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BOOKSHELF

The Franklin House Divided

Even as Ben Franklin was helping to lead the Revolution, his son was opposing it, aiding the loyalist cause and ending up in prison. Robert K. Landers reviews “The Loyal Son: The War in Ben Franklin’s House” by Daniel Mark Epstein.



A Currier & Ives lithograph of Benjamin Franklin and his son William. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By *Robert K. Landers*

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On the Fourth of July 1776, Benjamin Franklin was in Philadelphia, having helped to draft the Declaration of Independence, while his son, the governor of New Jersey, was under arrest in Connecticut, having been branded an enemy of his country for persisting in his royal duties and opposing the Revolution. In less than a year, William Franklin would be taken to the notorious Litchfield Gaol, a destination for, among others, “traitors” who had abused their privileges in lighter incarceration.

The history of loyalist William Franklin and his famous father has been told before but not as fully or as well as it is by Daniel Mark Epstein in “The Loyal Son.” Mr. Epstein, a biographer and poet, has done a lot of fresh research and invests his narrative with literary grace and judicious sympathy for both father and son.

Despite Ben Franklin’s confession in his “Autobiography” that, when young, he had often had “intrigues with low women,” Mr. Epstein believes that William’s mother was most likely “someone of breeding,” perhaps a married woman whose husband was often away. In an unusual fictional preface to his scrupulously nonfictional history, Mr. Epstein portrays Ben Franklin in April 1731 taking the 8-month-old baby from his mother and bringing him to his common-law wife. She, in fact, would be the only mother William would ever know.

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As a young man, William and his father were close. During the early 1750s, William (then in his 20s) helped Ben in his scientific studies, flying a kite with him in a thunderstorm and later himself determining that a lightning bolt's electrical charge, despite appearances, moves from the ground up. During the winter of 1755-56, William served as an aide-de-camp to his father as Ben led Pennsylvania militia troops in mounting a defense against Indian raiders in the western part of the state. In 1757 father and son went off to London, Ben to represent Pennsylvania in opposing the Penn family's proprietorship of the colony, William to assist him and to study law. Before long, William became a lawyer—and a father himself, to a son, mother unknown.

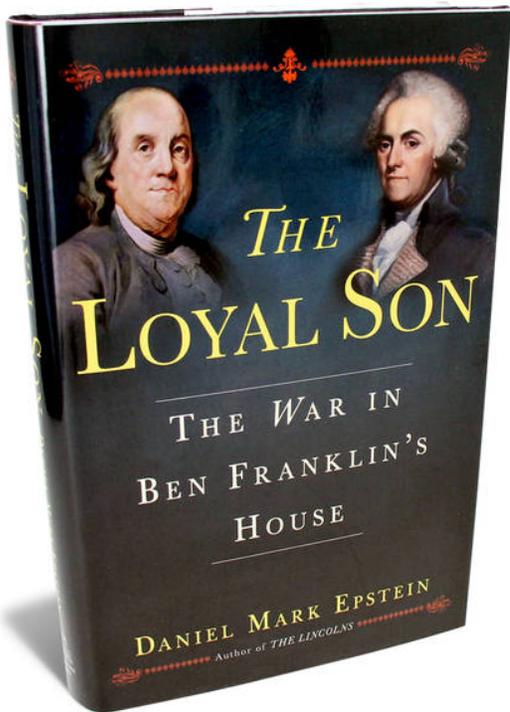


PHOTO: WSJ

THE LOYAL SON

By Daniel Mark Epstein
Ballantine, 438 pages, \$30

written calling for “an abridgment” of colonists’ liberties. Ben claimed that he had wanted to ease tensions with England—by shifting some blame for them to Hutchinson. Most historians have accepted that, but Mr. Epstein finds it incredible and deems his motive a mystery. Whatever Franklin’s reasoning, his deed led to him being blamed in

The new barrister, Mr. Epstein writes, was “handsome, easy-going, more agreeable than his father by all accounts, politically shrewd, and extremely capable.” In 1762 he was recommended for the New Jersey governorship. His father traveled from London to attend his son’s swearing-in.

For most of the 1760s—a period marked by controversies over the Stamp Act and the Townsend duties on tea and other commodities—father and son were of one mind about the British Empire and America’s place in it. But in 1768 Ben told William that he saw a serious breach between the two countries developing. Two years later, Mr. Epstein says, Ben’s thinking underwent a radical shift: Not content with repeal of all Townsend duties

except the tax on tea, he favored keeping up the colonies’ boycott of English goods.

In the winter of 1772-73, Ben Franklin exposed inflammatory letters that Massachusetts Gov. Thomas Hutchinson had



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England for the Boston Tea Party. Humiliated and disgraced, his reputation there in tatters, he urged William to resign his governorship.

William Franklin, however, had no intention of doing so. “You are a thorough government man,” his father had said shortly before the Boston Tea Party in December 1773, adding that he did not “aim at converting” him. Less than a year later, no doubt disappointed that his son had not shown more outrage at his treatment in Britain, he told William disapprovingly that he was “a thorough courtier.”

Ben Franklin finally left England for America in March 1775. That June, the resonant shots having been fired in Lexington and Concord, he met with William, Mr. Epstein records, and tried to warn his son “that America was arming itself for war.” After one more fruitless meeting, their communications ceased.

William Franklin had been the last royal governor conducting the king’s business when his prominent opposition to the Revolution led to his arrest. He was moved from comfortable detention to the Litchfield jail after he was discovered issuing official pardons to loyalists who wanted their properties spared by the British army. Nearly eight months later, weak and in poor health, he was released from his squalid dungeon—and eventually set free in a prisoner exchange. He was able at last to escape to England—and had he done so then, Mr. Epstein writes, he would have come to be seen as “a high-principled, courageous British governor during a civil war.” Instead, William resolved to remain in New York and fight. He stayed for four years, forming loyalists into a paramilitary organization that conducted raids in New Jersey and Connecticut.

“What he did then, as his father learned from prejudicial sources, was so appalling he could not possibly forgive him,” Mr. Epstein writes. “That had been the turning point.” But when William finally left for England in 1782, he himself was “justly satisfied” with his past conduct. “His conscience . . . was clear.”

Benjamin Franklin little grasped his son’s wartime hardships, Mr. Epstein says; nor did William grasp his diplomat father’s struggles. A gulf of misunderstanding and ignorance separated them—and would never be bridged.

William Franklin’s motto was “Pro Rege & Patria.” Mr. Epstein’s engrossing account of his ordeal in striving to be faithful to that motto illuminates the plight of the hundreds of thousands of British Americans who remained, during the Revolution, devoted to both crown and country.

Mr. Landers, a former reporter at Congressional Quarterly and a former editor at the Wilson Quarterly, posts his reviews and essays at robertklanders.com.

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