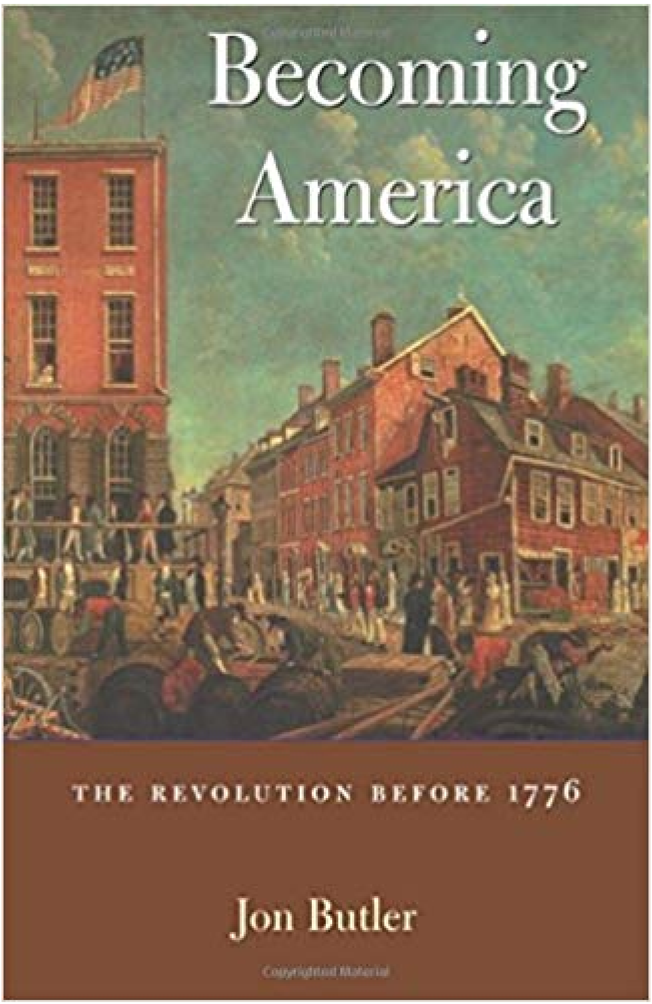
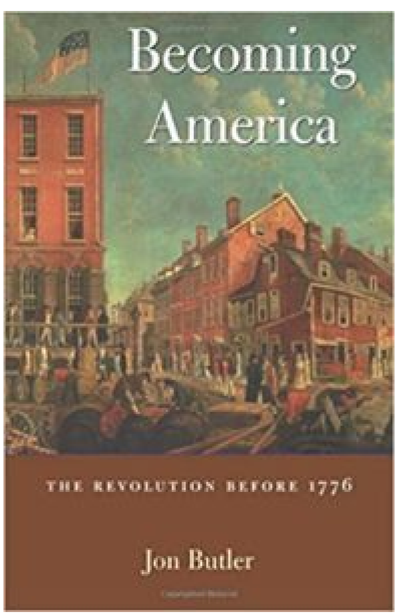
Describing America





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Why should we write or read history? Why should we teach or study it? Benjamin Franklin thought he knew. In *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania*, a 1749 pamphlet advocating the establishment of an academy in Philadelphia, Franklin proclaimed that “the general natural Tendency of Reading good History, must be, to fix in the Minds of Youth deep Impressions of the Beauty and Usefulness of Virtue of all Kinds, Publick Spirit, Fortitude, etc. [History also shows] the Advantage of a Religious Character among private Persons; the Mischiefs of Superstition, etc. and the Excellency of the CHRISTIAN RELIGION above all others ancient and modern.” [1]

Franklin figures prominently in Jon Butler’s *Becoming America*, a wide-ranging and spirited book that describes the emergence of the first modern culture in a way that will satisfy many readers and provoke others. The book’s final words are drawn from the familiar, charming epitaph Franklin wrote for himself in 1728, while he was still a young man:

The body of
B Franklin Printer
(Like the Cover of an Old Book
Its Contents torn out
And stript of its Lettering & Gilding)
Lies here, Food for Worms.
But the work shall not be wholly lost:
For it will, as he believ’d, appear once more,
In a new & more perfect Edition,
Corrected and amended
By the author. [2]

