

BOOKS & THE ARTS

The Bourgeois Revolutionary

ROBIN BLACKBURN

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: An American Life.By Walter Isaacson.
Simon & Schuster. 590 pp. \$30.**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.**By Edmund S. Morgan.
Yale. 339 pp. \$24.95.

Publishers, even academic presses, know that the public likes biography and cater to this taste with a stream of handsomely produced, and often quite well-written, volumes. Part of the attraction may be that biography is a leveler. Even if one's grasp of the work of great philosophers or statesmen is shaky, one can be fairly sure that their life will bring them down to size. As they used to say: "No man is a hero to his valet." The biographies of American statesmen and Founding Fathers have an added attraction in that they fortify national identity, supplying it with a gallery of imagined ancestors. As with children's bedtime stories, it doesn't matter that the plot twists are known in advance; indeed, this is part of the reassurance they provide. The lives of America's patriot saints are pitched to illustrate civic virtue and point to a contemporary moral. In these books, even quite glaring individual failings only serve to underline the redemptive power of the national idea triumphing over human frailty. Biography can thus easily pander to anti-intellectualism and patriotic piety, failing to register that the past is truly another country. But at least this type of history has a clear narrative line, something that many other brands of history have unwisely abandoned.

Many books have been written about Benjamin Franklin, several in languages other than English. Franklin was the only Founding Father who signed all four of the documents that established the Republic: the Declaration of Independence, the

peace treaty with Britain, the treaty with France and the Constitution. Though he was never President, his role in nourishing colonial self-confidence was unparalleled. Long before he advocated formal independence he was teaching both Americans and their imperial masters that the attempt to rule the colonies from Britain was a folly.

Nevertheless, Franklin's life has posed some problems for patriotic historiography. It was not until he reached almost 70 years of age that he ceased to be a loyal supporter of the British Crown; indeed, for several of these decades he was, as deputy postmaster, a prominent royal officeholder. While his scientific experiments always captured the popular imagination, Franklin's intimate friendships with women other than his wife grated on the eighteenth-century sensibility. The long years he spent in Eng-

A Francophile, a latecomer to the independence struggle and a philanderer, Franklin makes for an unlikely American hero.

land and France can also make him appear to be an offshore American, even though his role in bringing France into the war made a decisive contribution to independence. Though Francophobes may not like the thought, the French alliance not only brought military supplies, trained soldiers and naval power; it made British statesmen see the war in the context of their overriding preoccupation with France, inclining them to an earlier and fairer peace than might otherwise have been obtained. Franklin understood this and used his great prestige as scientist and *philosophe* to promote it.

Franklin's scientific renown and fairly liberal views have always secured for him a niche as the most progressive of the Founding Fathers, assuming, as is usually the case, that Thomas Paine is excluded from their ranks. Franklin both helped and hindered his own legend by writing one of the first secular autobiographies. It furnishes the classic story of the self-made man. In this

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and in his other writings, he constructed a vivid image of the striving and thriving "middling people," seen as the true backbone of any healthy social order. Not surprisingly, Max Weber illustrated his famous essays on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* with many quotations from Franklin's autobiography.

The appearance of two new books on Franklin shows that the legend still has life in it. The full-dress biography by Walter Isaacson fortunately transcends the limits of conventional hagiography, even though the author makes large claims for his subject and extravagant claims for the Republic he helped to create. Isaacson, a former managing editor at *Time*, has written a book whose research and writing would do credit to a professional historian. It helps that he has a strong thesis, even if one takes exception to it, because it connects the life to the larger pattern of events. He portrays Franklin as the exemplar of "an American national identity based on the virtues and values of its middle class," the implicit contrast presumably being with the American identity cultivated by the Virginia grandees.

Isaacson's vivid and readable narrative gives a clear account of Franklin's scientific work, of his extraordinary career as a social innovator, of his labors as a diplomat and statesman, and of the vagaries of his love life. Animated by pride in "American idealism" and "the most successful [constitution] ever written," Isaacson's warm and various book furnishes a portrait that chimes with the recent tidal wave of national feeling. It is given shape and direction by its close attention to the growth of a dynamic civil society, which supplied the wind in Franklin's sails.

Edmund S. Morgan, the *doyen* of colonial historians, has written a biographical essay on Franklin, largely based on his writings, including his voluminous correspondence. Morgan's book, at only about half the length of Isaacson's, does not attempt the same sort of comprehensive treatment of Franklin's life, but it is sometimes better attuned to historical context, and achieves truer perspective on some vital topics. Where Isaacson too readily assumes that Franklin shares our understanding of democracy, Morgan stresses his considerable attachment to the assumptions of eighteenth-century English gentlemen on both sides of the Atlantic, including their great distrust of direct action by "the mob." In the 1760s such attach-

ments led Franklin into taking stands, notably his initial support of the Stamp Act, that he would later see as contrary to American ideals and interests.

