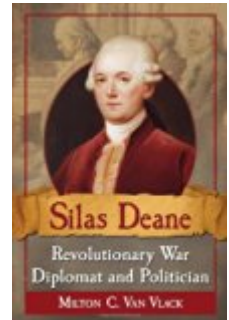


Milton C. Van Vlack. *Silas Deane, Revolutionary War Diplomat and Politician.* Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2013. 244 pp. \$40.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-7252-9.



Reviewed by Nathan D. Wells

Published on H-War (November, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The various politicians, diplomats, soldiers, and revolutionaries who comprise the so-called Founding Fathers were a diverse mixture to be sure. Some remain household names, others have experienced a renaissance, and still more have receded into the depths of history due to their more minor role in comparison to their contemporaries or due to an unkind historical point of view. One of the latter is Silas Deane of Connecticut, whose accomplishments have been forgotten because of his recall by a Continental Congress then controlled by political rivals. For over half a century, Milton C. Van Vlack, a retired high school history teacher and adjunct faculty instructor of history in the Connecticut State University System, has set out to amend this oversight.

Deane was a successful lawyer and pillar of the community of Wethersfield, Connecticut, when the War of Independence broke out. Van Vlack's compact volume is divided into ten chapters and four appendices. The chapters work roughly in pairs. The first two chapters, "Influences on a Connecticut Youth" and "Lawyer, Mer-

chant, Politician," focus on Deane's formative years from 1738 to 1775. Chapters 3 and 4, "Continental Congress Connecticut Delegate" and "Leading Connecticut Congressional Delegate," describe Deane's experiences as one of his colony's delegates to the Continental Congress in 1774 to 1775. Chapters 5 and 6, "Secret American Agent to France" and "American Commissioner to France," recount his actions as an American espionage and diplomatic agent in France from 1776 to 1778. Chapters 7 and 8, "Franco-American Treaties at Last" and "Congressional Recall Debacle," focus on the climax and nadir of his career from 1778 to 1780. The final two chapters, "Return to France, Exile and Death" and "A Long Finale," look at his postwar career, his death, and the impact on his reputation of popular histories published between 1780 and 1842.

According to Van Vlack, it was due to his rivalry with the powerful Adams-Lee faction in the Continental Congress, especially Virginian Arthur Lee, that led to his undeserved recall and even more undeserved consignment to the forgotten

sections of America's past. As a result, Van Vlack looks primarily at Deane, as well as some members of the Adams-Lee faction, especially Samuel Adams and Richard Henry Lee. Deane's résumé was impressive. He represented Connecticut in the Continental Congress, ensured that both this legislative body and France sent vital supplies and funds to the Continental army, ran an early intelligence service in Europe, and along with fellow agents Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee oversaw the signing of the American-Franco Peace Treaty of 1778. Arthur Lee, who was brother to Richard Henry Lee and Francis Lee (two members of the Adams-Lee junta), despised Deane. The feeling was mutual. Their efforts brought France into the war and led to other European powers to fund the American effort. His recall over misappropriation of funds (and longtime friendship with fellow Connecticut colonial Benedict Arnold) was controversial even then. Congress exonerated him in 1842.

This is an interesting subject and informative read all-around (apparently Bermuda had a very good chance at becoming our fourteenth state), but there are some issues with this volume. The first is alluded to in the acknowledgements, where the author thanks his editors due to his "erratic and somewhat blunt writing style similar to language I used in lecturing in the university classroom" (p. xi). This writing style is prevalent for most of the book and what works to keep undergraduate students interested can be off-putting to readers. Van Vlack defends Deane's reputation like any good defense attorney, believing that the best defense is a good offense. While Arthur Lee is the main villain here, the rest of the Adams-Lee junta comes under fire as well. Samuel Adams is depicted as a throwback Puritan, while Richard Henry Lee and John Adams are mentioned only in passing. The problem with this approach is that this cabal was vital to a united war effort. As Virginia goes, so does the rest of the South, which had not nearly been as bent on independence as the North. (Georgia had not even sent a delegate

to the first Continental Congress.) This was the main reason John Adams had for recommending Virginian George Washington for Continental army command. Van Vlack mentions that both Deane and John Adams studied their fellow delegates and wrote detailed reports. He quotes from Deane's report, but not from Adams's. There are two potential reasons for this. When Deane was recalled, Adams was named as his replacement. The second possible reason relates to a main theme of the volume, the importance of Freemasonry among most of the main participants. It was a system in which membership was not based on class. King Louis XVI was a mason, and so were common men such as Deane. The author (along with one of the editors) is a mason, and he recounts how nearly all the major players in the book were members. One of the few exceptions was John Adams. Had Van Vlack simply focused on Deane and his contemporaries, the volume would have been of more use.

This is a good book overall, and should appeal to anyone interested in America's struggle for independence or Freemasonry.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Nathan D. Wells. Review of Van Vlack, Milton C. *Silas Deane, Revolutionary War Diplomat and Politician*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 2014.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42188>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.