A Folksy Aristocrat

By BARRY GEWEN  AUG. 8, 2004

THE AMERICANIZATION OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

By Gordon S. Wood.

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IT'S Benjamin Franklin's time. Two years ago Edmund S. Morgan gave us a fine character sketch with "Benjamin Franklin." Then Walter Isaacson's "Benjamin Franklin: An American Life" planted itself on the New York Times best-seller list for a long stay. H. W. Brands has chimed in with "The First American," a more commodious biography than Isaacson's, if a less fluent one. And now we have Gordon S. Wood's engaging book "The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin."

Wood has some tough acts to follow, but he is no slouch. A skilled writer with both Pulitzer and Bancroft prizes to his credit, he possesses as profound a grasp of the early days of the Republic as anyone currently working. He is the author of two books -- The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787" and "The Radicalism of the American Revolution" -- that are essential for understanding the United States from its founding down to the present.

This study is not a biography, at least not a conventional one. Wood focuses on Franklin's personal development and constructs his narrative around various turning points in the life, almost like a bildungsroman. We learn the choices Franklin made, the conflicts he had to resolve. This is the most dramatic of the recent Franklin books.

One of Wood's major topics is Franklin's reputation, then and now. A reader today cannot fail to be astonished by Franklin's remarkable modernity. Isaacson calls him "the founding father who winks at us." Wood echoes this judgment: "He seems to be the one we would most like to spend an evening with." Washington was too solemn, Jefferson too lofty, Hamilton too driven, Madison too lawyerly, Adams too difficult, a royal pain. With his disdain of powdered wigs and the other formalities of his very formal age, Franklin comes across as the most recognizably human of them all, a man for our time. His immediacy compresses centuries. He is not even Franklin, he's just Ben -- witty, ironic, plain-spoken, shrewd, congenial, devious, visionary, lusty, magnanimous, hardheaded, manipulative, brilliant Ben.
Not everyone today would enjoy his company, be seduced by this consummately seductive man. The politically correct would most likely hector him if they could. For Franklin was a slaveholder. It’s true he turned against slavery, and ardently so, at the very end of his life, but he took a long time getting there. He could be a bigot as well. He wrote nativist diatribes against the large German population in his own colony of Pennsylvania. In 1751 he argued for excluding everyone from Pennsylvania except the English; Morgan calls him "the first spokesman for a lily-white America." Franklin loved the company of women, but he was no feminist. He treated his wife miserably, and he admonished young brides to attend to the word "obey" in their vows. He worried that handouts to the poor would encourage laziness, and he was a fervent supporter of a strong military.

An 18th-century Jesse Helms? Modern right-wingers would probably be even more uncomfortable with him than left-wingers. Take his religious views. Franklin was a deist; God, in his opinion, was a distant presence in the affairs of men. He was no churchgoer. He accepted neither the sacredness of the Bible nor the divinity of Jesus. His ideas about property rights were similarly unorthodox. Beyond basic necessities, he said, all property belonged to "the public, who by their laws have created it." Brands calls such remarks "strikingly socialistic."

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What most sets Franklin apart from contemporary conservatives, however, is his attitude toward that panoply of
issues gathered under the heading of "family values." As a young man he consorted with "low women," and fathered an illegitimate child. In 1745 he wrote a letter to a youthful friend -- long suppressed -- offering advice on choosing a lover. (Older women, he declared, were preferable to younger ones.) Franklin was always an incorrigible flirt. How much actual sex was involved is anybody's guess, but one incident stands out among the rest. When he was in his 70's and living in Paris, he became enamored of the captivating 33-year-old Mme. Anne-Louise Brillon, one of the leading lights of Parisian society. Even the puritanical John Adams was enchanted by her. She was no less taken with Franklin, and their vivacious correspondence consisted of a determined campaign on his part to bed her and her equally stalwart resistance, based on the customs of the day and what was proper between a widower and a married woman. Their bantering give-and-take, as quoted by Brands, constitutes one of the most charming episodes in early American history and -- since as far as the historians can tell they never did sleep together -- also one of the most poignant.

Moral zealots of his own era -- Adams, for example, and the Lees of Virginia -- didn't like him, and our own zealots of both the left and the right wouldn't like him now. In these overheated, bipolar times, if a decision had to be made about our currency, it's a safe bet that a slaveholding lecher would not be gracing our $100 bills. But Franklin was a hero of moderation throughout his life, and he is a hero for moderates today. He took the world as he found it, accepted people for what they were and didn't try to make them over. He had no axes to grind. His code of conduct began in sociability, with a firm commitment to the practical. Franklin has been criticized for not being a dreamer. He wasn't; he wanted to get things done. He was devoted to public service, the public good. Thus, the library, fire company, insurance company, hospital and university he founded in Philadelphia; thus, the inventions and scientific experiments that won him fame on both sides of the Atlantic; and thus, the magnificent political and diplomatic achievements. Franklin, as Isaacson points out, was the only person to sign the four major documents establishing the country: the Declaration of Independence, the treaties with France and Britain, and the Constitution. Wood calls him "the greatest diplomat America has ever had."

So extraordinary was the multifaceted Franklin that it's all too easy to sentimentalize him, and here Wood's book can serve as a useful corrective. Two themes in particular lend themselves to fuzzy effusiveness. The first is that Franklin was some kind of tribune of the masses, the populist among the founding fathers. But no less than Thomas Jefferson, Franklin believed in the idea of a natural aristocracy, and well understood where he was positioned within that hierarchy.

He could interact enjoyably with anyone, commoners as well as kings, yet as Morgan observes, he preferred associating with those "on the same
wavelength” -- which meant neither commoners nor kings but Hume, Burke, Condorcet, Boswell, Beaumarchais, Adam Smith. He hated the rabble, feared mobs. When it came to decision making, he held that wisdom resided with the wise. "The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin" makes clear just how much of an elitist our folksiest founder was.

The other problematic theme concerns Franklin’s “Americanness.” He seems almost a checklist for those national qualities Americans take pride in -- and others despise us for. Yet Wood alerts us to be careful in how we think about this aspect of his character. For he was the most cosmopolitan of the founders, at home anywhere. Twenty-five of the last 33 years of his life were spent abroad, and those years were anything but a hardship for him. He was wined and dined and celebrated by the Europeans more than he ever was by his own countrymen. Soon after arriving in London he was complaining about the provinciality and vulgarity of Americans. In Paris he was quite simply a superstar, acclaimed as the equal of Voltaire, and he gave thought to settling permanently in "the civilest Nation upon Earth.” These sentiments did not go unnoticed back home, and Franklin fell under suspicion of being a foreign agent, first for the British, then for the French. When he returned to Philadelphia for the last time in 1785, it was in part to clear his name.

So what does it mean to speak of his "Americanization”? What changed him from a citizen of the world to a citizen of the United States? As Wood shows, these aren’t easy questions to answer. But it should be said that in one way Franklin never really did change. He turned against England because it had become smaller in his mind, oppressive and corrupt, no longer the center of civilization that he had come to love. Now it was America that seemed to be civilization’s future. The Revolution was not a conflict over taxation or home rule, not even a dispute over the rights of Englishmen. For him it represented something universal, a world-historical event, "a miracle in human affairs.” That is, Franklin never stopped being the urbane cosmopolitan, the ultimate sophisticate. He stayed true to himself. But by 1776 he had concluded that the only way to remain a citizen of the world was to become an American.