

Dobbs, Arthur ^[1]

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by Richard Beale Davis, 1986

2 Apr. 1689–28 Mar. 1765



A copy of an original portrait of Arthur Dobbs, made circa 1800-1850. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

^[2]Arthur Dobbs, colonial governor of North Carolina, surveyor-general of Ireland, promoter of exploration for a [Northwest Passage](#) ^[3], and scholar and scientist, was a son of the Enlightenment and one of his colony's ablest executives. He was born in Ayrshire, Scotland, whither his mother had been sent for safety's sake because of political and religious unrest. His ancestral home was Castle Dobbs, County Antrim, Ireland, where he spent most of his life and where his descendants still reside. His father was Richard Dobbs, and his mother, Mary, was the daughter of Archibald Stewart of Ballintoy. The first Dobbs landed near Carrickfergus in 1599; since then the family has been prominent in that area of Northern Ireland and, before Irish independence, in Dublin. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the [Anglican](#) ^[4]Dobbses distinguished themselves in Dublin intellectual circles and became close friends of Jonathan Swift, who for a time had a residence near Castle Dobbs.

Though Dobbs's recent biographer did not discover the place and manner of his early education, and though his name does not appear on the incomplete alumni lists of the principal Scottish or English universities or of Trinity College, Dublin, it is obvious from his writings, his speeches, and his library that he received good training, perhaps beyond that possible to obtain in the grammar school at Carrickfergus near his home. Regardless of where he received his formal education, Dobbs was back in County Antrim for a year or two before he obtained a commission in the dragoons, joining his regiment in March 1711. In October 1712, after his father died, he was placed on the half pay on which he remained until he was appointed [surveyor](#) ^[5]-general of Ireland almost twenty years later. In 1720 he became high sheriff of Antrim and soon after mayor of Carrickfergus. Like his immediate Dobbs ancestors, Squire Arthur in these and later political posts identified himself with the interests of Ireland at the same time that he was an imperialist. In 1727 he was returned from Carrickfergus to the Irish House of Commons, being identified with the ruling [Whig](#) ^[6] party rather than Swift's Tory faction. In the 1720s he had demonstrated his scientific curiosity with reports to the London Royal Society on a [Parhelion or Mock Sun](#) ^[7] (1721–22), [on an Aurora Borealis](#) ^[8] (1725–26), and on [an eclipse of the moon](#) ^[9] (1728–29)—all published in the society's *Transactions* (vols. 32, 34, and 36). Among his extant unpublished manuscripts of the period is an essay on coinage in Britain and Ireland in which he proposed a method of preventing frauds and abuses. The paper reflects Irish protests against a new Irish coinage authorized by the British Parliament; it also suggests early interest in a matter with which he was to be concerned in North Carolina, the issuance of a provincial coinage.

Meanwhile, Dobbs improved his estates agriculturally and developed even greater interest in local politics. Concomitant with both these interests was a third, Irish trade. The squire and MP became a champion of the rights of his fellow countrymen and of the necessity that foreign and British purchases from his homeland be increased. On the subject he wrote and published [An Essay on the Trade and Improvement of Ireland](#) ^[10] in two parts (Dublin, 1729, 1731), both serious and significant contributions to Irish economic thought and history that anticipated the kind of encouragement he gave or tried to give North Carolina trade a full generation later. In the essay he also championed the right of the "commonalty" to own land. Here and later he insisted that parts of the empire outside Great Britain—that is, Ireland and the North American colonies—be allowed new markets for their produce.

The *Essay on Trade*, his experience in the Irish Commons, and a letter from Archbishop Hugh Boulter to [Walpole](#) ^[11] brought the limited political recognition he was to enjoy the rest of his life. Before he actually met the prime minister, however, Dobbs sent him a sixty-page "Scheme to Enlarge the Colonies and Increase Commerce and Trade" aiming to advance the prosperity of the mother country and Ireland as well as of America. In the treatise he traced the growth of colonial empires, stressed the need for more settlers and settlements in America, pleaded for a just treatment of the Indian and a more vigorous missionary effort, and, as in his *Essay on Trade*, asked for the repeal of the [Navigation Acts](#) ^[12]. Finally, he proposed means of forestalling the French threat in North America. His suggestions were sound politically, economically, and militarily, as events within the next generation were to prove, for he definitely anticipated the necessity for various British moves in these spheres.

