



The Society for Useful Knowledge: How Benjamin Franklin and Friends Brought the Enlightenment to America

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Benjamin Franklin and his contemporaries brought the Enlightenment to America--an intellectual revolution that laid the foundation for the political one that followed. With the "first Drudgery" of settling the American colonies now well and truly past, Franklin announced in 1743, it was high time that the colonists set about improving the lot of humankind through collaborative inquiry. From Franklin's idea emerged the American Philosophical Society, an association hosted in Philadelphia and dedicated to the harnessing of man's intellectual and creative powers for the common good. The animus behind the Society was and is a disarmingly simple one--that the value of knowledge is directly proportional to its utility. This straightforward idea has left a profound mark on American society and culture and on the very idea of America itself--and through America, on the world as a whole.

From celebrated historian of knowledge Jonathan Lyons comes *The Society for Useful Knowledge*, telling the story of America's coming-of-age through its historic love affair with practical invention, applied science, and self-reliance. Offering fresh, original portraits of figures like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and the inimitable, endlessly inventive Franklin, Lyons gives us vital new perspective on the American founding. He illustrates how the movement for useful knowledge is key to understanding the flow of American society and culture from colonial times to our digital present.

The Society for Useful Knowledge: How Benjamin Franklin and Friends Brought the Enlightenment to America Details

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Mmiller400m says

Two new words from the time period. Manufactory = Factory and Natural Philosopher = Scientist.

It took me quite a long time to get through this 175 pages. I don't know if I'm burnt out on non-fiction for a bit or maybe this speaks to the quality of the book itself.

One thing to take away though is how some of our founding fathers viewed knowledge that was useful. I sometimes act as a hoarder of knowledge and just collect it all when I should be focusing a bit and only gathering and keeping that knowledge that is useful. While much of the book won't stick with me, I think this small thought will be one I take with me for a very long time.

Pamela Conley says

If you are interested in not only the history of events at the foundations of the United States but the history of ideas and the philosophical underpinnings of what makes America a America - good and bad - this is a good book. It is a painstakingly researched and cited (to the point it can make it a choppy read for the flipping to foot notes) account of Ben Franklin, his cohorts, and the quest for "useful knowledge". This takes us to the foundations of the educational debate between classical humanities and application based knowledge.

Lisa says

"Traditional assessments tend to view America's technological triumphs as the natural, logical outgrowth of the nation's political system and its dedication to free enterprise" ... "This is, however, to look at the problem backward, to write a history of the present".

Americas entrepreneurial ethos all seems so inevitable in hindsight, but America started as a feeder system of raw materials back to the politicians, manufacturers, philosophers and educated 'thinkers' in Europe. This was limited by British law, as well as by the real limitations of our developing educational system and by a necessary focus on agriculture and subsistence.

This book outlines the path to encouraging and sharing practical knowledge among those early 'engineers', as well as touching on the major political and educational developments of this revolutionary time.

The period is fascinating; and this book will provide yet another way to examine and view the massive challenges of our early American leaders. I found it to be somewhat repetitive and academic as it outlined all of the details of the various 'societies' created for sharing knowledge. I found the perspectives about philosophical vs. utilitarian education, agrarian vs. 'self-supporting' societies, and of course the political systems to be valuables. It is worth a read.

Bruce Arthurs says

Useful and interesting overview of how Benjamin Franklin and others established the beginnings of a formal scientific culture in 1700's America, despite difficulties in communication, transportation, and a lack of acceptance by the older scientific establishment in Britain and Europe.

I would have liked to see this done at longer length and more in-depth, especially in regard to the personalities of the people involved. Lyons tantalizes with hints of the conflicts and struggles of people like David Rittenhouse, but then rushes on to the next bit of historical progress. Now I feel like I'll have to read further, in other people's books, to learn more about people Lyons mostly only intrigued me about.

