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“The best short biography of Franklin ever written.”—Gordon S. Wood

Benjamin Franklin is perhaps the most remarkable figure in American history: the greatest statesman of his age, he played a pivotal role in the formation of the American republic. He was also a pioneering scientist, a bestselling author, the country’s first postmaster general, a printer, a bon vivant, a diplomat, a ladies’ man, and a moralist—and the most prominent celebrity of the eighteenth century.

Franklin was, however, a man of vast contradictions, as Edmund Morgan demonstrates in this brilliant biography. A reluctant revolutionary, Franklin had desperately wished to preserve the British Empire, and he mourned the break even as he led the fight for American independence. Despite his passion for science, Franklin viewed his groundbreaking experiments as secondary to his civic duties. And although he helped to draft both the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution, he had personally hoped that the new American government would take a different shape. Unraveling the enigma of Franklin’s character, Morgan shows that he was the rare individual who consistently placed the public interest before his own desires.

Written by one of our greatest historians, *Benjamin Franklin* offers a provocative portrait of America’s most extraordinary patriot.

Benjamin Franklin Details

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From Reader Review Benjamin Franklin for online ebook

Kristen says

I was terribly disappointed by what I was able to slog through of this book. I was also surprised to be so disappointed, because I have always thought that the small portions of the life of Benjamin Franklin that I've come across through the years has always seemed to present him as an exceptional and utterly fascinating person on every possible level. So to have this book be so painful was unexpected and confusing.

This biography, which doesn't dispute my perception of Franklin's impact, is simply written so painfully, and with such text-book-like complexity and dullness that it gets in the way of telling the life story of Benjamin Franklin. The actual facts and stories about Ben manage to fight their way through the author's dense prose, but the amount of effort required to glean the gems in all that weight just became too much work for me. The actual interesting bits are in spite of, rather than because of the writing style of the book.

I'm sorry to have to be so negative about this book, particularly as the author is clearly an academic luminary - "Sterling Professor of History Emeritus at Yale" no less. But just because you're a celebrated professor doesn't mean your writing is engaging, and the writing in this book just isn't.

I haven't given up on Ben Franklin's life, but I clearly need to find a more engaging biography of him, one that tells more stories and really reflects a more accessible approach to telling us about his life. A man as accomplished and important as Benjamin Franklin shouldn't have a biography about his life putting people to sleep, and that's what this bio did to me, unfortunately.

Kyle Walker says

Maybe it was me, but struggled getting thru it.

Casey Vaughan says

Amazing man. Thankful for his vision of America and willingness to do everything in his power to bring it into being.

Gerry says

I have read books on American Founding Fathers that have included George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and even one on George Mason. I was reluctant in the past to read anything on Dr. Benjamin Franklin only because of the complex person that he was in his life, and to those of us to History and love of the same. I am happy to say that I am glad that this would be the first book on Dr. Franklin that I would read. This author Mr. Morgan captures (or attempts to capture) that complexity well without making any sort of claim that he "solved the puzzle" of who Ben Franklin actually was during the course of his life. In my opinion, Dr. Franklin is the most unique of the Forefathers of the United States. He was by all accounts ahead of his time, (and dare I say it), he was the Leonardo da Vinci of this same time frame. The difference in my own mind between Leonardo and on Benjamin in this sense is that one was pure science

and the other was pure Public Service with a skill for Science.

The long-standing relationship America has today with the United Kingdom and that of France began with the efforts of one person who proudly considered himself a British American, or more specifically an English American. Prior to the American Revolution Dr. Franklin considered himself a British citizen and had hopes that the American Colonies of his day were going to be recognized more as a “nation” rather than a collection of “colonies”. A multi-faceted person who considered his world one of wonder and one in which many discoveries had to be made in order to better serve the “publick”. His public service was to him his greatest achievement and once the Revolutionary War had started he considered himself “American” as his disappointment in the motherland was based on his 10-year effort to avoid the conflict all together. He had told the British Parliament time and again that they would gain more from America by not taxing them and would lose handily by fighting them. In his mind the Revolution was avoidable, but he also accepted that with Lexington and Concorde it was also then “unavoidable”. Ironically, elements of the British Parliament considered Dr. Franklin to be the “cause” of the American Revolution – the Parliament simply misunderstood who existed in her colonies and Dr. Franklin made every effort to explain “who” these people were at the time.

