

CHAPTER I  
BLUE BLOOD

GEORGE CLINTON'S NOBLE ANCESTORS  
A ROYALIST GREAT-GRANDFATHER  
CHARLES CLINTON'S TRAGIC VOYAGE  
CHARLES MEETS THE FIRST GOVERNOR GEORGE  
HE ADMONISHES HIS SON  
A POLITICALLY PROLIFIC FAMILY

WHEN George Clinton became the first governor of the state of New York, a famous contemporary commented that Clinton's family connections did not entitle him to such a distinction. Yet Clinton had noble blood in his veins. He was a direct descendant of Henry the second Earl of Lincoln. His ancestry can be traced back to John of Gaunt, to the famous Lord Henry Percy known as Hotspur, and to most of the Plantagenets. He was also a distant cousin of that other George Clinton, the son of the sixth Earl of Lincoln, who was governor of the province of New York from 1743 to 1753, and of his son, Sir Henry Clinton, the gallant British officer who occupied New York City during some months of the Revolution. Of this ancestry there can be but little doubt.

The Earls of Lincoln were of the English family of Clinton; and the seal of the New York Clintons, which Governor George Clinton used in 1777 as his official seal before the New York state seal was designed, was similar to the arms of the Earls of Lincoln. Not only does the similarity between the two seals show the relationship between the two families, but it also makes it clear that the ancestors of Governor George, who are known to have been in Ireland for several generations before their migration to New York, were in

all probability descended from the English Clintons and had migrated to Ireland after the adoption of the Lincoln arms in comparatively recent times.<sup>1</sup> That is, they did not belong to any Irish branch of the family and George Clinton was not an Irishman as so many historians have asserted. This is not to say that he did not, through his mother, have a splendid dash of Celtic blood in his veins, a dash that may have been responsible for some of his most attractive qualities.

There is conclusive evidence of the relationship of Governor George with the Earls of Lincoln. A Sir Henry Clinton, "vulgarly called Fynes," was the first son, by the second wife, of the second Earl of Lincoln. Sir Henry took unto himself a second wife who was "full of divilish and unreformable humors." This couple had two sons of whom William the younger seems to have been that mysterious great-grandfather of Governor George Clinton about whom much has been written but little is known.

This great-grandfather, the key figure in establishing Governor George's family tree, used in 1663 the surname "Fiennes," one of the spellings of "Fynes," a family name acquired by the Clintons through a fifteenth-century marriage long before Good Queen Bess created Edward Clinton Earl of Lincoln. Inasmuch as great-grandfather William used both surnames, Clinton and Fynes, he is in all probability the William Clinton, "son of Sir Henry Clinton, alias Fynes, of Kirkstead Co. Lincoln, Knt, dec'd," who was in 1650 apprenticed for eight years to William Methold, "Skinners Company."<sup>2</sup> Although it has been stated that William was the son of Sir Thomas and the grandson of Edward the first earl, that parentage seems most un-

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Pound, *Native Stock* (New York, 1931), 152. In August 1777 the Council of Safety of New York gave Governor Clinton permission to use his personal seal for official purposes. I. N. P. Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island* (6 vols., New York, 1915-28), V, 1054.

<sup>2</sup> The statement regarding the apprenticeship was furnished in 1933 by M. I. Holden, Kirkstead Manse, Woodhall Spa, Lincolnshire, to Dr. Joseph M. Beatty Jr. of Baltimore, a descendant of the sister of the first American Clinton. For the Clinton ancestry see also Dr. Beatty's excellent accounts in the *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, LI (1920), 360-61 and LXVI (1935), 330-35; Arthur Collins, *Peerage of England* (7 vols., London, 1768); Cuyler Reynolds, ed., *Genealogies of Southern New York* (New York, 1914), 542. Beatty quotes from the family Bible of George Clinton regarding the Clinton ancestry, *loc. cit.*, LXVI, 331.

likely. Had he been the son of Sir Thomas he would have been an elderly gentleman by 1661 when he was, as a matter of fact, doing active service in the army. It is much more probable that he was the grandson of the second Earl of Lincoln and the son of Sir Henry Clinton who was not married until 1624.

After the period of his apprenticeship, which may have lasted to 1658, William Clinton's career is not easy to trace. Governor George wrote years later in his Bible that Sir William was a Royalist who was forced to leave England to find asylum in Spain; he then went to Scotland where he married an Elizabeth Kennedy, and later to Ireland to settle on his estate, "Glengary." General James Clinton, the brother of Governor George, told a similar story and attributed it to his father. An ingenious descendant of William Clinton, alias Fynes, has pointed out that if Clinton did escape from Cromwell's England to France, he would probably have gone to Spain with the many other Royalist soldiers who deserted France after Cromwell made peace with Louis XIV in 1655. Subsequent to the Restoration, Charles II brought a body of these Royalist troops from Spain to garrison the great fortress of Dunkirk, which was in the hands of the English from 1658 to 1662, and we find that an officer named Fiennes was in the British regiment under Sir Robert Harley which left Dunkirk in December 1661. Two years later a Captain Finnes, alias Clinton, was serving in the Tangier Regiment and in July 1666 Captain William Clinton received a lieutenant's commission in the Holland Regiment.<sup>3</sup> It is entirely possible then, that William, the great-grandfather of Governor George, did in fact escape from Commonwealth England to serve with the exiled Royalists in France and Spain, and that he remained in active service in the army for some years after the Restoration. It does not, however, seem quite fitting that Governor George, New York's first great democratic statesman, should have had a Royalist ancestor.

