



Back in Time: William Franklin in London, 1757-1762 by Lady Reid

When Benjamin Franklin arrived at 36 Craven Street in early August 1757, he was accompanied by his son William. At the age of 27 William was determined to qualify as a barrister. He was personable, articulate and made friends as easily as his father, but he was socially ambitious, and lacked his father's judgement. His five years in London moulded his life and career and tell an extraordinary story.

William registered as a pupil at the Middle Temple within walking distance of Craven Street. His father fell ill shortly after they arrived and William competently became secretary, negotiator and spokesman for him in early negotiations with the Penn family, which brought him into contact with a wide range of influential people. They seemed to like him. William Strahan, one of Benjamin Franklin's closest friends, became a life long correspondent, writing in 1757: 'Your son I really think one of the prettiest young gentlemen I ever knew from America.' There was talk of William marrying Strahan's daughter. All in all, William appeared to have been quite a golden boy.

But he had problems to overcome. The first was with him forever, in that he was Franklin's illegitimate son. Franklin always recognised William fully, but the tag 'ill-born brat' constantly hung over him. His second problem was that he was officially engaged to rich Philadelphia beauty Elizabeth Graeme, whose family were supporters of the Penns – the proprietors Franklin had come to London to petition against to the colonial ministers. Benjamin saw no future in this match and was relieved to see the romance die as William became caught up in the delights of London.

William, in contrast to his father, set about gaining entrance to the salons and parlours of the great and good. He sent visiting tickets – calling cards – to his sister Sally to impress her with his social calendar. Visits to Windsor, Vauxhall Gardens and the theatre were all recorded. He was on his way up, ill-born or not.

A serious setback came in 1760 when he confessed to fathering a son by an unknown woman. Benjamin had been in this pickle before and immediately acknowledged the child and arranged for his care and education – unlike William who never revealed his existence, not even to his eventual wife Elizabeth Downes until years later in New Jersey. In the meantime, Benjamin was not only paying for William's son but complaining regularly about William's personal extravagance. From

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this time on, almost every letter between father and son contained some financial niggle or argument.

By 1761 William was a qualified barrister, well-know writer and liked by a range of important people, as illustrated by his description of the coronation of George III. He and his father had arranged to watch the ceremony from a vantage point outside the Abbey but William did not need the place as he 'had a ticket giveing me by which I was enable to see the whole ceremony in the Hall, and to walk in the procession quite into the Abbey.' He had also met Elizabeth Downesm a wealthy West Indian planter's daughter, who promised an entrée into another non-Franklin world.

In 1762 Benjamin Franklin was at last thinking of returning to Philadelphia. William was setting his sights on some royal appointment, when a political fuss occurred over the New Jersey governorship and the incumbent Governor Hardy was dismissed. To the shock and horror of the establishment, William aged 31 was appointed. Cries of nepotism, favouritism and bastardy rang around, with Scotsman Lord Bute, Secretary of State and favourite minister of George III, at its centre. The Franklin-Scottish connections were bearing fruit.

Strangely, Benjamin Franklin accepted his son's appointment very modestly. He did not attend the wedding of William and Elizabeth, which suggests he may have disapproved of both events. The relationship between father and son was beginning to show the cracks that eventually led to their estrangement.

William and his bride left London in February 1763 to begin a long tragic sojourn in New Jersey. His father's loyalty gradually moved to the side of the separatists, while William stuck solidly to his oath to King George. On Benjamin have been heaped the accolades of fame and reverence. Poor William reaped a reward of imprisonment, loneliness and bitterness. Thus were both men's lives shaped by their experiences in London.