Science:

Dr. Franklin never spent time arguing his detractors on discoveries – one case in point that stands out well is the Lightning Protection of the Royal Arsenal in which he published his results. A local political argument ensued as to how he “procured” the work and effort. In this manner, we also see a hint of contractual concerns that were also unfounded. Rumors and stories followed, stories that would run amok in the British Press when the letters ended up in Boston – fingers were also pointed toward different people. The finger pointing would lead to a classic old fashioned duel; one dueler would be injured as a result and this then led to yet another announced duel. Before the second duel took place, Dr. Franklin wrote an article in the London Chronicle and claimed “...I am the person who obtained and transmitted to Boston the letters in question...” This article had appeared on 25 December 1773. More importantly, what is noticeable here is how the anger across the ocean had been brought to a boiling point in both directions from Parliament in London to the known powder keg that lay in Boston Massachusetts. As time of the news traveled on this “Lighting Protection of the Royal Arsenal” and a law suit had been attempted in January of 1774, the effort was lost when in January of 1774 it was learned in England of the “Boston Tea Party” just a month previous.

Dr. Franklins work on the smokeless stove, chimneys, rigs for smaller ships for better aerodynamics is comparative to Da Vinci’s “flying machines”. He was a member of nearly all Academies and Societies of his day and I doubt there are others who have come close to actual memberships except for maybe Mr. Albert Einstein. When he had returned to Philadelphia from Paris in 1785 he added a room 16’X30’ (16 by 30 feet) that could accompany up to 40,000 volumes and this above his dining room – he built a contraption that would keep each of these works within an arm’s reach. He was the United States First Postmaster – but had also been the Postmaster of Pennsylvania during Colonial Rule. His discovery of the jet stream is what lead him to work on the aerodynamics of masts of smaller ships to travel faster across the ocean.

Writings:

What is lost to History in America are the Dr. Franklin writings in London against the Boston Port Act or the Coercive/Intolerable Acts which reorganized the Massachusetts Government, reduced the powers of assembly, and shut down meetings that also limited trial by jury. This also provided for troops to be quartered anywhere in Boston at the leisure of the British Commander. His earlier works are in some ways better known to Americans, but (again) his writings in defense of the Colonial persons is overlooked in this nation. Most important to reemphasized here is the personal belief he held that the colonies were in fact an extension of the British (specifically English) nation – what is more appropriately termed the United Kingdom.

Upon the news of the Boston Tea Party, Dr. Franklin had written the following:

“When I see that all petitions and complaints of grievances are so odious to government, that even the mere pipe which conveys them becomes obnoxious, I am at a loss to know how peace and union is to be maintained or restored between the different parts of the empire. Grievances cannot be redressed unless they are known; and they cannot be known but through complaints and petitions: If these are deemed affronts, and the messengers punished as offenders, who will henceforth send petitions? And who will deliver them? It has been thought as a dangerous thing in any state to stop up the vent of griefs. Wise governments have therefore generally received petitions with some indulgence, even when but slightly founded. Those who think themselves injured by their rulers, are sometimes, by a mild and prudent answer, convinced of their error. But where complaining is a crime, hope becomes despair.”

Dr. Franklin believed it would have been the “right” thing to do to pay the East India Company for the loss of the tea in the Boston Harbor. An interesting point that Mr. Morgan (author) didn’t mention in this book is that the tea spilt in the Boston would not be repatriated until 4 July 1976 when Queen Elizabeth II was in Washington DC for the Bicentennial celebrations that took hold during President Ford’s administration. The value paid was increased to the value of the time based on the loss as calculated by the East India Company calculation.

Epitaph of an Empire:

The British Empire as we know would not be relegated to a mere Commonwealth until the independence of India took hold nearly two centuries later. But, Dr. Franklin did write “Epitaph of an Empire” seven weeks before he would have to take leave and relinquish his “English American” citizen self-status. He became fully prepared to simply be known as an “American”. He would return to Southampton with his grandson in order for his British son to sign over papers of property to the grandson. The property was in New Jersey, the British son would never have a relationship with his father when he, himself sided with the Loyalist cause. What is discouraging to a small degree in this book is the realities that American Colonists felt and believed as a whole to the time. One third of the population claimed to be Revolutionaries, another one third were fierce Loyalists, and yet, another one third of the (then) population simply didn’t know what they wanted or where they belonged. This is not explored nor discussed in this book and I do believe it should have been tackled with reference to at least 3 paragraphs and no more than 2 pages. South Carolina became the first location of the “Civil War” between Revolutionaries and Loyalists. It was a bloodbath of the worst sort that is often overlooked and rarely discussed – this in part may possibly be because of the American Civil War that would take hold some 90 years later in which South Carolina was on the losing side and the side that opened the salvos of the same on 12 April, 1861. None the less, the history of these atrocities on both sides cannot be ignored during the American War for Independence.

Overall, I have to give this book 5 stars – this Author and this effort deserve nothing less. The whole book was one very enjoyable read.