Together these two passages signal the depth and complexity of Franklin’s character and suggest the reasons why he continues to intrigue and elude us. Franklin thought the study of history shows not only the “Usefulness” but also the “Beauty” of virtue, not only the “Advantage” of a religious character but also the “Excellency” of Christianity. In his epitaph Franklin poked fun at his own mortality but also testified publicly to his faith in an afterlife, a conviction that endured throughout his life. In the “Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion” that the young Franklin wrote in 1728, he professed “I believe there is one Supreme most perfect Being, Author and Father of the Gods themselves.” Franklin’s religious faith overflowed the boundaries of conventional Christianity without evaporating. He was a deist but never a skeptic. Six weeks before his death in 1790, in a letter to Ezra Stiles, he reaffirmed his creed: “I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That he governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we render to him is doing good to his other Children. That the soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion, and I regard them as you do in whatever Sect I meet with them.” [3]

Like many other American and European *philosophes*, Franklin surely doubted the divinity of Jesus and the desirability of spending his own Sundays in prayer. He savaged dogmatism, scorned evangelical enthusiasm (although he befriended George Whitefield), and valued benevolence above conventional forms of religious observance. Franklin just as surely prized the virtues of prudence, temperance, and fortitude, qualities that his contemporaries as well as later commentators such as Max Weber associated with him, and that made *Poor Richard's Almanac* so widely read.

Franklin can of course be interpreted, as D. H. Lawrence did, as a passionless, humorless grind. Or he can be taken as a shrewd, secular sage, a prototypical operator who appeared pious just to prosper, who did well by seeming to do good. To read him that way turns him into a denizen of our own culture of irony, a clever calculator always making rational choices to advance his own narrow self-interest; it rescues him from being a sap. But Franklin became a crucial figure in the eighteenth-century North Atlantic world—and has remained a crucial figure—not because he simply shrugged off his religious and philosophical heritage to emerge as an economic man but because he, like the equally complex Adam Smith, worked to translate the ethical impulses of Christianity from other-worldly asceticism into a worldview compatible with a market economy and a democratic culture. In place of a simplistic and historically false dichotomy that would fix Franklin as either an old-fashioned Calvinist or a new-fangled capitalist, we need to recover a richer, more nuanced understanding of Franklin as one of many who tried to take seriously and live sincerely the moral precepts of Christianity, and those of Poor Richard. Some may think those creeds irreconcilable; as historians we should acknowledge and try to understand why Franklin, like his Puritan predecessors, disagreed.

The Franklin who appears in *Becoming America* is no sap. He is a clever organization man engaged in establishing the Union Fire Company, the Junto, the Philadelphia Library Company, the American Philosophical Society, and the college that became the University of Pennsylvania. Whereas other historians have emphasized the civic spirit or social ethic animating such activity, Butler links what he calls "Franklin's boosterism" to the efforts of other proto-Babbits throughout the colonies who "pursued seemingly civic-minded goals though [sic] elite, private-membership organizations" (173-74). The savvy Butler is not fooled by Franklin's talk of "Virtue" and "Publick Spirit": Franklin schmoozed to make the connections he needed to prosper, and when he appeared to be endorsing the idea of an afterlife in his epigraph he was instead reshaping "a crabbed seventeenth-century idea about the transmigration of souls after death . . . into an affirmation of near-modern optimism" (p. 310, n. 45).

Franklin's witticisms, Butler claims in his concluding paragraphs, achieved their power because they "made sense of" the profound transformation of American society between 1680 and 1770. "These aphorisms tamed and disciplined an expanding, aggressive, and calculating society. They did not guarantee a moral society or even a good society. But they channeled behavior that might drift toward pure greed, asserted the virtue of labor over status, and bypassed traditional European emphasis on family inheritance, political deference, and vengeful religious dogmatism" (247). Franklin's genius, from Butler's perspective, lay in his ability to dismantle the obstacles of "vengeful religious dogmatism" in order to clear a path for free, independent, self-made men intent on making a new world for themselves.

Some historians who have taken seriously the words used by members of Franklin's generation contend that many of those innovators derived their most important—and most politically radical or democratic—ideas from their Christianity. Most of the nation's founding documents, they point out, were patterned on models with explicit, unmistakable origins in the Judeo-Christian idea of the covenant. Instead Butler urges us to watch the colonists' feet: "the tumult of provincial politics and Whig political ideology determined the emerging contest with Britain more profoundly than did evangelical revivalism." He contends that "religion's role in shaping the Revolution is easily exaggerated" and chastises contemporaries such as Boston loyalist Peter Oliver for just such hyperbole. The "clergymen who supported colonial protest, including the 'black regiment' that Peter Oliver detested, supported causes initially made by politicians on overwhelmingly secular grounds." Moreover, since the New England clergy spoke "from tax-supported pulpits invested with the authority of provincial government, as did pro-revolutionary Anglican ministers in Virginia" (243), Butler points out, how revolutionary could they have been?

