In 1775, shortly before Benjamin Franklin left London, where he had served as a colonial agent for 18 years, his son William proclaimed that he was “returning to a Country where the People revere you, and are inclined to pay a Deference to your Opinions.” William was right to add that in England Franklin was “in no small danger of being brought into Trouble for your political Conduct.” While Franklin was at sea, a warrant for his arrest was served.

In “Benjamin Franklin in London,” George Goodwin, the author of two previous books on Renaissance Britain, has produced an engaging and informative account of Franklin’s experiences in the pivotal period before America’s War of Independence.

Goodwin provides colorful details about dinners — and chess matches — with members of parliament, prime ministers and prominent intellectuals; the rich food Franklin continued to consume even after he contracted gout; and his conviction that fresh air was more conducive to good health than cold baths. And Goodwin expresses skepticism that Franklin had many — or any — of the sexual dalliances about which his contemporaries (and historians) have speculated.

Admiring Franklin as an “exceptionally intelligent and resourceful” businessman, journalist, scientist, philosopher and politician, Goodwin fends off accusations that he failed as a colonial agent. He acknowledges that Franklin did not succeed in getting Pennsylvania re-established as a royal colony and, if anything, may have further inflamed an already deteriorating relationship between Great Britain and its colonies by releasing the letters of Thomas Hutchinson, the governor of Massachusetts.

Political instability within Britain itself, which resulted in short tenures in office for prime ministers and
Cabinet members, each of whom had his own ideological position, Goodwin argues, made it impossible for Franklin (or anyone else) to reconcile “the mother country” with its colonies.

And Goodwin makes the intriguing suggestion that Franklin was less concerned about saving for America for Britain “and more worried about saving Britain for British North America.” America, Franklin wrote, might suffer for a while following its separation from Britain. But with its immense territory, favored by “All Advantages of Climate, Soil, and Navigable Rivers and Lakes,” America “must become a great Country, populous and mighty.” As someone who had spent so great a part of his life in Britain, “love it and wish it Prosperity,” Franklin believed passionately in the potential of a Greater British North America, consisting of the British Isles, America and Canada.

It was not to be, of course. After Franklin returned home, he served as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress; a member of the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence; and the diplomat who negotiated the peace treaty with the British, signed in Paris in 1783. A principal architect of the Constitution, Franklin had the credentials and the credibility as a scientist and statesman, to urge each delegate in Philadelphia to “doubt a little of his own Infallibility” and approve the document, despite its compromises and imperfections.

The archetypal American and man of the world, Franklin died in 1790.

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