

Did New York once have a transvestite governor?

James Hickok

5-6 minutes

January 25, 2002

Dear Cecil:

I recently read about a Lord Cornbury, appointed governor of New York in 1701, who was a transvestite. Can you verify this?



Illustration by Slug Signorino

Cecil replies:

I can verify that lots of people *think* a colonial governor was a cross-dresser. What's more, this isn't just some wild Internet fable — reputable folk have believed it for centuries. The New-York Historical Society even has an oil portrait of Edward Hyde, Lord Cornbury, in women's clothing, first exhibited in London in 1867.

But you asked if I could verify that Cornbury was a transvestite. Answer: no.

First the lurid details. From Henry Moscow's *The Book of New York Firsts* (1995):

One night during the early 1700s, a constable working for the British colony of New York arrested what he presumed was a prostitute walking along Broadway. When the suspect was brought back to the stockade, however, it

was discovered that he had actually taken into custody the colonial governor, who enjoyed taking evening strolls in his wife's clothes ... In addition to women's clothing, which he enjoyed wearing while walking the parapets of the British fort he commanded, [Lord Cornbury] also had a fetish for ears, and made it a point of telling visitors to official state functions that they were free to fondle those of his wife ...

After being in power for a while Lord Cornbury's marriage started to sour. Since he gave Mrs. Hyde no spending money, she took to "borrowing" clothing and other items from other aristocratic ladies, and then not returning them. He himself ran up considerable debts, and was finally removed from office by Queen Anne in 1708. Now a regular citizen, he was thrown into debtors' prison until receiving a sizable inheritance from his father's estate, which enabled him to buy his way out of jail and return to England, where he served in the House of Lords.

Quite the career, I think we'll all agree. But Patricia Bonomi, emerita professor at New York University, thinks the part about transvestitism was a pack of lies. In *The Lord Cornbury Scandal: The Politics of Reputation in British America* (1998) she argues that Lord Cornbury, appointed governor of New York and New Jersey by the crown, was the victim of a vicious whispering campaign by his political enemies. Among the points she makes:

- Notwithstanding the label on the frame, which may have been affixed for the 1867 exhibit, it's not certain who's depicted in the notorious portrait at the New-York Historical Society, who painted it, or when. The few other known likenesses of Cornbury bear only a passing resemblance to the party in the picture, and some art experts say it's just an unattractive woman. Cross-dressing, hardly a mainstream predilection today, was considered an abomination in the early 1700s, and no prominent man would have wanted himself portrayed in such a manner. Satirical illustrations were done as quick drawings or engravings, not as expensive oil paintings.
- The only contemporary evidence that Lord Cornbury was a transvestite consists of comments in four letters. The letters were written by three different people, all enemies of Cornbury's, around the time of his recall to England. Cornbury had been energetic and perhaps a little imperious in trying to whip things into shape in New York and New Jersey, and he'd antagonized many. Scandalous insinuations were a standard weapon of palace politics at the time. None of the letter writers claims to have witnessed Cornbury's unusual behavior personally, and they provide little detail; it's obvious their main goal was sandbagging the man. None of Cornbury's associates mentioned any eccentricities of dress, which would have been the talk of the colony had they been as blatant as described. On the contrary, many defended him when he came under attack. On

his return to England, Cornbury was warmly welcomed, served in high positions, and was granted a generous pension — not the treatment you'd expect if he were thought a deviant.

- The scant additional evidence consists of claims made at long remove. For example, a memoir by a 76-year-old woman recounted a story about Cornbury she'd been told by her grandmother, who claimed to have heard about his indiscretions as a teenager. The memoir was published in 1820; the events described in it had taken place more than a hundred years earlier.

Cornbury may not have been the world's best governor (although Professor Bonomi claims he was nowhere near as bad as he's been made out). But it seems clear the allegations about cross-dressing were just scurrilous rumor, made believable by the passage of time. Nobody believes the story about Richard Gere and the gerbil now, but who knows what they'll be saying in 200 years?

Cecil Adams

Send questions to Cecil via cecil@straightdope.com.

[Comment on this Column](#)