

Benjamin Franklin's Masks: A Historiographic Essay

by Stormy Sykes

January 17, 2006 marked Benjamin Franklin's three-hundredth birthday. In celebration, new biographies littered the shelves of bookstores across the nation, each one competing to reveal a new side to the man. Academic and public historians alike struggled to discover Franklin's identity. The American public had a renewed interest in Franklin, and historians wanted their version to be the one that changed history. Many Americans are aware of his portrait on the hundred-dollar bill, but is this due to learning about him in school or simply watching films where the bill is referred to as a "Benjamin?" Some know he was an inventor, but only because they heard the story about a kite. Others believe he helped contribute important ideas to the newly formed United States but are unaware of his loyalty to the British Empire. Franklin is commonly referred to as an enigma, a man whose true identity is a mystery. To some historians, Franklin is a scientific pioneer, a true American, and a man possessed with a deep-seated desire to be useful that drove him to greatness. Other historians see the same events and interpret Franklin's actions as political and academic self-promotion; they see him as a fraudulent scientist and a political chameleon blinded by the pursuit of power. Recent works cast Franklin as a scientist, a politician, a utilitarian, and a fraud. Each of these thematic archetypes for Franklin can be extrapolated from his autobiography and letters associated with him but fall short of a holistic view examining Franklin based not only on his introspection, but others' estimation of the man as well.

Franklin's *Autobiography* is one of the most widely read autobiographies in circulation, but unfortunately still contains many gaps about the man who wrote it. Instead of capturing his life as a whole, Franklin mainly concentrates on his early life. Missing from his *Autobiography* are his transition to an American and the years he spent in France. With these years missing, Franklin fails to capture his moments as a diplomat, scientist, and statesman. Although these moments from his life are missing, his *Autobiography* is still the most informative primary source about Franklin's life. Since its publication, Franklin's *Autobiography* has served as a foundation for historians interpreting his life. Biographies written on Franklin are interpretations of Franklin's *Autobiography* rather than his actual life. Not only do these interpretations differ from one another, but they also rely too heavily on Franklin. When writing his *Autobiography*, Franklin was in his eighties and would die a year after its publication. Due to his age, it is possible that Franklin may not have remembered aspects of his life. Also, Franklin may have altered moments to impress his readers. To supplement these gaps, historians turn to the letters Franklin wrote to family and colleagues. His letters, while valuable,

lack validation from outside sources. Despite the gaps in the *Autobiography* and lack of additional primary sources not written by Franklin, many historians have continued to publish works based almost solely off their interpretation of Franklin's *Autobiography* and letters.

Scientist

The Enlightenment ushered a new age of thinking, and encouraged more scientific thought not bound by religious dogma. Along with other philosophers and scientists, Benjamin Franklin flourished during this day and age, leading him to make significant scientific discoveries which permanently impacted society. His inventions, ranging from bifocals to the sentry box, paved the way towards progress and allowed America to become a future superpower.

In 2005, Philip Dray published *Stealing God's Thunder: Benjamin Franklin's Lightning Rod and the Invention of America*, a biography concentrating on the scientific portion of Franklin's life. In early literature, Franklin's life was mainly condensed to his role in politics and his role as an early American diplomat; however, Dray chose to concentrate his research on Franklin's scientific achievements. According to historian Bernard Cohen, "the usual portrayal of Franklin presents him as a political figure who, in his spare time, dabbled in science. His own century on the other hand, considered him a scientist who had entered the arena of international politics."¹ Recently, additional historians have discovered this to be partially true, including Dray.

