journalist Evan Thomas viewed the increased public interest in the Founding Fathers as a mark of nostalgia for “an era of truly genuine statesman” and that what he saw as a successful effort of authors to humanize the founders has fed that interest. Joseph J. Ellis, author of several bestselling founders books including the Pulitzer Prize-winning Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation (2000), has argued that “the central events and achievements and early republic were political” and that the political leaders therefore deserve attention as the prime movers of that historical era. By contrast, critics of the founders biographies, such as David Waldstreicher, argue that concepts such as “character” and “greatness” distort understanding of the history of the early republic. Overemphasis on character considerations also results in the trend toward idolizing one founder at the expense of the others. It is also contended by some critics that the founders books have a political bias, specifically a right-leaning bias. Allegedly, a tendency exists which favors the conservatives of the founding era such as Hamilton, Washington and Adams, at the

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1 It should be stated that the group of individuals known as the founding fathers refers primarily to the most prominent members of an already small group of elites. This group consists of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington.

2 These titles, Mason Weems. Life of Washington. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1962) and John Marshall. The Life of George Washington: Commander in Chief of the American Forces, during the war which established the Independence of his country and first President of the United States. (New York: William H. Wise and Co., 1925) were important contributions to the first generation of Founding Fathers biographies. They have noted shortcomings, which, according to the critics, are still to be found in the efforts of the current generation of biographers. These include excessive adulation of the subject by the author (observed in Weems’ invention of the famous cherry tree story) and the writing of a partisan account (Marshall’s biography of Washington had a decidedly Federalist bent).

3 There is no universally acceptable term for the trend. Supporters of the trend coined the term “Founders Chic” while its critics have used various other terms such as “Federalist Chic” or “Cult of the Founding Fathers” as substitutes that more accurately depict their position. For commentary on these various terms see Jeffrey L. Palsey, Andrew W. Robertson and David Waldstreicher eds. Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.) p. 1.


expense of the democrats Jefferson, Madison and Franklin. According to Jeffrey L. Palsey, "'Founders Chic' is really 'Federalist Chic'.

The debate over the recent Founding Fathers biographies is closely related to some changes in American historiography that have taken place over the last several decades. The concept of American exceptionalism closely relates to these changes. Until the twentieth century, American historians resisted the urge to write with an exceptionalist bent, focusing instead on the continuities between American and European history. However, beginning with Frederick Jackson Turner’s The Significance of the Frontier on American History, exceptionalism gained traction with historians leading to the height of its influence on historiography at the onset of the Cold War. Since the 1960s, American exceptionalism has experienced a decline in the wake of sustained challenges. Currently, American historians shy away from labeling U.S. history as exceptional. As Michael Kammen argues, it is safer to claim that "the United States is different" but that this "does not deny that other societies are different too."

Proceeding along with the decline of American exceptionalism among American historians was a general widening of American historiography. Historical scholarship began to branch out from the previously common trend of focusing on the continuities of American and European history to include greater attention to other regions of the world, including Latin America, Africa, and Asia, which had previously had much more limited roles in American historical studies. Historians themselves were becoming a more diverse group in the second half of the twentieth century, with a more racially and ethnically diverse population of students becoming professional historians.

The evolving perspectives within the historical community contributed to the rise of fresh approaches to historical writing. These new trends came in the form of social

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7 Grouping Franklin with the Jefferson and Madison needs to be qualified, as do the terms “conservative”, “progressive”, and “democratic”. For the purposes of this research, the terms only apply to how each individual viewed politics and the masses. Obviously, it cannot be correct to label slaveholders as “progressive” in our understanding of the word. Franklin’s place in the groupings is difficult because Franklin did not live well into the Federalist Era, and did not truly participate in the first political battles between the right and left in the nation’s history. However, Franklin’s political philosophy clearly had an affinity with Jefferson and Madison’s more democratic views.

8 Jeffrey L. Palsey. “Federalist Chic,” Commonplace April 2002 <http://www.commonplace.org/publick/200202.shtml> “Federalist” refers to the political party that controlled the American government through the first twelve years under the constitution, spanning the Washington and Adams administrations. Federalists generally favored government by the elites and were opposed by the more democratic Jeffersonian Republicans, who took power in 1801 after Jefferson’s election to the presidency. A good account of the politics of the federalist era and the key turning point that was the election of 1800, see Edward J. Larson. A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America’s First Presidential Campaign. (New York: Free Press, 2007)

9 American exceptionalism can be defined as “the notion that the United States has a unique destiny or history” or “a history with highly distinctive features or an unusual trajectory.” Michael Kammen. “The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration,” American Quarterly 45 (March 1993) p. 6.


11 For examples of some noted historians and works that demonstrate the rise of exceptionalism in the first half of the twentieth century see Daniel T. Rodgers. Imagined Histories. p. 25.


history and microhistory. In increasing numbers, historians elected to pursue a bottom-up approach to American history, with a focus on previously marginalized and periphery groups rather than the previous emphasis on elites. The goal of this bottom-up approach was to locate a different perspective and a deeper understanding of events previously covered only from the elite perspective.

Based on these trends in America’s historical scholarship, the resurgence of the Founding Fathers in history books (as a subject that seems naturally prone to being influenced by both exceptionalist and elite-focused approaches to history) does indeed seem to be, as Joseph Ellis put it, “against the scholarly grain.” However, it seems unlikely that a particular subject, such as the Founding Fathers, could attain immunity against trends in historiography. While the value of the founders’ surge is uncertain among historians, the popularity of the Founding Fathers amongst the public is not as difficult to explain. American exceptionalism, while no longer a potent concept among historians, remains deeply-rooted enough in the public at large to keep Americans interested in the generation of elites who sparked the birth of the myth of American uniqueness. Against the grain of historiography or not, there is certainly a popular demand for more on the founders.

Aside from these questions about historiography, there are other issues with the founders’ biographies. The huge number of books generated naturally brings up the question of how much the scholarship on the founders is being advanced. It is natural that new books on the founders will appear over the generations as new historians reconsider old subjects. But again, the clear surge of founder books begs the question of how much is too much. According to historian David Hackett Fischer, “each generation does not rewrite history books,” but refines and revises them. Good scholarship, according to Fisher, “widens and deepens inquiry” in a continuing process of refinement. Is this sort of refinement occurring within the scholarship on the founders? Is scholarship the primary motivation, or is the high popularity of the founders merely being exploited by authors trying to create lucrative bestsellers?

Clearly there are interesting questions to be investigated regarding the Founding Father biographies. I propose to investigate these issues through an examination of several of the recent books about one of the founders. I have elected to confine my research to books on only one of the members of the founding generation in order to attempt to investigate some of the issues regarding the advance of scholarship on specific topics presented above. I chose Benjamin Franklin as the specific founder for my

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14 Microhistory can be roughly said to be the history of “hitherto obscure people that concentrates on the intensive study of particular lives to reveal the fundamental experiences and mentalities of ordinary people.” Microhistory can also apply to the study of places or events with similar previous obscurity. Microhistory often has a high level of significance for the writing of biography, which focuses on the lives of particular individuals. For more on the subject, see Jill Lepore. “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography,” The Journal of American History 88 (June 2001). p. 129-144.


17 Ellis, p. 12.


research. It should be noted that Franklin is somewhat inconsistent with some of the debates surrounding the surge in founders books, specifically the debate about the Federalist era, since Franklin died too soon to join the controversies of that period. However, I think the general questions about whether authors are pushing a political agenda are still relevant in considering Franklin, even if the Federalist period is not being considered.

This research was based on the reading of a sampling of the most recent books written about Franklin. All were published within the last ten years and were accessible to the public at large. These five books were, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (2000) by H.W. Brands, *Stealing God’s Thunder: Benjamin Franklin’s Lightning Rod and the Invention of America* (2005) by Philip Dray, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (2003) by Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin* (2002) by Edmund S. Morgan, and *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (2004) by Gordon S. Wood. Of the five books that the sampling consists of, four were written by professional historians, Walter Isaacson being the exception.20

I determined that it would be necessary also to read less recent biographies about Franklin to serve as a basis of comparison in my search for evidence of legitimate refinement of scholarship on Franklin. The three older Franklin biographies consist of *Benjamin Franklin* (1938) by Carl Van Doren (long considered to be the best Franklin biography), *Benjamin Franklin: The Shaping of Genius (1706-1723)* (1977) by Arthur Bernon Tortellot (considered to be the authoritative treatment on Franklin’s youth), *Franklin of Philadelphia* (1986) by Esmond Wright21 (considered to be the best scholarly treatment of Franklin by many historians). These books were chosen because of their reputations and the fact that these are sources on which the recent books lean on frequently.

Before beginning the analysis of the recent books about Franklin, it will be useful to first note the motives and goals of the authors of the several recent Franklin books. H.W. Brands set out to write a full-length biography that would also provide wider context on the colonial and revolutionary eras that Franklin lived through. As is apparent in his choice of *The First American* as a title, Brands portrayed Franklin’s life as a microcosm for the birth of the American nation.22 Edmund S. Morgan claimed in his short Franklin biography that he was writing in order to prove that Franklin was “worth the trouble” to compile his papers.23 Morgan declares his purpose of giving readers an “introductory letter” to Franklin.24 In the introduction to his own full-length work, Walter Isaacson notes that each generation of Americans “appraises [Franklin] anew, and in doing so reveals some assessment of itself.”25 It is this self-assessing interpretation of the founder through the prism of twenty-first century that Isaacson most concerns himself with. Gordon S. Wood and Philip Dray, in their respective works, claimed more topic-oriented goals. As Wood’s title indicates, his book focuses on the forging of Franklin’s

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20 Walter Isaacson is a journalist who previously was the CEO of CNN and managing editor of *Time.*
21 Esmond Wright is the only author of the several books involved in this research who is not an American. He was, notably, a member of the British parliament.
24 Morgan, p. xi.
reputation as the quintessential American despite his very aristocratic and European sensibilities.26 The focus of Dray’s book is on Franklin’s scientific career, specifically the impact of the invention of the lightning rod.

By using both the recent and the older books on Franklin, I propose to investigate the following questions. First, is there merit to the criticisms that the surge in Founding Fathers books distorts understanding of the American Revolution? Secondly, to what extent are the recent books about Franklin truly “against the grain” of the recent trends in American historiography? Finally, to what extent do the recent books on Franklin represent refinement of previous scholarship on the founder?

Part I: The Criticism of Viewing the American Revolution through the Founders

To evaluate whether the detractors of the surge of founders books have a point, I will examine some specific criticisms that have been previously introduced. Their focus on “character” allegedly distorts or obscures some of the history involved with the subject of the American Revolution and early republic, and they have a purported right-leaning political bias. Through examination of some points of Franklin’s life, these questions can be investigated.

The “Character” Criticism:

Since the books on the founders are for the most part biographies, it is to be expected that they will have an emphasis on the topic of “character”. Each recent Franklin author adds color to his book with commentary on Franklin’s personal thoughts and feelings at important points in his life, which happened to be important historical moments as well. Do these aspects of the books distort any of the larger historical events that Franklin was involved with?

A few moments in Franklin’s life seem particularly vulnerable to the overemphasis of character. One such moment in Franklin’s life is the episode involving Franklin’s examination in front of the Privy Council in 1774, known as the Cockpit episode. The episode is named after the place where the incident took place, a chamber known as the “Cockpit” (apparently the site was used to hold cockfights during the reign of Henry VIII). The Cockpit had room for the Privy Council and also a gallery, which was full of spectators, to Franklin’s embarrassment.27 Franklin was examined by the Privy Council because of his role in the Hutchinson letters affair. The Hutchinson Letters were a correspondence between the Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson, and the secretary of the province, Andrew Oliver, between 1767 and 1769. In the letters, Hutchinson urged that the abridgement of “what are called English liberties” to control the unrest in the colony. Franklin obtained the letters in 1772, probably by way of a sympathetic member of parliament.28

Franklin decided to send the letters to friends in the Boston assembly to be used as a way to channel the anger of the assembly on Hutchinson (by then the governor of the colony) and his correspondents. He evidently thought that making a scapegoat of Hutchinson would be an effective way to calm tensions between Britain and the colonies. However, Franklin stated in his note accompanying the Hutchinson Correspondence that

he did not wish for the letters to become public.\textsuperscript{29} The letters were published anyway, causing further uproar in Boston and a sensation in England. The accusations about who had gotten the letters and how they had gotten them resulted in disputes and eventually dueling, which led Franklin to go public and admit his role in sending the letters to the Boston. Franklin was then summoned to testify on the affair before the Privy Council. Making Franklin’s situation even more difficult was the arrival of the news of the Boston Tea Party just before Franklin’s examination. The examination became little more than an opportunity for Hutchinson’s council, Alexander Wedderburn, to heap abuse on Franklin, calling him an “incendiary” and even a thief. Franklin stood silent throughout the tirade which lasted over an hour. The hearing was a crushing blow to Franklin’s reputation in England, and also resulted in the loss of his position as Deputy Postmaster for the colonies.\textsuperscript{30}

It is certain that the episode was one of the most humiliating moments of Franklin’s life, but its impact on Franklin’s future decisions is debatable, as is its value as a metaphor to describe the mindset of the rebellious colonists. The Cockpit incident is one of the most dramatic and symbolically loaded moments of the years leading up to the revolution, and has found its way into the popular perceptions about the period. The drama surrounding the Cockpit episode is also present in some of the recent Franklin biographies. H.W. Brands begins his book with a description of the episode, claiming that the incident made Franklin realize “his only home was America.”\textsuperscript{31} Wood writes that the episode destroyed Franklin’s affections for the mother country and relates an account of Franklin swearing to humble George III for the insult.\textsuperscript{32} Morgan and Isaacson, however, keep their narrations relatively simple, though Isaacson does later relate the account of how Franklin reportedly wore the same coat of Manchester velvet that he had worn in the Cockpit at the signing of the treaty of alliance with France in order to “give it a little revenge.”\textsuperscript{33} Because of the focus on the scientific career of Franklin by Philip Dray, the incident is not described at all in \textit{Stealing God’s Thunder}.

In addition to the fact that only two of the authors in the sampling, Wood and Brands, seem to dramatize the Cockpit incident, those authors also qualify their inclusion of the dramatic aspects of the story into their books. For instance, in describing Franklin’s alleged tirade against the king, Gordon Wood makes sure to note that the incident is of doubtful authenticity. Wood also points out the fact that Franklin continued to work for conciliation between the colonies and Britain, even after the insulting examination in the Cockpit.\textsuperscript{34} Brands similarly notes Franklin’s continued negotiation efforts. He sticks to his assertion that the Cockpit incident forever dispelled Franklin’s desire to settle permanently in England, but also acknowledges the affection Franklin continued to hold for England and his friends there.\textsuperscript{35}

The older Franklin biographies do not differ significantly from their recent counterparts in their renditions of the Cockpit incident. Carl Van Doren’s narrative of the
subject is relatively straightforward and free of the dramatic aspects of this period, with the exception of the anecdote about Franklin’s velvet coat getting revenge, which, as stated earlier, was also utilized by Isaacson. However, in Franklin of Philadelphia, Esmond Wright contends that the Cockpit incident was a clear turning point and can even be seen as a microcosm for the conflict between the colonies and Britain. Wright’s treatment of Franklin’s humiliation in the Cockpit is comparable to H.W. Brands’s account in its utilization of the dramatic factors involved with the event. The recent biographies, therefore, do not differ significantly from their earlier counterparts in their treatments of this period of Franklin’s life. If the incident is being overdramatized, it is not a recent phenomenon that emerged with the surge in books on Franklin over the last decade.

Another period in which “character” factors could conceivably be overemphasized is the subject of Franklin’s days as one of the American envoys to France during the Revolutionary War. The recent Franklin biographies place a heavy emphasis on Franklin’s relationships with his fellow Americans in this period. Walter Isaacson and Gordon Wood devote sections of their respective descriptions of the Paris phase of Franklin’s life to his relationship with John Adams. Morgan and Brands similarly spend several pages of their books on the personal dynamics involved in the Paris negotiations. More than half of Morgan’s treatment of Franklin’s role in the Paris negotiations is focused on the difficulties Franklin had with his fellow commissioners. Brands claims that Franklin’s fellow American commissioners were bigger obstacles than the French in negotiating with France. Even Philip Dray, in his book on the scientific Franklin, mentions the tensions that marked the relationship between Franklin and Adams.

It can be argued that some of the questions investigated by the recent Franklin biographers, such as Isaacson’s question about whether Adams and Franklin “liked” each other, are just the sort of character obsessed questions that dominate the founders books and obscure larger historical issues. Yet, it must also be acknowledged that the personalities and personal relationships of the American and French representatives participating in the Paris negotiations undoubtedly did affect how the negotiations proceeded and that some background information about these personal dynamics are necessary to fully understanding the American diplomacy of the period. In the case of Gordon Wood’s book, questions about what the other prominent revolutionaries such as John Adams and Arthur Lee thought of Franklin while they worked with him during this period.

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32 Franklin was in Paris from late 1776 until 1785. During this period, Franklin worked with other American Commissioners to negotiate the military alliance as well as material aid to the United States. The mission culminated with the negotiation of the peace treaty with Great Britain which resulted in the Treaty of Paris in 1783. For full accounts of the American diplomatic mission to France during the American Revolution, see Jonathan Dull. A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987.) and Robert Hoffman and Peter Albert eds. Diplomacy and Revolution. (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1981.)
33 Morgan Benjamin Franklin. p. 251-271.
period are particularly important because Wood’s study is focused on the development of Franklin’s reputation during his own and succeeding generations.

Does the focus on the character questions in Founding Fathers books indeed elevate the standing of one member of the founding generation at the expense of others? The focus on the relationship with John Adams in Paris seems to be an example where this is true. The recent authors of books on Franklin emphasize Adams’s jealousy, vanity, and displays of irrational behavior which led Franklin to characterize the second president as “sometimes and in some things, absolutely out of his senses.”43 However, this commentary on Adams exists wholly within the context of the Paris phase of Franklin’s life. The authors do not actively pursue the elevation of Franklin’s status next to the other founders in any other segment of Franklin’s life. Additionally, as was also observed in the investigation of the Cockpit incident, the trend cannot be said to be a clear cut result of “Founders Chic” since earlier biographers also compare Franklin favorably to Adams in this period.44

Character is arguably too highly emphasized when applied to Franklin’s supposed personal impact on the negotiation of the treaty of alliance with France. Clearly, the authors of several of the recent books believe that Franklin’s personal impact was undeniable, Isaacson going so far as to claim that Franklin had won the greatest diplomatic victory in United States history in securing the French alliance.45 Wood calls Franklin “indispensable to the Revolution abroad.”46 The opinion that Franklin’s individual contribution was irreplaceable does not seem confined to the current generation of authors, since in 1938 Carl Van Doren claimed that in securing the treaty of alliance with France, Franklin had “won a diplomatic campaign equal in results to Saratoga.”47

However Franklin’s alleged indispensability may be an illusion. For example, Esmond Wright downplays the personal impact that Franklin, or any of the American commissioners in Paris, had on the most important developments of the period- the treaty of alliance with France and the peace settlement with England. Wright notes that in all probability, both those treaties would have been settled no matter who was at the negotiating table, or whether or not the commissioners got along. According to Wright, the Battle of Saratoga was more of a catalyst to French recognition than Franklin’s prodding. Even the battle itself may have been moot, since there is evidence that the French government was in the midst of shifting its policy toward America of its own

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44 For example, while Carl Van Doren records several of Adams’s astute observations about Franklin’s arguably inflated reputation in France, he qualifies them by saying that “it is plain that Adams never liked Franklin,” and that jealousy and the incompatibility of Adams’s outspoken personality with Franklin’s habitually reserved character clearly manifested themselves in his observations. Van Doren concludes that Adams, while a great man, had trouble living beside a “very” great man such as Franklin. Van Doren. Benjamin Franklin. p. 600.


47 Van Doren. Benjamin Franklin. p. 593.
There certainly seems to be an effective argument against the contention of the recent authors that claims Franklin was indispensable.

The two periods examined, Franklin's last months in England and his diplomatic phase in France, are probably the two periods in Franklin's life where authors are most susceptible to overemphasizing the role of "character," personal impact, or aggrandizing Franklin while putting down the other founders. In the first case, it seems that the authors generally did not give in to the impulse to overdramatize the Cockpit incident and its impact on Franklin's decisions and qualified their inclusion of dramatic moments. The case of Franklin's diplomatic mission to France produced more evidence that validates the critics' argument that authors put much store in Franklin's personal impact on the diplomatic achievements of the period, despite evidence that those objects may well have been accomplished without Franklin's presence. There is also evidence of a "Franklin up, Adams down" interpretation to the heavily covered relationship between the two founders in this period, though the Adams-Franklin relationship was arguably relevant to the topic of American diplomacy.

From this survey of these two areas of Franklin's life most likely to overstress character issues at the cost of history, the detractors' criticisms related to character have some validity in the latest generation of Franklin books, though this validity is far from complete. It seems evident that the authors of the recent books avoided letting character issues dominate the two periods examined. From a comparison with two older full-length biographies, it also is clear that the recent books have generally not increased their emphasis on character issues. Thus, the recent "Founders' Chic" trend does not seem to be a radically different way of looking at the founders.

The Bias Criticism:

Franklin did not participate in the first factional struggles of the early republic. He is politically less controversial than the more politically combative founders such as Hamilton and Jefferson. Franklin's political makeup is markedly mixed when compared to the Federalist and Republican ideologies. Franklin's positions are, for the most part, an amalgam of the positions of each faction. For example, he shared Jefferson's populist views regarding the formation of the American economy over the mercantile and banking centered system favored by the Federalists. Franklin was a proponent of a strong central government, though he did not support the borderline monarchist views of executive power that Hamilton championed. Franklin became an abolitionist at the end of his life,

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49 Franklin, like Jefferson, believed that the future of America was linked to its frontier and the prosperity that available land would offer to yeoman farmers for generations. America's agrarian economy would thus be able to avoid the more undesirable aspects of industrialization, such as the emergence of a landless proletariat, which marked England at the time. Hamilton, by contrast, sought to mold the U.S. economy on the British model. Franklin first recorded his thoughts on the American west before independence in 1751 in the pamphlet 'Observations concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c.' Laberee, Ed. *Papers*. Vol. 4. pg. 227-234. For a full account on the differing views on America's economic future during the founding period see Drew R. McCoy. *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981.)
50 Franklin was consistent in endorsing legislative over executive power. Moreover, in his contribution to the Pennsylvania State Constitution, Franklin supported a unicameral legislature and a multiple-member executive. He also supported these institutions at the Constitutional Convention. Van Doren. *Benjamin Franklin*. p. 745.
aligning with the free-labor North which would eventually triumph over the slave-labor South. Franklin’s positions put him on the right side of history on most of the issues that would divide the nation in the decades following his death. People of all political persuasions can find much to like in him.

Franklin’s orientation as a political moderate whose positions effectively anticipated the course of history renders the use of Franklin for “Federalist Chic” difficult. Generally, the recent Franklin books do not seek to push a political message. Of the books surveyed for this study, Isaacson’s book draws the deepest parallels between Franklin’s philosophy and current political considerations, since his book most actively pursues the interpretation of Franklin from the point of view of the twenty-first century. Isaacson emphasizes Franklin as a self-made man with bourgeois values. He identifies Franklin with the middle class, a term that developed a greater meaning in the twentieth century than it had in the eighteenth century. Isaacson also defends Franklin from the criticisms of numerous well-known critics over time such as D.H. Lawrence, who, in deriding Franklin as shallow, is also, according to Isaacson, putting down middle class values that are one of America’s great strengths. Some of the other recent books similarly note the criticisms like Lawrence’s, but Isaacson’s defense is the most sweeping.

By viewing Franklin as an entrepreneur and social climber some evidence of a bias of the recent books can be seen. This bias does seem to have a bent to the right (positive emphasis on capitalism, materialism, and rugged individualism), though it must be acknowledged that it is confined to this specific facet of Franklin’s life, and that several of the authors make sure to qualify their descriptions of Franklin’s self-made “way to wealth” with assertions that Franklin was not the shallow, penny-pinching capitalist that many have painted him as. For instance, in the introduction to The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin, Gordon Wood claims that Franklin derided those whose sole concern with existence was moneymaking. He cites a letter Franklin wrote to his mother in which he declared that at the end of his life “I would rather have it said that He lived usefully, than, He died rich.”

An examination of the central criticisms leveled by the detractors of the surge in Founding Fathers books on the subject of the history of the American Revolution and early republic yields mixed results. The recent Franklin books do indeed participate in some of the “one founder up, one founder down” contention, and some overemphasize Franklin’s individual contribution to some events. A few authors infuse their books with overly dramatic accounts of events, and some political bias is present in one. Though the

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51 Isaacson, Benjamin Franklin, p. 3.
52 The choice of Isaacson to cite Lawrence, a British novelist, as one of Franklin’s chief critics over the years probably stems from the fact that Lawrence wrote the most famous portrayal of Franklin as a soulless capitalist. Other famous figures, such as Mark Twain also criticized Franklin as a self-made man. However, Twain’s tone was jesting while Lawrence’s was venomous. Lawrence’s opinions have relevance because they have become the most prominent expressions of the romantic criticisms of Franklin. Isaacson, Benjamin Franklin, p. 489
53 For example, Gordon Wood also notes that “everyone who had a quarrel with superficial bourgeois America also had a quarrel with Franklin,” but Wood differs from Isaacson in that he is not seeking to defend the bourgeois dynamic of Franklin, but to trace Franklin’s reputation across the different generations. Wood, Americanization of Benjamin Franklin, p. 6.
54 Wood, Americanization of Benjamin Franklin, p. 9.
criticisms about “character” emphasis and bias seem to have some weight, an
examination of the recent books hardly produces decisive evidence to endorse the
detractors’ positions. The recent authors often qualify their use of dramatic anecdotes,
political bias is not common, and a comparison to older Franklin biographies reveals very
little clear difference between the current and past generations’ treatments of Franklin
relative to “character” issues.

**Part II: The Question of Compatibility with Changes in Historiography**

On the surface, Joseph Ellis’s assertion that Founding Fathers books go against
the grain of current historical scholarship seems quite credible. The authors of the recent
Franklin books do put much store in Franklin’s individual contribution to historical
events and are generally confined to the perspective of elites like Franklin. But are the
recent Franklin books really resistant to the changes that have occurred in American
historiography over the last century? Do they revive an exceptionalist interpretation of
American history, or capitalize on the residual popularity of exceptionalism among the
American public? Are trends favoring social history and the microhistory incompatible
with the sampling of books on Franklin?

Examination of the recent books on Franklin seems to reveal that exceptionalism
does not make an extensive comeback in the surge of Founding Fathers books. Generally,
Franklin is portrayed as being a human as opposed to a superhuman figure. Franklin’s
flaws and failings are noted prominently alongside his triumphs. For instance, Franklin’s
sometimes ambivalent attitude toward his wife Deborah is a point of interest with the
recent authors. When he comments on Deborah’s physical decline and death while
Franklin was away in London, Gordon Wood clearly takes the stance that Franklin was
reprehensibly cold. It is a clearly admonishing tone that Wood notes Franklin’s letters to
his wife during this period “asked nothing about her condition and told her little about his
life.”

Although Wood takes the strongest stance on Franklin’s marriage, the other
authors also note Franklin’s failings on the subject. Isaacson takes a similarly stern view
on Franklin’s conduct during Deborah’s decline, noting how Franklin’s “short notes” to
his dying wife were “paternalistic” or “businesslike.” Brands says that Franklin had
“essentially abandoned [Deborah] in old age.” Even Dray’s science oriented book
points out how Franklin idealized his life in Philadelphia, but that this did not stop him
from going away from it for decades. Only Morgan’s book is free of any admonishment
of Franklin’s treatment of Deborah. A consensus exists among the other four recent
authors that Franklin erred in his treatment of his wife in her declining years. Such an
interpretation of Franklin’s behavior during Deborah’s decline is not found in Carl Van
Doren’s classic work. The example of Franklin’s less than perfect treatment of his wife

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60 Deborah’s death is mentioned as an aside in Van Doren’s book. The entire paragraph relating Deborah’s
death is put in parenthesis and is a straightforward account of the death and burial and ends with an excerpt
of a letter from Franklin to his wife in which the founder said “It seems but t’other day since you and I
seems to suggest that the recent books are indeed making more of an effort to humanize the founder. The new approach to Franklin’s marriage could also be a reflection of the impact of feminism and changing attitudes regarding women and marriage on American society, which would have had an impact on the historical community and the writing of history also.

