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April Ashley and Me

Katherine's Many Attempts to Catch-up with the 'Lady on the Go'

by Katherine Cummings

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April Ashley

I first became aware of April Ashley when the story broke about her divorce proceedings. I was still sixteen years from my own transition but my heart went out to April Ashley, who was fighting a courageous battle on behalf of all of us who might, one day, want our gender fully recognised under the law.

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When Ormrod J. brought his findings down and changed the lives of many transgender people who had proceeded to marriage after reassignment, as well as condemning those yet to reach those hurdles, I was passionately indignant on April's behalf. If I had known how to contact her, I would have done, but I was aware that she would be inundated by messages from her real friends and from the press and crazies of all descriptions.

A few years later, her book (*April Ashley's Odyssey* by Duncan Fallowell and April Ashley) was published and April herself came to Sydney on a signing tour. I tried to meet her then, but when I saw how the crowds were harassing her I held back and the opportunity passed.

A few years ago, long after I had become Katherine, I found myself in Hay-on-Wye (I had to buy two extra suitcases before I left town, I bought so many second-hand books). I knew April had gone to live in Hay-on-Wye and tried to find her, but alas, she had moved on and nobody seemed to know where she had gone. In the following years I was in San Diego three times (I was even negotiating for a job with the university there at one point) and April was living there, but of course I didn't find that out until much later.

A Canadian friend of mine mentioned April's website and I took the step of contacting her and sending her my book. We have become friends since then although I try not to bombard her with email.

When the decision was made to ask April if we could use her on the cover of this issue her acceptance was immediate and un-self-conscious. There was only one catch. She had been involved in a recent series of television interviews (including ones with her former colleagues at the Carrousel, Bambi and Coccinelle) and had no time to prepare anything for me, nor to select photos she would like used. She asked me to look after it for her, as she was off to London for more interviews.

Talk about a lady on the go! She has such energy and charm I think we will be running her again on the cover of *Polare* when she turns one hundred ... if *Polare* and I survive! And ... oh! to be in England now that April's there!

April Ashley

From Wikipedia:  Born George Jamieson in 1935, in Liverpool, United Kingdom, April Ashley was one of her parents six surviving children. She joined the Merchant Navy at the age of 14, however she was later given a dishonourable discharge, attempted suicide and was sent to the mental institution in Ormskirk for electric shock treatment.

She moved to London in 1950, and then to Paris a few years later, using the name April E she became a Drag Queen and joined the cast of the cabaret show at the Carousel Theatre, with the famous French entertainer Coccinelle.

At the age of 25 and having saved around £3,000, Ashley had her seven hour long sex reassignment surgery in Casablanca, Morocco under Dr Georges Burou.

After returning to England, she became a successful fashion model, appearing in such publications as *Vogue* and winning a small role in the film *The Road to Hong Kong*, which starred Bing Crosby and Bob Hope. After a friend sold her story to the media in 1961, under the headline "Her" secret is out, the *Sunday People* outed her as transsexual. She became the centre of attention and her film credit was instantly dropped.

In 1963 she married the Hon. Arthur Corbett (later 3rd Baron Rowallan), the Eton educated son and heir of Lord Rowallan.

