



Charles-Genevieve Deon De Beaumont

### At the Court of Louis XV

Charles d'Eon became famous at the court of Louis XV in the 1750's where a small and little-changing group of often fabulously wealthy men and women (although they did not, as we shall see, always stay that way) gathered together on a daily basis in the same glittering but mainly totally inconsequential life of the royal court. With few of life's practical problems, on their minds, boredom was very much the order of the day; only 'the status and the enjoyment of court life' became relevant. So, appearing in ostentatious clothing which displayed status in the most obvious way - in these particular circumstances a political expedient in itself - very quickly became the centre of their existence. Mind-blowing fashions for both men and women were almost the only strong antidote to their daily ennui.

So, in the court of Louis XV (as it had in the time of Louis XIV) fashion followed .fashion in thought, deed and particularly in dress. One week there might be a 'Harlequin ' theme following a theatrical presentation,

### D'Eon - The Fresh Face

Into the extraordinary French court and (as his title implies) starting as a soldier, came the Chevalier d'Eon. He was quickly appreciated not only for his bravado as a fighting man but for his abilities as a first class lawyer, writer and a bit of a linguist - which gifts he used to good effect keeping many a high-born libertine from an unwanted day with the prefecture of the palace police! He also stood out because of his unusually high-pitched voice and especially because of his fresh-faced complexion (a rarity where the obnoxious chemicals, often lead-based, used as make-up and the lack of suitable balms left most courtiers with very poor skin quality - in which condition, of course, they used even more make-up to hide their deformities, which made their complexion even worse! Elizabeth 1st's complexion was so awful, for similar reasons). Just prior to the Seven Years war, Elizabeth, Empress of Russia, concluded a treaty with England - and then refused to receive members of the French diplomacy. Louis XV, always liking a bit of spicy intrigue to brighten his day, and believing that a French woman (who were renowned everywhere for their charm, diplomacy and guile but not for their intelligence) might get through Elizabeth's door where a male diplomat could not; he hit on the idea of sending a 'lady' diplomat - an intelligent and gifted man in the guise of a woman - to Russia. His gaze fell on the fresh faced d'Eon who also had all the other qualities he needed - and Charles was 'persuaded' to go to Russia as "Lia de Beaumont", his own "sister", in robes of the latest Parisian fashion, with suitably forged documents proving "her" parentage and patronage.

The ruse worked brilliantly. "Lia" was able to spend many hours in the company of Empress Elizabeth and



another a rash of hats and bonnets depicting the flight of Montgolfier's hot air balloon. Strangers arriving at court out of the context of the day were not even "seen"!

The expense of this continuous requirement for exotic new clothing could be crippling even to the wealthy. Each ladies' dress or man's flamboyant garb might cost today's equivalent of a couple of thousand pounds each, and sometimes several were needed every day! A famous gold, silver and sable suit made for the Marquis de Stainville cost the equivalent often times that - and he wore it only about 5 times at court before it became passe!

The only saving grace for the courtiers was that they were not taxed -their presence at court and the expense of maintaining their palatial houses and servants to back their position was considered duty enough! A sizeable part of the industry around Paris and Versailles was actually sustained by this conspicuous and extravagant waste of resources. It was no wonder that so much ostentation finally fed the envy of the desperately poor and hungry beyond containment, and thus it can be said that fashion, as well as a lack of food were at the root of the 1789 French Revolution!

In Louis XV's court, there were many who carried foppery to extreme, and to get accepted some sort of fantastic fashion statement was usually called for - or the potential courtier would pass literally unnoticed; one young buff was accepted as a courtier by Marie Antoinette only after he bid for notice in a scarlet coat, pink and green gilet, sky-blue satin breeches, blue and red stockings, a lemon and green striped overcoat and an enormous powdered wig.

It can easily be seen that the life of Louis XV's

persuaded her to write to Louis and invite a new ambassador to Moscow,. "Lia" took a very strong liking to this highly pampered feminine lifestyle, but was soon back in Paris to report his success. Unbelievably he was re-despatched to Moscow by Louis XV in his male role - as an embassy secretary.

