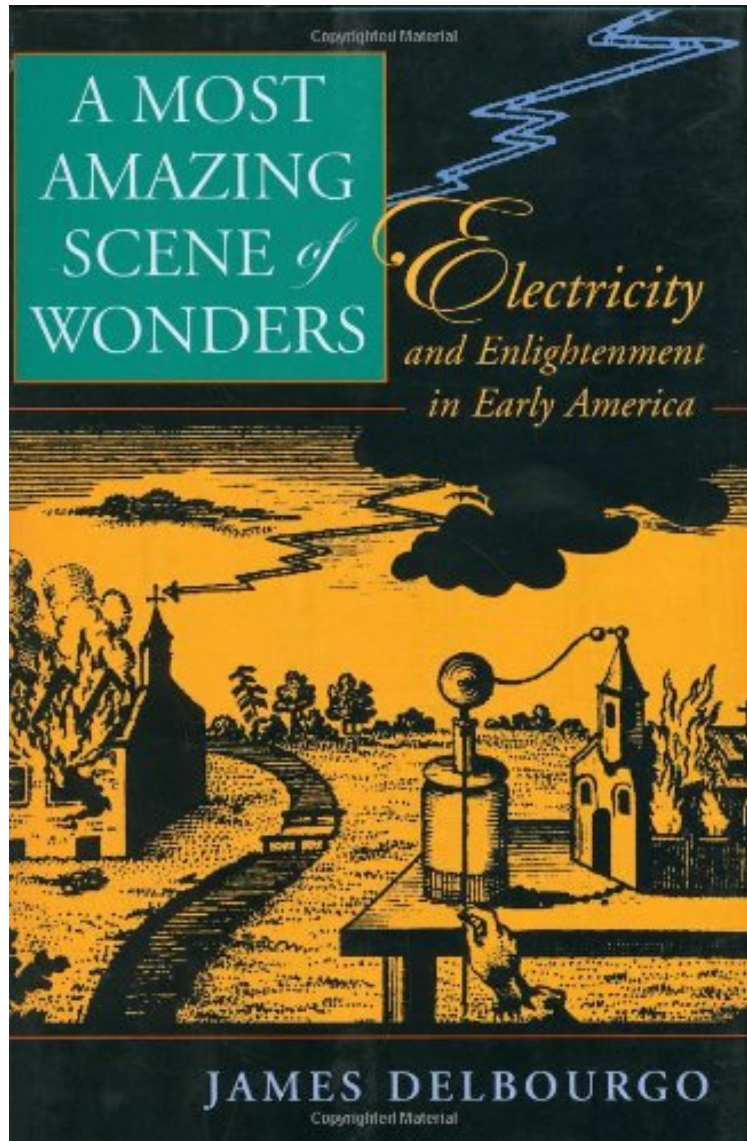


[Free] A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America

A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America

James Delbourgo

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James Delbourgo : A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America:

Benjamin Franklin's invention of the lightning rod is the founding fable of American science, but Franklin was only one of many early Americans fascinated by electricity. As a dramatically new physical experience, electricity amazed those who dared to tame the lightning and set it coursing through their own bodies. Thanks to its technological and medical utility, but also its surprising ability to defy rational experimental mastery, electricity was a powerful experience of enlightenment, at once social, intellectual, and spiritual. In this compelling book, James Delbourgo moves beyond Franklin to trace the path of electricity through early American culture, exploring how the relationship between human, natural, and divine powers was understood in the eighteenth century. By examining the lives and visions of natural philosophers, spectacular showmen, religious preachers, and medical therapists, he shows how electrical experiences of wonder, terror, and awe were connected to a broad array of cultural concerns that defined the American Enlightenment. The history of lightning rods, electrical demonstrations, electric eels, and medical electricity reveals how early American science, medicine, and technology were shaped by a culture of commercial performance, evangelical religion, and republican politics from mid-century to the early republic. The first book to situate early American experimental science in the context of a transatlantic public sphere, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders* offers a captivating view of the origins of American science and the cultural meaning of the American Enlightenment. In a story of shocks and sparks from New England to the Caribbean, Delbourgo brilliantly illuminates a revolutionary New World of wonder.

