

An Assembly of Demigods

John Dickinson

John Adams: Diary, Philadelphia, August 31, 1774

Made a Visit to Governor Ward of Rhode Island at his Lodgings. there We were introduced to several gentlemen.

Mr. Dickinson the Farmer of Pennsylvania, came to Mr. Ward's Lodgings to see us, in his Coach and four beautiful Horses. He was introduced to Us, and very politely said he was exceedingly glad to have the Pleasure of seeing these Gentlemen, made some Enquiry after the Health of his Brother and Sister, who are now in Boston. Gave us some Account of his late ill Health and his present Gout. This was the first Time of his getting out.

Mr. Dickinson has been Subject to Hectic Complaints. He is a Shadow—tall, but slender as a Reed—pale as ashes. One would think at first Sight that he could not live a Month. Yet upon a more attentive Inspection, he looks as if the Springs of Life were strong enough to last many Years.

John Adams to James Warren, Philadelphia, July 24, 1775

A certain great Fortune and piddling Genius whose Fame has been trumpeted so loudly, has given a silly Cast to our whole Doings. We are between Hawk and Buzzard.

Robert Whitehill to various friends, Philadelphia, June 10, 1776

Dickinson, Wilson, and the others, have Rendered themselves obnoxious to Every Whig in town, and Every Day of their Existence are losing the Confidence of the people.

Edward Rutledge to John Jay, Philadelphia, June 29, 1776

I have been much engaged lately upon a plan of a Confederation which Dickenson has drawn. It has the Vice of all his Productions to a considerable Degree; I mean the Vice of Refining too much. Unless it is greatly curtailed it never can pass, as it is to be submitted to Men in the respective Provinces who will not be led or rather driven into Measures which may lay the Foundation of their Ruin.

John Adams: Diary, June 20, 1779

He [Chevalier de la Luzerne] enquired after Mr. Dickinson, and the Reason why he disappeared. I explained, as well as I could in French, the Inconsistency of the Farmers Letters and his Perseverance in that Inconsistency in Congress. Mr. Dickinson's Opposition to the declaration of Independency, I ventured as modestly as I could to let him know that I had the Honour to be the Principal Disputant in Congress against Mr. Dickinson upon that great Question. That Mr. Dickinson had the Eloquence, the Learning and the Ingenuity on his Side of the Question, but that I had the Hearts of the Americans on mine, and therefore my Side of the Question prevailed. That Mr. Dickinson had a good Heart, and an amiable Character. But that his Opposition to Independency, had lost him the Confidence of the People, who suspected him of Timidity and Avarice, and that his Opposition sprung from those Passions: But that he had since turned out with the Militia, against the B[ritish] troops and I doubted not might in Time regain the Confidence of the People.

Benjamin Rush to John Montgomery, Philadelphia, November 5, 1782

There can be little doubt of Mr. Dickinson being president [of Pennsylvania]. Shame will compel some to vote for him whom inclination would not. He is everything that his friends would wish him to be. His enemies (who are enemies of virtue and public justice) sicken and tremble at his name.

Thomas Jefferson: Answers to François Soulés's Queries, September 13-18, 1786

Mr. Dickinson, a lawyer of more ingenuity than sound judgment, and still more timid than ingenious. . . .

William Pierce: Sketches of Members of the Constitutional Convention, 1787

Mr. Dickinson has been famed through all America, for his farmers Letters; he is a Scholar, and said to be a Man of very extensive information. When I saw him in the Convention I was induced to pay the greatest attention to him whenever he spoke. I had often heard that he was a great Orator, but I found him an indifferent Speaker. With an affected air of wisdom he labors to produce a trifle,—his language is irregular and incorrect,—his flourishes (for he sometimes attempts them), are like expiring flames, they just show themselves and go out;—no traces of them are left on the mind to clear or animate it. He is, however, a good writer and will ever be considered one of the most important characters in the United States. He is about 55 years old, and was bred a Quaker.

Benjamin Rush: Sketches

Few men wrote, spoke and acted more for their country from the years 1764 to the establishment of the federal government than Mr. Dickinson. He was alike eloquent at the bar, in a popular assembly, and in convention. Count [Thomas Cajetan] Wengierski, a Polish nobleman who travelled thro' the United States soon after the peace, said he was the most learned man he had met with in America. He possessed the air of a camp and the ease of the court in his manners. He was opposed to the Declaration of Independence

at the time it took place, but concurred in supporting it. During the war and for some years after it, he admired and preferred the British constitution. Towards the close of his life he became a decided and zealous Republican.