But d'Eon proceeded to be both Charles at the embassy and "Lia" at the Russian Court, carving (for those few important people in the know in France) an enviable reputation as a spy in the process! After a few years - when it was believed in Paris his double life was about to be exposed - he was withdrawn and sent to London instead to continue his dual role as a top spy; both Charles and "Lia" became an accepted part of the English Court and of the social scene around London. They were, of course, never seen together! One strange manifestation of this - and one that was very popular as a diversion with the public - was that of "Lia" d'Eon, the lady fencer, challenging the best swordsmen in or visiting the City!

## Blackmail and a Royal Dilemma

The need to maintain two lifestyles, especially the feminine one, soon had him deeply in debt, however; and d'Eon's fortunes took another turn for the worse when Louis XV died and Louis XVI took the French throne. From his secret London hideaway, d'Eon sent messages to Paris trying to blackmail Louis XVI by threatening to disclose his spying activities.

This truly was a royal dilemma as the new King had been making secret overtures to be on friendlier terms again with the English, as the cost of various wars was crippling the French (and other) economies. For the attempted blackmail the Chevalier should have gone to prison, and



courtiers had stresses of its own - as well as devouring huge sums of money, the lifestyle ate up huge lumps of time! Having retired in the wee small hours after the revels of the previous night, the lady courtier then had but a very few hours rest before starting the preparations for the next day's activities, needing to be in full ball-gown-style regalia by 8 a.m. for mass! Madame de Pompadour, being even more meticulous than most, is thought to have died from the sheer exhaustion of this daily round.

In these paranormal surroundings, where the aristocracy retained such power over the life and death of their subjects that their eccentricities went unchallenged, it is hardly surprising that transvestism played a very strong role, and it seems to have been more blatant and open in high society world-wide (feeding off the mores of the courts of Europe, and France in particular) than at any time since Nero and his decadent Roman successors. (The English Governor of New York was so blatant about his proclivities that he reviewed his troops in a ladies' dress styled in the latest Parisian fashion for hoop-and-pannier skirts - reasoning afterwards that as he represented the queen he should dress like her!)

Charles could not allow his advisors to see there was no punishment - so a unique solution was found. The Chevalier would be paid, for spying services rendered, a sum of money more than adequate to cover all his debts, and he would be allowed to return to France and live there freely - providing he did so ONLY as a woman! As such his prison sentence was merely suspended in case he tried to revert to being Charles, and with this threat hanging over his copious wigs, he would cause the King no further trouble. This solution provided a further safeguard too, because even when 'she' was back in France, Charles could not risk the discovery by the English of the identity of his high level spy, or of "her" duality!

As "Lia's" years went by and the need for secrecy passed, the conditions became onerous to the Chevalier, and time and again this swash buckling hero appeared at the palace of Versailles in breeches, only to be whisked off by the palace guards and re-dressed in ladies' clothes - often tied in such a way that "Lia" found them almost impossible to get off again without the aid of servants. "Lia"/Charles lived to a ripe old age as a high society matron, but all these odd comings and goings left ambiguity in the public mind, often depicted in rag-paper cartoons of the time. So much so that on "her" death, an autopsy was performed with the specific task of confirming her actual sexuality.

Charles-Genevieve Deon De Beaumont

By Danielle



" The Beaumont Society is a national self help body run by and for those who cross-dress or are trans-sexual. We welcome all transgender people and their partners, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race, creed or colour, and all varieties from nervous new transvestites to those who are experienced and confident in their second gender."

### The Beaumont Trust

BM Charity London WC1N 3XX  
07000 287878 Tues & Thur 7pm -- 11 pm  
<http://www.beaumont-trust.org.uk>  
Email:beaumonttrust@gmail.com

### The Beaumont Society

27 Old Gloucester Street London WC1N 3XX  
Info Line (24 Hr) 01582 412220  
Email:email@beaumontsociety.org.uk

### Women of the Beaumont Society

Info line 01223 441246  
Yahoo Groups WOBSMatters  
Email: WOBSMatters@aol.com