That is, however, precisely the point. Given the absence of a state church digging in its heels against rebellion, Americans of all faiths in all the colonies lined up on both sides during the struggle for independence. As a result, nothing like the 1790 Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the watershed document of the French Revolution that declared war to the death against the Catholic Church, ever divided American loyalists and republicans neatly into clerical and anti-clerical factions. Revolutionaries could, and did, use the Christian gospels on behalf of their radical political agenda with as great enthusiasm as English radicals did before and American radicals have done since, and they did so not as outsiders but as authoritative insiders.

Perhaps Butler denies the connection between colonial politics and colonial religion because he equates religiosity either with "vengeful religious dogmatism" or with witchcraft and magic (thereby neglecting Franklin's own clear distinction between religious faith and the "Mischiefs of Superstition"). At least since Butler published "Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage, 1600-1760" in the *American Historical Review* in 1979, and through the publication in 1990 of *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, he has adopted from the anthropologist Melvin Spiro what he calls a "substantive" definition of religion as "the resort to superhuman powers, sometimes beings, to determine the course of human events." This definition, which begs central questions debated by generations of sociologists and anthropologists and for centuries by Christian theologians, allows Butler to place Christianity comfortably within the same category as “numerous magical and occult arts—such as astrology, divination, and witchcraft,” which many Christians (like Franklin) anathematized. Given Butler’s understanding of religion as dogmatism or magic and his understanding of politics as the straightforward pursuit of self-interest, it is not surprising that Butler can see no connection between the two. Most eighteenth-century Americans were not so shrewd.

Offering a puzzling piece of evidence in support of his pugnacious claim for the marginality of religion during the 1770s, Butler contends that the Declaration of Independence “offered remarkably nonreligious claims for independence.” He concedes that the Declaration did rely on the “laws of nature and nature’s God” and appealed to “the Supreme Judge of the world.” He admits that the Declaration invoked “Divine Providence.” But, he protests, it “never mentioned Christ and never cited Old or New Testament verses to support the American cause (ironically, the deist Thomas Paine had done exactly that in *Common Sense* six months earlier)” (243-44).[4]

There is irony in the contrast, but it is not the irony Butler claims, because *Common Sense* worked just as the Declaration of Independence did, deriving much of its power and its popularity precisely from its biblical rhetoric and frame of reference. Like the Declaration, it helped provide ammunition for angry farmers, artisans, and merchants, and for preachers thundering against the crown from their pulpits. When Paine later denounced Christianity in *The Age of Reason*, he found that he forfeited his standing as an American patriot and lost his American audience. The canny Franklin, Paine’s patron and friend, advised his protégé after reading a draft of *The Age of Reason*: “He who spits against the wind spits in his own face. . . If men are wicked with religion, what would they be if without it?” [5] If we lacked Franklin’s writings about his own religious convictions, perhaps we could interpret his advice to Paine simply as the counsel of a wiser cynic, but Franklin clearly felt more sympathy for his contemporaries’ Christian cosmology than for Paine’s iconoclasm.

Why does it matter? Surely the role of religion in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American culture is an issue about which reasonable people may disagree. Indeed it is, and this issue returns us to our opening questions. Why should we write or read history? Why should we teach or study it? Many historians believe that describing what happened in the past is the historian’s job. Others believe the historian’s work begins where such description ends; together with Wilhelm Dilthey, they want to offer interpretations of past experience that take as seriously the perspectives of those who lived it as they take their own, and to derive from those interpretations an explanation of why things happened as they did. Together with Poor Richard, they believe that an empty bag cannot stand upright, and with E. H. Carr they believe that without interpretation facts from the past fall equally flat.*Becoming America* suggests that Butler has little sympathy with that hermeneutic view. I hope in this review—which raises questions not to deny the achievement of Butler's valuable synthesis but only to point out some of the issues I think might have received fuller treatment—to suggest some of the reasons why I think hermeneutics can help us achieve a more balanced understanding of eighteenth-century America than even the vivid and valuable portrait Butler offers.