What makes Dray's Franklin biography stand out from others is his decision to mainly focus on Franklin's work with electricity instead of his other inventions. Dray argues that Franklin's scientific work, especially with electricity, first made him a celebrity among his peers and later in the foreign nations he would call home. His lightning rod invention not only decorated the roofs of American homes but was also seen across Paris. The French were also aware of Franklin's infamous kite experiment which led to the creation of his lightning rod and were delighted by it. Their admiration for the diplomat was expressed in a variety of ways including art. Paintings depicting "Franklin's likeness often contained a fancified image of the kite experiment or of his using lightning bolts to destroy the symbols of monarchy."²

For Dray, Benjamin Franklin is a man worth celebrating even though he lived three centuries ago. His contributions to the scientific community not only impacted the Enlightenment but influence scientists of today. Without Franklin's willingness to "dabble" in science and take part in strange experiments, it may have taken longer for people to understand electrical natural phenomena. Dray believes Franklin's drive to be

¹ Philip Dray, *Stealing God's Thunder: Benjamin Franklin's Lightning Rod and the Invention of America* (New York: Random House, 2005), xvi.

² *Ibid.*, 141.

efficient led him to become a scientist, which in turn paved the way towards diplomacy, a role Franklin would flourish in. Unfortunately for Dray, his knowledge in science appears to be lacking which is evident in his attempt to explain Franklin's experiments, but this does not alter his ultimate goal in sharing a portion of Franklin's life usually left unnoticed.

In 2006, a year after Dray's biography was published, Joyce Chaplin released her own biography, *The First Scientific American: Benjamin Franklin and the Pursuit of Genius*, concentrating on Benjamin Franklin's scientific career. Instead of only focusing on one field of study, electricity, Chaplin dives deeper into his lesser known experiments and his role as a natural philosopher. Both Dray and Chaplin would agree, Franklin's scientific research led him to become a statesman, an argument many of their peers disagree with. However, where Dray believes his diplomatic position in Europe was because of his incredible work with electricity, Chaplin disagrees. Instead, Franklin became popular among the public because of his accomplishments in natural science. Chaplin notes that Franklin's popularity continued to grow even after his famed work with electricity, leading her to believe that the people simply admired him and considered him to be a genius of his time.

Obviously, Franklin was not the only American scientist working in the United States, but as her title suggests, Chaplin firmly believes he earned the title of "First American Scientist." Her reasoning is simple: he was the first American of his time to gain international recognition for his scientific research. Chaplin is quick to point out that Franklin never considered himself to be a scientist, but rather a printer who allowed his curiosity to get the best of him. In fact, the term scientist did not even exist during his time and wasn't coined until the end of the 18th century. Only "toward the end of Franklin's life, would people begin to use the term *scientific* in the way we do now."³ This meant that Franklin's scientific career expanded across multiple practices including ethnography, philosophy, and medicine.

With only a year separating the publications of their books, Chaplin and Dray came to the same conclusion of Franklin's reputation as a notable scientist aiding him as a foreign diplomat in Europe. They believe Franklin was a man of many talents, but his role in the scientific community during the 18th century remains a stone left unturned. For decades, students of Franklin have interpreted vast amounts of information in hopes of revealing more about a man who helped shape our nation, so they focus only on his political role. Chaplin and Dray's biographies fill the void that has been left by historians. To prove that Franklin was a true genius of his time, rather than a man who dabbled in experiments.

³ Joyce E. Chaplin, *The First Scientific American: Benjamin Franklin and the Pursuit of Genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 6. Emphasis is Chaplin's.

Politician

At seventy years old, Benjamin Franklin was the oldest delegate to sign the Declaration of Independence. He may also have been the youngest “American.” Today, Franklin is considered one of our Founding Fathers, but for most of his life he considered himself a loyal British citizen. When he signed his name on the Declaration, Franklin was perfectly aware of his betrayal of Britain, but at that moment he knew it was the right thing to do.⁴ Recently, many historians have decided to focus on the transformation Franklin underwent throughout his life to become a fighter for American independence.