Though Walpole could do little at the time to implement Dobbs's proposals, apparently the prime minister was impressed. Soon afterward, Dobbs was asked to assume control of the vast Conway estate in Ireland and to act as legal adviser and court agent for the heir who was still a minor, a rather complex task that took too much time from the MP's own public and private business. In 1733 Dobbs received some reward for his diligence, however, for he was appointed engineer and surveyor-general of Ireland, a lucrative post that was by no means a sinecure. Under his supervision the handsome new Parliament House was completed, the result one of the finest Georgian buildings in Dublin. Other public buildings were rebuilt or erected in the city also under his supervision and planning. He appears to have been an [architect](#) ^[13] of considerable skill.

A few years before this major political appointment Dobbs had become interested in the Northwest Passage, partly at least concomitant with his ardor to increase British imperial trade. He made a methodical study of the subject and, as he rose to political prominence, besieged the admiralty and the

Hudson's Bay Company ^[14] with proposals for exploration. Though he met with indifference or hostility from the company, in 1735 he and a group of influential London merchants—including at least two who were within a few years to be his partners in the acquisition of North Carolina lands—laid their own plan of procedure before the government, attacking the company for its inertia and monopoly. Dobbs appealed to the English people, combining as motives religion, patriotism, and profit—the usual incentives to promotion. The rising tide of public opinion forced the Hudson's Bay Company to send two ships to the northwest section of Hudson Bay, but they returned without accomplishing anything, leaving everybody unsatisfied.

With the support of such powerful friends as merchant John Hanbury and First Lord of the Admiralty Sir Charles Wager (both friends and correspondents of Virginian William Byrd II ^[15]), Dobbs managed to get independent action, and an expedition of two ships set out in 1742–43 under the command of Captain Christopher Middleton ^[16], an old Hudson's Bay Company employee. The results were again disappointing, for Middleton proved beyond any reasonable doubt that no passage existed in the area searched. The expedition was successful only in charting an unknown region. Dobbs refused to believe Middleton's report, which he thought suggested withheld information, thereby demonstrating the stubbornness of which he was later accused as well as his high hopes for British imperial economy, both traits actually or allegedly displayed during his colonial governorship. There was a long controversy between the seaman and the surveyor-general, in part recorded in such tracts as Middleton's *Vindication of the Conduct of Captain Middleton* ^[17] . . . In Answer to Certain Objections and Aspersions of Arthur Dobbs, Esq (1745) and Dobbs's *Remarks upon Captain Middleton's Defence* (1744) and *A Reply to Captain Middleton's Answer* (1745), among others. In the midst of the turmoil Dobbs published *An Account of the Countries Adjoining Hudson Bay in the Northwest part of America* . . . (1744), a large volume full of current inaccuracies but still indicating the author's immense knowledge of the nature and geography of Canada and its almost unknown interior. It includes an account of Joseph La France ^[18]'s travels from Lake Superior to Hudson Bay in 1740, a significant and detailed relation. Curiously little of the book is concerned with the Middleton controversy, though it is mentioned in the long subtitle.

A second voyage of discovery ensued in 1746, this time backed entirely by Dobbs and his friends and commanded by two bitter enemies of Middleton and the Hudson's Bay Company. Two ships were sent on the expedition: the *Dobbs Galley* and the *California*. Fairly thorough search of the bays and inlets revealed nothing, though Dobbs to his dying day continued to believe firmly in a Northwest Passage. The proof of its above-and-below-water-and-ice existence was to come centuries too late to be of importance. His insatiable interest in America and its potential is borne out further by two other unpublished essays of this period on the beaver trade and the settling of Labrador, and a published piece on the distance between Asia and America ^[19] (*Transactions*, vol. 44). All are perceptive expositions of the imperial situation.