Becoming America synthesizes an enormous amount of recent scholarship on America from 1680 to 1770. Butler guides readers sure-footedly through the immensely difficult terrain of these rapidly transforming societies. He is particularly good at harvesting the bountiful studies of material culture from recent decades that have enriched our understanding of colonial America, and incorporating the worlds of those left out by earlier generations of historians, especially women, Indians, and Africans. Enthusiastic, well deserved endorsements from no fewer than eight of the most distinguished historians of early America (including one of the editors and three members of the editorial board of *Common-place*) grace the dust jacket; such an array of authorities will surely make reviewers inclined to criticize the book think twice about their own judgment. But much as readers learn about colonial America—and as a nonspecialist I learned a great deal indeed—they learn much less about the lived experience of those who inhabited England's mainland colonies during these years. The book's first three chapters carefully describe the colonies' changing demography and ethnic composition, their economy, and their politics. A fourth chapter concerns "Things Material," a fifth "Things Spiritual," and a sixth relates these issues to 1776.

Rich and varied and well informed as his descriptions are, however, rarely in the book does Butler ask what these changes *meant* for those who lived through them. It is as if his focus on "things" excludes asking questions about the meanings of experience. In the chapter "Things Spiritual," for example, a chapter drawn from the rich material in Butler's much admired book *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, readers learn about the "sacralization of the landscape," a topic that has long interested Butler. But they do not learn what that sacralization meant to those who accomplished it or why they felt compelled or enabled to undertake it. Readers learn about "a near frenzy of congregational expansion after 1680" throughout the colonies. "Tracing the numbers," Butler admits, "is dizzying but illuminating." Over 700 congregations formed in New England from 1710 to 1770, about 900 in the middle colonies, and another 550 in the South, a pattern of growth that "outpaced population expansion" (191). Why? What motivated the colonists to engage in such spirited building campaigns? Butler offers no explanation. Butler tells readers what churches looked like (some were orange, others red, yellow, blue, or green, few the white we have taken for granted since the nineteenth century), what they sounded like as bells began to toll from steeples, and what forms of decoration they contained, but he does not say what went on inside or what those who attended (or preached) thought about the proceedings. Readers learn about (and see a fine illustration of) Jonathan Edwards's desk and how it grew, but they learn next to nothing about the books and sermons Edwards spent thirteen hours a day writing on it.

Readers encounter George Whitefield, “one of the first modern celebrities,” “famous simply because he was famous,” but despite such evangelicals’ apparent successes Butler concludes that the effect of “revivalism combined with pluralism” was “debilitating,” as initial enthusiasm collapsed into confusion and exhaustion (202-03). Again, puzzled readers may wonder why revivals kept breaking out nevertheless. *Becoming America* is, in short, cultural history with not only most of the ideas but also most of the experience left out, history missing not only theology but phenomenology, history devoted more to describing objects and behaviors than to attempting to understand their meaning or explain their significance.

This quasi-positivist conception of his project may account for Butler’s preference—one certainly shared by many historians—for taking seriously what people did and paying less attention to what they said. It may also be inescapable given the scope of the undertaking: Butler is after all attempting nothing less than a synthetic overview of a century of American history. In his notes readers will find informative guides to much of the historical literature of the last several decades. Butler explains that he wants to direct readers’ attention to the history rather than the historiography, and he confines to the notes his discussions of those interpretive disputes that he does choose to address rather than ignore.

I do not mean to imply that Butler avoids taking positions or that it is hard to identify his perspective. He announces at the outset that the book is his response to two questions, Crèvecoeur’s classic “what then is the American, this new man?” and a friend’s less lofty “how do you synthesize colonial history after the Puritans?” Butler makes clear that he judges neither New England nor Puritanism central to an adequate overview of colonial American history. Moreover, he rejects claims that American culture was becoming increasingly hierarchical, deferential, refined, or “Europeanized” on the eve of the American Revolution. To the contrary, the colonies were diverse, boisterous, and becoming more so as America became the first fully modern culture. In his introduction Butler summarizes the features of his overall argument about the transformation of colonial America between 1680 and 1770: “its extraordinary heterogeneity of peoples; its rapid economic transformation; its energetic provincial and local politics; its evolving secular and material culture; its rapidly expanding pluralistic religions; its regionalism and sometimes unwilling creation of vigorous subsocieties within the larger culture; and a widespread drive for authority to shape individual and collective destinies” (6).

