

## FOREWORD

GEORGE CLINTON was one of the foremost of the prophets and agitators of the American Revolution; he was perhaps the greatest of all the war governors; he was the foremost opponent of the Constitution of 1787; and he was a figure to be reckoned with in virtually every New York gubernatorial contest and in every national election until his death in 1812. The friend and trusted colleague of Washington, the foe of Hamilton and Burr, the rival of Jefferson, the uncle of DeWitt Clinton, and the father-in-law of the notorious Citizen Genêt, he exerted a quiet but amazingly persistent influence upon men and politics in New York and the nation for over forty years.

Yet he has been all but forgotten by the historian. He is the most important individual in American history who has not had a biography. Historians of the Federalist school who have, for better or for worse, dominated the writing of history in America, very naturally disliked Clinton because of his fervid Antifederalism; New England historians have had no love for the New Yorker who so bluntly expressed his unflattering opinions about New England troops and generals and who was so ready to resort to arms to keep Vermont subject to New York; and those who worship at the shrine of Hamilton, who have been legion, have taken pains to ignore Hamilton's greatest New York rival or to damn him with the faintest of praise. Yet Clinton is an immensely significant figure because he does represent the radical republicanism and democratic ferment of his times that Hamilton so distrusted.

Without men of his stamp the American Revolution would have been only a political movement, not a democratic one. And after the states had cut loose from monarchy, he worked to build a true political democracy in America. Other Americans preached the doctrines of the Declaration of Independence only while the war lasted; Clinton never forgot them. He remained a sincere democrat and a fanatical re-

publican in an era when every democrat and every republican was suspected of rank Jacobinism.

Consequently he became a rallying point for the masses who sought complete liberty from England and genuine Republicanism in America. Few men of his generation enjoyed such a following, in war and politics, as did George Clinton. The masses of men admired his rugged, manly qualities, his integrity and his essential democracy. They loved and followed him because of that very simplicity of character—naïveté, perhaps—that has made him seem uninteresting to the historian searching for profundities.

Born in rural New York, the son of an immigrant surveyor and farmer, himself a surveyor, soldier, farmer, country lawyer, land trader and politician, he was of common clay, and men of common clay revered and trusted him. They sent him to the provincial assembly for seven years and to the Continental Congress, applauded when he was made both a state and a Continental brigadier general, elected him seven times governor of New York, chose him to oppose a federal Constitution that they heartily disliked, and made him twice vice president of the United States. They nearly succeeded in making him president. Surely no New Yorker of his entire generation had nearly so great and so devoted a following in his own state as had Clinton. Hamilton's popularity with the rank and file did not begin to approach the governor's. The masses of men suspected Hamilton of leaning toward monarchy, of conspiring to create an autocratic central government that would destroy the states, and of trying to build a governmental system for the benefit of the bankers, merchants, and gentlemen of blue blood. Clinton they knew to be a genuine republican, a foe of centralization in government, and an enemy of banks and of the time-honored alliance between the mercantile and the landholding families.

It has been said that the American character is a strange combination of idealism and materialism, a dualism somewhat like that which John Randolph found in the alliance of John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay and so aptly characterized as the union of Puritan and Blackleg. George Clinton, like so many of his fellows in that formative period of American life, combined the idealistic and the sentimental with the grossly materialistic. On the one side he possessed a refreshing and

almost fanatical faith in the future of American institutions and in political democracy, and on the other hand he shared the unlovely enthusiasms of his age for shillings and pence, for speculations in land and, even less fortunately, for practical politics. In his shortcomings as in his virtues, he was, however, no mere "stuffed shirt." He was perhaps only too typical of his age.

Had he possessed Jefferson's eloquence in ink he might have been the first Republican president. But he was no philosopher, except in the homeliest sense of that word, and the Virginian instead of the New Yorker became the standard bearer of the Republican cause. Lacking the power of the pen, Clinton could win to his cause only the men with whom he came into immediate contact. He remained, therefore, a local figure to the end of his life, but a local figure of such importance that he became vice president of the Union and several times a serious candidate for the presidency.