The treatment of such personal failings as Franklin’s coldness to his wife and his having once owned slaves are complemented by the authors’ explanations of public failings such as his unsuccessful scheme to have the proprietary Pennsylvania colony made a royal colony and his initial support for the Stamp Act. Clearly the recent Franklin authors are not seeking to deify the founder, or push an idealized view of the American revolutionary period or America itself in the process. In this way, the books seem to go along with decline of exceptionalism in American historiography.

Humanization of Franklin is thus evident in the recent books. However, the authors do seem to cater to the resilient feelings of exceptionalism in the American public through the rendering of anecdotes that have taken on the status of legend in the American psyche. An example of this is the story of Franklin’s interpretation of the design on George Washington’s chair at the Constitutional Convention as being that of a “rising and not a setting sun.” The story is a symbolically loaded anecdote that plays to the residual feelings of exceptionalism within the public. It is utilized by Brands, Isaacscon and Wood in their books. Another symbolic anecdote is Franklin’s famous letter were ranked among the boys and girls, so swiftly does time fly. We have, however, great reason to be thankful that so much of our lives has passed so happily.” These are fond words, but as Van Doren himself notes, this letter was written two years before Deborah’s death. Van Doren essentially passes over perfunctory nature of Franklin’s correspondence with his wife in her final months. Van Doren. Benjamin Franklin. p. 503.

Franklin’s concern with the transfer of Pennsylvania to royal authority was based on his contempt for the proprietors, the heirs of William Penn. The main point of contention was the exemption from taxation of the proprietary lands, the largest source of land in the colony. The proprietors resisted attempts to tax their land, even for the purpose of defending the colony from the French and Native Americans. Franklin also favored the transfer to royal authority because his own imperialist vision required centralization of authority over the colonies. When, in 1764, Franklin circulated a petition to the King, it was heavily opposed by counter-petitions that garnered four times as many signatures, and Franklin lost his seat in the Pennsylvania Assembly in the next election. Franklin completely failed to anticipate that his fellow Pennsylvanians might view being taken under the royal umbrella as a greater threat to their constitutional and religious liberties than the proprietors. Wood. Americanization of Benjamin Franklin. p. 91-101. The next time Franklin severely misread popular opinion was in 1765, during the Stamp Act Crisis. In his capacity as an agent of the Pennsylvania colony, Franklin made known his personal opposition to the Stamp Act on the grounds that it was impractical. However, when the act passed, Franklin reconciled himself to its enforcement and utilized the opportunity to recommend a man of his choice (Franklin chose his friend, John Hughes) to fill the collector post in Philadelphia. Franklin was shocked by the ferocity of the colonial opposition, (which included mob violence that threatened Hughes and Franklin’s own Philadelphia house) and by the fact that the opposition justified itself on the basis of rights. Franklin would spend the next years trying to reaffirm his support among Americans, many of whom always remained suspicious of his true loyalties, even during the revolution. Wood. Americanization of Benjamin Franklin. p. 105-113.

to his “former” friend, London printer William Strahan in 1776. The same three recent Franklin writers use this story. A third humorous and sentimental story, involving Franklin and Adams being forced to share a bed at a crowded inn, and their resulting discussion on catching colds, appears in the books by Wood, Isaacson, Brands and Dray. Only Morgan’s short length work cut these well-known stories. Overall, the authors of the recent books adhere to presentation of much of the popular lore surrounding the American Revolution and thus the continued potency of American exceptionalism in American culture.

An examination of the recent books on Franklin also reveals a higher degree of compatibility with “bottom-up” interpretations of history and social history in general than appears on the surface. For instance, Gordon Wood and Philip Dray chose to look at Franklin through the lens of particular subjects, Wood through eighteenth century society and social mores, and Dray through the Enlightenment. Both authors seek to relate understanding not only of the individual subject, Franklin, but also the broader topic through which the subject is being viewed. In describing the context of Franklin’s lightning rod as an invention that ended centuries of fear and superstition surrounding lightning strikes, Philip Dray seeks to relate how truly revolutionary the Enlightenment was as a period of history. Similarly, through the example of Franklin, Gordon Wood is able to describe the role of rank, class, and the nature of social mobility during the eighteenth century. Wood used this context to bring a greater understanding to the historical Franklin and the image of him as the original self-made man which emerged early in the nineteenth century, and has endured ever since. Based on this, The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin and Stealing God’s Thunder seem to bear the markings of microhistory in that they focus on particular context and key events and not on the whole life of the subject or even the subject itself.

H.W. Brand’s full-length Franklin biography demonstrates some of the influence of the rise of social history. While giving its conventional narrative of Franklin’s life, Brands also injects lengthy sections of the book that give the context of Franklin’s eighteenth century. Brands’s level of context given on eighteenth century society in is

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63 The famous letter reads “Mr. Strahan, You are a Member of Parliament and one of that majority which has doomed my country to destruction. You have begun to burn our towns, and murder our people. Look upon your hands! They are stained with the blood of your relations! You and I were long friends; you are now my enemy, and I am Yours, B. Franklin.” Laberee Ed. Papers Vol. XX. p. 87. The letter was never sent. No evidence exists to prove it was published, as has been claimed in the past. But there is no doubt that Franklin wrote and probably circulated the letter in some form in order to bolster his reputation with his contemporaries in America, some of whom were suspicious of his loyalties to the rebellion after a long stay in England and a slow transformation to open opposition to the British government. Wood. Americanization of Benjamin Franklin. p 272.
64 The incident took place in 1776 near Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Adams and Franklin were part of a committee of Congress authorized to meet with the Howe brothers, the British commanders, who were then headquartered on Staten Island. A summary of the story is that before getting into bed Adams went to close the open window, and Franklin protested, offering to explain his theory on how catching cold had more to do with the spread of germs than with temperature and the resulting benefits of fresh air that come with open windows. Adams and Franklin drifted off to sleep during the explanation. This story is one of the most commonly related about the revolutionary generation. L. H. Butterfield Ed. The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1961) Vol. III. p. 418.
65 Dray. Stealing God’s Thunder. p. xvi.
66 Wood. Americanization of Benjamin Franklin. p. 16.
clearly more expansive than Van Doren’s 1938 work, the previous standard Franklin biography. For instance, in the examples of Franklin’s arrival in Philadelphia and London, Brands devotes extensive passages to acquaint the reader with the history and character of the cities and those who inhabited them when Franklin lived there, while Van Doren’s narrative sticks with Franklin and does not provide the context on setting. According to Jill Lepore, the drift away from focus solely on the “hero” narrative in The First American is another characteristic of microhistory. While being a much more conventional biography than the topic-centered books of Wood and Dray, Brands’s book also demonstrates the influence of the recently emerged norms of historiography.