Butler’s first chapter, “Peoples,” shows the precipitous decline of Indian populations due to disease even more than war, the dramatic decline in the proportion of European colonists who traced their roots to England, and the catastrophe of the slave trade, “the largest forced human migration in history” (39), which brought more Africans than Europeans to England’s mainland colonies from 1700 to 1770. Butler’s account of slavery highlights its unimaginable cruelty and stresses that Americans did not inherit but “created the modern system of human and legal interrelationships that left a devastating and indelible imprint on America, its society and its conscience" (42). He contends that the "principal impetus" for the expansion and tightening of the slave system "was simple: profit" (37). Given the vast differences between the slave societies that did and did not develop on both sides of the Atlantic during these years, some readers may wonder whether that explanation is adequate. Butler does discuss other factors, including the decline in the availability of indentured servants, the failure of attempts to enslave Indians, and the cultural predispositions of Europeans to perceive Africans as "different, disagreeable, and dispensable, ideal candidates for an enslavement that very quickly became indelibly American" (39). Whether his account of the reasons for the development of, and the reasons for the emerging opposition to, slavery are adequate or not, Butler's description of the system and its consequences for Europeans and Africans alike leaves a lasting impression. Butler's discussion of the colonial economy shows the same strengths and—from my perspective—weaknesses. His descriptions of the colonies' unprecedented economic growth from 1680 to 1770, the rapid development of domestic and international markets for the agricultural products that were central to all the colonies' economies, the dispossession of Indian lands, the gendered division of labor that prevailed everywhere, and the increasing gap separating the richest from the poorest Americans—especially slaves—are excellent. On questions of regional variation concerning issues such as slavery or how to deal with Indians—questions frequently addressed by taking seriously the different religious convictions of different colonists—Butler has less to say. He judges all colonists accomplices in the slave system and the destruction of Indian cultures. Because European settlement throughout the colonies ultimately had the effect of enslaving or oppressing Africans and attacking or infecting or acculturating Indians, the differences separating, say, John Eliot or William Penn from many of their contemporaries on such issues fade to insignificance from Butler's point of view. Since he concludes this chapter by pointing out, persuasively, that in these "provinces of plenty," the patterns of wealth and privation "demonstrated how the experience of wealth and impoverishment descended not from the land, but from human invention" (88), some readers might want to know more about the reasons the colonists themselves offered, or the arguments they had with each other, as they tried to justify the cultures they were inventing. For answers to those questions they will have to look elsewhere.

In his chapter on colonial politics Butler outlines the functioning of local and imperial administration, the rise of colonial assemblies, and the incongruous expansion of the claims to authority of the crown's representatives and the shrinking of their effective power. He challenges other historians' claims about the importance of religion or democracy in American politics. Most local government, he points out, was conducted by appointed rather than elected officials, and even when colonists had a chance to vote, most did not. Moreover, "the law denied the vote to whole classes of people: women, servants, slaves, religious minorities, Indians, and many without property" (97). Voting was "an innovation that many eligible men used reluctantly" during a period that “represented a transition from an early modern hierarchical and quasi-deferential society to a more open, ultimately democratic nation” (99). In short, Butler insists, “Colonial politics was not democratic” (90).

Instead of appealing to voters’ interests through speeches or public appearances, colonial notables “talked to voters individually and asked for support personally and sometimes only indirectly. As a result, ‘electioneering’ implicitly stressed a candidate’s personal standing and prestige and only sometimes bore on issues or ideology” (99-100). From Butler’s perspective, an oligarchy consisting of a few families or wealthy individuals dominated colonial politics until interest groups at last emerged over issues reflecting the differences among self-interested ethnic, religious, or economic groups. Because Whig ideology, like Christian social theory, appealed to an ideal of the common good transcending individual interest, Butler argues that “it bordered on the self-contradictory” because of the “ethnic and religious heterogeneity that was not unusual in eighteenth-century America and that defied any common social analysis” (114-15). If one sees politics as nothing but the organized pursuit of self-interest, then all talk of a public purpose is bound to appear disingenuous or duplicitous. Many eighteenth-century Americans, however, whether writing pamphlets about republican liberty or delivering (or listening to) sermons on what Jonathan Mayhew called “the public welfare” or John Witherspoon “public virtue,” appear to have had a profoundly different conception of the relation between self-interest and the common good, a conviction still shared by a few stubborn Americans. Some readers may wonder whether interest-group liberalism provides a better framework for understanding eighteenth-century politics than the colonists’ own explanations of their ways of thinking about freedom and duty.