Arleigh Kovacs says

This is a fairly easy to read biography. There was a great deal in here that I didn't know/hadn't learned about Franklin. It got a bit dull toward the end but, maybe, because I was trying to process so much information. That is, I got a little bogged down when Mr. Morgan was trying to explain who the US assigned to help in the financing from France and the treaty written with them. Not the author's fault. The US couldn't seem to decide who should be there and kept sending men and then calling them home. I wasn't reading it all at one sitting so it was a little confusing (I'm sure it was for Franklin and the French, as well) and I had to keep reading bits over to get it clear in my mind. Other than that, I recommend it. Especially if you are doing some research for a term paper or such.

Henry Sturcke says

In this biographical sketch, the author -- a noted historian of the American Revolution -- expresses his admiration for this remarkable figure. A generation older than other leading Founding Fathers, Franklin had already earned enough to retire from business and devote himself to public service while Washington was a teenager and Jefferson a child. The international renown he achieved through his scientific experiments was of inestimable value when he went to France during the Revolution to plead America's case in its quest for independence, but even more valuable in Morgan's estimation was his integrity and winning personality. Morgan does not gloss over Franklin's blunders, the chief of which his feud with Thomas Penn, proprietor of the Pennsylvania colony. This son of William, colony founder, displayed all the faults of an absentee landlord, which seems to have violated Franklin's sense of right and wrong to such an extent that he departed from the pragmatism and far-sightedness that normally governed his conduct. Yet the moribund government that resulted from Penn's neglect was the environment in which Franklin practiced his growing skill at organizing private schemes for the public good such as a fire department and a library. It was characteristic of the man, and a key to his success, that he never appeared to lead, but let others take the initiative and even the credit in projects he organized. Those in the know saw through this, of course, and esteemed him the more for it. Ironically, this led the British to suspect that Franklin, in the long years he spent in London as agent of the colonies, was the ringleader of the growing rebellion. They were wrong, but not by much. Franklin's own vision of America as a partner in a transatlantic empire, in time, the dominant partner, was frustrated in his lifetime, primarily because a succession of British governments were led by men who lacked the imagination to share it (others, such as William Pitt, did grasp it, but were no longer in power). Franklin's hope was eventually realized nevertheless in the special relationship between the two English-speaking powers through most of the 20th century.

Few people born three centuries ago are as accessible as he. Morgan based his research primarily on Franklin's own writings, which fill 46 volumes in the critical edition. At the same time, he stresses that there is always something Franklin seems to be withholding.

Morgan tells the tale well and has succeeded in his goal of presenting Franklin as an appealing personality. Some other figures, such as John Adams, who is seen through the prism of his own overweening vanity and faulted for claiming to one and all he could have done a better job negotiating with both the French and English, come off more poorly. I would have liked more of an exploration of the origins of Franklin's insatiably curious mind and astounding physical energy, but Morgan avoids the pitfalls of psycho-biography. This is not a detailed biography, but a good first introduction to this giant of a man whose vitality, optimism and gregarious nature were emblematic of the new nation taking shape on the Western shore of the Atlantic. Highly recommended.

Demetria says

We all know about the kite and we picture Benjamin Franklin in his little glasses looking quite serious, but after reading this book, it seems like Franklin was a a very flirtatious, intelligent, charming, diplomatic man. He sounds like a lot of fun and someone with a lot of big ideas and the drive to carry out his ambition. He did own slaves for a few years though before he became an abolitionist, so we probably would not have hung out and what not. The book is pretty engaging and the author does a good job with balancing Franklin's social life with his professional life, which often overlapped. The overall portrait of Franklin is perhaps a little too generous though and I think the author's genuine admiration for Franklin may have influenced him to create a bit of a saintly persona. Other than that though, it's a great read.

Stephen says

2004 wrote: Franklin, being a great thinker and socialite and Morgan, being a fine writer and interpreter, make this book a great read. Morgan pushes history into a timeless realm. This book quenched a thirst for getting to know Franklin further and fulfilled a book report for American History.

Bruce says

Neither a definitive biography of this Founding Father nor a deeply academic work, this short biography uses recently available personal papers to explore Franklin's complex personality, the contradictions in his own ideas and positions regarding the relationships between Great Britain and her North American colonies, and his own efforts to mold and guide those relationships, not always successfully. A man of many talents, Franklin labored long and hard, and the story of his efforts is a fascinating one. The book sheds light on aspects of his life and work that are new and interesting.

Ron says

Three stars was a gift. It wasn't that Morgan got his facts wrong, how could he? Everyone knows Franklin was an earnest achiever behind his aw-shucks Poor Richard facade, John Adams was a pompous ass, despite David McCullough's best efforts to reconstruct him.

But his writing style was egregious. Despite his age and credentials, Morgan wrote like a CNN or FoxNews copy writer: asking rhetorical questions and setting up false dilemmas, then telling you over and over again how he solved them. It may make for gossip-y, attention-grabbing television but in a book it's repetitive and boring. We got that Franklin espoused no Christian creed of his day the first dozen times. We got that the maternity of William Franklin is unknown. We know that Franklin was a distinguished scientist aside from his political roles. We had an inkling that he liked girls and they liked him. Despite Morgan's apparent effort to tell us something new, he doesn't.

