

John Trumbull

1750 - 1831

*"I hear a voice, that calls away,
And cries "The Whigs will win the day."
My heck'ning Genius gives command,
And bids me fly the fatal land;
Where changing name and constitution,
Rebellion turns to Revolution."*

- From *M'Fingal*

Called the wittiest of the "Hartford Wits" and a pioneer in American literary humor, John Trumbull was born in Westbury parish (then a part of Waterbury, later Watertown) on April 24, 1750. Trumbull had been a precocious youth, passing the admission exam for Yale at age seven. However, he did not enter the college until he was thirteen. He graduated in 1767 and received his master's degree in 1770. While tutoring at Yale, he wrote his first successful poem *The Progress of Dullness*, a direct, incisive and sparkling critique of college education, the clergy, and the woeful state of female schooling. Trumbull's motivation for the poem is clearly stated in the preface in which he says: "Ignorance wanders unmolested at our colleges, examinations are dwindled to mere form and ceremony, and after four years dozing there no one is ever refused the honors of a degree on account of dullness and insufficiency". Contrary to Yale's curriculum at the time, he was a proponent of fine arts and literature and said they "ennoble the soul purify the passions, and give the thoughts a better turn. They add dignity to our sentiments, delicacy and refinements to our manners".

He is best known for his mock epic poem *M'Fingal*, written at the instigation of some leading members of the first Congress for the purpose of satirizing the British and raising Colonial moral. Trumbull began the poem while residing in Boston in 1775 where he was studying law in the office of John Adams. The poem was reprinted thirty times between 1782-1840 and was the most popular American poem of its length before Longfellow's *Evangeline*. It is a skillful work of literature with an impassioned argument in favor of American independence. The title character is a Tory living in the midst of Colonial patriots. Trumbull said, "with as much impartiality as possible" he had tried "to satirize the follies and extravagancies of his countryman as well as their enemies". *M'Fingal* was frequently quoted by the press when ratification was debated and reached its peak popularity during the controversy between the Federalists and Democrats. Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Madison all owned copies of this influential work that was condemned in the British press. An indication of the importance of *M'Fingal* in the canons of American literature is its inclusion in 1963 as one of the volumes to be held in a permanent White House library of books central to the understanding of the American national experience.



Trumbull returned to Connecticut to practice law in New Haven and Hartford from 1774-1825 and was drawn into the poetic circle known as the "Hartford Wits" or "Connecticut Wits". Becoming more conservative and an ardent Federalist in the years following the Revolution, he joined in the writing of *"The Anarchiad"*, twelve papers in verse satirizing democratic liberalism.

He was active in state politics, serving as a judge of the Connecticut Supreme Court from 1801-1819 and as a judge of the Superior Court of Errors from 1808-1819. It has been reported that he considered it unethical to write on political issues while he held judicial office.

Robert Ferguson said Trumbull was "the most celebrated American poet of the eighteenth century, and his critical expertise brought vital leadership to the country's first school of poetry, the "Connecticut Wits". One of the prominent satirists in early American literature, he died in Detroit on May 11, 1831.