An examination of some issues related to changes in American historiography, including the decline of exceptionalism amongst historians and the rise of social and microhistory, has revealed that the recent books on Franklin are much more compatible with those changes than they would appear on the surface. The authors by and large seem to humanize Franklin, including in their narratives some of the more negative aspects of his personality and poorer decisions. Franklin is not portrayed as one of the demigods that participated in the providential creation of America, but as a flawed human who had a mixed bag of triumphs and failures. While the authors do include many of the tales that play into exceptionalist feelings within the public, those well-known stories are used to add color to the books and do not overwhelm them. Trends toward social and microhistory seem to have influenced the recent Franklin books, especially the topical books of Wood and Dray, though the example of H.W. Brand’s liberal use of context in his full length work also demonstrates this. It can be argued that the authors of recent books on Franklin sought to utilize the trends of historiography rather than resist them.

**Part III: The Question of Scholarly Refinement:**

Aside from the criticisms made by those concerned with the telling of the history of the American Revolution and early republic, and the issues presented by the evolution of American historiography, legitimate questions exist regarding whether or not the books legitimately advance the scholarship on their subjects— the founders themselves. It is expected that subjects and people of high significance will periodically be reappraised by new generations of historians. This fresh assessment is supposed to result in the refinement, widening and deepening of understanding and inquiry. This section will investigate whether this is true for the recent Franklin books and the related issue of whether the books bear evidence of authors seeking a bestseller over the advancement of Franklin scholarship.

**Sources and the Autobiography:**

In beginning an examination of the recent Franklin books for evidence of scholarly expansion, it would be helpful to first look at what historians have to work with when studying their subject. Obviously, the number of primary sources by or relating to Franklin is static. However, until recently, with the compilation of Franklin’s papers at Yale University, Franklin’s writings were scattered. The synthesis of Franklin’s papers makes locating specific sources easier and can reveal previously obscure sources to have greater significance. While nothing “new” is expected to emerge, it is possible that some diversification could come of the Papers project, though it does not seem evident that this

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has occurred as of yet. Carl Van Doren’s *Benjamin Franklin* is still, as J.A. Leo Lemay writes, “the single best book for locating some bit of information concerning Franklin.”\(^{69}\) The principal sources Van Doren used, what he considered the most important Franklin writings to be, are still the basis for books on Franklin and very little that was previously in the shadows has been brought forward.

One famous primary source on Franklin poses a threat to biographers seeking to deepen and refine Franklin scholarship. Biographers of Franklin have always had an easier job of beginning their narratives because the founder himself was his own original biographer. The *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*\(^{70}\) is a colorful rendering of Franklin’s first five decades of life. Due to the scarcity of sources on Franklin’s youth, the *Autobiography* is necessary to tell the story of his early years.\(^{71}\) What is more, the story of Franklin’s rise in the world as he told it became an American classic during the nineteenth century and must be reckoned with as a famous work.\(^{72}\) With all this comes the danger that Franklin’s biographers might take Franklin’s description of his youth, written nearly a half century after the fact, too much at face value and merely relate Franklin’s version, possibly distorting his life in the process.

It is clear that the recent Franklin books lean heavily on Franklin’s version of events for the years which the *Autobiography* covers. If one were to read the sampling of recent books about Franklin and then read his autobiography, one would likely get a feeling of *déjà vu*, as though one had already read the whole thing... more than once.

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\(^{70}\) Written from 1771-1790, Franklin’s autobiography was not published until after his death, and at first not with the authority of his heirs. The first editions appeared in France, most likely produced from a copy of Franklin’s manuscript, two of which were sent to Europe in 1789. The first authorized edition was produced in 1818 by William Temple Franklin, Benjamin Franklin’s grandson and the inheritor of his personal papers. The Temple Franklin version became a popular success despite heavy editing that rendered the work sterile in comparison to the mischievous style of the original manuscript. Indeed, Temple Franklin did not even base his version of the work on the original manuscript, but on one of the European copies that the first French bootlegs had been produced from (which also happened to be missing the fourth part of the *Autobiography* which Franklin wrote after the first copies were sent to Europe but before his death in 1790). The most widely used version of Franklin’s autobiography with an excellent introduction is the edition produced at Yale University alongside the papers project. Leonard W. Labaree, Ralph L. Ketcham, Helen C. Boatfield, and Helen H. Fineman, Eds. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.)

\(^{71}\) The first writings that exist by Franklin are pieces he wrote for *The New England Courant*, his brother James’s newspaper, in addition to some poems which have been loosely attributed to the founder. It is thus quite understandable that the *Autobiography* is so heavily relied on for the telling of Franklin’s Boston phase. As was mentioned earlier, the best book on Franklin’s childhood, adolescence and the city where it took place, see Arthur Bernon Toutellot. *Benjamin Franklin: The Shaping of Genius* (1706-1723). (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1977.)

\(^{72}\) Out of the sampling of recent Franklin books, Gordon Wood deals most with the reputation and influence of the *Autobiography* since the book had such an important influence on the formation of Franklin’s post mortem image, which is closely related to the central focus of *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*. Wood claims that the popularity of the *Autobiography* was the most influential factor in formation of the image of Franklin as both the “folksy” founder who the American people remain charmed by and also as the original self-made American which has always been the source of admiration by some and derision by others. Wood *Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*. p. 1-3. For more on the message, reputation and significance of the *Autobiography* across the generations, see Steven Forde. “Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography and the Education of America”. *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 86. No. 2. (June 1992). p. 357-368.
should be noted that this is nothing new; Carl Van Doren’s classic book on Franklin gives
the founder’s writings the center stage, and Tortellot’s work on the Boston phase of
Franklin’s life naturally requires the Autobiography to flesh out the sparse sources from
that period.

It is also evident that the recent books on Franklin challenge the founder’s
interpretation of the events of his early life at some points. For instance, Franklin’s
portrayal of his brother James as a petty tyrant (young Benjamin served as an apprentice
to James) was immortalized in his autobiography. Van Doren essentially took Franklin
at his word in this view, writing that James “was a capable printer and journalist, but
Benjamin at seventeen had the best mind in Boston and was the best apprentice in the
world.” However, this rather fawning interpretation gave way over the decades to new
appreciation of Benjamin’s older brother as a significant figure in his own right. First
expressed by Tortellot in his work on Franklin’s boyhood and adolescence, and present in
Isaacson, Brands and Wood, is the argument that James Franklin was a pioneer for a free
press in America, who, as Isaacson wrote, “deserved better” than the immortal stigma
placed on him by his younger brother’s autobiography.

The case of James Franklin reveals that the recent Franklin biographies, while
liberal in their relation of portions of the Autobiography in their narratives, are still
willing to challenge Franklin on his interpretation of events. The interpretation of the
significance of Franklin’s autobiography has been noticeably expanded. Van Doren noted
that Franklin’s autobiography was the first “masterpiece of autobiography by a self made
man.” In The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin, Gordon Wood builds on this
sentiment by arguing that the popularity of Franklin’s autobiography depended on its
publication during the early nineteenth century, the best climate for self-made men in
American history. Wood further claims that the use of the Autobiography and some of
Franklin’s “Poor Richard” writings were crucial to forming Franklin’s reputation as the
original self made man, and consequently crucial in the portrayal of Franklin as a soulless
capitalist by romantics and other critics ever since.

