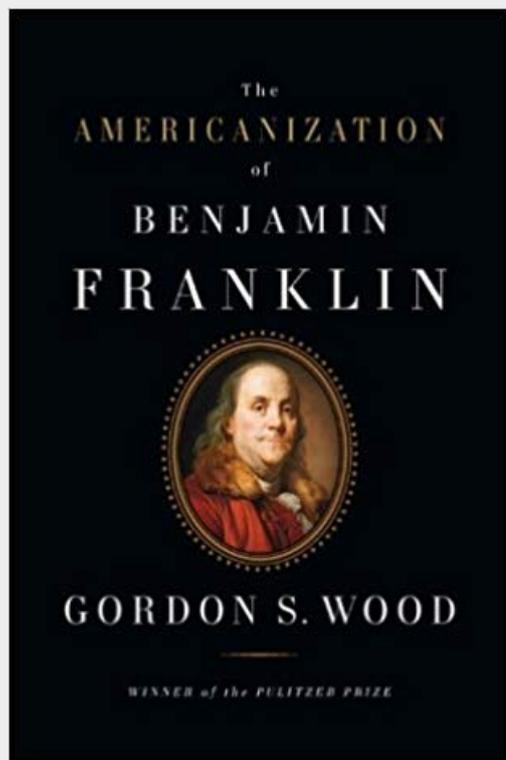


The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin by Gordon S. Wood



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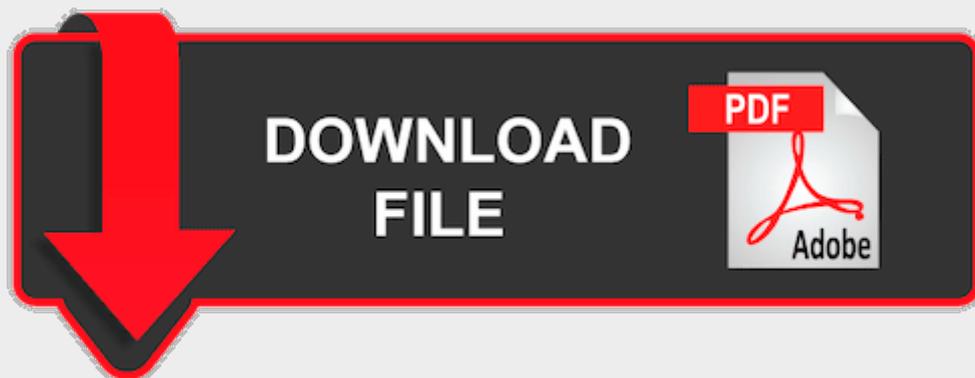
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A leading historian of the American Revolution offers an incisive portrait of the complex, often contradictory figure of Benjamin Franklin, a man who was at once the quintessential American and a cosmopolitan lover of Europe, a one-time loyalist turned revolutionary, and an ambassador whose French diplomacy, crucial to the American cause, became a source of suspicion at home. 150,000 first printing.



Reviews of the [The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin](#) by Gordon S. Wood

1. Talrajas

The story most of us learned in school was that Franklin was a kind, jovial fellow, a polymath, an inventor, a scientist, a politician, all of which is true. He was also presented as the quintessential new American man, who was born in this country and felt a loyalty to the new country, and a spirit of rebelliousness where Mother England was concerned. It's a great story, but it's far from the truth. It's also far too simple a description of this complex man. Franklin was indeed a self-made man, who started out (as did many of that era) in an apprenticeship to a master of his trade (in this case, an elder brother) but his drive, independence and intelligence led him to leave that form of indentured servitude early, and seek out his own fortune. To that end he cultivated patrons, charmed a good many people, and even traveled to England on the promise- false, as it turned out- or financial support to set up a business there. The idea that Franklin would consider moving to England may seem odd to the reader brought up on the popular myth of Franklin as rebel, but for most of his life Franklin considered himself an Englishman first and foremost, and much of his political activity early on was dedicated to convincing the government back in England that the American colonists were deserving of the same rights as Englishmen back home, and convincing the more rebellious elements here that it was in their best interests to reconcile with England. It wasn't until 1774, when Franklin was already 68 years old, that he effectively renounced his English identity in favor of an American identity. Once declaring himself to be an American, Franklin relished his new identity as a pioneer and, in the eyes of many European, a rustic. He arrived in France, where he was to serve as Ambassador, wearing a frontiersman's fur hat, and happily played the role expected of him. He stayed in France for another nine years, entertaining the French, negotiating several important treaties, and enjoying the various pleasures that Paris could provide.