In 2005, Stacy Schiff published *A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America*, a biography concentrating on the eight years Franklin spent dazzling members of French society. When he arrived in France in 1776, Franklin was inexperienced as a diplomat but was deemed the perfect man for the job. He had already spent many years abroad in Britain and had obtained celebrity status in France due to his scientific research. From the moment Franklin stepped foot on French soil, he was welcomed and celebrated, leading to his success in receiving aid for America’s independence. Schiff argues that without Franklin, France would not have come to America’s aid. “The French mission stands not only as his greatest service to his country but the most revealing of the man.”⁵

According to Schiff, Franklin’s service to America as a foreign diplomat truly tested his loyalty to the new country he originally didn’t support. While he was away in France, he grew distant from his wife, severing a tie that held him to his home. In her place, he formed new relationships and grew comfortable, enjoying the more cosmopolitan lifestyle. It was easy to tell that Franklin was seriously considering making France his home, which makes some historians doubt how loyal he was to the United States. “The French years provided his detractors precisely what they needed; proof that the ur-American was un-American.”⁶ In the end, Franklin returned home, but only because he was needed, not because he missed it.

Instead of analyzing Franklin’s life as a whole, Shelia Skemp’s *The Making of a Patriot: Benjamin Franklin at the Cockpit* from 2012 is a microhistory approach to focus on

⁴ It is impossible to know Franklin’s true opinion on the Declaration of Independence and whether he believed severing ties with Britain was the best thing to do since he died before completing the second half of his autobiography. However, after the Declaration was written he informed General Howe that it was too late to reconcile the Mother Country and her Colonies.

⁵ Stacy Schiff, *A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2005), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 404.

one event in Franklin's life: the humiliation he faced at the Cockpit⁷. Similar to Schiff, Skemp narrows down on one moment to reveal Franklin's identity as an American. However, the two authors disagree on the moment when Franklin's loyalty to the United States is tested. Schiff believes his time in France is the moment when Franklin recognized his changing devotion, while Skemp points to the moment when Franklin was questioned by British politicians.

When Franklin left the colonies to serve in Britain there were no doubts of their loyalty to the Mother Country, but, over the next several years, it became evident that the British empire he dreamed of was falling apart. Franklin's loyalty towards Britain never wavered until 1773, when he found himself being accused of involvement with the Boston Tea Party. Franklin was aware of the growing tension but never believed the colonists would take such a radical approach. British politicians believed Franklin knew the Tea Party would happen. Skemp believes this is the moment when Franklin began to question his faithfulness to Britain for two main reasons. First, a country he served proudly and believed in was now turning its back on him. His time at the Cockpit not only humiliated him but revealed to him that the British no longer trusted him. Second, he realized that the colonies had reached a point where it was no longer possible to create the empire he dreamed of. Franklin had to make a difficult decision, and in the end, he chose America.

Unlike both Schiff and Skemp, Gordon S. Wood's *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* from 2004 focuses on Franklin's entire life to reveal his transformation to a loyal American patriot. From an early age and until 1773, when he left London, Franklin dreamed of a powerful British Empire which would only be possible with the support of the American colonies, adding to Franklin's identity as a loyal British American. However, as the rift between the colonies and Britain expanded, Franklin realized his dream was no longer possible. What makes Wood's biography different from both Schiff and Skemp is his belief that many minor events led to his change of loyalty. Rather than at a single inflection point, Franklin experienced a gradual change that completely altered his life and revealed to him what was important to him.

Wood separates his book into five chapters with each one focusing on a particular moment in Franklin's life. From the moment he was born to his decision to support America, Wood's biography focuses on five identities that Franklin takes on throughout his life—each an incremental step towards his ultimate identity. First, Franklin became a gentleman, something he did not achieve until he was forty-two, followed by becoming an Imperialist, a Patriot, a Diplomat, and finally, an American. Franklin lived a different life and had much more humble beginnings than his fellow

⁷ The Cockpit refers to a room inside the Whitehall Palace where Franklin was summoned to stand on trial before a group of the king's advisors.