A lucid, original cultural history of electricity in colonial British America. No one until Delbourgo has paid attention to the world of savants, preachers, itinerant merchants, natural philosophers, curiosity mongers, millenarian physicians, and polite audiences amidst whose views on electricity Franklin hammered out innovative theories and experiments. Clearly breaking new ground, Delbourgo uses the science of electricity to shed light on religion to politics to medicine to the nature of the public sphere. (Jorge Caizares-Esguerra, author of *How to Write the History of the New World*) In a remarkably ambitious and brilliantly executed study, Delbourgo turns the tables on received histories of science, enlightenment, and practical reason in the American colonies. With subtle mastery and ingenious flair, he illuminates a world of mystical piety, commercial medicine, and transatlantic science. This compelling book is for anyone interested in the roots of America's modern sense of science's place and of its crucial attitudes to expertise, authority, and intellectual life. (Simon Schaffer, University of Cambridge) Every once in a while, after finishing a work of history, I have the sense that I could have an engaged and engaging conversation with someone in the past. Reading James Delbourgo's book, I had that feeling. He shows that the experience of electricity in all its forms provides a powerful opening onto the experience of the Enlightenment by ordinary people. This wonderful book allows us almost to touch and feel the lost world of emerging science and systematic knowledge. (John L. Brooke, author of *The Refiner's Fire*) Does electricity explain everything about the American Enlightenment? James Delbourgo makes a convincing case that it does. A wonderful book on a wonderful topic. Anyone interested in early America's cultural history will learn much from Delbourgo's learned and readable interpretation. (Joyce Chaplin, author of *The First Scientific American: Benjamin Franklin and the Pursuit of Genius*) [An] excellent new book... Delbourgo succeeds admirably in closing a lacuna in our understanding of the period, by providing a cultural history of science and the Enlightenment in America. (P. D. Smith *Times Literary Supplement* 2007-04-13) James Delbourgo's cultural history of electricity in early America benefits considerably from its attention to the circulation of knowledge across the Atlantic. It provides a fresh analysis of Franklin's work while also offering a fascinating case study of the intellectual, natural-philosophical exchanges between the Old and the New Worlds. (Paola Bertucci *British Journal for the History of Science* 2008-07-01) In this groundbreaking book, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders*, James Delbourgo shows us how pervasively electricity coursed through the bodies, technologies, imaginations, and rhetorics of early America... Delbourgo introduces the reader to facets of the cultures of electricity that have, until now, remained obscure. That is where the originality of the book lies and where Delbourgo's exhaustive digging in the far-flung provinces of early American life payoff... This capacious book extends the historiography of science to include its vital non-European locales and corrects the historiography of early America by demonstrating how much the circuits of science animated culture. (Susan Scott Parrish *Journal of American History* 2007-06-01) [A] well-researched and engaging study of science in early America... Delbourgo complicates our understanding of a particularly American enlightenment by demonstrating how social structures shaped scientific inquiry. America both depended upon and rebelled against European naturalists, preferring to forge an individualistic naturalism that incorporated religious fervor, spiritualism, materialism, and competing epistemologies. Underlying any scientific claims was a fierce commitment to individual experience and personal testimony, and an equally fierce rejection of hierarchal expertise. (Linda Simon *American Historical* 2007-10-01) James Delbourgo's very fine book sets out to examine how electricity came to have such cultural significance in eighteenth-century America... The display of scholarship never intrudes on the lucidly written prose, and the notes are discreetly sequestered at the end of the volume. Readers without a specialist interest will find the book very accessible... Delbourgo refers to the works of enlightened savants as having staked out a 'middle ground' between elite science and popular entertainment; he might be said to have situated his own project on the same terrain. To accomplish this, and at the same time to speak with authority to scholars in several

fields, is a significant achievement. (Jan Golinski Isis 2007-09-01)James Delbourgo's book is a significant addition to the literature on science and the Enlightenment. Focusing on a geographical area comparatively neglected by historians of science--early America and the British Atlantic, from the 1740s to ca. 1800--Delbourgo raises a number of issues that claim relevance for our understanding of science and the Enlightenment generally. (Giuliano Pancaldi Nuncius 2007-06-01)The history of electricity in eighteenth-century America is very often reduced to the iconic image of Benjamin Franklin alone in a rainstorm holding aloft his kite to which is attached a key--the key to American science some might say. James Delbourgo's admirable new book reveals that Franklin was but one player in the development and integration of electrical science into the American consciousness during the Enlightenment. Indeed, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders* introduces readers to a host of overlooked electricians (the contemporary term given those who studied or performed with electricity) such as T. Gale, Ebenezer Kinnersley, Elisha Perkins, Archibald Spencer, Henry Moyes, and Samuel Domjen, to name only a few of Delbourgo's intriguing cast of characters. With his fine book Delbourgo joins a growing list of scholars who have lately considered provincialism, issues of the body, questions of vitalism, and indeed of "Enlightenment" itself in eighteenth-century studies of Nature and its workings...Delbourgo's analysis, which illustrates that very little in eighteenth-century America, whether religious, political, medical, or public spectacle, happened independently of electricity. The result is a compelling cultural history of electricity and of early America that deserves a wide readership. Delbourgo's book is yet another example of very exciting times in the history of science. (Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth University of Toronto Quarterly 2008-11-01)Makes quite a number of fascinating observations with regard to public demonstrations of the effects of electricity...Although [not] directly concerned with visual culture or audiovisual media, [it's] an interesting read for all those who want to know more about the cultural contexts for such forms of popular entertainment in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (Frank Kessler Early Popular Visual Culture 2008-03-01)Moving beyond while not abandoning the story of Benjamin Franklin's discovery, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders* presents electricity as the story of the American Enlightenment...Delbourgo shows what was uniquely American about electricity at the same time that he connects it to broader Atlantic trends. (Sarah Rivett William and Mary Quarterly 2007-10-01)*A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders* provides an interesting look into the almost childish excitement with which electricity was viewed before its ubiquity and power made it both dangerous and banal. Early America had enormous intellectual diversity, much like our own time. Their reactions sometimes resonate with contemporary cultural and political norms, and other times seem quite modern. (John L. Neufeld Enterprise and Society 2007-09-01)About the AuthorJames Delbourgo is Associate Professor of History at Rutgers University.