



EDWARD HYDE, VISCOUNT CORNBURY (1661–April 1, 1723) was the son of Henry Hyde, second earl of Clarendon, who was lord privy seal under James II. In his youth Cornbury hardly appeared likely to go down in history as “a spendthrift, a grafter, a bigoted oppressor and a drunken vain fool.” His grandfather, after whom he was named, had served as lord chancellor under Charles II, and his father’s sister was the wife of James II. With such a distinguished background—an important father, a king as uncle, a good education in Geneva, a seat in Parliament (1685) and a profitable marriage (1688) to Katherine, daughter of Lord O’Brien—Cornbury’s prospects sparkled.

Fate seemed to be on his side. From youth he had been taught to regard his first cousin, Princess Anne, as “the ground work of his fortunes.” This bias proved highly fortunate in 1689, when Cornbury had to choose between supporting his Catholic uncle and siding with the Protestant rebels under William of Orange and Anne’s sister Mary. An Anglican like Anne, Cornbury became one of the first army officers to desert James II, thus ingratiating himself with the victorious William and Mary, as well as with Anne. Since the Bill of Rights named Anne as the successor to William and Mary unless, as was unlikely, that long-childless couple produced an heir, Cornbury’s fortunes appeared assured.

Despite all these advantages, Cornbury embarked on a course of conduct that earned him an odious reputation in history. In a quest to satiate his lavish tastes, he overspent his considerable income and found himself pursued by numerous creditors. Impatient to escape their grasp and recoup his fortunes, he sought a post in the colonies. William obliged in 1701 by naming him the governor of New York, and Anne, who became queen in 1702,

added the governorship of New Jersey.

Cornbury attached particular importance to his royal relationship. He convinced himself that he acted with the sovereign authority of his cousin, stretching this identification to the extreme in emulation by “dressing publicly in women’s clothes every day.” Evidently, Cornbury assumed that he resembled his cousin in appearance as well as authority.

When Cornbury first came to New Jersey in the summer of 1703, he found the colony consumed, as usual, with factional political strife. In what had been the proprietorships of East and West Jersey, a variety of parties sought the first royal governor’s favor as they fought with each other over land, money, power and religion. Cornbury cared little about the issues, but he immediately sensed the possibility of personal gain.

Instead of allying himself with an existing faction, he began to build his own, the “Cornbury Ring.” Using his broad appointive power, he placed a group of avaricious men on the provincial council and in other high offices. With their connivance, he designed an overall strategy for grabbing land and looting public funds. The first step was to try to disfranchise the Quakers, who dominated West Jersey politics, and seize control of the assembly. Then, the Ring planned to stack the East Jersey Board of Proprietors and the West Jersey Council of Proprietors with accomplices who would grant them huge tracts of land. Cornbury also expected the assembly to vote him substantial personal revenues. Finally, he and his cohorts considered themselves not accountable for the expenditure of various public funds.

Cornbury began almost immediately to pursue these designs. In his first report to the Lords of Trade, he suggested that Quakers be excluded from holding public office. When the first assembly met in November 1703, he asked for a revenue. The assembly, however, engaged in factional bickering, and he prorogued it. In May 1704, when the house convened once

more and passed a bill granting him a thousand pounds for a year, Cornbury declared "the sum was not suitable," again prorogued the assembly, and again asked the Lords of Trade to bar Quakers from public office. He could afford to be patient, since his political machinations in neighboring New York had brought him a gift of two thousand pounds beyond a revenue for seven years.

Furthermore, he soon lined his pockets with New Jersey money. Dr. John Johnstone, representing the East Jersey proprietors, twice gave him sums of two hundred pounds in the hope of buying support for his faction. Richard Slater, a reputed felon whom Cornbury had commissioned as a justice of the peace, traveled throughout East Jersey soliciting money from the opponents of the proprietors. He promised that Cornbury would dissolve the assembly, which had reconvened in June 1704, and also hold new elections, seek to abolish the quitrents, and reduce the property qualifications for voting and office holding. Cornbury received between £500 and £1,500 and dissolved the assembly, even though it had offered him a revenue of £1,500 for three years. He had more ambitious plans.

Cornbury's designs quickly unfolded. He called for new elections, and the Cornbury Ring resorted to unlawful tactics. As their opponents noted, "many of the towns had not any (much less due) notice of the day of election." In Burlington, Sheriff William Fisher, a Cornbury appointee, "refused to allow any person to vote unless for such men as he named and the Quakers in particular were wholly excluded." In spite of such tactics, the Cornbury Ring failed to control the new assembly.