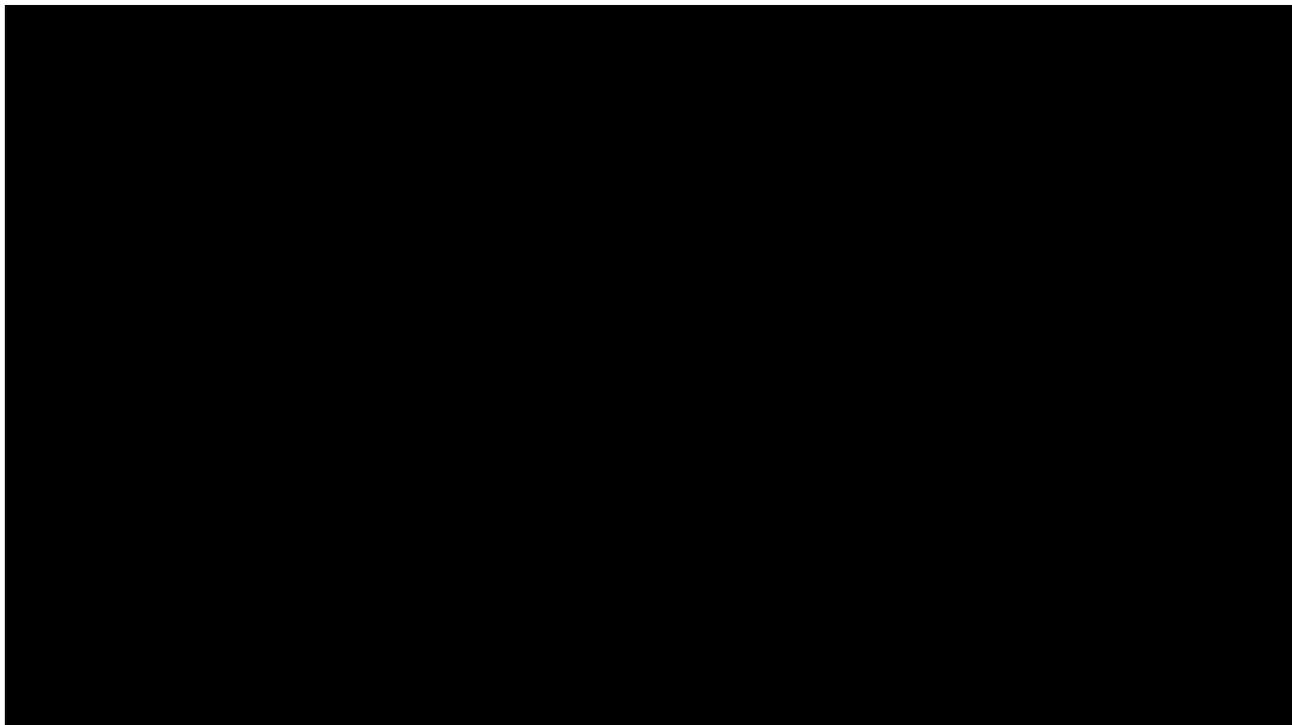


However, in 1970 Corbett had the marriage annulled on the grounds that Ashley had been born male, even though he knew about her history when they married.

In 2005, after the passage of the Gender Recognition Act 2004, she was finally legally recognised as a female and issued with a new birth certificate, and in 2012 she was appointed as a Member of the Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.) for services to transgender equality.

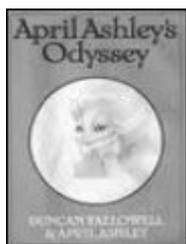
Further information about April Ashley can be found on her website. 

Another website of note is [The April Ashley Project](#)  which features the following video:



The First Lady: I Was a Vogue Model and a National Celebrity But I Was Living With a Secret That Was to Shake the World... Author: April Ashley and Douglas Thompson
Publisher: John Blake (2006)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 1844542314

From Amazon Books:  April Ashley was a *Vogue* model, the lady of the manor and a glamorous young woman, yet she was living with a secret that was to shake the world. She became the world's most famous transsexual when her secret was revealed in 1970. The revelation ruined her marriage to war hero Arthur Corbett and left her battling against prejudice in a time when gender operations were a taboo subject. Christened George Jamieson in 1935, she was one of nine children brought up by a drunk sailor. She felt disillusioned with her physical appearance and gender and soon suffered great self-loathing as she became withdrawn from her family. After a suicide attempt and electric shock treatment, she decided to go through with a sex-change operation. Since then, she has never looked back becoming a beautiful woman with a glamorous life. In the 1960s and 1970s, she was adored and her popularity was at an ultimate high. Having slept with an array of big names such as Omar Sharif, Peter O'Toole and a one night stand with Michael Hutchence, April was much in demand. Indeed, although she agreed to be photographed by David Bailey yet refused to sit for Picasso and Dali as they were deemed too lecherous!



April Ashley's Odyssey
Author: April Ashley and Duncan Fallowell
Publisher: Jonathan Cape Ltd. (1982)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0224018494

From Transgender Archive:  In this outstanding collaboration with friend and writer Duncan Fallowell, the descriptions of social scenes positively sparkle: in Paris where Sartre sat about in his dingy overcoat, in London where April shone in the salons of wealth and rank, and in Spain where her suitors included very famous actors as well as her future husband. This is an emotional and dramatic story as well. We encounter the Liverpool slum where a young boy was relentlessly bullied and beaten senseless by his peers; the first, unexpected remarks about his unusual beauty; the terrible confusion which set in when he went to sea; the suicide attempts and sentence to the most stringently policed section of a mental hospital; then escape to London, and soon after, to Paris. "The day I wear women's clothes", April (then called Toni) had said, "is the day I know I can become one." But in Paris Toni was to wear elaborate costumes in a club called Le Carrousel where celebrities gathered to feel they were doing something "existential". It was the first break from many years' strictly androgynous dressing habits. Until then Toni had largely let people make up their own minds. Of course, with close friends (of which there was not just quantity but an endearing variety) the labels were unimportant. Then the

decision was made. Toni flew to Casablanca. The operation and its psychological effects are described in moving detail ...

While *April Ashley's Odyssey* remains out of print, a copy of the book in its entirety exists on [the AntiJen Pages](#) . 

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.