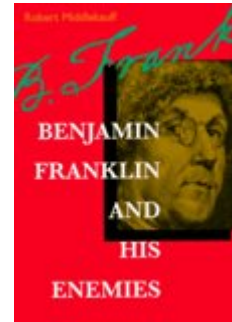


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Middlekauff. *Benjamin Franklin and His Enemies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. xix + 255 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20268-9.

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In the Eye of the Beholder

Middlekauff applies his very considerable skills as a narrative historian to this analysis of the career of Benjamin Franklin as seen primarily through the eyes of his enemies. His brief incisive character sketches and pithy style brings an overall freshness to the material. Middlekauff has written a book which emphasizes the impact of personality upon unfolding historical events. This book does not so much present a particular point of view as focus upon perspective and historical understanding. Thus, we are offered a political history inhabited by real people with real strengths and real weaknesses. This is not a book for those seeking an overt analytical framework or a broad theoretical foundation. The title of this book is deceptive—while Benjamin Franklin and his enemies are accorded much attention, the real story revolves around the 'and' in the title for it is indeed a story of relationships—stormy, tempestuous, filled with strong feeling and animated by intense dislike. Middlekauff seems to be suggesting that although the individual qualities and abilities of the actors are important, how they play off against each is even more significant. Relationships that are formed, transformed, unformed and reformed are the substance of this work and give it its unique character.

The book begins with a brief review of Franklin's friends over the course of his lengthy career, including Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the English chemist Joseph Priestley, the London merchant Peter Collinson, the Scottish printer William Strahan, the philosopher David Hume, the French chemist Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier and the encyclopedist Marquis de Con-

dorcet. If these friendships were part of Franklin's overall quest for greatness, many other relationships (especially with women) provided a sense of stability and a degree of intimacy. Middlekauff notes Margerat Stevenson, Franklin's London landlady and her daughter, Mary, became his lifelong friends. Later, while an American commissioner in Paris, he had close relationships with Mesdames Brillon and Helvitus. Indeed, as Middlekauff demonstrates, Franklin needed close female companionship throughout his life.

Having established that Franklin had many friends at all levels of society, Middlekauff then devotes the remainder of the book to his notable enemies. He discusses the growing antipathies between Franklin and the proprietary party in Pennsylvania. While individuals like William Smith receive attention, it soon becomes clear that Franklin's chief enemy was the proprietor himself, Thomas Penn. Middlekauff devotes an entire chapter to the development of this mutual dislike, paying particular attention to its negative impact on Franklin's judgment. Unfortunately, the normally rational Franklin became increasingly irrational in dealing with Penn. Ultimately, the Penn position in England was too solid for Franklin's anti-proprietary lobby to have an impact. His missions to England to end proprietary government in Pennsylvania ended in failure.

At the same time, relations between Great Britain and her North American colonies continued to deteriorate. Middlekauff traces the transformation of Franklin's attitude toward England from one of unabashed admira-

tion and affection to one of suspicion, frustration and anger. The scene then quickly switches to Paris where Franklin resided from 1778 to 1783 as an American commissioner. Here we are introduced to three disparate enemies: Arthur Lee, Ralph Izard, and John Adams. Middlekauff's phrasing is put to excellent use in his thumbnail sketches of Lee and Izard: "Lee felt about quiet the way nature feels about a vacuum, and the remainder of the year noise abounded between his lodgings in Paris and Franklin's in Passy" (p. 161). "By South Carolina standards, Izard had been born to a very wealthy and distinguished family—a circumstance he never forgot or, to use less generous terms, never got over" (p. 162). Such phrasing would have made the incomparable Dr. Johnson proud. Despite his falling out with these two American representatives, Franklin retained the support of the powerful in Congress and sustained his position in Paris. The attitudes of John Adams are accorded a separate chapter.

Through his many attributes, Franklin garnered many friends and many enemies. Certainly, by the end of the book the reader is left with a far more human image of Benjamin Franklin. Middlekauff effectively presents the less salutary side of Poor Richard. However, this is far from a hatchet job. Throughout the book, the author is clearly more sympathetic to Franklin, finding any number of reasons to call into question the views of Lee, Izard and Adams, to say nothing of William Smith and Thomas Penn.

