

rough country that had never been
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 ve, Clinton was the active surveyor
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 o make him a fugitive in his own

Land Titles in Hudson County, New Jersey
 k of the survey. George Clinton's notebook
 : New York State Library.
 14, 1767, in William L. Clements Library.

CHAPTER III

POLITICS AND A GOOD MARRIAGE

- GEORGE CLINTON'S FIRST ASSEMBLY
- HE JOINS THE LIVINGSTON PARTY
- HE IS RETURNED AGAIN
- HE TURNS RADICAL WHIG
- CLINTON AND NEW YORK'S WILKES CASE
- A DUTCH ALLIANCE

EARLY in February 1768 Sir Henry Moore, Governor of the Prov-
 ince of New York, dissolved the General Assembly that had too
 often forgotten what Moore thought was its duty to the Crown and the
 Constitution, and four days later issued writs for the election of a new
 Assembly. At this election the freeholders of Ulster rejected such can-
 didates of the governor's party as Cadwallader Colden Jr., son of the
 great lieutenant governor, and chose as their representatives two plebe-
 ians who were to become anathema to the governor and his friends.
 One was a "fiery young radical" of Kingston named Charles DeWitt
 and the other was DeWitt's good friend, the 28-year-old lawyer, George
 Clinton.

To represent a rural county in the General Assembly in 1768 was no
 great distinction. In fact, the successful candidate probably considered
 himself an unfortunate victim of his neighbors' confidence, doomed to
 exile from his own farm and law office for several months each year.
 Yet service in the legislature was exactly what George Clinton needed.
 It drew him away from the Ulster rustics and compelled him to mingle
 with the sharper wits and more polished manners that were to be found
 in New York City. It was an auspicious beginning for his political
 career.

With the elections of the spring of 1768 the de Lancey party had recaptured control of the Assembly from the Livingston faction. It was a red letter day for the faithful—the fall of Presbyterianism and the triumph of the Episcopalians, as Thomas Jones put it.¹ The returns showed that the strength of the de Lancey group was neatly concentrated in the southern counties—counties that were to be loyal to the Crown up to 1776 and even after. Except for one delegate from New York County, Philip Livingston, the Livingston party captured no seats from constituencies south of Cortlandt Manor. Westchester County and Borough, Richmond County, the Long Island counties, New York County with the exception already noted, all went for the de Lanceys. But north of Westchester and excepting only the County of Dutchess the Livingstons made a clean sweep. To them went Albany, Orange and Ulster Counties, the township of Schenectady, and the three manors of Rensselaerswyck, Cortlandt, and Livingston. It was the defeat of the Hudson River counties by commercial and courtly New York City and its neighbors: Clinton's party had received its first defeat in the better part of a decade, but Clinton's political apprenticeship had begun. He was present when the new Assembly met in the New York city hall on October 27, 1768.

The Clinton who sat in the Assembly of 1768 was no "fiery young radical"; nor was he, as the critical Thomas Jones would have us believe, a mere creature of the governor carefully "secured" by the gift of a license to practice in all the courts of the province.² He was an able young man, still in his twenties, whose father had received favors from the royal governor, who had fought under the flag of England, and who had himself accepted favors from the King's governors. It is hardly likely that he was elected as a revolutionary or fire-eater. On the other hand, he was chosen by an obstinate rural county, where the Episcopalians were few and the lesser dissenting sects numerous, where there were few merchants or great land-holding aristocrats of the court party and many independent farmers, and where the unprivileged racial minorities such as the Scotch-Irish and the Germans were to be found in considerable numbers. His colleague, Charles DeWitt, was an out-

¹ *New York*, I, 18.

² *Jones, in New York*, II, 326-27.

standing Ulsterite, twelve years his senior, who was well known to be opposed to the court party. And Benjamin Myer Brink, author of a series of articles on Clinton that appeared in *Olde Ulster*, states that the war cry of the privileged in the March elections of 1768 had been "No Lawyers and No Presbyterians!" For the lawyers wanted political freedom and the Presbyterians wanted religious freedom.³ Elected from such a county and in such an election, it is only natural that Clinton should have kept carefully away from the de Lancey party and should after some indecision have become the fiery radical that he was not in March 1768.