While there is an inherent danger in the overuse or excessive admiration for
Franklin’s most famous work for any of his biographers, it does not seem as though the
recent biographers of Franklin fall into that trap. The recent books are willing to
challenge Franklin’s word on some occasions as demonstrated by the example of James
Franklin. It is also evident that the interpretation of the Autobiography and its
significance is being refined and expanded to an extent. As would be expected, the new
generation of Franklin biographers has not unearthed new ground in terms of sources, but
as the example of the Autobiography demonstrates, they have worked to build on the past
interpretations of sources rather than simply accept them.

The Issue of Originality:

73 Franklin noted that the beatings he received from his brother as an apprentice might have been “a means
of impressing me with that aversion to arbitrary power that has stuck to me through my whole life.”
74 Van Doren. Benjamin Franklin. p 32.
75 Isaacson Benjamin Franklin. p. 34.
76 Van Doren. Benjamin Franklin. p. 414.
Given the static supply of primary sources on Franklin, it is not expected that new books about him will bring forth anything that could be considered new or groundbreaking. However, it is not unreasonable to expect that new appraisals of Franklin should bring some original interpretations or ways of looking at the founder. In this section, each of the recent Franklin books will be surveyed for signs of originality and the refinement that one would expect from new additions to Franklin scholarship. The opinions of professional historians who reviewed the books will be important to interpreting the value of the books as expansions of Franklin scholarship.

H.W. Brands’s *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, as indicated by its title, is concerned with giving an understanding of Franklin and the world he lived in. As a full length and thorough cradle-to-grave biography, it can most easily be compared to Van Doren’s work out of the recent biographies. The insertion of many pages of context about the people and places that Franklin met and saw while also retaining the emphasis on Franklin’s own writings is an expansion that led reviewer John Ferling to predict that Brands’s book would “supplant Carl Van Doren’s *Benjamin Franklin* as the standard Franklin biography for the general reading public.”78 In this way, *The First American* does seem to be a refinement of a past classic, though it must be noted John Ferling contends that the book is not up to the standard of Esmond Wright’s *Franklin of Philadelphia* as a scholarly work.79 This is an accurate assessment of *The First American*. While Brands work surpasses Van Doren’s 1938 classic, the previous standard for the public, it fails to measure up to Wright’s *Franklin of Philadelphia*, the current scholarly standard.

Edmund Morgan’s *Benjamin Franklin* certainly has an original style. Morgan’s narrative is not exactly chronological, and does not give a standard birth-to-death account of Franklin’s life, but instead focuses on key issues that highlight Franklin’s character. As a short biography designed to be an “introductory letter,” Morgan’s use of highlights is understandable.80 It was argued by one of his reviewers that “in the manner of a nineteenth century novelist his subject’s character and career unfold slowly through a series of vignettes…” during which “…we come to understand the overlapping worlds in which Franklin distinguished himself.”81 However, it can also be argued that this stylistic contribution is a slighter scholarly achievement than Brands’s contributions of additional context.

Walter Isaacson is most original in his interpretation of Franklin from the standpoint of our position in the twenty-first century. Isaacson stresses Franklin’s compatibility with our time in his articulation of middle-class values. Barbara Oberg claims that the numerous comparisons between contemporary events and culture and Franklin’s achievements and writings “never fail to reveal something you had not quite thought of before.”82 As was noted in Part I, however, Isaacson’s argument about Franklin’s compatibility with the twenty-first century and middle-class values (which

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80 Morgan. *Benjamin Franklin*, p xi.
implies that the current norm of American values are middle-class in nature) arguably contains a political bias that detracts from the subject.

Wood’s The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin contributes the originality of its topic, the examination of the forging of Franklin’s reputation as an American Founding Father during his life and after his death. In exploring his topic, Wood offers fresh interpretations of several aspects of Franklin’s life, including his meteoric rise to the status of “gentleman,” and puts him back into the context of the eighteenth century. This context, according to Wood, is the only way in which the often contradictory aspects of Franklin can be understood. Reviewers generally concur with the opinion that Wood’s book effectively allows us to sift through “the manipulation of his image by subsequent generations of misguided admirers” by putting him firmly within the context of his time.83

In Stealing God’s Thunder, Philip Dray puts forth the contention that Franklin’s invention of the lightning rod was a revolutionary development that had important links to the coming of revolution in America and Europe. In the words of one reviewer, Dray states that the lighting rod “catalyzed the conceit that enlightened men could extend the practices of science to human life and could thus design societies that respected the rights of individuals.”84 Like Wood, the topic focused Stealing God’s Thunder makes an original contribution to Franklin scholarship in an innovative argument.

A glance at the sampling of recent books about Franklin for signs of original thinking has revealed that each book contributes some form of original interpretation to the topic. However, as in the case of Brands and especially Morgan, this contribution is mostly stylistic. Brands, in adding more context to his narrative, likely improved on the past standard Franklin biography of Van Doren, and Morgan’s unorthodox style likely conveyed the essence of Franklin better than any short biography of him ever has. None the less, it can be argued that these contributions are more literary than scholarly. Isaacson’s look at Franklin through the eyes of our century, moreover, brings up the concerns about bias and distortion examined in Part I. The topic-oriented books of Wood and Brands seem to contribute the most in terms of original arguments. With these assessments in mind, the question of whether the books take the popular dynamic too far at the cost of serious scholarly analysis will next be investigated.

The Question of Pandering to the Public:

As was previously mentioned, all five of the books in the sampling of recent works about Franklin were readily available to the public. All were also written with popular consumption in mind. Whether the targeting of public interest panders for bestsellers rather than advancing the scholarship of the subject will now be investigated. As in the previous section, the opinions of reviewers will be important to this in making determinations as to whether the books strike the scholarly community as overly popular.

H.W. Brands’s The First American built on Carl Van Doren’s past classic book by including large amounts of context about Franklin’s world that added color and a fuller understanding of Franklin’s life. Reviewer John Ferling predicted that Brands’s

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book would supplant Van Doren’s *Benjamin Franklin* as the standard for the general public. However, he is critical of the book’s “omissions and analytical shortcomings” and concludes that “for those who seek a scholarly biography that best sets the man in the circumstances of his times, Esmond Wright’s *Franklin of Philadelphia* remains unsurpassed.” This implies that Wright’s 1986 book is a more effective treatment of “the life and times” of Franklin than Brands’s *The First American*, (nearly twice the length of *Franklin of Philadelphia*) which, as its full title (*The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*) indicates, has the central purpose of explaining Franklin’s “life and times.” While this is a rather indirect criticism, it is essentially a dismissal of *The First American* as an improvement of Franklin scholarship.

Edmund S. Morgan’s unorthodox style of writing in his short biography of Franklin contributed to giving an introduction to Franklin’s career and an understanding of his presence in several different spheres of eighteenth century society. Reviews of Morgan’s work were generally positive. No sentiment contending that the book is overly popular exists. The observation that the book is based “almost exclusively on his extensive readings of Franklin’s writings and little else” is not viewed as a desire on Morgan’s part to exploit his own name as an eminent historian in order to sell books. Rather, in considering Morgan’s *Benjamin Franklin*, reviewing historians are inclined to “thank him for his insights.”