P.e. lolo says

Really liked this book. It was filled with a lot of information about the history of our country before the revolution. One of the topics is how Benjamin Franklin along with a couple of other men. Thought that a new type of school should be started. One that focused on englished, reading, math and then at some point history, astronomy. He also thought that a school should also teach trade works, glass making, printing, leather making, wood working etc. He felt along with some other men that this would free up the colonies from Britan. This was 20 years before the war. Once the school came into place a he had a set of guide lines and came up with an elected board from the area.He still felt there should be some type of control. He main ideas were to have no teaching of classics, latin, greek, for example. That middle class and lower would be provided free education.This worked for a short time for after he got this started he was given an award from a college in Germany and another one in France. For his work in science,(electricity). By the time he came back the school was changed by the board, to teaching the classics and not teaching the middle class. He wrote about the waste the the students will learn nothing that will be useful for them to grow, build, or make things. His whole ideas were taken over and his friends who also thought liked he did had passed on. He still saw that the colonies were to dependent on England and encourage people to start making there oen items. By the time the war started there was a company making cloths, a few ship builders, one company working on gun powder, and of more tools were being made. So they did not have to pay taxes, or duties. Which he wrote to people is another tax. I could stil go on but you should read this book. It is a book that should be used in school.

Gerald Matzke says

This book shed new light on the economic situation in the colonies before and after the Revolutionary War. These were not the things that were talked about in US history classes. The dependence on England put the colonists in a desperate situation that led to the kind of frustration that eventually caused them to revolt. The difference between the practical-minded colonists and the classical theorists in Europe actually resulted in many scientific advancements. Again, something that was overlooked in most history classes.

Tracey says

I saw this mentioned as a Kindle Daily Deal in July & checked it out of the library, as the topic sounded interesting.

While I enjoyed the biographical info on Franklin as well as some of the other individuals (David Rittenhouse sounds particularly interesting!), the text felt a bit dry and repetitive at times ... tho it might have been me. The notes and bibliography were very thorough, so Lyons definitely did his homework.

It just didn't quite grab me, but is probably worth the read if you're interested in the Enlightenment as well as the struggles & conflicts between the leading men of the early United States.

Kristen Luppino says

About the knowledge revolution in revolutionary America. A fascinating amount of info that spans much of Benjamin Franklin's life. I really enjoyed this book!

Chris says

'Useful knowledge'?

The book contains much information about early philosophical societies. What I find lacking in this and many other works of this historical period, is a complete absence of any mention of the role Native Americans played in early colonial society. I understand, this book is not designed to address Native American issues or roles but I find it at least curious that there is no mention of the tragedy that was Indian policy in the pursuit of American ingenuity.

Bruce says

Franklin is noted for the comment "Let the experiment be made." The author says that for Franklin true knowledge must be both useful and social. Arguing that European economics of knowledge circumscribed American imaginations as assuredly as England restricted economic autonomy and limited political freedom in the colonies Lyons it is no accident the struggle to create American science went hand in hand with the struggle to create a free and independent America. Throughout the book the author shows the American 'science' establishment to be comprised of artisans, mechanics and other 'amateurs.' With the enlightenment well underway in Europe Franklin and others were able to correspond with scientists in Europe and exchange ideas. Franklin's reception in Europe was a result of his 'scientific' accomplishments even though he was self-taught. One of the author's conclusions is: the Colonial movement for useful knowledge preceded and made possible the Revolution and subsequent rise of America's political and economic system.

Tamhack says

"Franklin and a network of kindred American innovators plunged into the task of creating and sharing "useful knowledge." They started a raft of clubs, journals, and scholarly societies, many still thriving today, to harness man's intellectual and creative powers for the common good. Electricity, magnetism, astronomy,

botany-the restless minds of Franklin and company probed into all these fields. And as these New World thinkers began to make their own discoveries about the natural world, new conceptions of the political order were not far behind."

Benjamin Franklin has always been an enigma to me. How he had accomplished so much and was a big part in the the birth of the history of the USA.

43-" With labor of all types in short supply, colonial tradesman, such as Franklin's father, Josiah, were increasingly free to choose their craft and pursue their business outside of any meaningful government or social control. This same freedom allowed those interested to acquire additional skills and supplemental knowledge through educational lectures, evening vocational courses, and similar projects aimed at artisans and workingmen."

52-"Before the introduction of the postal stamp, recipients paid substantial fees when collecting their mail, while letters sent by the postmaster carried no such expense. This meant that Franklin could act as a convenient clearinghouse for scientific reports, receiving the originals and then distributing copies to America's virtuosi, precisely the task of secretary that he had spelled out in his plan for a national philosophical society."

74-"It was an article of faith among Franklin and his colleagues that science has the power to open up the world of wonders all around us. It could also explain those wonders as the product of orderly natural laws, debunk superstition, and tame unreasonable fears of nature."

78-"Ever since his early days as a printer and publisher, Franklin had been acutely aware of the hazards surrounding extreme weather."