Of course, Franklin was a gentleman with a difference. While happy to mingle with aristocracy and royalty, he retained pride in his middling origins, claiming that the name Franklin itself echoed the status of his long line of freeholding ancestors. This much respect for tradition in no way inhibited his extraordinary gift for social innovation, as he founded newspapers, self-help societies, debating clubs, lending libraries, firefighting organizations and colleges. More than a century of development, combined with metropolitan neglect, had brought the North American colonies to the point where there was great pent-up need for such institutions of civil society.

Isaacson sees Franklin as the protagonist of a distinctively middle-class transformation—what Marx called 'the bourgeois revolution.'

As the most successful colonial printer and publisher, Franklin was well-placed to take the initiative, illustrating Benedict Anderson's point about the powerful role of "print capitalism" in the birth of a new horizon of social identity.

Belying his self-portrait as someone obsessed with money and grudging with his time, Franklin often threw himself into these projects with little thought of gain. Likewise, Isaacson reminds us, he never sought to capitalize on his numerous technical inventions, including the famous lightning conductor, by taking out a patent.

Isaacson sees Franklin's scientific genius as essentially pragmatic. Obviously he was not a grand theorist. But neither did he proceed by pragmatic induction and common sense. His account of electricity—of positive and negative charges, of batteries and conductors—was a theoretical system, and he even left it to French experimenters to make the first test of his device for snatching electricity from lightning. His penchant for the counterintuitive was shown in his explanation of why "northeasterlies" actually came from the southwest.

Franklin's social initiatives also had an experimental quality. He was not a great orator and often shied away from the limelight. Instead, using one of his pseudonyms, he would propose some new measure and then lobby behind the scenes for others to make it their own. His keen sense of how society might be transformed for the better

was vindicated time after time and helped to remove the social prejudices that blinkered other gentlemen-*philosophes*. Thus when he proposed a militia for Philadelphia he insisted that officers be elected, because this was likely to promote volunteers for the new body. But he confidently predicted that the militia would express the social leadership of "we, the middling people... the tradesmen, shopkeepers and farmers of this province and city!"

Isaacson's larger argument that Franklin was the protagonist of a distinctively middle-class transformation takes its cue from Gordon Wood, in particular his book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1991). While leftists will have an important demurrer to enter at some of the claims made, many will recognize the old Marxist notion of the "bourgeois democratic revolution," alive and kicking notwithstanding the toil of sundry historical revisionists. In fact, it is difficult to make

overall sense of much modern history if one discards this concept. Such major recent books as Robert Brenner's *Merchants and Revolution*, John Markoff's *The Abolition of Feudalism* and even, in a different way, Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* all fall into place only if we see in them the moving spirit of bourgeois revolution. Since Marx himself borrowed the concept (from Guizot, the Orleanist statesman and historian, and Abbé Sieyès, the revolutionary of 1789, who insisted that the future belonged to the "Third Estate"), leftists cannot really complain that it has been reappropriated by partisans of neoliberalism.

The problem with the concept is that bourgeois revolutions were more hybrid and flawed than the theory allowed. It wasn't just that many bourgeois lacked the courage of the revolutionaries. It was also that the early, burgeoning capitalist order was deeply indebted to practices, such as slaveholding and Indian removal, that were not at all liberal or democratic.

Franklin in his later life became a critic of slavery, but Morgan, author of the classic *American Slavery, American Freedom*, registers better than Isaacson both Franklin's racial assumptions and the mildness of his opposition to slavery. Thus Isaacson cites antislavery remarks made by Franklin in letters to Benjamin Rush and Anthony Benezet without noting that he was not exactly breaking new ground by chiming in with the well-known views of these two early abolitionists. Never-

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theless, by the late 1780s, Franklin did have a keen sense that a revived slavery would compromise the future of the young Republic.

This also has a bearing on Isaacson's claim that the US Constitution has been "the most successful ever written," a claim that would, if true, belie Franklin's own profound reservations at the time. Franklin favored proportional representation and a single representative chamber, and consequently at first opposed the power conferred on the President and the setting up of the Senate. He was one of the few to challenge the clauses giving special treatment to slaveholders and also to insist that the federal government ought to be able to tax the rich more heavily than the poor. While he had forebodings, his eventual and reluctant support for the compromises of 1787 was motivated by his view that, like other human arrangements, it was provisional and temporary, and could soon be improved on, and when he did at last publicly take up the slavery issue it was to underline this fact. So the ongoing project to sacralize the Constitution is not a Franklinian enterprise. While we cannot possibly know what Franklin would have made of the Civil War, with its 600,000 dead, it scarcely ranks as a triumph for the Constitution. Likewise the sustained exclusion and oppression of African-Americans and Native Americans, and the lack of restraint on imperial adventures.

