

An Assembly of Demigods

Oliver Ellsworth

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

Mr. Ellsworth is a Judge of the Supreme Court in Connecticut;—he is a Gentleman of a clear, deep, and copious understanding; eloquent, and connected in public debate; and always attentive to his duty. He is very happy in a reply, and choice in selecting such parts of his adversary's arguments as he finds make the strongest impressions,—in order to take off the force of them, so as to admit the power of his own. Mr. Ellsworth is about 37 years of age, a Man much respected for his integrity, and venerated for his abilities.

William Maclay: Journal, April 9, 1790

I can with Truth pronounce him the most uncandid man I ever knew possessing such Abilities. I am often led to doubt Whether he has a particle of Integrity, perhaps such a Quality is Useless in Connecticut.

William Maclay: Journal, June 12, 1790

Ellsworth a Man of great Faculties, and eloquent in debate, but he has taken too much on himself. He wishes to reconcile the Secretary's [Alexander Hamilton's] System to the public Opinion, and Welfare but it is too much. He cannot retain the Confidence of the People & remain in the Good graces of the Secretary. He may lose both.

Jeremiah Smith to William Plumer, Philadelphia, March 5, 1796

. . . I write merely to inform you that yesterday Mr. Ellsworth was appointed Chief Justice of the United States—The vote was unanimous in Senate except *Mason* of Virginia who is a very ill natured & sour *man* as well as *politician*.—I presume no appointment in the U.S. has been more wise or judicious than this: He is a very able lawyer, a very learned man, a very great Politician & a very honest man. In short he is every thing one would desire.—I know this will give you much pleasure as you are a sincere well wisher to good Government & especially to a good judiciary; a thing which *we* know the Value of by the want of it. I hope he will accept.—

Connecticut can not send his equal into the Senate—He was the life & soul of that body & they will severely feel his loss—He was a man of investigation & uncommon Industry—Nothing passed without his examination.—I believe his enemies placed as much Confidence in him as his friends, if this is not an improper expression—

Abigail Adams to John Adams, Quincy, March 20, 1796

I both rejoiced and mourned at the Appointment of Mr. Ellsworth as Chief Justice, but what the Senate lose, the Bench will acquire. I rejoice that they have obtained a Man of a fair Fame, distinguished abilities and integrity. Caesar's Wife ought not to be suspected. This will apply to that office.

Abigail Adams to John Adams, Quincy, April 17, 1797

I have just been reading Chief Justice Ellsworth's Charge to the Grand jury at New York! Did the good gentleman never write before? Can it be genuine. The language is stiffer than his person. I find it difficult to pick out his meaning in many sentences. I am sorry it was ever published.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, April 24, 1797

You and Such petit Maitres and Maitresses as you, are forever criticising the Periods and Diction of Such great Men as Presidents and Chief Justices. Do you think their Minds are taken up with such Trifles? There is solid, keen, deep sense in that Morsel of Ellsworth's. You ought to be punished for wishing it not published.

Frederick Wolcott to Oliver Wolcott, Jr., Hartford, Conn., January 23, 1798

. . . Mr. Ellsworth will not go to Philadelphia till some time the next week.—He is considerably unwell, I understand quite hypochondriac.