In the next several years Dobbs wrote two unpublished papers on the necessity of a union between Britain and Ireland and a third on extending trade with Labrador. He also published his observations on bees and honey ^[20] manufacture (*Transactions*, vol. 46) and in other ways demonstrated the scientific observation he was to continue in America. In the same period, perhaps beginning even a little earlier, he showed his direct interest in the established colonies of America by purchasing lands in North Carolina and making plans to bring a large number of Irish, especially distressed Protestants, to settle on them. According to some historians before the end of 1735 he, other Irish gentlemen, and London merchant Henry McCulloh ^[21] had purchased a tract of 60,000 acres along the Black River, though in fact Dobbs had no financial interest in the purchase. The next year McCulloh and his group (including James Huey ^[22] and Murray Crymble ^[23]) secured a vast area so unwieldy that within a few years they sold off considerable sections to other speculators, including Dobbs. In 1745 Dobbs and Colonel John Selwyn, a prominent court figure, purchased from the McCulloh associates 400,000 acres lying roughly in the present counties of Mecklenburg ^[24] and Cabarrus ^[25]. A provision required the grantee to settle one white person on every 200 acres and at the end of ten years all unsettled land was to revert to the Crown ^[26]. Dobbs persuaded Mathew Rowan ^[27], a native of County Antrim and surveyor-general of the colony, to act as their agent for the grant, and by 1747 a survey had been completed. The Dobbs-Rowan correspondence reveals the former as an astute businessman who understood the possible confusion concerning and the frequent invalidity of land grants and who already had some knowledge of the people, products, and topography of the colony. With his usual vigor and enthusiasm Dobbs at once set about the planting of settlers, despite Rowan's warnings, for North Carolina was still sparsely occupied by a mixture of middle-class and vagabond or rough adventurers from neighboring colonies who might give newcomers trouble. Dobbs is frequently given credit for bringing the Scotch-Irish ^[28] who stabilized the colony's society, and he did induce numbers of out-of-work Irish Presbyterians and Scottish Jacobites to settle in the province. But people of the same stock came from other sources, and German Moravians ^[29] were at least as sturdy and "moral" as the Britons.

Though Governor Gabriel Johnston ^[30] of North Carolina, a former professor of Oriental Languages at St. Andrews' University, Scotland, had served ably for twenty years, he had to contend with a number of problems including the bitter rivalry for representation between the older settlers in the north and the new settlers in the south. Among Johnston's opponents in Britain, hostile primarily because of fear of losing their lands, were Dobbs and his associates Crymble, Huey, and especially McCulloh. Charges were submitted through the Duke of Bedford to the Board of Trade ^[31], the latter admitting that there was clear evidence of considerable disorder and confusion in the colony, ironic enough in view of what Dobbs was to experience.

In 1748, the Ohio Company of Virginia ^[32] was organized to develop lands in the western area of Virginia—partially to exclude the French, partially to extend the British Empire. Merchant Hanbury presented the petition to the Board of Trade for 500,000 acres. Besides thirteen Virginia gentleman-planters, partners or shareholders included the two future colonial governors Dobbs and Robert Dinwiddie ^[33] (Virginia) and also Samuel Smith ^[34], Dobbs's personal agent in London. Dobbs's influence was considerable in the founding and development of this stock company, as the discussions noted in the bibliography below indicate. Its aims coincided almost exactly with his own as to trade, curtailment of French power in America, and territorial enlargement of the empire, among others. In 1754 he drew up and was the first signer of the company's second petition to the Board of Trade for an additional 300,000 acres. Though this and similar land companies were hardly financially more successful than the first Virginia Company of London in 1606–24, they made major contributions to American colonization, major despite feeble support from home or colonial governmental agencies. Today the Ohio Company is given considerable credit for the ultimate fate of the Ohio Valley, though the investors individually may have lost a great deal financially.

Since 1750 Dobbs had corresponded steadily with his agents or with settlers in North Carolina concerning his lands and the general and specific state of affairs there. He frequently considered visiting the province, as he wrote Rowan. He continued to be overly zealous in dispatching settlers without making proper provision for their sustenance during the early months of residence, a weakness he shared with other colonizers from the days of Roanoke ^[35] and Jamestown. When Governor Johnston ^[30] died, Dobbs pressed claims for the governorship for himself. Toward the end of 1752 he wrote his son Conway (his first wife had died some years earlier) that he expected the appointment before the beginning of the next year. He was officially appointed 18 Apr. 1753. While awaiting the drafting of his Instructions ^[36], Dobbs attempted to improve his estate and to persuade French Protestants or Moravians to settle on his Carolina lands. He was also active in the Irish Parliament, aligning himself with the government against the Patriot party, consistent with his belief in British imperialism and the "English interest" in Ireland. It must be repeated, on the other hand, that throughout his long life he had frequently supported causes of the Irish commonalty, Protestant or Catholic, and that he had always been concerned for the welfare and suffrage of the Irish people as equal partners in the British nation.

Before his departure from Ireland Dobbs also made arrangements for the payment in Britain of his gubernatorial salary, as he was aware of the tremendous arrears in the late Governor Johnston's income from provincial quittrents ^[37]. Undoubtedly the independence this gave him personally would be later a source of irritation to the North Carolina lower house, which like those of other colonies controlled or wished to control all revenue. Meanwhile the French threat in America had grown more apparent. It was clear that the French were going to fight rather than submit to British claims to the Ohio Valley. As Dobbs arrived at the port of Hampton, Va., in late 1754, the French were already moving to drive English traders and settlers from the border territory and to erect a series of forts along the Ohio and Allegheny rivers as a bar to British expansion.

Though certain historians have alleged that Dobbs landed with a host of needy relatives and friends, the records indicate that he was accompanied by only his younger son Edward, his nephew Richard Spaight ^[38], and a few personal servants. At any rate, upon his arrival he was met by Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia. The two with Governor Horatio Sharpe of Maryland ^[39] conferred at Williamsburg on the situation before Dobbs set out for his own province. He reached New Bern via Edenton ^[40] and Bath ^[41] on the last day of October, having been greeted on the way by his friend Mathew Rowan, the acting governor, and by James Murray ^[42], the attorney general; the latter was to become a thorn in his side during most of his decade as viceroy. Thus at sixty-six Dobbs began the most difficult task of his life.

Despite his age, the new governor commenced his administration with vigor and statesmanlike conduct. He was received with great cordiality, for all

parties were weary of the necessary indecisiveness of interim governments under the two presidents of the council who succeeded Governor Johnston. Everyone knew that there were vital problems to be coped with, including the war with France, irregularities in the collection of quitrents and concomitantly the survey of lands county-by-county, the South Carolina boundary, the location of a permanent capital, the franchise for freeholders, the need for a [currency](#) ^[43] or coinage, the establishment of [apost](#) ^[44], and dozens of other matters. Dobbs spoke always first in general and then in specific terms, usually surveying the whole imperial situation and then turning to the province's peculiar problems, mindful that he must obey his Instructions from the home government. Beneath the surface were the tensions between "parties" including coastal and [backcountry](#) ^[45], north and south, [Granville District](#) ^[46] versus settlers on royal lands; the greed and long-accustomed semi-independence of local officials and landowners; and a reluctance to devote adequate revenues in support of troops to meet a frontier threat North Carolinians believed far removed from themselves. Many of these problems were inherited; however, the accelerated conflict with the French, Dobbs's firm conviction that what benefited the empire would benefit North Carolina and usually vice-versa, his ardor for the established church, and his justifiable suspicion of misappropriation or noncollection of royal revenues were to bring him into a collision course with his General Assembly.

At first he attempted to compromise when he found he could get defense funds from the legislature in no other way. But one compromise hurt him in reputation at least, that concerning the establishment or appointment of a local judiciary system in defiance of his Instructions. For his conscientious efforts to do his best with an impossible situation he received a severe reprimand from London authority. Thereafter, as political and war matters grew more acute he became more intransigent, for he resolved to follow his Instructions to the letter, though he was never quite capable of doing so.

Meanwhile he was most active in internal affairs. With [Governor James Glen of South Carolina](#) ^[47] he attempted to settle their mutual boundary line, though not fully or finally successfully. He did plan and have built a string of blockade forts on the coast and inland for defense, employing some of his own experience as Ireland's chief engineer in drawing up his plans. He felt compelled to suspend two men and then a third from government positions on the council or other prominent places, and for several years he was engaged in acrimonious disputes with them through correspondence with the home government. Because the majority of North Carolinians were not Anglicans, he naturally encountered opposition in his efforts to secure clergy and build edifices for the established church. Apparently unjustly he was accused of attempting to make a personal profit on lands he bought (and sold for what he paid) as a location for a capital city and capitol building. Several historians have stated that his obstinacy and general irritability increased with age. This accusation is not justified based on the extant records of the legislature and Board of Trade, his personal correspondence, and other documents.

