

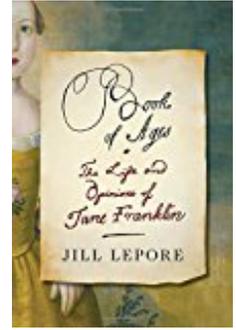
## What Is Lost: Jane Franklin and the Great Man Syndrome

"I know the most Insignificant creature on Earth may be made some Use of in the Scale of Beings, may Touch some Spring, or Verge to some wheel unperceived by us."

--Jane Franklin, In a Letter to her Brother, 1786

"One Half of the World does not know how the other Half lives."

--Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, 1732-1758



For ages now, our culture has been grossly afflicted with the Great Man Syndrome, a malady that contaminates both individuals and the collective.

In an individual, the syndrome presents itself predominantly in high-achieving males as the conviction that they are fundamentally central to human existence, sovereign agents of history. In the aggregate, the illness manifests in the mass delusion that certain male individuals by the sheer force of their achievements are alone responsible for determining our collective destiny. The disease, having infected the population in plague-like numbers, has mutated into the belief that fame at whatever cost is a supreme value, an ordinary life cause for shame.

In her *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin*, Jill Lepore challenges the pre-eminence of The Great Man in historical and biographical writing. She brilliantly excavates the life of Jane Franklin, youngest sister of Benjamin, mother of twelve, wife of a "bad man or a mad man," and an avid reader whenever she could forgo housework. In a rich account of an ordinary life of struggle, failure, and occasional delight, Lepore paints a revelatory portrait of an age, inclusive of the female perspective and experience.

Lepore's groundbreaking book is reminiscent of Jean Strouse's formidable biography of Alice James, sister to William and Henry (see my earlier [column](#)). The obvious, however, must be stated: It is highly unlikely that Alice James or Jane Franklin would have been deemed viable subjects for books by today's trade publishers if it weren't for these women's association with Great Men. An ordinary life -- especially an ordinary woman's life -- remains the stuff of ignominy.

Lepore describes Jane and Benjamin's close relationship: Jane considered Benjamin her "Second Self"; Benjamin wrote more letters to Jane during his lifetime than to anyone else. Of Jane's many letters to her brother, none survive before 1758 when she was forty-eight. In Benjamin Franklin's autobiography -- "an allegory about America: the story of a man as the story of a nation" -- Benjamin never once mentioned Jane. In writing Jane's biography, Lepore had few facts and scant remains to work with. "Her obscurity," she writes, "is matched only by

her brother's fame. If he meant to be Everyman, she is everyone else." Historian Lepore's project investigates "what it means to write history not from what survives but from what is lost."

Lepore, using more the historian's tools than the novelist's, imagines the trajectory of Jane's life, given the legal and social status of women at the time. "The two eyes of man do not more resemble," Benjamin wrote, "nor are capable of being upon better terms with each other, than my sister and myself." Benjamin, however, went to school; Jane did not. Benjamin taught his little sister to read and write, but when he ran away from home, abandoning his poverty-stricken, soap-making family in search of a better life, Jane's education ended. For her to run away, depriving parents and siblings of her much needed help, was unthinkable. When Benjamin became sexually active he took a mistress and fathered a child. When Jane, at sixteen, got the urge, she likely became pregnant, forcing her to marry a ne'er-do-well.

Upon marrying, Jane became under the eyes of the law a *feme covert*: "The very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing." Jane could not earn money without her husband's permission, and all she earned was his. She couldn't own property or sign a contract.

Benjamin Franklin became a printer, and by 1748 was, at forty-two, "the largest bookseller in Philadelphia and the most important paper merchant in the colonies." He soon retired, devoting himself to science and writing a book, *Experiments and Observations on Electricity*. In 1751, the year Benjamin's book was published, Jane, forty-one, was pregnant with her twelfth child. She too had authored a book. She'd composed it on paper made from rags, sewn with thread made from flax. She'd written the title, *Book of Ages*, in ink made of boiled oil mixed with soot. The contents were the names of all the births, marriages, and deaths in her family. She wrote: "Abiah mecom born augst 1st 1751." Of her twelve children, she would record in her book the deaths of eleven.

As Benjamin Franklin rose further to fame and fortune, his experience and renown stretching across two continents, Jane sank even lower into poverty. In 1765, her husband died leaving her deeply in debt. His entire estate, assessed at \$67, placed his family among the poorest in Boston. Jane, with two daughters and two grandchildren to support, ran a boarding house.

In the summer of 1775, Thomas Paine, friend and mentee of Benjamin Franklin, published his essay "An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex." He wrote, "If we take a survey of ages and of countries, we shall find that women, almost -- without exception -- at all times and in all places, adored and oppressed. Man with regard to them, in all climates, and in all ages, has been either an insensible husband or an oppressor."

That autumn, Independence on the verge of being declared, Abigail Adams wrote in a letter to her husband John Adams:

And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.

Her husband replied: "As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh... Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems."

As Lepore points out, "More than one revolution had begun."

In 1784, at seventy-three, Jane moved into a house in Cambridge her brother owned. With more time now to read and write and enjoy the company of others, she nevertheless wrote to her brother, "I Injoy all the Agreeable conversation I can come at Properly, but I find Litle, very Litle, Equal to that I have a Right to by Nature but am deprived of by Provedence." Jane was well aware of what it meant to be born female and poor.

In her 1939 essay "The Art of Biography" Virginia Woolf wrote:

The question now inevitably asks itself, whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography -- the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what is smallness?

That same year, Jane's house was demolished to make room for a memorial to Paul Revere. "The house wasn't in the way of the Revere memorial; it simply blocked a line of sight," Lepore specifies. Thus one more piece of evidence testifying to the existence of Jane Franklin was lost.

Ultimately, Jill Lepore's essential, beguiling book goes far beyond biography and history to become what she calls: "A meditation on silence in the archives." We, as a culture, would do well to listen to that silence, to contemplate what we have lost, and continue to lose, to the Great Man Syndrome.

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