Founding Fathers. Unlike them, he rose in ranks and worked hard to build his reputation among the public. According to Wood, "Franklin began as an artisan, a lowly printer who became the architect of his own fortune. He is the prototype of the self-made man, and his life is the classic American success story."⁸

The main difference between Wood from Schiff and Skemp is the moments of Franklin's life he chose to focus on. Franklin's mission to France, and the trial he faced at the Cockpit are defined as pivotal moments in Wood's biography but are not his prime examples of Franklin's transformation. Franklin's last years in Philadelphia after his return from France are missing from both Schiff and Skemp's biographies, however, it is a period Wood dedicates an entire chapter to, titled "Becoming An American." Upon arriving back in his home city, Franklin received a warm welcome from the citizens, but it would not be shared by many members in the American government. Surprisingly, Franklin takes on the role of head of Pennsylvania and becomes involved in the Constitutional Convention where he attempts to interject his opinion into the new government. At the convention, Franklin was an old man with failing health, but his opinion was strong as he worked for a stronger nation. Sadly, this hard work, plus the countless things he did to aid the new nation, would not be fully recognized until several years after his death. France mourned his death more than America, mainly due to their impending Revolution where they believed they needed his support. According to Wood, many Americans doubted where Franklin's true loyalty stood, and "the more France honored Franklin, the more Franklin's image suffered, at least in the eyes of those Americans opposed to the French Revolution."⁹ In the end, Franklin died an American, even if he was the only one positive of it.

Utilitarian

A common theme present in recent biographies on Benjamin Franklin is his drive to be considered useful. This is the main point in Edmund S. Morgan's biography, *Benjamin Franklin* from 2002. Similar to Wood, Morgan analyzes Franklin's entire life, primarily focusing on his career as a public servant. Morgan argues that Franklin's goal of being useful is what fueled him to accomplish everything he did in his long, successful life—a unique perspective on Franklin's character. Franklin's life as a scientist is depicted in the background, while his time as a servant for American progress shines. Morgan writes that as a young child Franklin was extremely curious which led him to never stop "considering things he could not explain."¹⁰ Franklin could have easily devoted his entire life to science, but he did not consider this work

⁸ Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁰ Edmund S. Morgan, *Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 6.

important enough. Instead, he wished to become a public servant where he believed he would be more useful to his country.

Not all historians agree with Morgan's interpretations. In his own Franklin biography, Wood writes on how many contemporaries in the field believed Franklin's attempt to make Pennsylvania a royal colony seemed "futile" after the colonies declared independence from Britain.¹¹ Morgan, the main historian Wood disagrees with on this idea, asserts that during the years 1762 and 1764, when Franklin attempted to convince Britain to make proprietary colonies into royal ones, is a mystery and a moment of "political blindness."¹² Morgan continues that historians have made mistakes in figuring out Franklin, just as he made mistakes in his political role. Wood disagrees with Morgan's interpretation of Franklin's behavior, stating in his notes:

I think we have indeed made mistakes in our attempts to understand Franklin. Once we accept the fact that Franklin in these years was a fervent royalist who very much wanted to participate in the grandeur of the British Empire—which was, after all, a *royal* empire—much of the surprise, confusion, and mystery about his behavior in the early 1760s falls away. Pennsylvania was no longer as important to him as the empire.¹³

Although Wood and Morgan disagree on this particular issue, they are in agreement on Franklin's shift in loyalty. Throughout Morgan's biography, we see a shift from a loyal British subject to a firm believer in American independence, coinciding with Wood's central argument.

Fraud

In the last century, there has been a peak in scholarship on the Founding Fathers, but not necessarily the roles they played in creating the United States. Instead, there has been a growing interest in discovering their character flaws, revealing to the public that although considered great men, they remained human. An example of this is the discovery of Thomas Jefferson's affair with his slave, Sally Hemmings, which resulted in children between the pair. If the author of the Declaration of Independence and our third president had this large of a secret, then he probably was not the only one. Were there secrets Franklin held? Did he perhaps lie and cheat to further his own career? These are questions many historians have asked themselves, but few have found evidence to support these accusations. To them, Franklin was a self-made man, living before his time who accomplished great things in the political and scientific world. Like

¹¹ Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, 93.