Two of Cornbury's henchmen on the council quickly remedied the situation. Daniel Leeds and Thomas Revell objected to the qualifications of three newly elected Quaker assemblymen, Thomas Lambert, Thomas Hardner and Joshue Wright. Cornbury, ignoring the law that made the assembly the judge of its mem-

bers' qualifications, refused to confirm the three Quakers in their seats, thereby winning his party a majority of one.

The Cornbury Ring then passed a number of bills designed to enhance his fortunes financially and politically. Cornbury accepted a revenue bill providing him £2,000 a year for two years—a victory over the Quakers, who had "bragged that there should be no revenue settled." The Ring also pushed through a militia bill that included a £1 fine on all who refused to serve and allowed militia officers to levy taxes for the support of their forces. This severely hurt the pacifist Quakers when the militia confiscated their property for refusing to pay, but it earned the Ring an estimated £1,000 a year. The Ring also passed a tax of £10 per 100 acres on all land, including unimproved acreage. This proved particularly burdensome to the proprietors, who protested to London and succeeded in having the law disallowed. In the interim, however, Cornbury spent the receipts, pocketing £830 and distributing the rest among his party. The assembly also enriched the Ring by authorizing a 6-shilling tax on every freeman. Finally, in a bid for increased political support and in return for bribes already paid, the Ring lowered the property qualification for voting from ownership of 100 acres to ownership of as little as a freehold.

The succession of legislative victories ended in May 1705, when the Board of Trade ordered Cornbury to seat the three Quakers in the assembly. Having lost his majority, Cornbury prorogued the assembly and for the next two years governed without it. During this time he and his cohorts found additional ways to enrich themselves. They seized the records of the East Jersey proprietors, and Cornbury certified the appointment of Peter Sonmans, a member of the Ring, as receiver general of the East Jersey Board of Proprietors. Sonmans then engineered the sale of hundreds of thousands of acres of land to speculators, many of them members of the Ring. Cornbury also insisted that the Quaker members of the

West Jersey Council of Proprietors swear an oath of allegiance. The illegal demand violated their convictions. Cornbury used their refusal as an excuse to prevent the West Jersey council from functioning, and the Ring helped itself to as much as one-half million acres of land.

In neighboring New York, Cornbury administered his office in an equally corrupt and arbitrary manner. He allied himself with the so-called Anti-Leislerian party to secure gifts and a revenue. He twice dismissed uncooperative assemblies, and during Queen Anne's War he embezzled a large part of the money raised for the defense of the colony. He also illegally seized the Presbyterian parsonage and church in Jamaica and unjustly prosecuted the Presbyterian minister, Francis Makemie, for preaching without a license. Even when Makemie was found innocent, the court insisted that he pay all the costs of his trial. Cornbury's role in the affair hastened his recall as governor.

Cornbury's record of political tyranny, religious oppression, graft and theft—as well as transvestitism—angered the populace of both colonies. The New Jersey assembly acted first. Cornbury called the house back into session in April 1707 to ask it to grant him a revenue bill of twenty-one years' duration, but the house instead opened an investigation of his conduct and drew up a list of grievances. The speaker of the house, Quaker Samuel Jennings, read the long list in Cornbury's presence, and the assembly sent a copy with supporting affidavits to the Board of Trade asking the body "to relieve them from the oppressions they groan under by the arbitrary and illegal practices of his excellency." In September 1708, the New York assembly followed suit by unanimously adopting resolutions condemning Cornbury's illegal activities in the colony. This brought action from London. In December the queen concluded that "his near relation to her . . . should not protect him in oppressing her subjects," and she dismissed him from office.

As soon as the word of this development

reached America, Cornbury's numerous creditors had the sheriff of New York arrest him for debt. He languished in a New York jail until the death of his father, when his inheritance enabled him to pay his debts and return to England. Cornbury then took his seat in the House of Lords as the third earl of Clarendon. He was raised to the Privy Council in 1711 and in 1714 served as envoy extraordinary to Hanover. He died in London on April 1, 1723, unmourned in America, where he had become a symbol of despotism. Most Jerseyans probably agreed with Lewis Morris's assessment of Cornbury as "a wretch who by the whole conduct of his life has evidenced he has no regard for honor or virtue."

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