He played, however, no great part in his first assembly. To pay his debt of gratitude to his constituents, he introduced a bill for the relief of the poor in Ulster and Orange which provided for the election of overseers of the poor; and the bill became law.⁴ He was placed with Philip Schuyler and Ten Broeck on the committee on privileges and elections. The Assembly, however, chose to consider the disputed elections of de Lancey and Jauncey in committee of the whole, thus ignoring Clinton's committee which had probably turned out to be four to three Livingston in character.⁵ The young Ulsterite voted almost invariably with that leader of dissent, Philip Schuyler, and with his colleagues DeWitt, Ten Broeck of Rensselaerswyck, Livingston, and Pierre Van Cortlandt. These six were the nucleus of the party of protest.

The dominant de Lanceyites might obtain, as they did, the passage of a resolution providing a grant of £1800 for the supply of the King's troops in the province⁶—a concession that was not much to the liking of the Sons of Liberty and their kind; but they showed themselves to be better defenders of the commercial interests of the province than the governor expected. On November 8 the Assembly formally protested the Townshend duties and ordered that a committee be appointed to draw up a petition to the King, a memorial to the Lords, and a

³ Brink's life of George Clinton runs through volumes IV and V of *Olde Ulster*.

⁴ *Assembly Journal*, November 4, December 24, 1768. The *Assembly Journal* has been consulted for the years 1768-75. Citations to it, however, will generally be omitted.

⁵ *Assembly Journal*, October 28, November 8, November 18, 1768. Only Schuyler, Clinton, Ten Eyck, and Livingston voted not to refer the disputed seats to the Committee of the Whole.

⁶ *Assembly Journal*, November 9, 1768.

remonstrance to the Commons, praying relief from the grievances the colonies were suffering. Evidently the de Lanceyites of 1768 would be loyal to governor and Crown only so long as their trade was not interfered with.

Clinton was present on the last day of 1768 when the Assembly tempted fate by resolving that the General Assembly, like the House of Commons, might petition the Crown; that the powers of the General Assembly might be lawfully abridged only by the Crown; that the Assembly might correspond directly with other colonies or subjects of the Crown; and that a committee should be appointed to correspond during the recess with the colony's agent at the Court of Great Britain.

Here, thought Sir Henry Moore, was treason enough! A colonial assembly claiming for provincials the constitutional rights of Englishmen, including the right of petition, and, most serious of all no doubt, the right to appoint a recess committee to correspond over the head of the King's own governor with authorities in Britain! Perhaps a royal governor could scarcely be expected to accept such resolutions with complete equanimity. He met with the council on January 2 and dissolved the Assembly.

The January elections of 1769, however, returned an Assembly with a majority that was also decidedly de Lanceyite. "Our election is ended," wrote Peter Van Schaack whose politics were hardly open to question, "and the Church triumphant. Messrs. Cruger, Delancey, Walton and Jauncey were the members [for New York County], in spite of all the efforts of the Presbyterian interest combined with some other dissenting sects. This is what the Churchmen call a complete victory;—'tis a lasting monument to the power of the mercantile interest. It is impossible that there ever could be a more decently conducted election, . . ." Van Schaack was greatly pleased at the outcome. The Presbyterians, he declared, believe that they, as a religious body, have everything to fear from the dominance of the Church. But their apprehensions were, he believed, entirely chimerical. Nevertheless, the Presbyterians had made a mighty effort to regain control of the Assembly; for the Episcopal Church, they said, was secure in every other branch.⁷ As indeed it was.

⁷ Henry C. Van Schaack, *Life of Peter Van Schaack* (New York, 1842), 10-11.

The elections in Ulster County were bitterly contested and they brought with them the regrettable but inevitable alienation of the Colden and Clinton families which had been for so long friends and neighbors.⁸ George Clinton and Charles DeWitt were re-elected by a generous majority to take their places with the little junto of Livingston Whigs in the last General Assembly of the province.

