



## Ashley, April (b. 1935)

by Claude J. Summers

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April Ashley in 2009.  
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A favorite of the British tabloids after she was outed as a transsexual in 1961, the indomitable April Ashley rose from poverty to become a glamorous entertainer and top model. Rumored to have had affairs with movie stars and artists, she married into the British aristocracy only to be humiliated in a very public divorce proceeding that left transsexuals in the United Kingdom in legal limbo until 2004, when the Gender Recognition Act was passed.

Her efforts on behalf of transgender equality were recognized in 2012 when Queen Elizabeth II named her a Member of the British Empire (MBE).

Ashley was born George Jamieson on April 29, 1935 in Liverpool, one of six children of a Roman Catholic father, who was a cook in the Royal Navy, and a Protestant mother, who worked in a bomb factory. She grew up poor and suffered abuse, including regular beatings both at home and at school, because of her bed wetting and effeminacy, which were exacerbated by numerous health problems.

She recalls believing from a very early age that she should have been born a girl instead of a boy.

At the age of 14, Ashley joined the Merchant Navy as a cabin boy. By age 15, she had not developed secondary sexual characteristics. When she attempted suicide at age 18, she was dishonorably discharged from the Merchant Navy and confined in a mental institution, where she received forced electric shock treatment—then standard treatment for people who had attempted suicide—and was raped.

Upon release, Ashley moved to London, where she lived in a rooming house and began dressing as a woman.

In 1955, she reinvented herself as "Toni" and relocated to Paris, where she became a transvestite entertainer.

Ashley joined the cast of Cabaret Le Carousel, a notorious drag club. At this time, she assumed the name April E. and became friends with American and British expatriates, including Ernest Hemingway and Nina Simone, as well as members of French bohemian circles, such as Jean-Paul Sartre.

At the age of 25, Ashley made the momentous decision to undergo dangerous and painful sex reassignment surgery. Having saved £3,000, she traveled to Casablanca, where she endured the seven-hour-long operation on May 12, 1960.

It was performed by French surgeon Dr. Georges Burou, who began the practice of sexual reassignment surgery in 1953. He pioneered the penile inversion form of vaginoplasty, which is used to this day. She was the ninth patient on which Dr. Burou performed the surgery. (Later, Dr. Burou would operate on British travel writer Jan Morris.)

The operation was painful and had a number of unpleasant side-effects, but Ashley never doubted the

wisdom of her decision. She reported having felt immediately a great sense of joy because finally her outer form was in conformity with her inner feelings.

At this time, Ashley assumed the name April Ashley—April for her birth month and Ashley in honor of the character Ashley Wilkes from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*.

Ashley returned to London, where her striking appearance and insouciant personality helped her build a promising career as a model and actress. She was photographed by such celebrated photographers as David Bailey, Terence Donovan, and Lord Snowden; and she became *Vogue's* favorite underwear model. She garnered small roles in films, such as the Bob Hope and Bing Crosby vehicle, *The Road to Hong Kong*.

However, her career was cut short when a friend sold her secret to a tabloid in 1961. Under the headline, "Her' Secret Is Out," the newspaper *Sunday People* outed Ashley as transgender. The outing increased her celebrity, but at the cost of her career.

"I was a celebrity freak. I couldn't even get a job as a shop girl," she told an interviewer in 2006.

Although Ashley's six-month's worth of bookings as a model were canceled overnight and her name was removed from the credits of *The Road to Hong Kong*, she was by no means shunned by other celebrities. Indeed, during the 1960s she was romantically linked to a number of actors, including Omar Sharif and Peter O'Toole, as well as artists such as Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali.

In April 1963, on Gibraltar, Ashley married Arthur Corbett, an Eton-educated aristocrat who later became the 3rd Baron Rowallan. Corbett, the heir to a castle and 7,000 acres in Scotland, had four children with his first wife, whom he divorced in 1961 after becoming smitten with Ashley. He frequently cross-dressed himself. Indeed, he first met Ashley in Paris when she worked at the Cabaret Le Carousel, which he frequented.

Corbett's divorce from his first wife and his affair with Ashley created a scandal. Allegedly, his father threatened to disinherit him and he was often portrayed as having romantically sacrificed all for the sake of Ashley. However, the marriage was not a happy one and soon they parted, rarely living together during the seven years duration of the marriage.

Corbett knew of Ashley's history when they married, but as their relationship turned sour, he was ruthless in using it against her. In 1969, in order to avoid paying alimony, he sued to have the marriage annulled on the grounds that Ashley had been born male.

The divorce proceedings, known as *Corbett v. Corbett*, were heard in 1970 and created a media sensation as the couple hurled charges against each other. During the proceedings details of Ashley's anatomy were plastered across the tabloids.

The decision, in Corbett's favor, was devastating to Ashley. Not only had her privacy been violated, but she also felt that she had officially been denied recognition as a woman, either legally, socially, or biologically.