¹² Morgan, *Benjamin Franklin*, 120.

¹³ Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, 262.

all men, Franklin had small flaws, such as his illegitimate son and unhappy common-law marriage, but nothing serious to lead historians to doubt his true character. However, not all historians agree with this. Some historians view him unfavorably, believing Benjamin Franklin was a man who manipulated others to promote himself.

Recently, historians have taken a more in-depth look into Franklin's scientific work, admiring the astounding work he was able to achieve during the 18th century; however, Tom Tucker believes most of his work is fraudulent. Published in 2003, *Bolt of Fate: Benjamin Franklin and His Electric Kite Hoax* analyzing Franklin's scientific experiments, primarily focusing on his infamous kite experiment. According to Tucker, it should not be shocking since Franklin was a "splendid master of the hoax."¹⁴ His many pseudonyms are widely known and noted in many biographies, however, many historians do not believe it is reason to accuse him of being a liar. Authors writing under a false name was not abnormal during his time, meaning that it did not threaten his reputation. Creating a fictional experiment, on the other hand, would damage his hard-earned reputation among the science community greatly, leading to many historians believing he would never attempt it. Tucker disagrees, stating that if one was to look at the facts, then it should be obvious that he tricked everyone to further his career.

Not only does Tucker accuse Franklin of false experiments, but also believes he knew they were potentially dangerous or lethal. In 1753, Georg Rikhman, a Russian scientist, attempted to recreate Franklin's sentry box experiment which resulted in his untimely death. When the news of the scientist's death reached America, Franklin initially remained silent on whether he knew it was dangerous. In fact, when he finally voiced an opinion on the matter, he stated Rikhman had died because he simply did not know what he was doing.¹⁵

Tucker's interpretation of Franklin's scientific career is considered to be controversial by many historians in the field, stating that he lacks true evidence to prove his theory correct. They admit it seems suspicious that only his son and he were present during the kite experiment, but it does not change the fact that his experiment was successful. One historian who does not share Tucker's belief is Wood who called his argument "unpersuasive."¹⁶ In *Stealing God's Thunder*, Dray quotes many scientists from Franklin's time who also claimed to successfully recreate his experiment, although some claimed to have thought of the idea first.¹⁷

Published in 1996, David T. Morgan's *The Devious Dr. Franklin, Colonial Agent: Benjamin Franklin's Years in London* takes an in-depth look into Franklin's years spent as

¹⁴ Tom Tucker, *Bolt of Fate: Benjamin Franklin and His Electric Kite Hoax* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), xvii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁶ Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, 258.

¹⁷ Dray, *Stealing God's Thunder*, 250.

a colonial agent in London. Not only is this a time ignored by other historians, but a period of Franklin's life where his true character is revealed. In recognizing the gap of scholarship on this period of Franklin's life, Morgan decided his book was needed to reveal the darker side of the Founding Father. According to Morgan, Franklin "understood that image is crucial to a person in public life."¹⁸ By closely examining Franklin's time in London, Morgan claims that the colonial agent meticulously created an image he wanted people to see. This is evident by analyzing his changing opinion on the Stamp Act. At first, he disagreed with its passing, but quickly changed his mind and supported the British Empire he admired, going as far as to help his friend acquire a comfortable political appointment.