The Whig minority was even more hopeless than that of 1768. After the confident majority had effectually disposed in the first weeks of the session of two of the Whig members, Philip Livingston and Lewis Morris, on the ground that they were not *bona fide* residents of their constituencies, the effective strength of the Livingston group was about eight to their opponents' eighteen.⁹ The group included DeWitt of Ulster, Ten Eyck of Albany, Woodhull of Suffolk, Minderse of Schenectady Township, Ten Broeck of the Manor of Rensselaerswyck, Pierre Van Cortlandt of the Cortlandt Manor, and the leaders, George Clinton and Philip Schuyler. Had the Assembly of 1769-1775 been less predominantly de Lancey in character, it might well have provided more satisfactory leadership in the campaign against parliamentary aggression and so have obviated the need of setting up extra-legal committees until months after the time when they actually appeared. New York might in such an event have been even slower than she was to arrive at the decision to declare independence.

It is worth noting that in the last colonial Assembly the Whigs captured and held only one seat south of the Cortlandt Manor. It was strikingly the party of the up-country, of the farm, of mixed racial stocks, of religious minorities, and of opposition to the merchants of the seaboard, to the established church, and to parliamentary measures. These northern New York farmers were the stuff of which the Revolution was to be made.

In the sessions of 1769 Clinton felt entirely at home. He was often on his feet, advocating, suggesting, and opposing, or introducing curious little bills for the gratification of the Ulsterites. He had his bill to prevent damage by swine in Orange County and parts of Ulster, his better

⁸ Carl Becker, "Nominations in Colonial New York," *American Historical Review*, VI, 268n.

⁹ *Assembly Journal*, April 12, 20, 1769. Gale of Orange cannot be definitely awarded to either group.

roads bill for Ulster, and his bill for the regulation of the use of spirituous liquors at Ulster vendues. In December and January he supported the ill-fated bill providing for the election of delegates to the assembly by ballot, a bill that was pressed by the "Friends to Liberty." He voted for bills that would relieve the lesser Protestant sects from discrimination of various kinds.¹⁰ He was again a member of the Committee on Privileges and Elections, and again the Assembly ignored the committee by taking upon itself the task of deciding contested elections. The April votes which unseated Livingston and Morris were clear party votes,¹¹ and Clinton of course voted with the minority.

Clinton was very often in the minority. Perhaps only the pugnacious Schuyler was more consistent in his detestation of everything that emanated from the de Lancey party. It was indeed significant that Philip Schuyler, the first citizen of Albany, a man of wealth and, for that day and age, of culture, should have been one of the two recognized leaders of protest against things as they were. He was a man of ability; he was according to Hamilton superior in ability to George Clinton; and he had wealth, vast estates, and immense influence in his community. But he was one of those who had been neglected by the governor and the de Lanceyites whose political horizon ended well south of Westchester's northern border. And Schuyler, always politically ambitious, fought the privileged group which neglected him. New York's royal governors made a serious blunder in overlooking such a man who might easily have been attached to their cause by a few favors and a little attention. "To him and Governor Clinton," wrote Timothy Dwight, "it was chiefly owing, that this province made an early and decided resistance to those British measures, which terminated in the independence of the colonies."¹²

The Assembly was prorogued late in May and was to meet again in the city hall of New York on November 21. In this interval Governor Moore died, leaving a more remarkable man to act as the King's governor and to worry over the fumings of the mob and the impudence

¹⁰ *New-York Journal*, January 4, 1779; *Assembly Journal*, January 9, 24, 25, 1770.

¹¹ *Assembly Journal*, April 12 and 20, 1769. Woodhull, however, voted against Livingston and Boerum championed Morris.

¹² Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York* (4 volumes, London, 1823), II, 476.

of the press. This was Cadwallader Colden,¹³ the old friend of Charles Clinton. Colden was something of a mathematician, a philosopher, a botanist, and a student of medicine and history—for he was the author of the *History of the Five Nations*. This versatile man held a degree from Edinburgh and had studied at the London School of Medicine. Although born in Ireland of Scotch parents, there was nothing of the democrat about him. In 1720, two years after his arrival in New York from Philadelphia, he became surveyor-general and served valiantly defending the public lands against the land-grabbers of his time. He was for years a councillor and from 1761 to his death at his Long Island farm in 1776, lieutenant governor. Naturally he was closely identified with the court party and naturally Clinton was to oppose in the Assembly virtually every cause that Colden championed. Clinton was, for instance, with the minority that voted in December 1769 against granting £2000 for supplying His Majesty's troops in New York.

