

spent in out-of-the-way posts reading military history and working out tactical problems, all of which helped prepare him for the unforeseeable challenges and stresses of high command.

By contrast, the Army of today contains an officer corps of extremely hardworking men and women—an officer corps with virtually no leisure for independent professional study, an officer corps whose members' marriages suffer and often break

down because of long hours and lengthy absences from home, an officer corps which often pursues its advanced education in areas only marginally related to the art of war. It is an officer corps which could benefit from having Bradley as a model rather than Patton, to remind itself that competence does not require bluster, that courtesy and gentility need not detract from firmness, that integrity remains the foundation of leadership. □

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
Ronald W. Clark / Random House / \$22.95

Tom Wendel

With predictable regularity, one-volume biographies of the incomparable Benjamin Franklin issue forth from the nation's presses. Biographers who tackle the "first American" come in two categories: the Generalist and the Specialist. The Generalist has a little background in a few of the aspects of Franklin's career. He is usually broadly familiar with American revolutionary historiography and the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment. But about electrical currents and other scientific matters he is a novice. Even worse, he has little knowledge of colonial Pennsylvania, the arena in which Franklin won his first political battles.

The Specialist, on the other hand, comes to Franklin through an interest in one of the good doctor's activities, be it medicine, meteorology, autobiography, diplomacy, typography, hydrology, convection, the Constitutional Convention, physiocracy, democracy, music, Pennsylvania, electricity, sociology (as he was the first everything in our history, his "Observations on the Increase of Mankind" make him our first sociologist), the common cold, or the common man. Of all of these and more, their practitioners are drawn to Franklin.

Ronald W. Clark is more of a Specialist than a Generalist, his primary interest being science, or, to be more exact, scientists. He has written biographies of Einstein,

Tom Wendel is professor of history at San Jose State University and author of Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Liberty.

Freud, J.B.S. Haldane (biochemist and geneticist), the Huxleys, the philosophical scientist Bertrand Russell, and he is currently working on a biography of Darwin. The emphasis on science is made clear from the striking opening pages of this volume; they deal not with genealogy but with the lightning rod. The book begins *in medias res*, in 1752; the scene is Marly-la-Ville, where the *Frankliniste* François Dalibard verified the identity of electricity and lightning.

The opening pages are a harbinger of things to come. Clark is superb on Franklin as electrician, though for the complete story one must still turn to I. Bernard Cohen's *Franklin and Newton*. Franklin's other scientific interests are expertly—if all too briefly—delineated. The book would have been immensely strengthened had Clark devoted more space to these.

As it is, *Benjamin Franklin* is seriously, maybe crucially, flawed by innumerable historical errors. Here, the Generalist could have come to the aid of the Specialist. One or two errors would be a slight matter, but their multiplication, I should think, is proper cause for comment. Is it carping to point out:

Franklin was 65, not 55, when he began the *Autobiography*. He not only was known to his colleagues as author of the *Dogood Papers*, he himself "discovered" his authorship to them. Ralph did not "abandon" his mistress; he left her in his friend Franklin's eager hands while he

found work outside London. There is no certainty as to Franklin's authorship of *A Witch Trial at Mount Holly*. The *Letter to the Royal Academy* was written in the 1780s, not the 1730s. The *General Magazine* was not successful; it had a run of only six issues. Pennsylvania's Royal Charter does not exempt the Penn family estates from taxation. The Albany Plan of Union did not involve "states," but colonies, and the Stamp Act had no effect on "the United States," which would not be born for another eleven years; and so on, throughout the entire book.

And there are errors of omission as well as commission. Why leave out the archetypal story of young Franklin's bedraggled entrance into Philadelphia, parading before his future wife's house while clumsily holding three great puffy rolls? And why leave out old Franklin's superb vindication when the great Chatham

praised him before the House of Lords? The list of omissions would equal that of the commissions, and then there are errors of interpretation. There is really no sense here of the radical Whig milieu from which the American Revolutionaries drew their ideology. Franklin's position on the Anglo-American dispute seems ambiguous at best; he is portrayed as "obsessed" (Franklin is frequently obsessed in this book) with healing the breach, but then in the Hutchinson affair he is motivated to bring about "a major row or confrontation" to resolve the dispute (which, among other things, was simply not Franklin's style). And although Clark is excellent on the affair of the Hutchinson letters, he attributes too much to that crisis. It is doubtful that it made the Revolution inevitable.

Which brings us to hyperbole: Franklin had "almost alone given Philadelphia the library, the hospi-

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tal. . . ." Franklin's work in France "made American victory possible." Although such examples abound, Clark's book, in all fairness, is not hagiographical. Nor is it without other positive attributes, the above error list notwithstanding.

Among these are Clark's frequently admirable style and the interesting bibliography particularly

strong in English sources. The book is full of cogent quotations from Franklin and his contemporaries. Myriad unusual details hold the reader's attention; so does Clark's ability to "spin a yarn": even though we know how it all comes out, there is some real suspense here.

