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

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The French threat in North America. His suggestions were sound politically, economically, and militarily, as events within the next generation were to

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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

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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 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

Museum of History.


Arthur Dobbs, colonial governor of North Carolina, surveyor-general of Ireland, promoter of exploration for a Northwest Passage, 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 Anglicans 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 which could be obtained 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 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 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 (1721–22), on an Aurora Borealis (1725–26), and on an eclipse of the moon (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.

The Essay on Trade, his experience in the Irish Commons, and a letter from Archbishop Hugh Boulter to Walpole 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. 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 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 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 national action. 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
Dobbs’s brother-in-law), Dobbs managed to get independent action; and an expedition of two ships set out in 1742–43 under the command of
Captain Christopher Middleton, 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 [1744] and In Answer to Certain Of Captain Middleton’s Assertions of April 1745 (1746) 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 [14] 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 Calwaria. 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-
land 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 on this period of the beaver trade and the settling of Labrador, and a published piece on the distance between Asia and America (1746)
(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 manufacture (Transactions, vol. 46) and in other ways demonstrated the scientific
observation he was able to make 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 the colony. As Dobbs wrote to Mathew Rowan in 1750, he 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 and Murray Crumbley) 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 and Cabarrus. 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. Dobbs persuaded Matthew Rowan, a native of County Antrim and
surnamed to one of the wealthiest and most influential of the great families of Ulster, to accept their agency for the grant. The provision of its above-and-below-water-and-land 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
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Though Governor Gabriel Johnston, 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
Crumbley, Huey, and especially McCulloh. Charges were submitted through the Duke of Bedford to the Board of Trade [21], 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 [22] 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 [23] (Virginia) and also Samuel Smith [24].
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 colony 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 considered give 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. In 1754 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 of considerable skill.

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 quitrents [25]. 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 [26], and a few personal servants. At any rate, upon his arrival he was met by Governor

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Edward Brice 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, and John Starkey 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, his house and estate near Brunswick, 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, 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, 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 of Craven County, and left descendants who became prominent in North Carolina history. Dobbs was seventy-three when he married his second wife Justinia Davis, daughter of another eminent colonial family, thus committing, according to his detractors, the supreme folly of old age. A scrupulous mock-epistle (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 Justinia’s letters surviving in the Dobbs Papers give every indication of genuine mutual affection in the marriage.
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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