



Michael Dillon

(1st May 1915 – 15th May 1952)

was the second child of an Irish baronet. Assigned female at birth, he took an early interest in masculinity. At Oxford University he became President of the Women's Boat Club and was already presenting in a masculine fashion.

After graduation, Dillon got work near Bristol. A local GP, George Foss, was experimenting with a new drug, testosterone, but it had unfortunate side-effects for women patients. He wrote up the trial for The Lancet. Dillon thought those side-effects were just what he needed. Dr. Foss was initially happy to help, but asked Dillon to see a psychiatrist. This did not go well. The psychiatrist told Foss not to help Dillon. He also gossiped to people at Dillon's workplace, forcing him to seek alternative employment. Foss gave Dillon a supply of testosterone but declined to continue treatment.

WW2 created opportunities for people who were legally female. Dillon obtained work at a car dealership in Bristol. Meanwhile, testosterone began to change his body. In 1942 Dillon collapsed in the street and was taken to the Bristol Royal Infirmary. There he met a doctor who agreed to perform breast removal surgery. Dillon also obtained a letter explaining that his sex had been incorrectly recorded at birth. This allowed him to change his legal name and gender. Able to live freely as a man, he enrolled in a local college to study medicine. Dillon was introduced to the leading plastic surgeon, Sir Harold Gillies. He spent his free time working at Gillies' hospital in Basingstoke. In return, Gillies experimented with surgery to give Dillon a penis. Thirteen operations later, Dillon had the body he wanted.

As the war ended, Dillon completed his studies in Bristol. He wrote *Self: A Study in Ethics and Endocrinology*, which even today is leading edge in its patient-centred approach to trans medicine. Dillon qualified as a doctor through Trinity College, Dublin. *Self* was read by Roberta Cowell, a racing driver and former Spitfire pilot. She contacted Dillon who introduced her to Gillies. At the time removing someone's testicles was a crime. Cowell said that a friend performed that operation secretly so that Gillies could proceed with her vaginoplasty legally. The friend was probably Dillon. He also introduced Cowell to Arthur Milbourn, the Canon of Bristol Cathedral, who wrote the introduction to her autobiography.

Dillon hoped that he and Cowell might marry, but she turned him down. Distraught, he joined the merchant navy, serving as a ship's doctor until 1958 when he was outed by the Daily Express. Unable to work, Dillon headed to India to explore his interest in Buddhism.

The Buddhist leaders were reluctant to accept Dillon as they normally only admitted men. However, with patience and devotion he finally became the first Western European to be ordained as a Buddhist monk. Unfortunately, India did not agree with Dillon. He became sick and died in 1962.

A champion rower with two degrees, and an ordained monk, Michael Dillon encapsulated mind, body and spirit.

Cheryl Morgan – Co-Chair, OutStories Bristol (June 2020)

Body, Mind, Spirit

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