If we can excuse Clark's errors, then, his *Benjamin Franklin* is an

enjoyable and readable account. But by virtue of its one-volume format, it is also an incomplete account: what is needed is a multi-volume "Franklin," written by a Generalist willing to become a Specialist. We have multi-volume biographies of relatively dull people like George Washington and James Madison. Why not one of Franklin? A book published in

1977 shows the way: Arthur Bernon Tourtellot's *Benjamin Franklin, the Shaping of Genius: the Boston Years*. Its fascinating and learned 440 pages take us to the year 1723—Franklin to age seventeen. Far better that someone pick up that challenge than for one more redundancy to appear, no matter how felicitous it may be. □

SPECTATOR'S JOURNAL

NORMAN MAILER TURNS VICTIM

by Peter Shaw

Norman Mailer's 700-page Egyptian epic, *Ancient Evenings*,* is a work so heavy and convoluted that one would have expected a reluctance among reviewers to assess it fully on short notice. Yet most newspaper and magazine reviews did not hesitate to reject the book out of hand. In the past Mailer's merest efforts, even when they were self-proclaimedly vehicles for making money, had met with a respect they hardly deserved. Now his most serious and ambitious work, written over a ten-year period (during which he published three other books), was greeted with an unprecedented, easy condescension. This new attitude, whose source evidently lay outside literature, was in some ways more interesting than *Ancient Evenings* itself.

The novel is set in the Egyptian Pharaoh's court and its environs. Apparently convinced that illusion and reality were indistinguishable for the ancients, Mailer attempts to capture the period's mystical spirit. His hero's life spans some hundred and eighty years and permits a view of every level of Egyptian society. Menenhetet I, who narrates much of the book, has risen from peasant origins to the army, the aristocracy, and the inner world of the Pharaoh's court. He has also experienced the mysteries of death and rebirth.

The prelude to Menenhetet's story, which concentrates on the reign of Rameses II (the Ozymandias of Shelley's poem), describes the marriage of the gods Isis and Osiris, who were brother and sister, and the

three-day, hand-to-hand battle between their son Horus and his uncle Set. The incestuous and anal passions of the gods are enacted by their human counterparts for whom these profane matters become the objects of religious and metaphysical speculation. Mailer's well-known excremental ponderings are here based on the Egyptian use of the scarab or dung beetle, which was the hieroglyph for creation. Pharaohs commemorated themselves in golden icons of this tiny creature that rolls up its freshly laid egg in a ball of dung. In partial reference to Egyptian fascination with the dung beetle, Mailer's Menenhetet is also known as Meni-Ka, the second part of which stands for "feces." The reviewers were vastly amused to report that *Ancient Evenings* thereby came down to being a treatise on ca ca. "Perhaps it's stunted and philistine of me," wrote James Wolcott in *Harper's*,

"but I just don't have any great fascination for the subtleties of shit."

Over the course of his long career, even Mailer's slightest maunderings had been received with respect, not to say solemnity. Now his most considered meditation inspired extravaganzas of derision. *Ancient Evenings* was compared to the Hollywood epics of Cecil B. De Mille and others (Wolcott mentioned *Land of the Pharaohs*). Eliot Fremont Smith in the *Village Voice* likened the sex to *National Geographic's* sanctioned voyeurism, while the reviewer for *New York* magazine, picking up a quip once made by Gore Vidal, offered H.P. Lovecraft as a model. Benjamin De Mott in the *New York Times Book Review* found the characters "ludicrous blends of Mel Brooks and the Marquis de Sade." For the *Boston Globe* the whole undertaking was so much "rubbish," while for

Time magazine it was of "utterly invisible significance."

The book undeniably lays itself open to parody. Its invented, portentous language of no time or place; its ponderous, decorously salacious renderings of unusual sex acts; and above all Mailer's projection onto his characters of his favorite macho conceits are transparent failures. On the other hand, if *Ancient Evenings* was a failure it remained a serious work. This had to be evident even to those reviewers who failed to note that its model for approaching the ancient world was Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*. As for the ideas relating excrement and sex, these derived from D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* and Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death*. The mythology, moreover, appears to have come straight from J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

Mailer's aspirations were those of the classic modern works that, starting with *The Waste Land*, attempted to probe ancient mysteries through Frazerian and other modern paradigms. As Frazer himself wrote in the section of his book on the mutilated and reborn god Osiris: "It would be to misjudge ancient religion to denounce as lewd and profligate the emblems and ceremonies which the Egyptians employed for the purpose of giving effect to [their] conception of the divine power." That reviewers felt free to denounce the subject matter in just these terms, and with self-confessed philistinism at that, was a measure of the present revolt against high modernism. But something besides this revolt had taken place since Mailer's last major work: namely, his involvement in the Jack Abbott affair.

Abbott was the convicted murderer



*Little, Brown & Co., \$19.95.

Peter Shaw has written for *Commentary*, the *New Criterion*, and other periodicals. He is author, most recently, of *American Patriots and the Rituals of Revolution* (Harvard).