

Benjamin Franklin: The Critical Reception

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Franklin was one of the most famous people in the world during his lifetime, and he has remained so—but the reason for his fame has shifted over the centuries. In this essay Gurdip Panesar looks at the ways critics have read Franklin’s works and suggests that one of the reasons we have trouble making sense of Franklin is the multiplicity of his interests and talents. Which discipline does he “belong” to? Was he a literary author who happened to be involved in politics and science? Was he a historic figure who happened to write and do scientific experiments? Was he a scientist who happened to publish and shape the course of a nation?

Of course Franklin was all of these things and more, but most critics, and most ages, have been able to see only part of the picture at a time. Thus the Franklin who appears in the pages of both learned journals and popular biographies has changed his character: sometimes he is the practical man of business, sometimes the protagonist of the archetypal poor-boy-makes-good story, sometimes the infallible sage, sometimes the deeply flawed and conflicted human being. As Panesar points out, the people of each age see in Franklin what they want to see, or perhaps what they need to see. — J.L.

Benjamin Franklin is known as a great man who wrote much but not necessarily as one of America’s greatest literary figures. We can identify several reasons for this. First of all, he is such a multifaceted individual that it often appears something of a daunting task to try to approach him from any critical angle. The phrase “many-sided Franklin,” the title of Paul Leicester Ford’s 1899 biography, has often justly been invoked in relation to him. He remains one of the relatively few figures in world history who could genuinely be called a Renaissance man or polymath, given that he was a politician, a journalist, a writer, a printer,

a diplomat, a scientist, and an inventor. Furthermore, he had, of course, a fundamental role in shaping the independent United States as one of the Founding Fathers, a role that has embedded him in the national consciousness. Indeed, Franklin is a public figure of such standing that he has become enshrined in myth as well as history, a “massively symbolic folk hero” (Wood ix) as much as, if not more so, than his illustrious political contemporaries Jefferson, Madison, and Washington.

Biographies of Franklin have abounded over the past two hundred-odd years. His achievements in so many fields have naturally resulted in a multiplicity of approaches in Franklin scholarship—political, philosophical, sociological, and scientific. Trying to extract him from the realm of legend and from his variety of public roles in order to concentrate on him purely as a man of letters can be an arduous task. Even here, literary criticism remains generally mixed with the subject of “life writing” in his case, owing to his famous *Autobiography* and other writings on various aspects of his public roles. In a purely literary sense, it is not easy to know just what approach to take in examining his writings. It is therefore not too surprising that a purely literary approach has historically not been much in evidence among Franklin scholars.

Another reason for the paucity of “pure” literary criticism on Franklin is the relative lack of critical appraisal of the colonial/eighteenth-century period of North American literature as a whole. Studies and introductions to that era of literature of course have been produced—a very recent and notable work of reference being *The Oxford Handbook of Early American Literature*, edited by Kevin J. Hayes—but it remains overshadowed by the great flowering of American literature in the following two centuries. Literary criticism of this period has often tended to break down into discussion of the era’s most important writers, such as Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather, with whom Franklin is often usefully compared. As a literary period the eighteenth century in America remains a fairly tenuous area of scholarship (in stark contrast to the British literature of that time).