Why Sir William went to Scotland we do not know. Whether he moved on to Northern Ireland because he had acquired a fondness

<sup>3</sup> Beatty, *loc. cit.*, LI, 360-61. Beatty cites Charles Dalton, ed., *The English Army Lists and Commission Registers, 1661-1714* (4 vols., London, 1892), and Richard Cannon, *History of the First or Royal Regiment of Foot* (London, 1847).

for roving, or because an appreciative Stuart king had rewarded his services with an estate there, or whether he found Scotland too much in turmoil politically and religiously to suit him, I have not been able to discover. It seems probable, however, that he died on Irish soil leaving Governor George's grandfather, James, an orphan at the age of two.

Family tradition has it that this James returned to England to claim his patrimonial estates but succeeded only in obtaining a wife, a certain Elizabeth Smith, who was the daughter of an officer of the Commonwealth.<sup>4</sup> He returned to Ireland, took up arms in the cause of William of Orange and, it is said, as a reward for his valiant services in the defense of Enniskillen, acquired an estate in the County of Longford, a county in central Ireland that had been "planted" with English and Scotch settlers by the first Stuarts.<sup>5</sup> Like his father, James was a Presbyterian.

His son Charles, the father of Governor George, was born at Corbay, County Longford, in 1690. It was over thirty years later that this gentleman was married to a young Irish woman named Elizabeth Denniston who was to outlive her husband and to see her son the first governor of an American state. In spite of William Dunlap's acrid pen which wrote over a century later that Charles Clinton "had married below himself an Irish drab,"<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Denniston seems to have been a woman of wit and ability who could write a charming letter in an age when charm was sadly lacking in family correspondence. If Elizabeth Denniston was indeed of Scotch ancestry, as has been asserted, then her seven children had in their veins blood that was entirely Scotch and English.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Charles A. Clinton's sketch of the Clinton family in A. C. Niven, ed., *The Centennial Memorial: Hundredth Anniversary of the A. R. Presbyterian Church of Little Britain* (New York, 1859), 225.

<sup>5</sup> W. W. Campbell, *Life and Writings of DeWitt Clinton* (New York, 1849); Charles B. Moore, "History of the Clinton Family," *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, XII, 198; Dorothe Bobbé, *DeWitt Clinton* (New York, 1933), 4. James Clinton died January 24, 1717-18 and his wife December 5, 1728 according to C. B. Moore, *loc. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> New York Historical Society, *Collections* [1931], "Diary of William Dunlap," 679.

<sup>7</sup> C. B. Moore in *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, XIII, 5. Sympathetic sketches of Elizabeth Denniston appear in Bobbé, *op. cit.*, and in Charles A. Clinton, *op. cit.*

Like so many thousands of Scotch-Irish families during the generation that followed the Battle of the Boyne, the Clintons found life in Ireland intolerable. Elder Charles Clinton of the Corbay congregation discovered that the ruling classes had little use for dissenters. English conquerors imposed economic shackles on Irish industry and it is probable that the estate at Corbay did not prosper. There were many other nonconformists in the neighborhood who were willing to try their fortunes in Pennsylvania; so Clinton leased his estate for a long term of years to Lord Granard and with four hundred kindred spirits organized a large party of emigrants, chartered at Dublin a ship called the *George and Anne*, and sailed for America on May 20, 1729. The *George and Anne* was of about ninety tons, approximately half the size of the *Mayflower*.

The voyage was a tragic one. The Clintons took with them their three small children: Catharine who had been born in 1723, James born in 1726, and Mary born less than a year before, in July 1728. Of the three, only Catharine survived the epidemic of measles that broke out soon after the ship left Dublin. Mary and George and over ninety other passengers died before they saw the American coast on October 4! It would seem from his diary that Charles Clinton accepted the gruesome voyage philosophically enough; but tradition has it that, enraged by Captain Rymer's criminal incapacity or duplicity, Clinton schemed to seize the ship but failed to get the support of his fellow passengers. They were finally landed, not at Philadelphia, but at Cape Cod, where they seem to have remained until the following year when they arrived in Ulster County, New York, and settled at Little Britain not far from the west bank of the Hudson.<sup>8</sup>

Thus was founded the American branch of a family that was to give New York a great political dynasty and was probably to give America more place names than any other family has been responsible for.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Clinton's diary of the voyage is printed in *Olde Ulster* (10 vols., Kingston, N.Y., 1905-14), IV, 175-80. A typed copy is in the New York State Library. See also David Hosack, *Memoir of DeWitt Clinton* (New York, 1829), 137-39, extract from the journal of Dr. David Young, a descendant of one of the emigrants; and Charles A. Clinton, *loc. cit.*, 225-26. Little Britain is now in Orange County.

