

came to the idea of a rod on his house only after he had learned from the French that no greater height was needed. He felt certain enough of the value of such rods to recommend them confidently in *Poor Richard* the next month. But not till eight years later did Kinnersley report to Franklin, then in London, that a house in Philadelphia had unmistakably been struck by lightning and saved by his invention.²⁹

Franklin suggested if he did not erect the first lightning rod, and he probably flew the first electrical kite, but there are little mysteries about both his proof of his great conjecture and his application of it.

III

In 1752-53 these were not mysteries but wonders. A man in Philadelphia in America, bred a tradesman, remote from the learned world, had hit upon a secret which enabled him, and other men, to catch and tame the lightning, so dread that it was still mythological. To the public, as it gradually heard about him, he seemed a magician. To scientists, from the first, he seemed a master. He had resounding praise from France, even the applause of the king. When Franklin learned of this he felt, he told Jared Eliot on 12 April 1753, like the girl in the *Tatler* "who was observed to grow suddenly proud, and none could guess the reason, till it came to be known that she had got on a new pair of garters."³⁰ His account of the electrical kite was read at the Royal Society 21 December, almost as soon as it could get to London, and was published in the *Transactions* for that year. Harvard gave him the honorary degree of Master of Arts in July 1753. Yale followed with the same degree in September, and William and Mary in April 1756. The Royal Society on 30 November 1753 awarded him the Sir Godfrey Copley gold medal "on account of his curious experiments and observations on electricity," and on 29 May 1756 elected him a member of the Society. "I had not the least expectation," he told Collinson, "of ever arriving at that honour."³¹ Giovanni Battista Beccaria made Franklin quickly known and accepted in

CHAPTER 6

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