82-" Among Franklin's recognized innovations were the distinction between positive and negative electrical charges; a plausible explanation of the workings of the mysterious Leyden jar, a simple condenser capable of storing electricity; the design and naming of the electrical "battery"; and the use of bodkins and other shape points to "throw off, as well as draw off the Electrical Fire," the fine step toward his development of the lightning rod."

Learned about others in this time period: 125 & 169-David Rittenhouse; 143- John Adams; 146- 147 mechanics and leather aprons, 153 -Thomas Paine "The moral character and happiness of mankind, are so interwoven with the operations of government , and the progress of the arts and sciences, is so dependent on the nature of our political institutions, that it is essential to the advancement of civilized society to give ample discussion to these topics."

p164-the establishment of manufacturing

174- "...the great milestones of nineteenth century America were overwhelmingly the products of fields that Franklin, Rush, Rittenhouse, Coxe, and their associates would have recognized and encouraged as natural outgrowths of the movement for useful knowledge-applied science, practical inventions, mechanics, and engineering."

"These included the steam locomotive, the typewriter, the sewing machine, the reaper, and the revolver, among other icons of America's accelerating industrialization. The Civil War, an incubator of terrible innovation, produced iron-clad ships, more accurate naval artillery, mass production of uniforms and shoes, modern ammunition, and the machine gun."

Becky says

A fascinating book! My takeaway is how our modern American culture was shaped by these earliest of colonials. After spending the first hundred years struggling to just survive in this new world, all the old European hierarchies of class, work, church, and academia seemed absurd to our forefathers. In the early 1700s, the craftsmen, mechanics, farmers, as well as the "tinkerers" and the simply curious, could experiment, invent, observe, and learn. They turned so many established notions upside down! They encouraged free thinking, common sense, and the USEFULNESS of knowledge put to some practical, common good. They scoffed at the notion that lightening was punishment from God and invented the lightening rod anyway. They wanted education to be more than church led universities for the rich studying Greek and Latin, and started the first independent college in America. Here, if you had a good idea, you could share it and give it a try and possibly be successful, no matter who you were. It is no surprise that this kind of independent thinking led to the revolution a few decades later. There were stories here of uneducated geniuses, inventors and engineers that I am sad to say I had not heard of before. Really interesting book

Riley says

Benjamin Franklin is easily my favorite Founding Father, given his expansive intellect and curiosity, even among a score of other giants from his time. This book is a celebration of one of Franklin's gifts to America: the country's long embrace of practicality. I enjoyed the book, though I wish it had given some time on the negatives of that worldview as well.

Here's sort of a thesis:

"Traditional assessments tend to view America's technological triumphs as the natural, logical outgrowth of the nation's political system and its dedication to free enterprise. Popular icons invoked in support of this notion invariably include the lone inventors, the industrial sympathizers, and the ingenious marketers whose technological prowess have been confirmed by great commercial success and accompanying celebrity -- the Wrights, Edison, Frederick Winslow Taylor, Henry Ford, Steve Jobs, among many others. This is however, to look at the problem backward, to write a history of the present.

"In fact, the colonial movement for useful knowledge, dating back at least to the Junto of the late 1720s, preceded and then made possible the Revolution and the subsequent rise of America's characteristic political and economic systems. The movement, which produced such figures as Ebenezer Kinnersley, David Rittenhouse, Benjamin Rush, and of course Franklin, firmly embedded the values of the mechanic, the artisan, the engineer, and the inventor in American society. In their hands, earlier European notions of practical learning and the idea of science took on a revolutionary cast, one that anticipated the coming political resistance against the British."

Corey says

Decent toe-dip into a fascinating era

This is no Franklin biography, this is much broader than that. I was very intrigued by this book, as it's a great

introduction into this wondrous piece of our past. For the most part I would have to say this just gets you started, details would need to be found with further reading.

At times this does get a bit repetitive, and I cannot vouch for just how accurate it all is. However, I did really enjoy reading this book, and look forward to diving deeper into some of these subjects and people of the time. That, I think is important for a book of history, to make you want to read more!

Michelle says

Informative and entertaining account of how Benjamin Franklin and his colleagues set the stage not only for the culture of American entrepreneurship but also for the American revolution itself through developing a culture of innovative and collaborative approaches to science and intellectual development. Combination of serious research and lively stories and local color that bring the characters and context to life.