Gordon Wood's biography presents a full picture of Franklin, a man whose life was filled with both triumph and tragedy. He was celebrated through Europe as a great scientist, inventor, and wit, while at the same time the War of Independence resulted in an acrimonious split with his beloved son William. His common law wife Deborah Reed, whom he had first proposed to when she was only 15, and who ran his many businesses during his frequent absences, died while he was away in England. He was a hard working businessman, campaigner for various causes, and government official, who nonetheless found time for his avocational scientific interests. He discovered the Gulf Stream, was credited by Malthus with discovering the law of population growth, and made discoveries in electricity and meteorology. Wood presents a more detailed picture of Franklin than have most biographers, giving a glimpse into Franklin's family life, his working relationship with allies (like Jefferson) and enemies (most notably Adams), as well as his own beliefs and emotions. An excellent and entertaining look into the life of one of America's greatest, and first, citizens.

2. Yozshujind

Benjamin Franklin is probably the second most well-known Founding Father after George Washington. But why? He wasn't a president. He wasn't a general. He didn't write the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution (although he signed both). In fact, even though he was influential in so many ways he was also quite old by the time the American Revolution occurred. Gordon Wood explains that although Franklin passed in and out of public favor during and after his life, his enormous influence on the nation and our ideals was far more than political.

America has long been called the "land of opportunity" but Franklin might be the biggest reason behind the idea of the "American Dream." The nations of Europe in the 1700s were very class-conscious. You were either from the wealthy gentry or you labored with your hands. To be certain, there were a few successful people - the "middling" classes - who were financially successful, but they were still looked down upon for having earned their fortunes by work. It sounds almost silly now, but work was seen as morally debasing and it was believed that only by being born into a state of not having to spend time and effort at work (particularly with your hands) could one's best traits be developed. Franklin was one of those who amassed immense wealth by his industry... but he made a show of extolling the virtues of being a "self-made man" especially through his Autobiography which became immensely popular. Wood explains that Franklin was perhaps the single greatest influence in creating this idea that Americans had the opportunity to make something more of themselves than their birth might have implied. (I even worked for a company called Franklin that taught his ideas of self-improvement.)

The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin generally follows a chronological format but isn't precisely a biography in the traditional sense (such as Benjamin Franklin: An American Life by Walter Isaacson). It focuses more on the important points of Franklin's life and the many and varied accomplishments for which he is remembered. Of course it details his achievements as a revolutionary, especially his influence in persuading the French to assist the American Revolution, but it also explains his very *late* conversion to the cause of the Revolution. In fact, Franklin was a very loyal "British" subject until he finally realized how futile his efforts were to persuade Parliament to treat Americans fairly. This caused many patriots to wrongly view his conversion with suspicion, and he wasn't as highly valued in America as he was abroad. Wood doesn't shy away from covering his shortcomings, but he rightly praises him for

his many contributions.

And this really is a good book about one of the greatest Americans and his personality and character and the context of his time. As he *became* an American he also created the *image* of an American. And he might just be the biggest reason for our expectation that anyone can - through their own efforts and hard work - make of themselves whatever they chose. And if that isn't a true "Founding Father," I don't know what is.

3. Ielonere

Dozens, probably hundreds, of books have been written about Franklin over the years. One might wonder how much of a new contribution another book about Franklin could make. Apparently, quite a lot.

Nowadays, Franklin is viewed as the most "American" of the Founding Fathers, chiefly because he is perceived as a self-made man who was able to make something out of himself against all odds. In other words, Franklin represents the American Dream.

However, as Mr. Woods so clearly illustrates in his brilliant biography, this view of Franklin as the "ideal American" is not so conclusive, and was developed primarily after his death. Franklin was a rather strong supporter of the Crown for most of his adult life. As a point, he thought that the grant of Pennsylvania given to William Penn should have been revoked and returned to the Crown. He also tried, up to the last moment, to reconcile between the Americans and the English in the years prior to the Revolution. Even during the Revolution, at the time when he was in France securing loans and lobbying the French to support the American cause, he was still (unjustifiably) suspected of being a royalist in disguise.

The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin is a tremendous contribution to our understanding of this great man.

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