The decision in the case had ramifications not merely for Ashley, but for all transgender people in the United Kingdom and Australia. The judge not only granted Corbett's plea for an annulment, ruling the marriage null and void, but he also ruled that a person born male is a male in perpetuity.

The case established a precedent that left intersexuals and transgendered persons in legal limbo, with no means to correct their gender on government documents, including birth certificates. From 1970 until 2004, when the Gender Recognition Act took effect, the United Kingdom refused to change birth certificates of transgendered individuals, including those who had undergone sex reassignment surgery.

Despite the defeat in court, Ashley rallied. With the help of friends, she opened a restaurant near Harrod's in Knightsbridge called AD8. On the opening night 2,000 people came and she began a new career as the owner of a fashionable watering hole.

In 1975, however, Ashley, overworked and out of shape from excessive drinking, suffered a heart attack. Once she recovered, to the surprise of her friends she gave up London's frenetic pace and retired to the sleepy bookshop-filled town Hay-on-Wye on the Welsh border.

There she began working with an old friend, writer Duncan Fallowell, on telling her life story. *My Odyssey* (also issued as *April Ashley's Odyssey*) was published in 1982.

Ever restless, in 1986 Ashley abandoned the quiet life in Hay-on-Wye and relocated to the United States, living first in New York and then in San Diego, where she worked at art galleries and as a fundraiser for Greenpeace. She is alleged to have married a man named Jeffrey West aboard the docked ship Queen Mary in Long Beach, California.

In 1989, suffering from a variety of health problems, she relocated to Nice, in the south of France. During these years she lived modestly, supporting herself through stints as an art consultant and interior designer.

As transgender issues began to be taken more seriously in the 1990s and the 2000s, Ashley reinvented herself once more as something of an activist. She became the face of transgenderism in the United Kingdom.

She moved back to England and became active in the movement for transgender equality. Not only did she campaign for legal reform, but she also gave numerous interviews about transgenderism. In her television appearances and interviews, she denied any scientific expertise, and evinced little interest in the causes of transgenderism, but she was invariably happy to share her own story and to offer encouragement to others.

Her glamour and regal bearing, combined with her self-deprecating humor and hints of the scandalous, brought new attention to the plight of the transgendered, especially the inability to correct legal documents.

The campaign for legal reform gained a necessary impetus in 2002, when the European Court of Human Rights ruled in the case of *Christine Goodwin v. The United Kingdom* that the human rights of transgendered individuals were violated by the impossibility of changing gender on government documents in the United Kingdom.

Following this judgment, Tony Blair's Labour government introduced a bill that would allow the change of gender on birth certificates and other government documents. After an intense debate in both Houses of Parliament, the Gender Recognition Act of 2004 was passed. It received the Royal Assent on July 1, 2004.

Ashley wrote numerous letters to government officials, including the Prime Minister and the Lord Chancellor, on behalf of the legislation. "They said: 'Be patient,' and eventually the law did change," she recalled in 2012.

She finally received her amended birth certificate in 2005. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, who had been a friend of hers in the 1950s, helped her navigate the maze of bureaucracy to correct her birth certificate.

In 2006, Ashley announced the publication of a "new autobiography" entitled *The First Lady*, which she co-authored with Douglas Thompson. In interviews and television appearances promoting the book, Ashley declared that it contained material that she could not include in *My Odyssey* in 1982, including details of her alleged affairs with Michael Hutchence, Peter O'Toole, Omar Sharif, Grayson Perry, and the future 19th

Duke of Infantado, among others. However, when it was discovered that the book heavily repeated passages in the 1982 book, the publisher of *My Odyssey* sued and a court ordered that copies of *The First Lady* be recalled from book stores and pulped.

Perhaps Ashley's most significant role in advancing understanding of transgenderism has been through her response to thousands of people who have written her or otherwise sought her out over the years. "I would always wish people three things--to be kind to yourself and to others. To be beautiful, on the inside, which makes you beautiful on the outside. And most of all to be brave, because you will need that," she told an interviewer.

In her advice to others, especially young people, Ashley is always careful to tell them that she is not a medical expert. She directs them to organizations that can provide professional advice.

Although she believes that some young children should be allowed access to sex reassignment surgery, she also recognizes that others should wait. As she told Peter Stanford in 2009, "For me it was clear-cut. When the doctors in the loony bin told me, 'Go away and be gay,' I said, 'I'm not a homosexual. I want to be a woman.' But some people do get confused. I have known quite a few who committed suicide after the operation because they realised they'd made a terrible mistake."

Ashley has been featured in documentaries and exhibitions about gender identity, such as the 2006 exhibition at London's Wellcome Collection called "Eight Rooms, Nine Lives." For several years, a film based on Ashley's life was rumored to be in the making, with Catherine Zeta Jones in the title role, but it has not materialized.

When informed that she had been included in the Queen's Honours List as a Member of the British Empire on June 16, 2012, Ashley was thrilled. "It's unbelievable and wonderful and especially fantastic to receive it in the year of Her Majesty's Jubilee," she said.

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