



Benjamin Franklin (Lives and Legacies Series)

By Edwin S. Gaustad

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The tenth and youngest son of a poor Boston soapmaker, Benjamin Franklin would rise to become, in Thomas Jefferson's words, "the greatest man and ornament of his age." In this short, engaging biography, historian Edwin S. Gaustad offers a marvelous portrait of this towering colonial figure, illuminating Franklin's character and personality.

Here is truly one of the most extraordinary lives imaginable, a man who, with only two years of formal education, became a printer, publisher, postmaster, philosopher, world-class scientist and inventor, statesman, musician, and abolitionist. Gaustad presents a chronological account of all these accomplishments, delightfully spiced with quotations from Franklin's own extensive writings. The book describes how the hardworking Franklin became at age 24 the most successful printer in Pennsylvania and how by 42, with the help of *Poor Richard's Almanack*, he had amassed enough wealth to retire from business. We then follow Franklin's next brilliant career, as an inventor and scientist, examining his pioneering work on electricity and his inventions of the Franklin Stove, the lightning rod, and bifocals, as well as his mapping of the Gulf Stream, a major contribution to navigation. Lastly, the book covers Franklin's role as America's leading statesman, ranging from his years in England before the Revolutionary War to his time in France thereafter, highlighting his many contributions to the cause of liberty. Along the way, Gaustad sheds light on Franklin's personal life, including his troubled relationship with his illegitimate son William, who remained a Loyalist during the Revolution, and Franklin's thoughts on such topics as religion and morality.

Written by a leading authority on colonial America, this compact biography captures in a remarkably small space one of the most protean lives in our nation's history.

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Benjamin Franklin (Lives and Legacies Series) By Edwin S. Gaustad Bibliography

- Rank: #226282 in Books
- Brand: Edwin S Gaustad
- Published on: 2008-04-29
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 5.30" h x .50" w x 7.80" l, .28 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 160 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Gaustad's entry into Oxford's "Lives and Legacies" series provides a brief but informative look at one of the then-nascent U.S.'s most complicated personalities. Gaustad, a history professor and author of works on Roger Williams and Thomas Jefferson, compresses what could be a multi-volume biography into 160 lively pages that render Franklin far more complex than a proverb-proffering, portly patriot who played with lightning rods. Gaustad mentions Franklin's illegitimate son; his common-law marriage with his beloved wife; his scientific experiments, including his early toyings with electricity; his role in forming the post office, fire departments and public libraries; his religious and social beliefs (he was one of the first noteworthy abolitionists); his success as a printer, which allowed him to retire in his mid-forties; and his role as a British statesman before the Revolutionary War changed his loyalties. True, these accomplishments cannot be fully explored in this brisk history, but Gaustad's slim volume is a great starting point. Photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Booklist](#)

Despite its subject's great familiarity, Gaustad's second Lives and Legacies series entry is even more engrossing than *Roger Williams* (2005). For when all Franklin's accomplishments are set out as succinctly and fluently as Gaustad sets them out, what Shakespeare's Cassius said of Caesar--"He doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus"--appears eminently repeatable, sans sarcasm, about Franklin. He excelled at every occupation he earnestly essayed: businessman, journalist, civic innovator, inventor, experimenter, politician, and diplomat. Yet even during his long ambassadorial residence in a prerevolutionary France that lionized him, he refrained from looking important, dressing simply as "the epitome of a new and classless society." His statecraft has been slighted lately in comparison to his scientific work, so Gaustad's precis of his toils in England against the oppressive taxes of the 1760s and 1770s may be the most valuable chapter here. Franklin's late-life abolitionism, which Gaustad points up, will also gratify many. Only die-hard detractors of Franklin's Enlightenment rationalism may deny that Gaustad has written an excellent introduction to this foremost founding father. *Ray Olson*

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Review

"An excellent introduction to this foremost founding father.... When all Franklin's accomplishments are set out as succinctly and fluently as Gaustad sets them out, what Shakespeares Cassius said of Caesar--"He doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus"--appears eminently repeatable, sans sarcasm, about Franklin."--*Booklist*

"Edwin S. Gaustad's admirable brief life of Benjamin Franklin is written with grace and informed by a lifetime of close and thoughtful study of the American past. Perhaps our greatest historian of American religion, Gaustad deftly weaves together the many strands of Franklin's life and thought. In the process, he exemplifies Franklin's teaching: 'What is serving God? 'Tis doing Good to Man.'" --R. B. Bernstein, author of *Thomas Jefferson*

"Edwin Gaustad has written a short life of Benjamin Franklin that is rich in detail and insight. Here is Franklin on his way up in Pennsylvania, the public-spirited craftsman and businessman, the pragmatist whose ideas do not exceed his grasp, the insightful politician, the imaginative scientist, and the shrewd diplomat. The whole story of his life is told with sophistication in a book that is a joy to read." --Robert Middlekauff, author of *The Glorious Cause*

Users Review

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