Obviously, Franklin was successful in creating a positive image due to his popularity today. In school, Franklin is always referred to as a man who helped shape the nation and the reason why France helped us in our fight for independence. Morgan compares Franklin biographers to photographers whose job is to make sure their client looks their best, believing that they "have been kind to him, even when dealing with his shortcomings."¹⁹

While his shortcomings may not have affected Franklin's political role, it certainly raises questions as to his character. Franklin carefully created an image as a family man, which allowed his peers and historians to overlook the fact he never officially married Deborah Reed. The couple lived together for many years, resulting in a common-law marriage. William, Franklin's illegitimate son, frequently appears in biographies about Franklin, but the authors never go into depth as to who his mother was. Instead of viewing the situation as a scandal, some historians praise Franklin for raising the boy. This misconception of Franklin's identity as a "family man" allows historians to look the other way on his character, but Morgan believes that these aspects of his life played a role and no longer need to be buried.

David Waldstreicher, another historian who viewed Franklin unfavorably, published his biography *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* in 2004. In agreement with David T. Morgan, Waldstreicher believes Franklin created an image he wished for others to see and believe, but was not completely accurate. Late in his life, Franklin publicly voiced his opinions against slavery, calling it an institution which needed to end. In his will, he demanded his daughter to release her slave if she wished to receive any of her inheritance. Earlier in his life, however, Franklin shared a much different opinion on slavery. In fact, Franklin had once been a slaveholder even though he had experienced the harsh reality of being a servant for someone.

¹⁸ David T. Morgan, *The Devious Dr. Franklin, Colonial Agent* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1996), ix.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, ix.

Although Franklin experienced firsthand what it was like to serve as an indentured servant for his brother, he still owned slaves and had servants throughout his life. Waldstreicher's book adds another identity to the mysterious founding father – hypocrite. As a printer, Franklin profited from slavery due to the advertisements published in his paper, *The Gazette*. "Between one-fifth and one-quarter of the paper's advertisements directly concerned unfree labor. The profit generated was considerable, not to mention essential to the life of Franklin's entire printing business."²⁰ By the age of forty-two Franklin had acquired enough wealth to retire and still live a comfortable lifestyle; notably, this is also the moment Wood claims he became a gentleman. Waldstreicher agrees with this idea, giving additional evidence in Franklin's newfound identity, stating "Franklin's ownership of slaves has traditionally been seen as a function of his middle-aged rise to wealthy status."²¹ Franklin was a man who escaped servitude, only to subjugate others in life, and dispense freedom in death.

To piece together Franklin's life, historians refer back to his own words from his *Autobiography*. Some historians were successful in filling in the gaps in the primary source, but there are still places that could be interpreted differently, as seen in recent Franklin biographies. Before his death, Franklin attempted to complete his *Autobiography*, but sadly fell short, leaving much of his older life, including his years in France, a mystery. Of course, his words should be taken with a grain of salt, but it is the most important piece of his life available to us. Without Franklin's guidance, historians struggle to find meaning behind his actions.

Franklin was complicated, and he was aware of it. He carefully crafted an image he wished for others to recognize and appreciate, but unfortunately would not live to see it. Recent scholarship primarily focuses on major events from Franklin's life but seems to ignore his last years in Philadelphia. When he came home from France, Congress wasn't willing to pay him for his services, nor offer his grandson a political position. Friends he had prior to leaving were now dead, leaving men who did not understand him. Franklin dedicated his life to the American cause, but the country he served seemed to not appreciate his sacrifice. Because these years are missing from his *Autobiography*, it is hard to know how he felt about the treatment he received. Perhaps he regretted his decision to come home, instead wishing he was still in France, surrounded by people who admired him. Journals and letters help us fill these gaps, but do not do enough to reveal Franklin's emotions during this hard time, leaving us to wonder if there were regrets in his life.

In recent years, historians have struggled to determine which mask would properly fit Benjamin Franklin. Throughout his eighty-four years, Franklin earned

²⁰ David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

many titles, but they only lightly touch on his life overall. At one moment, he was a scientist, but at another he was a printer. For most of his life he considered himself to be British but died an American. He was a man who carefully crafted an image of himself, wanting others to consider him useful. To many, this is a positive trait, while others believe he was a manipulator. In the end, it is still uncertain which mask Franklin wore, but that is because he wore more than one.