

BOOKS

A Reflective Revolutionary

**The Cost of Liberty:
The Life of John Dickinson**

By William Murchison

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BY ROBERT K. LANDERS

JOHN DICKINSON'S vigorous defense of Americans' rights as Englishmen won him renown throughout the colonies in the 1760s, but his refusal to sign the Declaration of Independence in 1776 diminished his reputation and came to be unfairly seen as his defining moment. Recent books by historians Jack Rakove, John Ferling and Richard Beeman have brought this neglected Founder again to the fore, and now, with "The Cost of Liberty," a brisk, admiring biography, journalist William Murchison provides a fuller portrait.

A wealthy, high-minded Philadelphia lawyer, intelligent and erudite, Dickinson (1732-1808) strongly objected to British efforts to tax Americans to raise imperial revenue. But the colonists, he argued, should avoid "turbulence and tumult" in seeking to persuade the British to rectify their mistakes, lest "the cause of liberty . . . be sullied." His affection for the mother country was genuine. "Every drop of blood in my heart is British," he said. Though not a Quaker, he derived from the Quaker tradition a commitment to strive for peace, with force to be used as a last resort. Many historians have characterized him as "conservative" or "moderate." Such labels have their uses, Mr. Murchison says, but none can encompass so complex a figure.

One scholar called Dickinson "an

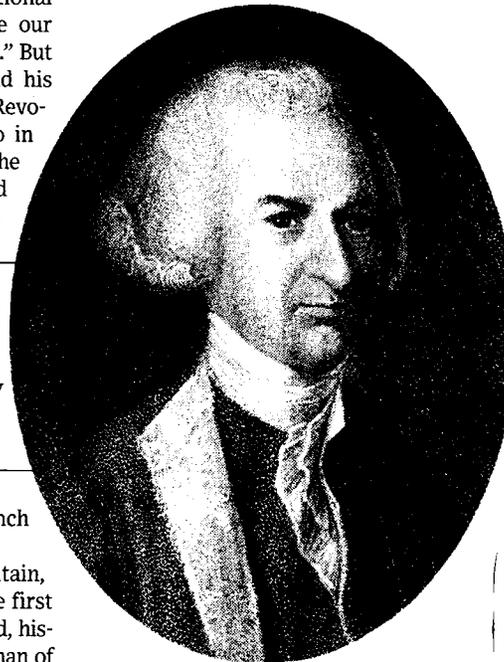
American Burke"—and, Mr. Murchison comments, "not without cause." Like the British statesman Edmund Burke, who supported the colonists in their struggle, Dickinson "would stand with the rooted and the tested over against the products of human guesswork." Or, as Dickinson put it during the 1787 Constitutional Convention: "Experience must be our only guide. Reason may mislead us." But in sharp contrast with Burke and his denunciatory "Reflections on the Revolution in France," Dickinson, who in the 1790s associated himself with the Jeffersonian Republicans, welcomed the French Revolution and, despite

Dickinson opposed the rush to declare independence but gladly served when war came.

the Terror, embraced the French republic that emerged.

Whatever his affection for Britain, Dickinson played a vital role in the first stirrings of American revolt. Indeed, historians have termed him the "Penman of the Revolution." At the Stamp Act Congress in October 1765, he drafted its Declaration of Rights and Grievances explaining the colonial opposition to the act, which required the purchase of revenue stamps on legal documents and other items. In 1767-68, in opposition to the Townshend Acts imposing duties on tea, paper, glass and other commodities, Dickinson (adopting the persona of a learned gentleman-farmer) wrote

"Letters From a Farmer in Pennsylvania." The series of 12 essays had wider circulation and greater impact than any other publication in the revolutionary era except Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" (1776). Though Dickinson lacked Paine's instinct for "the stunning, knock-



down phrase," Mr. Murchison says, he brought to his writings "the invaluable gifts of lucidity, balance, and eloquence . . . fortified by scholarship and wisdom."

At the First Continental Congress in October 1774, Dickinson wrote the final draft of its petition to George III, combining an indictment of his ministers and their policy with fulsome expressions of regard for the king himself. At

the Second Continental Congress the following year, after fighting had broken out in Lexington and Concord, Dickinson in effect collaborated with Thomas Jefferson on the congress's Declaration of Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms and was the primary author of the Olive Branch Petition, the congress's final appeal to the king. John Adams, who spoke in opposition to the petition (but signed it), privately derided it as a "measure of imbecility." Like the earlier petition, it proved futile—but it also showed, by its very rejection, how unshakable British intransigence was.

By the spring of 1776, if not before, Dickinson realized that reconciliation with Britain wasn't in the cards. But he opposed declaring independence prematurely. It would be imprudent to rush into a war for independence, he argued, without first getting France's assurance that it would come to America's aid. If Dickinson had voted for independence, the historian Forrest McDonald has observed, he, and not Jefferson, would probably have been chosen to write the Declaration of Independence—and the declaration's rights would probably have been based not on theoretical natural law but on English constitutional history, with less than universal implications.

When the final vote on independence came on July 2, 1776, Dickinson and the wealthy merchant Robert Morris, who also opposed a declaration as premature, abstained. This decision allowed what had been the Pennsylvania delegation's 4-3 vote against independence the previous day to become a 3-2 vote in favor of it and so let the congress speak with one voice on this momentous matter.

Having followed his conscience on independence, Dickinson showed himself to be a patriot, almost immediately going off as a colonel in command of a Philadelphia militia battalion to Elizabethtown, N.J., to fight the British. He had stated his conviction about declaring independence "as an honest man ought to do," he said later, but once the Continental Congress had made its decision, "I received that determination as the sacred voice of my country. . . . From that moment, it became my determination; and I cheerfully contributed my endeavors for its perpetual establishment."

Morris, his fellow oppositionist, in August 1776 added his signature to the Declaration of Independence—a fact that Mr. Murchison notes only parenthetically and in an endnote, without comment. Why didn't Dickinson do as Morris did and sign this expression of the country's "sacred voice"? Dickinson, it seems, never explained, and Mr. Murchison doesn't speculate.

After the war, Dickinson served as "president" (chief executive) of Delaware, then of Pennsylvania (and, for a few months, of both simultaneously). He was a significant presence at the Constitutional Convention and wrote "Letters of Fabius," arguing for the Constitution's ratification. When he died in 1808 at age 75, Jefferson said of Dickinson to a friend: "A more estimable man or truer patriot could not have left us. . . . His name will be consecrated in history as one of the great worthies of the Revolution."

Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell."