

REVIEW

# How Britain's most famous trans woman married an aristocrat (but left after 14 days)

Douglas Thompson's wickedly entertaining biography of April Ashley recounts the life of a sailor reborn as a dancer, model and activist

[Lynn Barber](#) 26 April 2024 • 11:00am



April Ashley in 1964 CREDIT: Vic Singh/Shutterstock

Douglas Thompson's jaunty biography, *Inside Out*, opens with a bang: "[April Ashley](#) was born, aged 25, on 12 May 1960." She'd previously been born as George Jamieson on 29 April 1935 in Liverpool, the fourth of six children, among whom she had a rotten time. Her mother hated her, and liked nothing better than picking her up by the ankles and banging her head on the ground. Her father Frederick loved her, albeit "in a maudlin, drink-sodden way", and he was anyway absent most of the time working as a ship's cook.

George knew from as young as three that she could never live as a man. So she ran away to sea at 16, and joined the crew of the SS Pacific Fortune, sailing up the west coast of America. But she was increasingly confused and upset by her sexuality, unable to eat or sleep, and in San Pedro, she went to see a doctor who prescribed her sleeping pills. Jamieson took them all in one go, aiming to commit suicide; her crewmates found her and took her to hospital in Long Beach. The ship sailed on without her and she was eventually flown home. Back in Liverpool, she tried to commit suicide again, this time by jumping into the Mersey, but again she was rescued and taken to hospital and given ECT.

Sent home for Christmas, her mother said George must go to midnight Mass; she refused and fled to London instead. She waitressed at a Lyons Corner House and at a hotel in Jersey. By this time, she was growing breasts as a result of oestrogen injections, so she took herself to Paris and got a job at the famous transvestite nightclub, Le Carrousel. She began to call herself "Toni" and won many admirers, including Salvador Dalí. All the "chicks with dicks" at Le Carrousel read about Christine Jorgensen, an American GI who transitioned in 1952; one of them went to a clinic in Casablanca and came back to show everyone her new vagina.

Jamieson saved up the necessary £2,000, and on May 11 1960 she presented herself at the Casablanca clinic of Dr George Burou. He told her he would operate at 7am the next morning. (In truth, he'd only performed eight sex-change operations to that date, though later he would do two a day, including Jan Morris.) Thus April Ashley was born, and she was entirely happy with the result. Her first sexual intercourse was "a painful delight", but soon she was happily having one-night stands without ever bothering to tell her partners that she'd once been a boy.

Ashley moved to London, joined a modelling agency and did occasional shoots for David Bailey and Donovan. She hung out at Les Ambassadeurs, and was, as the writer Veronica Horwell put it, "a welcome good-time girl at any party". But then The People newspaper, tipped off by someone she'd known in Liverpool, published the story that she had changed sex, and all her modelling work dried up.



April Ashley modelling in London in 1973 CREDIT: Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy Stock Photo

Instead, Ashley sold her story to the News of the World for £10,000. She had always fancied a title, so when Arthur Corbett, the future 3rd Baron Rowallan, came wooing, she was interested. He was married with four children, but he got a divorce, and persuaded Ashley to marry him in September 1963 in Gibraltar. She knew he was a transvestite, but he also turned out to be a useless lover, so they only stayed together for 14 days. In 1969, Corbett brought a lawsuit saying that his marriage was fraudulent because she was at all times a man. The judge agreed and the marriage was annulled. Ashley sold her story, again, to the Sunday Mirror for £5,000 and appeared on the Simon Dee show with John Lennon and Yoko Ono. By now, she was very thin, on the sedative Mandrax, drinking heavily, and unable to find work.

So she moved to Hay-on-Wye, where Richard Booth, the self-styled King of Hay, appointed her Duchess, and let her live rent-free in one of his properties. Sometimes she got shop work, but often she was on the dole. The locals didn't know what to make of April Ashley at first, but she soon became popular because she was so kind.

She acted as carer for a widower called Charles Simpson, who left her his big Victorian house when he died.

There, she took in lodgers, one of whom was a struggling young artist called Grayson Perry who told her: “I only have to look at you to get an erection.” Ashley went out boozing most nights, leading one Hay landlord to rule that she wasn’t to be served port. She was fine while she stuck to the Glenmorangie, champagne, whisky and gin, but when she started on the port she became “uncontrollably rude” to customers.



April Ashley CREDIT: Vic Singh/Shutterstock

Ashley was still living in Hay when she turned 50 in 1985, but then she went off to America, where Quentin Crisp threw a party for her. She married a gay friend, Jeff West, to get a green card, then worked as a restaurant hostess in San Pedro in California. In 2005, as a result of the Gender Recognition Act passed under Tony Blair’s government, she finally got the female birth-certificate she’d always longed for, and in 2012, after lobbying by her friend Simon Callow, she was awarded an MBE for “services to transgender equality”. For her 80th birthday she was also made a “citizen of honour” of Liverpool, and her memorial service was held there shortly after she died in 2021.

Ashley is often described as the first person in England to change sex. She wasn’t actually that – both male and female candidates preceded her by over a decade – but she was certainly the most celebrated. She remained glamorous almost to the end: no one ever saw her without her makeup, and she carried herself with queenly hauteur. “There was always the moment,” Thompson recalls, “when you thought some poor sod would curtsy to her.” But she also had a wicked Scouse sense of humour. When Edward Enninfu asked her to appear with other famous women on the cover of *Vogue*, she asked about the fee. He said she should do it for the honour but her reply was “No fee, no me.” Thompson, who used to be a Fleet Street showbiz

correspondent, obviously knew her well, and was fond of her. In this wickedly entertaining biography, he has done her proud.

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*Inside Out: The Extraordinary Legacy of April Ashley is published by Ad Lib Publishers at £10.99. To order your copy for £9.99, call 0808 196 6794 or visit [Telegraph Books](#)*