America's "middle-class revolution" took an inordinately long time to deliver on its promise and imposed heavy costs even when it did so. Often its genuine successes owed much to numbers of obscure individuals who will not have biographies written about them. Franklin's own representations in the courts of Europe required such backing, and sometimes helped to shape his views. Franklin tolerated British tax proposals until the protests of the patriot mob taught him otherwise. For the spirit of popular rebellion we need to consult books like *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000), by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, rather than these biographies. But we should not forget that the momentous sweep of Atlantic revolution involved an interaction. Sometimes Franklin's disdain for the mob was commendable—for example, his denunciation of the Indian-killing "Paxton Boys." At other times he strongly endorsed the radical democratic impulse, as when he backed Paine in the writing and publication of *Common Sense* or when he supported the contention at the Pennsylvania Constitu-

tional Convention that "an enormous Proportion of Property vested in a few Individuals is dangerous to the Rights, and destructive of the Common Happiness, of Mankind; and therefore every free State hath a Right by its Laws to discourage the Possession of such Property."

These lives of Franklin are most valuable if read as part of a broader history. Both show that Franklin clung to his own notion of empire as a union of equals until almost the very end. But they also show that as the

choice between empire and independence was posed, and despite having reached the age of 69, Franklin threw himself wholeheartedly into the anti-imperial struggle. After all, so much of his life and work had reflected a belief in self-determination and in the notion that people are elevated by their own efforts. As the first country to defy modern empire becomes the last to practice imperial rule, the legacy of Franklin acquires a new message, and becomes subversive all over again. ■

Lady Day

HERMAN SCHWARTZ

THE MAJESTY OF THE LAW. By Sandra Day O'Connor. Random House. 330 pp. \$25.95.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's new book, *The Majesty of the Law*, appears at a particularly auspicious moment. As the swing vote on and author of *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the Supreme Court's 5-to-4 decision in June upholding the University of Michigan Law School's affirmative action program, she has

shaped the future of minority education in America's universities for years to come. Also, she is the first female Justice. The book is thus a timely statement by a powerful judge at a time when the judiciary has more power than ever. The situation is also rife with irony. Ever since Ronald Reagan, Republicans have fiercely opposed affirmative action programs for racial minorities and women. They have shed tears over the harm to self-esteem that the beneficiaries of these programs have supposedly suffered, expressed grave concerns over the tensions that affirmative action has fomented between blacks and whites, and denigrated diversity and all the other justifications put forth for these programs.

All that is conveniently forgotten, however, when a little affirmative action will bring a lot of political profit. The most prominent uses of affirmative action in the past twenty-five years were actually by Republicans: the nominations of O'Connor by Reagan and of Clarence Thomas by George H.W. Bush. On any gender- or color-blind list, neither would have appeared. Thomas was an undistinguished federal appellate judge in Washington, and an unimpressive chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; O'Connor was an obscure midlevel Arizona

state judge and former state legislator with no outstanding reputation among Arizona lawyers. She herself has acknowledged to NPR reporter Nina Totenberg that she was the beneficiary of affirmative action.

Like so many other affirmative-action candidates given an opportunity to show what they can do, Justice O'Connor has proved her merit, becoming an able and important jurist. Now, two decades after her appointment, she has written a book that, she says, is "the result of more than twenty years of thinking about and speaking about some of the major themes in our national history and the principal challenges facing our world today."

A book by a Supreme Court Justice with so grand a title and that claims to be the product of so much experience and thought should be an important event. One expects insights, reflections, insider discussions of problems and anecdotes about this powerful institution, especially about what it has been like for the first woman to enter the previously all-male sanctum sanctorum of American law.

O'Connor's book will, alas, be a disappointment to anyone looking to learn something about the Supreme Court that is not already common knowledge. The chapters are short and barely skim the surface. Part 1, on "Life on the Court," contains little that is new or interesting, except for a chapter on an early fight among those who collected and published the Court's decisions. The second and third parts con-

Herman Schwartz, a professor of law at the American University, is the editor of The Rehnquist Court: Judicial Activism on the Right (Hill & Wang).

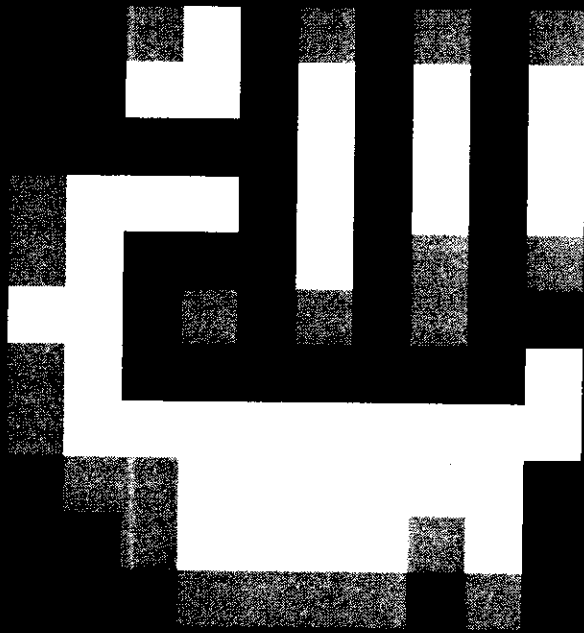
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