

Lord Cornbury

(Edward Hyde, 3rd Earl of Clarendon)

Governor-in-Chief 1661-1724

by David Rosen

One of the grandest sex scandals of the early colonial era may never have occurred. Rumor has long persisted that Lord Cornbury (Edward Hyde), Britain's captain-general and governor-in-chief of New York and New Jersey between 1701 and 1708, opened the New York General Assembly of 1702 in an exquisite, formal gown in the Queen Anne style—a hooped gown with an elaborate headdress and carrying a fan.

According to legend, legislators were shocked and he retorted, "You are very stupid not to see the propriety of it."

As has become a popular legend, the governor insisted that he dressed in drag to better represent the Queen, his first cousin. Looking back, Lord Cornbury may well have been the nation's most famous drag queen—if he was a transvestite at all.

Shelley Ross, writing in his popular history, *Fall From Grace*, calls the Cornbury affair one of "the most notorious—and bizarre" tales of "sex, scandal, and corruption in American politics." According to Ross, Cornbury "was a thief, a bigot, a grafter, a drunk, and, strange as it was, a transvestite." An image of Cornbury in drag is immortalized in a painting first exhibited in London in 1867 and

now held by the New-York Historical Society.

Ross' opinion is shared by other scholars, including George Bancroft, a leading 19th century historian. Many attribute the Cornbury story to William Smith in 1757, one of the first historians of New York. A contemporary scholar, Patricia Bonomi, points out that Cornbury "is notorious in the historical literature as a moral profligate, sunk in corruption, and perhaps the worst governor Britain ever imposed on an American colony."



In addition to his alleged drag outfit worn at the opening of the 1702 Assembly, he reportedly dressed in drag at his wife's funeral in 1707, deeply upsetting his contemporaries. He reportedly "was in that Garb when his dead Lady was carried out the Fort, and this not privately but in face of the Sun and sight of the Town." There is even a story that he was arrested as a prostitute.

However, Bonomi argues in her study, *The Lord Cornbury Scandal*, that there is no direct evidence, legal or otherwise, to substantiate these claims, only four letters from three of Cornbury's political opponents. She insists that "the sight of a royal governor parading about the streets, or even the

ramparts of the fort, in female dress would have scandalized friend and foe alike.”

More so, she points out that at the end of the seventeenth century, colonial America moved aggressively against cross dressing. She notes that during the seventeenth century two men were arrested in New York for appearing in public in women’s cloths; in 1696, Massachusetts passed a law against cross dressing; and in 1703, a man named John Smith was arrested in Philadelphia for being “MASKT, or Disguised in women’s apparel... .” Thus, one of America’s grand sex scandals

might well have been no scandal at all.

For more information:

Patricia Bonomi, *The Lord Cornbury Scandals: The Politics of Reputation in British America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1998).

Shelley Ross, *Fall From Grace: Sex, Scandal, and Corruption in American Politics from 1702 to the Present* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988).

David Rosen, *Sex Scandal America: Politics & the Ritual of Public Shaming* (Toronto, Canada: Key Publishing, 2009).