Dobbs undoubtedly (and even critics hostile on other matters agree on this) had the welfare of North Carolina at heart in all his major moves, defending the colony against attacks by the London Board of Trade and attempting, as he had in Ireland, to have a foreign trade that would increase the prosperity of the colony. His plans for a general education system and for aiding the Indians were implemented to the best of his ability, and he reiterated his interest in both many times. As representative of North Carolina at the governors' conference in Williamsburg when he landed in 1754, at another top-level meeting in Philadelphia in 1757, and at the famous Indian Treaty Conference in Augusta in 1763, he placed his colony as a political entity for the first time on a par with its neighbors. At the heart of each of his disputes with the Assembly, which generally increased with time, was the long-present and by now rapidly growing conflict between the prerogatives of the Crown as represented by the governor and those of the people embodied in the legislature. Even the highly personalized controversies with James Murray, [John Rutherford](#) ^[48], and [John Starkey](#) ^[49] were deeply rooted in the question of prerogative, though records indicate that Dobbs had ethical as well as political authority on his side.

Dobbs's personal life in North Carolina is of considerable interest. He made [Russellborough](#) ^[50], his house and estate near [Brunswick](#) ^[51], a comfortable domicile into which he moved in 1758. Within this mansion were his hundreds of books on many subjects; especially interesting were the varied histories, chronicles of exploration, theological studies, and current belles-lettres. In the colony he wrote "An Account of North Carolina" and the much longer manuscript, now fragmentary but clearly ambitious and deeply pondered, "Essay upon the Grand Plan of Providence and Dissertations Annexed thereto." The latter is a work of speculative theology and philosophy, evidently part of an extensive treatise affording one of the recently discovered proofs that there was considerable writing on religion in the colonial South. It should be studied and edited for publication. In the correspondence of the English botanist Peter Collinson is a letter from Dobbs describing the [Venus's-flytrap](#) ^[52], a description declared by historians of science to be the first ever recorded. Thus Dobbs continued his scientific investigations or observations in the colony.

As already noted, Dobbs had as a companion in America his younger son [Edward Brice Dobbs](#) ^[53], a career army officer who served with North Carolina militia and later with the troops of General Edward Braddock. In his will the governor bequeathed to this son £1,000 and all lands and much other property held in America. Also accompanying him was his nephew Richard Spaight who, with Dobbs's son, was appointed a member of the council and who held other important posts (there was plenty of precedent for such nepotism in colonial annals). Spaight married Mary Moore, daughter of the distinguished [John Moore](#) ^[54] of [Craven County](#) ^[55], and left descendants who became prominent in North Carolina history. Dobbs was seventy-three when he married his second wife [Justina Davis](#) ^[56], daughter of another eminent colonial family, thus committing, according to his detractors, the supreme folly of old age. A [scurrilous mock-epistle](#) ^[57] (the original of which cannot now be located) concerning the alleged scandal connected with this marriage was printed in the *Colonial Records of North Carolina*. But Justina's letters surviving in the Dobbs Papers give every indication of genuine mutual affection in the marriage.



The ruins of St. Philip's Church in Brunswick.
Image from Flickr user Travis S.

^[58]The governor suffered a stroke of apoplexy in 1762 while preparing to go to Britain on leave. He recovered sufficiently to carry on most of his duties until his death three years later. He died while packing his books for what he must have known would be a permanent return to Great Britain; he was buried in the uncompleted church of [St. Philip](#) ^[59] near his home. There was no Anglican cleric within a hundred miles, and a justice or judge read the burial service.

The evidence that Dobbs was irascible, arbitrary, and obstinate rests almost entirely on the testimony of enemies he felt forced to make because of their ill service to the colony. Obstinance of a kind not meant by his enemies, a determination to follow imperial instructions, is evidenced in his speeches, proclamations, and letters. But he was also a far-sighted man who realized what the British must do about the French and what his home government must allow in free trade if it was to retain its empire. As other British imperialists of his day, he had a world vision of which his own province of North Carolina, and his old home of Ireland, were integral parts. Recent opinion has very much altered the hostile nineteenth-century portraits of a petulant, senile, and tyrannical governor. Dobbs's major role in persuading the Scotch-Irish, especially from County Antrim, to make North Carolina their permanent home has often been cited. But he did more, as he was largely responsible for moving his colony from a position of inferiority to one of equality among the thirteen coastal provinces, thus assuring it a prominent place in the moves toward independence.

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Additional Resources:

"HIS EXCELLENCY ARTHUR DOBBS ESQ." Museum of Early Decorative Southern Arts
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Authors:

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