Middlekauff deals quite extensively with Franklin's animosity toward the proprietary family, especially Thomas Penn. There can be no doubt that Penn was Franklin's greatest cross—yet despite this emphasis we are still left without a real sense of the Pennsylvania proprietor's personality. Arguably, Thomas Penn became the most significant person in Benjamin Franklin's life, albeit as a steadfast enemy. As Middlekauff amply demonstrates, Penn was the only one of Franklin's many enemies who prompted him to lose his composure. While the impact upon Franklin is made very apparent, the reader is left to speculate about Thomas Penn's motivation. While Middlekauff takes us back to the John Adams's early childhood, his early career, his marriage to Abigail to help explain his attitude toward Franklin, we receive scanty personal information about his most powerful antagonist. Unlike Arthur Lee, John Adams, and William Smith whose personalities appear more well defined, Thomas Penn remains shrouded in shadow despite the series of essays in A. G. Olson and R. M. Brown (eds.), *Anglo-American Political Relations,*

1675-1775 (New Brunswick, N.J., 1970). The essayists focused on Anglo-American politicians living throughout the English Atlantic world in the 18th century. Certainly Benjamin Franklin was one such politician. Admittedly, he was not as highly placed as many of the more successful (and unsuccessful) Anglo-American politicians, but he shared with them a sense of an empire which was organic, that was based on interest and pragmatic compromise and on the necessary balance of local and metropolitan concerns. As imperial politicians in the years preceding the revolution began to redefine the relationship between the various parts of the empire, those who had been successful within a loose, pragmatic, cosmopolitan world were forced to choose sides. Finding it more and more difficult to balance American and British interests, some chose to 'become' American while others decided to 'become' English. In this context, Franklin's choice of friends and enemies can be understood. Those Englishmen who remained his friends despite the growing tensions, appealed to his cosmopolitan sensibilities and recognized his contributions to that world. Those who became his enemies ignored these aspects of his life or appeared to thwart his aspirations. It seems to me that Franklin's efforts to bring royal government to Pennsylvania can best be understood in this Anglo-American context. For him, royal government offered a real chance to be part of a broader English Atlantic world with more direct access to the metropolitan center. Proprietary government marginalized aspiring Anglo-American politicians within this broader imperial world.

Ultimately, Benjamin Franklin's decision to choose to become 'American' required him to cut himself loose from his English attachments all the while resenting those who were forcing him to do so. Thus, those Englishmen who proved to be most arrogant, most condescending, most indifferent to his concerns came to represent all Englishmen and eventually England itself came to be perceived as the enemy. Again, this I think helps to explain the depth of feeling associated with his son's decision to 'become' English. Being forced to choose proved to be the great crisis of Benjamin Franklin's life and the fact that his son chose not to follow his example remained a constant reminder to Franklin of that disruption. Middlekauff discusses this rift between father and son with detachment, which serves to underscore the pain and anger of Benjamin and William Franklin.

Certainly, Franklin's relationships in Paris that Middlekauff so capably describes also make sense if we consider that France quickly became a surrogate for England, Paris replacing London as the cosmopolitan cen-

ter of Franklin's universe. Thus, his friendships with the Parisian intelligentsia replaced the lost relationships in England. And the reactions of John Adams in particular to this aspect of Franklin's activities are readily understood. Unlike his more urbane fellow commissioner, Adams had never really been part of the Anglo-American political world, nor had he aspired to be part of that world. His rise took place largely within an American orbit; the imperial world remained distant and increasingly alien. Adams had a very fine mind, but it was a mind more attuned to the provincial values of New England. The cosmopolitan world of Paris was to be approached with suspicion. The fact that Franklin seemed to embrace this world so wholeheartedly would have been difficult for Adams to fathom.

In sum, *Benjamin Franklin and His Enemies* brings a fresh perspective to the well-beaten paths of Franklin

scholarship. By focusing on Franklin's relationships with foes as well as friends, Middlekauff effectively adds further depth and nuance to our understanding of this complex figure. At the same time, this is a brief book and in many ways is more suggestive than definitive. It is unfortunate that Middlekauff was unable to draw upon more detailed biographical studies of Thomas Penn. Yet by his emphasis on this erstwhile enemy of Poor Richard, Middlekauff invites other historians to examine Penn and his enemies with the same skill and sensitivity that he has exhibited in this treatment of Franklin's relationships.

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