Not surprisingly, the book that can most aptly be considered to be overly geared toward popular sentiment is the one that was not written by a professional historian. Isaacson’s book is not nearly as thorough as Brands’s. It relates a greater number quotes from entertaining anecdotes and writings by and about Franklin than any of the other recent books in the sampling. The feature that makes Walter Isaacson’s *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* unique, its appraisal of Franklin from the twenty-first century perspective, is also the feature that makes it most open to criticism as being biased or open to distortion. While Barbara Oberg may have thought that Isaacson’s comparisons of Franklin to recent and contemporary features and events created an engaging new take on the founder, such comparisons as likening Franklin’s securing of the treaty of alliance with France to the establishment of NATO can be more accurately be judged shallow and unoriginal.

It was revealed in the previous section that Wood and Dray had the most original topics of the sampling. It would not be expected that the search for popular pandering would unearth much in the case of these authors. This expectation proved valid for Wood. *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* was well liked by reviewers. The topic centered formula that Wood employed in his examination of Franklin was characterized

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85 Ferling. Review of Brands. p. 1508. This is an opinion that is relatively common among reviewers of Wright’s 1986 book. Need more.
87 Berkin. Review of Morgan p. 126.
88 Oberg. Review of Isaacson. p. 606. While it would be interesting to see whether other historians viewed Isaacson’s biography as Franklin as generously, I was unable to obtain other reviews relating to this book. This was also true of H.W. Brands’s *The First American* and Dray’s *Stealing God’s Thunder*. This might be considered a telling silence, as though historians thought these books too slight as scholarly efforts to merit comment. However, there is no evidence that this is the case.
as “insightful and delightful reading for scholars, students and the general reading public.” Dray’s book was received more negatively. Michael Brain Schiffer criticized Dray’s lack of specificity regarding sources and his inaccurate descriptions of some of the scientific concepts and instruments Franklin worked with during his scientific career. This led him to label Stealing God’s Thunder as “enjoyable subway reading,” implying an inability to treat Dray’s work as serious scholarship.

The examination of the sampling of recent books on Franklin for signs of overemphasis of the popular aspect of their appeal has produced mixed results. The authors who made almost purely stylistic contributions to Franklin scholarship, like Morgan and Brands, may have been writing in an effort to cater to public favor more than serious analytical contributions to Franklin scholarship. Isaacson’s book clearly was the most popularly oriented, and was the most prone to shallowness and a focus on entertainment rather than analysis. Philip Dray’s intriguing topic was marred by analytical mistakes that failed to impress one reviewer as a truly scholarly effort. Yet, overall, other historians reviewing the books were not inclined to trash the books as being too popular, at least not openly. Some reviewers did criticize by implication (Schiffer calling Dray’s book “enjoyable subway reading” and Ferling’s endorsement of Wright’s Franklin of Philadelphia as a better scholarly treatment of Franklin’s life and times than Brands’s book, which had the telling of the founder’s life and times as its central mission). While some arguments can be made that individual books in the set popularize at the cost of scholarship, in general other historians were not inclined to condemn any of the books.

The issues of sources, originality and the question of popular pandering in order to determine whether the recent books on Franklin refine and expand the scholarship of the subject have been examined in this section. Through the case of the Autobiography, it was observed that the books in general do not give in to the temptation to rely too heavily on the entertaining and subjective source. In fact, the authors showed a willingness to challenge Franklin’s word more than in the past and evidence of expansion of the interpretation of the significance of the famous source. It has been shown that each of the recent Franklin books have contributed to Franklin scholarship in some form, though in the case of two books (Morgan and Brands) this was found to be primarily stylistic and literary. The unique analysis one other (Isaacson) has been revealed to be of dubious value and the most prone to the criticisms investigated in Part I. While it can be argued that there is a higher priority given to entertainment than serious analysis in several of the books, professional historian reviewers did not openly push this argument in considering any of the books.

Conclusion:

The investigation of three central issues regarding Founding Fathers biographies has yielded mixed results within the sampling of recent books about Benjamin Franklin. It was observed that there is some truth to the charge that founders books’ focus on “character” issues and that the presence of political bias paint a distorted picture of the American Revolution. However it must be noted that investigation of the recent Franklin books did not produce a decisive, but rather a limited endorsement of these criticisms.

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Investigation of the recent books on Franklin in relation to recent trends in American historiography revealed a greater degree of compatibility with these trends than might be previously assumed. Despite their focus on the life of a member of the elite, the books incorporated features of microhistory and social history, important components of the current trends in historiography. In investigating the degree in which the recent Franklin books have advanced scholarship on Franklin, it was revealed that each book contributed a degree of originality, though this was confined to the stylistic in some books. It was observed that the problematic nature of the Autobiography as a source did not draw the books into the trap of shallowness. It was also observed that the books generally sought to expand Franklin scholarship, though some evidence also suggested that entertaining the public trumped this goal at times.

Historians who reviewed the books responded in a generally positive way, and though some books were criticized by implication, none were directly denounced. The fact that reviewer representatives of the scholarly community have generally given “bouquets rather than brickbats” to the recent books on Franklin seems to suggest that the critics of the founders books do not have widespread support in the scholarly community.\(^9\) It also indicates that Joseph Ellis was incorrect in his claim that the scholarly community treats historians who write a founder book as having “confessed a form of intellectual bankruptcy.”\(^9\)

From the examination of the recent Franklin books and a survey of what others have written about those books, it can be concluded that while both camps have some legitimate arguments, the evidence does not support either side resoundingly. Some broad criticisms of the surge of founders books seemed to find validity in the sampling of books on Franklin, but this evidence was far from being a dominant theme of the investigation of the sampling. Often when evidence was found to support one of the detractor’s criticisms, it was concentrated in one or two of the books and not across the sampling.

Of the five recent books surveyed, Walter Isaacson’s *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* was most often found to have fulfilled the criticisms of the founders books detractors. This was not surprising, since Isaacson was the only author of the set who is not a professional historian. Indeed, the fact that the writing of books about the founders has been taken on by some of the most names in the profession (Gordon Wood and Edmund Morgan are two of the most respected historians of early America) seems to be more evidence that the academic community regards the subject of the founders as being worth investigation.

Overall, while the investigation of the recent books about Benjamin Franklin reveals some evidence supporting the criticism of Founding Fathers as shallow scholarship, overly popular and opposed to recent trends in scholarship, this evidence is by no means overwhelming. The sampling of recent books on Franklin do make contributions to Franklin scholarship (though in some cases in an arguably limited way), generally limit distortion of the history of the American Revolution and early republic, and demonstrate evidence that authors incorporated rather than resisted recent trends in historiography within their works. As to the issue of popularity, the recent books on Franklin did not allow popular appeal to overwhelm the subject. The investigation of


“Founders Chic” through studies of Benjamin Franklin has generally revealed that neither the critics’ portrayal of the founders books as shallow and conservative, nor the melodramatic defense of the surge of the Founding Fathers as a positive development beleaguered by a populist and leftist academy, hold up to scrutiny. As would be expected, the truth lies somewhere between the two extremes.
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**Articles:**


