

Benjamin Franklin: An American Life

By Walter Isaacson

Simon and Schuster. ISBN 06848 07610

Reviewed by Rita Rhodes

I was pleased to find this recently published book in our local library and read it for several reasons. One is that many American co-operators believe that Benjamin Franklin (1704-1790) founded their first mutual society and, in recognition of this, inducted him into their Co-operative Hall of Fame in 1987. Another reason for reading the book was the hope that I would gain a better understanding of why the American colonies seceded from the British Empire in 1783 which has some bearing on my current research into the development of co-operatives within the British Empire. The Empire's loss of America helped to shape constitutional developments in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa; necessitated finding new sites for British penal colonies, and new markets to compensate for those lost in the Americas; and hardened Britain's resistance to later colonial demands for independence. Benjamin Franklin played a central role in America's secession, signing both the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the American Constitution in 1787.

At the outset let me emphasise that this is an all-American book. Its subject is American, its author, Walter Isaacson, a former Chairman of CNN and Managing Editor of *Time* magazine, is American as are the book's publisher, Simon and Schuster. Therefore, readers might initially find the American spellings of familiar English words offputting but Isaacson's clear and unpretentious style of writing more than compensates.

He shows Benjamin Franklin to have been a giant of a man: an important politician; a skilled negotiator and diplomat; an eminent scientist, and also a popular journalist and author. Sadly, Isaacson does not elaborate on the possibility that Franklin was also a founding father of American mutuality although his book points to a number of co-operative traits in his personality. For example, Franklin disliked disputes, believing them to be wasteful and best avoided by sensible people. However, where disputes did exist he believed that they should be settled through negotiation. In other words, he was not a natural revolutionary.

Franklin was initially opposed to American independence, his pro-British stance possibly being shaped by the 18 months he spent in London as a printer. Nevertheless, he recognised that the Americans in negotiating with the British needed to strengthen their position by acting more in concert. Otherwise they would be "like separate filaments of flax before the thread is formed, without strength because without connection. "A co-operative simile if ever there was one. This led Franklin, in the Albany Plan of 1754, to propose a Federation of American colonies which would have a general government but allow individual colonies to retain their legislative autonomy.

Such a federal division of powers became an important feature of the American Constitution of 1787 and has led some to believe Franklin to be the progenitor of modern federalism. This may lead us to wonder about the extent to which his federal ideas influenced those of British co-operation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As far as the American colonies were concerned, Franklin hoped that federation would make them strong enough to defend themselves, thus obviating the need for British troops and depriving the Westminster Government of the argument that it needed to raise American taxes to pay for them. Franklin had also hoped that the Albany Plan would help avoid war between Britain and America. However, the British rejected the Plan as being too democratic and continued to insist on the sovereignty of the British Parliament along with its right to tax the American colonists without their consent. At that stage, Franklin reluctantly moved into the pro-independence camp.

He was already well known through his journalism and as a politician in Pennsylvania. In 1736 he became Clerk of the Assembly, a year later the Postmaster of Philadelphia and in 1754 the deputy postmaster-general for all the American colonies. Britain's rejection of the Albany Plan led to his also becoming a prominent negotiator and diplomat. In 1757 and 1764, he was sent to London to try to negotiate a settlement. The failure of the latter mission led to America's Declaration of Independence

in July 1776 with Franklin being one of its signatories. During the following War of Independence, he was sent to Paris and successfully negotiated a Treaty of Alliance which gained French support in money and munitions. After America won the War and her independence in 1783, Franklin returned to Paris as the US Minister to France.

I have come across no book which explains so well and so clearly the constitutional disputes at issue between Britain and America as this one by Isaacson. If you are interested in American history it is therefore a book to be read. However, Isaacson goes on to show that, if anything, Franklin achieved even greater eminence in science, although a wholly self-educated man. He identified the nature and elements of electricity and proved that lightning was electricity. Some suggest that these discoveries ushered in "a scientific revolution comparable to those wrought by Newton in the previous century". The Royal Society acknowledged their importance by awarding Franklin its prestigious Copley Medal, the first time it had had given it to a non-Briton. Franklin's practicality is shown by his later invention of the lightning rod, or conductor, to deflect lightning from homes and other buildings and also in helping to form the Union Fire Company. In 1752 this became the Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire and is believed to be America's first mutual organisation. Sadly, Isaacson does not elaborate on this which is the one disappointment of the book.

However, he is quite clear about Franklin's contribution to American literature and folk humour, charting his career as journalist, author

and publisher. It seems that Franklin's *Poor Richard Almanac*, which he wrote and published over 25 years, earned him the kind of following that Charles Dickens enjoyed with the instalment publication of some of his books in Britain a century later. *Poor Richard's Almanac* was America's first folk humour classic. Later writers in the genre included Mark Twain, who is probably the best known of these in Britain. *Poor Richard* and his nagging wife became national figures, passing their lives in fictional vicissitudes and summing these up with their home-spun philosophies. Some of their short pithy maxims remain in common usage today, including: "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise", "Necessity never made a good bargain", and "He that lives upon hope will die fasting". King Richard III would no doubt have heartily endorsed *Poor Richard's* belief that "A little neglect may breed mischief ... for want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; and for want of a horse the rider was lost." As a fan of westerns, and particularly the film *The Alamo*, I was touched to read that Davy Crockett had a copy of Franklin's autobiography when he fought and died at the battle of the Alamo.

Franklin continues to influence our lives politically, scientifically and through literature. His contributions to early co-operative ideas are less clear but he undoubtedly had co-operative personality traits. He was such a giant of a man, and his achievements so disparate that you feel that only a polymath could really have done justice to his life. However, by the time you come to the end of Isaacson's biography, you feel that he has done a pretty good job.