



## Dillon, Michael (1915-1962)

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Michael Dillon, the first person known to have transitioned both hormonally and surgically from female to male, was a man of singular determination who articulated his life as an evolving struggle toward corporeal, intellectual, and spiritual integrity.

In an as yet unpublished autobiography, *Out of the Ordinary*--rediscovered by English journalist Liz Hodgkinson--Dillon narrates his transition as a facet of his lifelong quest for what he terms, simply, "The Truth."

While the emergence of transsexuality has tended to be examined in part through the lives of such male-to-female pioneers as Christine Jorgensen and Roberta Cowell, Michael Dillon's life has gained only modest attention, first through Liz Hodgkinson's *Michael Née Laura* (1989), and more recently through Pagan Kennedy's *The First Man-Made Man* (2007).

Dillon's significance for the history of transsexuality and for transgender, queer, and feminist studies more broadly does not lie only in his historically early (1939-1949) medical transition, however. Dillon also penned pioneering writings at the intersection of ethics, medicine, biology, religion, philosophy, and transsexuality.

His published writings include *Self: A Study in Ethics and Endocrinology* (1946), *Growing Up into Buddhism* (1960), *The Life of Milarepa* (1962), *Imji Getsul* (1962), and numerous articles. In his last years he wrote at a ferocious pace, turning out at least seven other manuscripts, including *Out of the Ordinary*.

Born May 1, 1915, Michael grew up as Laura Maud Dillon in Folkestone, England, and was raised by maiden aunts to be a respectable young lady, a worthy sibling of brother Robert, the eighth baronet of Lismullen. Dillon resisted his family, however, taking refuge in sports and studies of a theological bent.

With the encouragement of an ecclesiastical mentor, Dillon enrolled at St. Anne's College, Oxford, in Theology in the fall of 1934. He planned to become either an Anglican deaconess or missionary but switched to Classics (or, as the course of study is known at Oxford, "Greats") after discouragement by college advisers.

After graduation in the spring of 1938, Dillon's longstanding gender struggle dovetailed with a growing vocational conundrum. His gender ambiguity limited his opportunities, leading to his eventual employment at a gas station.

In 1939, he sought medical help and received a prescription for testosterone, which had only recently been synthesized on a large enough scale as to become readily available. Chest reconstruction from a sympathetic (unknown) surgeon followed in 1942, and re-registration as Lawrence Michael on April 14, 1944 solidified his identity as male.

Between 1945 and 1949, Dillon underwent thirteen surgeries in completion of a phalloplasty, performed by renowned plastic surgeon Sir Harold Gillies.

While transitioning, Dillon wrote a groundbreaking book entitled *Self: A Study in Ethics and Endocrinology*. By advocating for the medical adaptation of bodies to cross-gender identified minds, the book was, as Jay Prosser has noted, "surely the first medicolegal treatise on transsexuality." In it, Dillon lays the groundwork for sorting out from "homosexuality" the cross-gender practices, identities, and narratives of what would soon be labeled "transsexuality."

Dillon continued exploring the interplay between body and mind during medical school at Trinity College, Dublin, which he began in the autumn of 1945.

Near the end of his studies, Dillon met and fell in love with Roberta Cowell, a race-car driver born Robert Cowell, who had sought out the author of *Self* for help transitioning from male to female.

Dillon--in all likelihood--risked his medical career as well as his own cover by performing Cowell's orchidectomy (the surgical removal of the testicles). At the time British laws against "mayhem" prohibited the amputation of healthy testicles (a prohibition that effectively stymied the transition from male to female in Britain).

When, shortly after Dillon finished medical school in July 1951 and after Cowell had successfully transitioned, he proposed marriage. To his bitter disappointment, Cowell turned him down.

By the time the memoir, *Roberta Cowell's Story*, came out in 1954, less than two years after Christine Jorgensen's transition made headlines worldwide, Dillon was at sea as a ship's surgeon in the Merchant Navy.

During his years aboard ship, Dillon's continuing interest in mind-body interaction inspired religio-philosophical exchanges with Anglican priests, followers of G.I. Gurdjieff, author Tuesday Lopzang Rampa, and, finally, teachers of Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism.

When the media exposed Dillon's transsexuality in 1959, he retreated from the seas to Kalimpong, India, to seek refuge in Buddhist monasteries. There he sought to jettison the minor aristocratic heritage that had cost him his anonymity: inconsistent entries for the Dillon family in two peerage guides--one indicating an heir, Lawrence Michael, and the other listing Laura Maud--had led to media inquiry.

In India, Dillon poured himself into meditation and study, eking out a living by publishing essays and small volumes under the name Lobzang Jivaka. These writings sought to render complex, esoteric systems and stories accessible to non-specialist, English-speaking audiences: *The Life of Milarepa* is a condensed biography of twelfth-century Tibetan monk Jetsun Milarepa; *Imji Getsul* tells the story of Dillon's months at the remote Rizong monastery in Ladakh; and *Growing Up into Buddhism* seeks to render Buddhism accessible to young people.

A fellow English convert hindered Dillon's own access to his vocation, however: in Kalimpong, Dillon encountered Sangharakshita, a monk of the Theravada tradition, details of whose identity and painful conflict with Dillon are revealed in Pagan Kennedy's *The First Man-Made Man*.

Although Dillon embraced Sangharakshita as his mentor, the latter believed that despite his surgeries Dillon remained a woman or a member of a "third sex" and was ineligible for ordination as a monk. Dillon's conflict with Sangharakshita led him to find his way into the Tibetan branch of Buddhism, which had drawn him for several years.

Although he had inherited a fortune from his aunts, Dillon had given away his worldly belongings in the hopes of becoming a monk. Thus, he struggled with poverty and severe malnutrition. Still, he had finally found a home, which he describes in *Out of the Ordinary* as a milieu in which he could continue to live out the answer he had come to about "the purpose of life in general and of [his] life in particular: to evolve spiritually."

Dillon sought full monastic ordination, but before it could take place, he succumbed to an unknown illness in the hill city of Dalhousie, India on May 15, 1962. He had sent his memoir to his literary agent, John Johnson, just days earlier on his forty-seventh birthday.

Against the wishes of Dillon's brother Robert, who had never accepted Dillon's transition, Johnson sought to publish the memoir, ultimately without success.

Thus in death as in life, Dillon was in transit, striving toward personal transformation and seeking inspiration, as he wrote in *Milarepa*, with "all those who feel that circumstances weigh against them and that their ends are unattainable."

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### **About the Author**

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