Butler’s chapters “Things Material” and “Things Spiritual” give a vivid, memorable picture of colonial life. The former describes changing patterns of importing and producing goods as colonial artisans became increasingly sophisticated, the range of houses built for rich and poor colonists in different regions, and the ways that agriculture and diet changed. Butler describes the rise of civic associations and stresses the social advantages they conferred on their well-to-do members. Although he refers to Jürgen Habermas, he writes in the spirit of H. L. Mencken or Sinclair Lewis. Butler provides a detailed account of *Androboros* (1714), a scatological play written by New York governor Robert Hunter, and quotes from it perhaps the lengthiest passage in the book, apparently so that readers who have spent too much time obsessed with letters, speeches, pamphlets, and sermons about the “public sphere” can appreciate just how raucous, unrefined, and downright tasteless colonial politics really was. Near the end of “Things Material” readers encounter a full-page illustration of a “Masonic Mason’s chair” made by the Williamsburg artisan Benjamin Bucktrout—an object Butler describes without apparent irony as “the single finest chair known to be made in colonial America” (179)—which must be seen to be appreciated.

“Things Spiritual” is equally rich in telling details demonstrating the increasing diversity of colonial religious groups and practices, including fine treatments of the religious practices of women, Indians, and Africans. Although some might be tempted to draw conclusions about the vitality and influence of American religious faith and religious denominations from Butler's evidence, Butler instead downplays their political salience and cultural significance in an acquisitive, materialistic society. Butler further describes the "spiritual holocaust" that destroyed African religious practices, a process so total that in British North America "slave Christianity never developed the richly syncretistic patterns that emerged in other New World slave societies" (224). Butler does concede that contemporaries traced slave revolts to the persistence of African spirituality. He seeks to resolve that apparent inconsistency in a summary sentence the tone and implications of which careful readers should ponder: "The suppression of whole African religious systems, the survival of discrete African rites and customs, especially concerning death, and the emergence of a Christianization that later became endemic in nineteenth-century America remade African-American religious practice" (224).

In his concluding chapter, "1776," Butler sensibly denies that the Revolution was the "logical consequence" or "inevitable culmination" of eighteenth-century American colonial development, but he does insist that this first modern society, with its ethnic and religious diversity and booming economy, shaped the course of this first modern revolution. The cause of the Revolution was simple: the crown needed money to pay the costs of empire. The colonists resisted, forcing a confrontation that escalated into demands for independence. Although not driven by class or by a "single, cohesive ideology," the American Revolution was distinctively modern in that it "created the broad-scale popular mobilization that typified the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions" (227). How did the colonists make sense of what they were doing? In contrast to those historians who have emphasized sources ranging from the traditions of British common law or natural jurisprudence to Whig ideology and Protestant Christianity, Butler stresses the importance of "British popular culture" and offers a novel explanation for the explosive appeal of Paine's *Common Sense*: Americans "knew this compilation of sarcasm, wit, and satire through British politics and through their own political invective dating back to Robert Hunter's 1714 scatological play *Androboros*. Now Paine used the same language" (236). Although *Common Sense*may have combined the languages of rights and republicanism within a biblical framework, Butler assures us it inspired the colonists to revolution because it appealed to their taste for ribaldry.

The dust jacket of *Becoming America* carries an engaging illustration, "Colonial Days in New York City," that effectively communicates the tone and the argument of the book. Front and center, standing before a motley array of tradesmen, frontiersmen, soldiers, preening gentlemen, and hard-working artisans—and directly in the path of a delicate maiden dressed in white from bonnet to slippers, a figure embodying refinement who would cross the street if she could—a gleeful boy watches a dog attack a pig. Although one should never judge a book by its cover, no illustration could signal more accurately what awaits readers of *Becoming America*. Benjamin Franklin, who appreciated bawdy humor as much as any of his kindred, would have relished the vitality of the street scene. But would he have judged it an adequate rendering of his America—or an accurate account of the history that he and his contemporaries made?

Notes

1. Benjamin Franklin, “Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania,” in *Papers of Benjamin Franklin,* 3: 397-420, quoted in Esmond Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia* (Cambridge, 1986), 40.

2. Benjamin Franklin, “Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion,” in *Papers,* 1: 109, quoted in Wright,*Franklin of Philadelphia,* 48-49.

3. Benjamin Franklin to Ezra Stiles, March 3, 1790, in*Writings of Benjamin Franklin,* 10: 84, quoted in Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia,* pp. 49-50.

4. See Jon Butler, “Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage, 1600-1760,” *American Historical Review* 84 (April 1979): 317-46, especially 319; and Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, 1990), 1-6.

5. Benjamin Franklin to Thomas Paine, July 3, 1786, in *Writings of Benjamin Franklin,* 9: 552, quoted in Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia,* 49.

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