Charles Clinton was in every way an exemplary ancestor. Even the ill-natured Tory historian, Thomas Jones, wrote kindly of him, calling him "open, generous, and hospitable," an honest man and a loyal subject. He was tall and of commanding appearance. His contemporaries were impressed with his polish, his knowledge of literature and the arts, and his facility as a mathematician. Cadwallader Colden, the surveyor-general of the province, employed Clinton as his deputy for the survey of lands in Orange County as early as 1731 and in later years, and seems always to have had the utmost confidence in him. In 1748 Colden sent Charles Clinton to his distant cousin, Governor George Clinton, that "jolly toaper," with a letter recommending the surveyor as "a person I can safely trust who on all occasion has shown the greatest regard for your Excellency and your family as well as for me." The governor in his reply said nothing of family connections, but referred to "Mr. Clinton who I take to be a very good Sort of a Man & could have wished I had been acquainted with him sooner."<sup>9</sup> The governor showed his good will by offering him the office of sheriff of the City and County of New York "or any other commission" in his power; but Clinton, who was in "good business" and so had no need for assistance from the public treasury, declined.

The governor showed a special interest in his namesake, Charles Clinton's boy George. He named the boy to be clerk of the Court of Common Pleas of Ulster County, the appointment to be consummated at the time of the death of John Crook, the incumbent. Accordingly, George Clinton was to serve as clerk of the county court of Ulster, in person or through his deputy, from 1759 to his death in 1812. One of New York's most outspoken republicans did not object to holding for fifty-three years an office which the royal governor had bestowed upon him.

Like so many of his contemporaries Surveyor Charles Clinton dabbled in land. He saw active service in the French and Indian War, was appointed a justice of the peace, and served from 1769 to his

<sup>9</sup>New York Historical Society, *Collections*, "Cadwallader Colden Papers" (New York, 1918-23), II, 43, 155, 161; IV, 47, 61, 62; VI, 342.

death as first judge of the Ulster Court of Common Pleas.<sup>10</sup> It is said that when he died at Little Britain November 19, 1773, he implored his youngest son George "to stand by the liberties of America." George needed no such admonition.

A generation later the descendants of Charles Clinton were accused of monopolizing the best political offices in the state. Of his seven children only three survived him. Two had died on the fearful voyage to America. Catharine, the eldest, who in 1749 married neighbor James McClaughry, died without children in 1762. The promising young physician Alexander graduated from the College of New Jersey, learned to know music and the broadsword, studied "physic" under a Dr. Peter Middleton at New York, and practiced medicine in Ulster County. He married Mary Kane, but left no children when he died in March 1758, in his twenty-sixth year. His brother Charles, two years his junior, was also a physician, also studied under Dr. Middleton and returned to practice in Little Britain. After his father's death he moved to Hanover, a few miles away. Although he served in 1775 and 1776 on the Hanover and Ulster County committees and in the Provincial Congress which met in May 1775, he was apparently not an ardent patriot. He died, unmarried, in 1791.<sup>11</sup>

Charles Clinton's most prolific son was that substantial old warrior, surveyor, and farmer, Brigadier General James. James seems to have been stolid and unsociable, with a fondness for soldiering but no gift for politics. Born on August 9, 1736, he served in the French and Indian War and returned to make an excellent marriage in 1765 with Mary, the "aimiable, sensible" daughter of Egbert DeWitt—the DeWitts were Dutch and had influence in Ulster. His services during the Revolution won for him a comfortably large niche in history. General James spent most of his long career on or near his father's home at Little Britain. After his marriage and until his

<sup>10</sup>*New York State Library Bulletin*, Number 58, March 1902, "Calendar of Council Minutes 1668-1783," p. 328; E. M. Ruttenber, *History of New Windsor* (Newburgh, N.Y., 1911), 135.

<sup>11</sup>Dr. Joseph Young as quoted in Hosack, *op. cit.*, 139f., describes the children of Charles Clinton, the immigrant. Dr. Charles was born July 20, 1734.

father's death in 1773 he lived at the village of New Windsor and it was probably nearly thirty years later that he built his own home in Little Britain, a house that is still standing. He died on December 22, 1812, a man of means and of lands.

James was the patriarch who was largely responsible for the politically appalling spread of the Clinton family tree. His first son Alexander was for a time secretary to Governor Clinton; his second son Charles became clerk of the United States District Court; DeWitt, the third son, at one time or another held nearly every important political office within the gift of the State; George served in the State assembly and in Congress; Mary the fifth child and Catharine the second both married the politically prominent Judge Ambrose Spencer; and Elizabeth the sixth married William Stuart, the district attorney. By his second wife, Mrs. Mary Little Gray, General James had six children, raising his total to an impressive thirteen. The six children of his younger brother, Governor George, could show no such record of important political marriages. Indeed, General James and his brood were to prove far more useful supporters of George Clinton's political fortunes than were George's own progeny.

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