This grant of £2000 was the beginning of a drama that added considerably to the patriotic laurels of George Clinton. It gave New York its own "Wilkes case."

Three days after the grant was voted the Assembly received a handbill dated December 16 and signed "A Son of Liberty." It had been distributed in the night and posted throughout the town, but its authorship was a mystery. It was an attack on the Assembly for having betrayed the liberties of the people by voting the £2000 for the supply of the King's troops. The Assembly, according to the "Son of Liberty," made the disgraceful concession to keep itself in power by preventing a dissolution.¹⁴

A day later the Assembly voted the handbill of the "Son of Liberty" a "false, seditious, and infamous libel." Only Schuyler voted no, and for some inexplicable reason Clinton followed the majority. Soon the Presbyterian James Parker, in whose shop the mischievous "Son of Liberty" handbill had been printed, was questioned, and his statements

¹³ See Alice M. Keys, *Cadwallader Colden* (New York, 1906) and the article on Colden by the same author in the *Dictionary of American Biography*.

¹⁴ *Assembly Journal*, Dec. 15, 1769; C. E. Carter, ed., *Correspondence of General Thomas Gage* (New Haven, 1931), I, 248. A handwritten copy of "A Son of Liberty" is in the Library of Congress.

led to the arrest of a radical Scotch-Presbyterian merchant named Alexander McDougall. This leader of the Sons of Liberty was later to be a revolutionary major general of considerable valor and distinction, and, in his more conservative years before his death in 1786, the first president of the New York Society of the Cincinnati and the first president of the Bank of New York.¹⁵ The arrest of such a man on February 7, 1770, caused an immense sensation in the unruly little province.

Having refused bail, although he could well afford it, this American Wilkes was placed in the New Gaol, where he at once became the idol of the mob. In memory of the immortal Number 45 of the "North Briton" of John Wilkes fame, "45" became the charmed number. Forty-five "Virgins of the City" called on him; forty-five friends breakfasted with him; and he was presented with forty-five bottles of Madeira and forty-five pounds of beef. The wave of popular indignation was reminiscent only of Stamp Act days. The dissenting sects especially were enthusiastic for McDougall.¹⁶

Riots, demonstrations, and attacks on the Liberty Pole followed. But McDougall's release in the early spring brought a hiatus until the meeting of the Assembly on December 11 when George Clinton became involved.

On the second day of the session the General Assembly ordered that Alexander McDougall, still under indictment for libel, be brought before it. Clinton did not vote. Confronting the Assembly McDougall demanded that he be faced with his accusers and informed of the reasons for delaying his trial. De Noyelles, the Huguenot merchant from Orange, demanded in turn that he answer yes or no to the question whether he was "A Son of Liberty." McDougall objected and talked on. Speaker Cruger threatened to commit him for contempt. Clinton then interrupted to suggest that as long as McDougall showed proper

¹⁵ For McDougall and the McDougall case see *Dictionary of American Biography*, XII, 21; Jones, *New York*, I, 25ff.; Isaac Q. Leake, *Life and Times of General John Lamb* (Albany, 1850), 61-73; John Adams, *Works*, C. F. Adams, ed. (10 vols. Boston, 1850-56), II, 345, 347; *Assembly Journal*, *passim*; W. C. Abbott, *New York in the American Revolution* (New York, 1929), 85f., 92; McDougall's statement in the *New-York Journal*, February 15, 1770, and contemporary newspapers.

¹⁶ Auchmuty to Sir William Johnson, March 5, 1770, *Papers of Sir William Johnson*, VII (Albany, 1931), 309.

respect for the house he might better be allowed to give his reasons for his refusal to give a categorical answer. The speaker yielded, and McDougall explained. He had no counsel and had had no time to prepare a case. Further, he argued that as his case was pending in the civil courts where the Assembly itself was prosecuting him, the Assembly could not at the same time sit as his judge. There were threats from de Noyelles and more demands for the categorical answer. Again Clinton intervened to save McDougall, and, admitting the full power of the House to deal as it chose with the prisoner even to the extent of throwing him out of the window, declared that the public would in the end pass judgment and might well doubt the justice of any summary proceedings. Clinton then moved that the House enquire whether it was indeed a party to the suit against McDougall. Although Clinton urged that the true dignity of the Assembly might be "better supported by justice than by any overstrained authority," the de Lanceyites showed no mercy. The prisoner refused to ask pardon of the house, and he was committed again to the jail. Clinton was one of the five who voted against this action. His defense of McDougall added greatly to his credit with the patriots.

The rest of the McDougall case was anticlimax. The Assembly prevented the sheriff from serving a writ of *habeas corpus* for McDougall's release, but the chief witness was dead, evidence was lacking, and McDougall was finally dismissed. The city was quiet once more.

After the McDougall affair there was for George Clinton no turning back. Indeed, the significance of that affair lay in the fact that the party of prerogative, which had often joined the party of protest in opposition to restrictions on trade, had now broken definitely with the radicals of the Sears, McDougall, Schuyler, Clinton type. The conservative merchants were even ready to break the non-importation agreement of 1768. Henceforth the merchants might occasionally join the protestants, as on the tea issue, but the majority of the de Lanceyite group in the Assembly would stand for law and order and the government of the Crown against the assaults of the republican Sons of Liberty and the mob. It was, thought Thomas Jones, a conflict of the eminently respectable with the riff-raff.

It is perhaps significant that Clinton's rise to legislative prominence

and his frank espousal of the cause of the demos came at approximately the time of his marriage. For his marriage was an alliance with several of the outstanding families of Ulster and the middle Hudson Valley. The marriage license was dated October 28, 1769, but it was not until February 27, 1770, that he wrote from Kingston to his colleague Charles DeWitt: "D^r Sir:—Give me leave to inform you, that shortly after my return from New York, I completed that long talked of business of getting married [scarcely an enthusiastic observation!], and now having with my partner, visited my parents 'till when I did not choose to make it public, I propose myself the pleasure of having some of my most intimate friends and acquaintances stop and spend the evening with me on Friday next. . . ." Those invited were Mr. and Mrs. Wynkoop, Henry Jansen, Henry Sleight, and DeWitt.¹⁷ Lieutenant Governor Colden had prorogued the legislature on January 27, so releasing the groom-elect who returned to Ulster and on the evening of Wednesday, February 7, stole away from his friends and traveled with Anthony Hoffman, a well-to-do young Dutch merchant and patriot of Kingston, to East Camp across the river in the Livingston region of Columbia County, twenty miles away. Here the Reverend Gerhard Daniel Koch of the Reformed Church married Miss Tappen and Mr. Clinton.¹⁸

Lawyer Clinton was often at Kingston, the county seat, and it was there that he wooed Miss Tappen. According to Joseph Young she possessed "an ingenious, friendly, placid disposition." Born in 1744 she was about twenty-six when married. Thomas Jones called her a pretty Dutch maid, yet her profile with its weak chin and tapering nose was not an impressive one. She was not, during much of her married life, a healthy woman; and possibly it was because of her poor health that she was not more given to society and entertaining, a deficiency which in no way reflected upon her devotion as a wife but was decidedly unfortunate in the wife of a man who was to become governor and vice president. Nevertheless George Clinton's marriage has often been called a fortunate one, for Cornelia belonged to an established Dutch

¹⁷ *Olde Ulster*, IV (1908), 183.

¹⁸ According to the photostats of pages of the Clinton family Bible which are in the George Clinton House at Poughkeepsie, the minister's name was Daniel Gerard Cock.

family of influence. Her father was Peter Tappen, "an eminent, substantial, burgher" of the Kingston corporation. Her younger brother Peter was a physician of note and a dabbler in politics. Her older brother Christopher was a trustee of Kingston and a clerk of the corporation. He was later to sit in the provincial congress and he was a man of property. And through the Tappens, Clinton was to acquire Gilbert Livingston as a brother-in-law. Gilbert was a cousin of the better known Livingstons who was not without influence in Poughkeepsie and in the Livingston Manor country, and that influence was later to win votes for Clinton. There were also the Wynkoops, among the more prominent of the Ulster families, and Cornelia Tappen's mother was Tjaatje Wynkoop. Not the least of the Wynkoops was Dirck, a man of parts and of property, who was later to enjoy the patronage of Governor Clinton's government and to support his illustrious kinsman in politics. Indeed it has been said that the Tappen family was related to the entire town, and that any degree of cousinhood was recognized. Clinton now belonged to a staid Dutch community which was to be loyal to him in many a political battle.¹⁹

