THE FIRST AMERICAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
by H.W. Brands (Doubleday, 742 pages, $35.00)

Benjamin Franklin's life spanned an era of radical change, beginning at a time when witch trials were routine in the Colonies, and ending in an age when electricity had become the new supernatural force and an independent young nation stood ready to take on its role as an emerging world power.

For that reason alone, Franklin is a figure worthy of close study. For H.W. Brands, he is both the central figure of the age and a vehicle for exploring the emerging priorities, loyalties, and beliefs of nearly a century's worth of Americans and Englishmen. But Brands was also intrigued by Franklin's involvement in so many other aspects of his rapidly changing world. While the political revolution roocked both America and Europe and thrust ordinary men into prominence, Franklin had already earned worldwide fame by the time of the American tax crisis. In contrast to the other Founding Fathers, Franklin was an extraordinary man even in ordinary times.

His adventures during the relatively uneventful years prior to the tax crisis make the story of his life greatly entertaining. Through Franklin's letters, his autobiography, and the reminiscences of those who knew him, Brands gives new life to the mythic hero we thought we already knew—and because his acquaintances included ministers, philosophers, scientists, radicals, no-nonsense businessmen, as well as women of the street, the resulting picture is a delightful mosaic of a man who was one-third earthy rascal, one-third idealist, and one-third everything in between.

Although the book is anything but revisionist, and readers aren't asked to accept almost-plausible new theories, Brands definitely fine-tunes some well-established though overly simplistic perceptions of Franklin. Thus we see that while his reputation as a womanizer is based on fact, he was by no means an unabashed libertine. And while he truly was a master of compromise and tact, his bitterness toward his estranged son William reveals him to be unforgiving as well.

Had there never been an American Revolution, few of the Founding Fathers would be remembered today, but Franklin's reputation would be assured by virtue of the inventions, discoveries, and literary activities that, in Brands' hands, make his life read almost like a chapter from Huckleberry Finn. From the creation of literary alter-ego "Silence Dogood" to his often amusing and daring experiments with electricity, Franklin was never dull.

In fact, the essence of the man comes out most clearly in the accounts of the ordinary moments, when mundane events set Franklin's analytical mind into action, pondering such mysteries of life as why a storm coming out of the west seems to strike first in the east, or whether being cold really has anything at all to do with catching a cold—surely questions that would never have occurred to John Adams, or George Washington, or the other great Americans of Franklin's day.

—BRUCE HEYDT

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THE years immediately preceding the Civil War were frustrating for officers in the U.S. Army. Battles were few, and opportunities for advancement were limited. So, Bushrod Washington (1762-1835) turned his attention to other pursuits. These included politics, law, and the study of botany. This is the story of Washington's life, and his contributions to American history, as told by his great-grandson, Edward Washington Bbold. This effort, in part, inspired his exploration of Franklin's life. "One of the things that attracted me to Roosevelt was that he was a very multi-faceted individual. At any given time he had a dozen different areas in the line. After I finished Roosevelt, I asked myself, 'Where else in American history was it so multi-dimensional?' And immediately Franklin came to mind."

For his next project, though, Brands has a different approach in mind—a history of the California gold rush. "In Franklin I looked at a short period of time through the eyes of a single individual. In looking at the gold rush I'm going to look at a short period of time through the eyes of many individuals. It ought to be fun."

—Bruce Heydt

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