Before you read Benjamin Franklin, read The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. The only value Morgan adds is his coverage of the years after Ben's tome ended and his access to Franklin's extensive correspondence. Morgan's "insights" into the character and motives of Franklin are largely derived from Franklin's own pen.

Lynn says

Morgan's book is a study of Benjamin Franklin's character, philosophy and what made him tick. He centers on how Franklin thought and how he lived his beliefs. It is a fascinating book.

Paul says

I had been wanting to read a biography of Ben Franklin, and this was a good pick. It's a short book and an easy read, though it took me a couple of months because I only read a few pages at a time (occupied by other books!).

Edmund Morgan's Franklin is a humble superhero of sorts. Reading about Franklin, I often wondered when the man found time to eat and sleep, with all the writing he did, all the meetings he attended, and all the thinking he engaged in. I come away from the book with a wish that I had known Ben Franklin, probably like most people of his day. He was probably the most famous American in the world for many decades, but he never let that fame get to his head.

I enjoyed reading about Franklin's time as a man of Philadelphia, working to mold his city and immediate society into a better and more efficient place. He was perhaps a little too successful at it, because the people routinely elected him president of whatever society, club, delegation, etc that they invented, and generally without him running for the office!

Morgan is clearly a devoted admirer of Franklin, and takes his side on nearly every issue and against nearly every opponent. For example, Franklin's relationship with John Adams is portrayed in this book with Franklin in the most positive light. Adams is seen as a pompous, paranoid and jealous of Franklin. Adams is almost elevated to villain status along with Arthur Lee. It's an interesting perspective, and one that I'll be curious to expand on when I eventually read David McCullough's *John Adams*.

One thing that Morgan does throughout the book is attempt to speculate what the mind of Franklin was. Morgan extrapolates conclusions from documents and letters. Sometimes the conclusions are obvious. Other times, I got the feeling he was just concluding what he wished to be true about Franklin and others who corresponded with Franklin.

Still, I enjoyed reading the book, and laughed out loud on many occasions. Franklin was, of course, a very funny person with a good sense of humor and satire. Having not read any other biographies of Franklin, I can't make comparisons. If you want a basic introduction to the life of Franklin, I'd say this is probably a good start.

Mike says

I really enjoy reading about Ben Franklin, but this particular biography was difficult for me to get through. Edmund Morgan is one of the top scholars of the period, but the writing style just dragged for me with this read. I felt it was repetitive and focused too much on the same idea that Franklin was simply a master negotiator Europeans loved and American leaders didn't always understand. There were parts I enjoyed, but overall I feel there are better biographies of Franklin out there.

William Ng says

A little long and dry. Although it captures many aspects of Franklin's life, I felt the most exciting and compelling parts were muddled in the language of the text.

A good read for anyone who is interested in Ben Franklin. But, a warning to the writing style of the author who made it difficult to absorb simple concepts in long windy passages of thick text. I ended up glossing over the last 60 or so pages, which ended with an unsatisfactory recounting of his life, principles, and contributions.

Joe Moody says

Edmond S. Morgan takes on a huge undertaking in this short biography of one of America's greatest heroes. One must assume, because of his immense popularity, there being nothing left to say about Benjamin Franklin. It may also be questioned if it is possible to capture the life of such a great man in a small book of three hundred and fourteen pages. Morgan himself states in the preface the immensity of writings that Franklin left behind that, "will eventually fill forty-six or more printed volumes of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin." He also admits the existence of his book's dependence on the collection of these papers. It's his ability to choose the material for this book selectively from these papers that makes the book a complete success.

The book does not portray Benjamin Franklin as the Franklin known in high school textbooks. The condensed Franklin story may portray him as a diplomat and founding father, the inventor of the lightning rod, and a founder of the first U.S. library and post office. His work as a publisher and editor may impress people. The book humanizes the man behind the work. The reader follows letters and journal entries to discover his true character. Morgan shows a fun person who loves people and ideas and good conversation. His letters to various women in his life show charm and wit. Letters to his friends show annoyance and sadness in his desperate struggle to keep good relations with England. His attempts to keep America 'English' in the early days, end with outrage and disgust for England by the end of the book. Later, during his time as a diplomat abroad, we examine a change in Franklin as he falls in love with a country (France) that had fallen in love with him.

Franklin mentioned to his mother that he wanted to be remembered as a man who lived usefully. Above all, Morgan portrays a man with a deep commitment to public service. Until his last days, he worked tirelessly on experiments, diplomacy, and philosophical thought. The book makes it hard to imagine an America without his existence.