Furthermore, the Tappens and the Wynkoops and their connections were ardent opponents of Crown and parliament and were to become patriots in the Revolution. Benjamin Y. Prime wrote in April from New York to his friend Dr. Peter Tappen: "If I'm not mistaken, I've heard that Mr. Clinton has Marry'd your Sister. If so, I give you joy! He is a *very good* man; but I'm afraid he has been overseen in voting against my Friend McDougal. i.e. in joining in the Vote, that the paper signed *A Son of Liberty*, was a Libel; whoever it might be that wrote it."²⁰ And Prime asked Tappen to use his influence in the coming elections for the good of the cause. It was perhaps this influence, judiciously applied, that made a radical patriot of Clinton. He was throughout his life easily attracted to popular causes, easily won over to humanitarian ideals. Always Whiggish in sentiment, he was easily converted into a radical patriot.

¹⁹ Jones, *New York*, II, 326; Mercantile Library Association, *New York City during the American Revolution* (New York, 1861), 109 note; Richard Wynkoop, *Wynkoop Genealogy* (3d ed., New York, 1904), 48, 51.

²⁰ *New York City during the American Revolution* (1861), 52.

For the blood ran warm in the young Ulsterite's veins. His virtual elopement with Cornelia Tappen would indicate that. Even before the wedding he was addressing her as "my dearest Girl" and writing that he would have been more fervent but for the fear that his letters might be seen. After the marriage he was a more ardent husband than most—if we may judge by the devotion expressed in his letters. In an age when men often addressed their wives as "Madam," Cornelia was his "dearest wife." And although diminishing ardor may have been responsible for the "dearest wife" becoming "my dear wife" by the time a year had passed, his letters still betrayed devotion to his wife and home. In spite of his own distinguished political career, his family always remained his first and chief interest. Even while he was governor or vice president he could write charming letters to his children or grandchildren without a single reference to politics or to his own importance.

Clinton was now established, at a little over thirty. After his marriage he moved to a farm at New Windsor located on a hillside above the Hudson and commanding a superb view to the southward of the rugged Highlands of the Hudson that he was so soon to be called upon to defend. He apparently enjoyed the process of getting the house into condition, shopping in New York for paint, sheet iron for the fire places, "English superfine tiles," paper for the walls, pots and kettles for the neat kitchen, and chairs, which he had difficulty in finding to his liking. He had very definite ideas about the color scheme, preferring cream for the parlor and stone color for the entry and "common room."²¹ We can well imagine the enthusiasm of the young couple over this delightful little establishment. Unfortunately it was to be raided by the British during the Revolution and demolished by American vandals during the World War.

Here at the New Windsor farm were born his first two children. Catharine, born November 5, 1770, was to marry first John Taylor and then Pierre Van Cortlandt; and Cornelia Tappen, born June 29, 1774, was to marry a certain French minister known as "Citizen" Genêt. Here at New Windsor Clinton turned miller as well as farmer, purchasing wheat to grind in his mill. His flour was to help feed the Revolutionary

²¹ Letter of August 1, 1771, to Mrs. Clinton, New York Historical Society.

armies in New York.²² He seems also to have continued his law practice and, by and large, to have prospered. Possibly the hundred pounds left him by his brother Alexander who died in 1758 was his first nest egg. Certain it is that a short time before his father's death in 1773 George valued his own assets in bonds and notes at £1466, no small sum for that time.²³

²² *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, XIII, 179; *Public Papers*, I, 367, 371, 373, 445.

²³ Clinton to John Jay, October 8, 1774, ms. letter copied from Iselin Collection by Dr. Frank Monaghan; Gustave Anjou, *Ulster County, New York Probate Records* (2 volumes, New York, 1906), II (will of Alexander Clinton); George Clinton's accounts in Clinton Papers, New York State Library (duplicates, Box 2).