
A Disappearing Man

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LAURA Maud Dillon graduated from St Anne's (then the Society of Oxford Home-Students) in 1938. In the following decade, Laura took testosterone and underwent many surgeries to become Michael Dillon, complete with male birth certificate. It is not too anachronistic to call Dillon the first transsexual in Britain, and arguably the world's first female-to-male transsexual. Another transition of sorts came around 1960, when Dillon was ordained as a Buddhist monk under the name Lobzang Jivaka.

It is difficult to imagine a more extraordinary life or one with more perplexing contemporary resonance. Yet Dillon has all but disappeared from memory at Oxford. 'Visibility is important ... in a university city where many young people come out.'¹ So says the *LGBTQ+ Trail of the University's Collections*, launched during LGBT History Month two years ago. But Dillon has no place on this Trail. Searching all the University's websites (the domain *ox.ac.uk*) brings up a single substantive reference: three sentences in the Equality and Diversity Unit's *Transgender Guidance*.² Dillon also features under the 'Alternative Oxford Stories' heading on the TORCH website, though this page is inaccessible to Google search. The Hartland building at St Anne's portrays many notable alumnae and fellows, but makes only fleeting reference to Dillon as 'transsexual and Buddhist monk'. There is no photograph and nothing to suggest the historical importance of Dillon's time at Oxford.

Visibility was not always welcome for Dillon. The *Daily Mirror* printed a photograph of Laura in trousers about to cox the women's rowing team, under the caption 'Man or Woman?' This was his first experience of "the newspaper world which later was to become bitter indeed."³ His autobiography recalls "acid letters about making a freak of myself" from the aunts who raised him. This "regrettable incident" finds an echo in his 1946 essay *Self*, composed in the course of his decade-long physical transition. It describes those rare "travesties of manhood and womanhood" where "the body may approximate in essentials to one sex, male or female, but the personality is wholly peculiar to the opposite one". These people, he thinks, have "the most difficult life of all" for "their peculiarities are for ever being forced upon them by the thoughtless persons who gaze after them and loudly voice the question: "Is that a man or a girl?"⁴ For someone to whom the publication of a photograph was "regrettable", for whom a 1958 newspaper report made his "heart" stand "still", there are problems with commemoration.⁵

But Dillon was also determined that his story would not be forgotten. He told it twice: in coded form in the 1946 essay and in an autobiography finished shortly before his death, aged 47, in Ladakh. The TORCH webpage describes the autobiography as "an unprecedented account of what it was like to be a trans student in Oxford in the 1930s". In fact the narrative eludes any contemporary sexual or gender taxonomy. Not only did

Dillon wholeheartedly subscribe to a rigid gender binary, but he vigorously opposed the idea that women's mental achievement could ever equal men's. "The highest education cannot eradicate—even were it desirable for it to do so—the marked development of the emotional part which is woman's heritage".⁶ Paradoxically, just as these words were written, Oxford was nurturing (in the aftermath of the Second World War) talents like Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch, who would make lasting contributions to philosophy, the discipline which Dillon loved.

After Oxford, Dillon qualified as a doctor and practised as a ship's surgeon. The medical studies came in handy when he performed a do-it-yourself castration in his kitchen. This was required by Robert Cowell, as a prerequisite for genital surgery; Roberta then became Britain's first male-to-female transsexual. According to Dillon, "where the mind cannot be made to fit the body, the body should be made to fit, approximately at any rate, to the mind."⁷ When conflicting entries in *Debrett's* and *Burke's Peerage* outed him to a prurient press, Dillon insisted on resigning his post, believing that his female past destroyed his credibility with his patients. Although Dillon failed to value female minds, his achievement at Oxford—a third-class degree in Greats—can be appreciated only if we recognize his upbringing as a woman. Laura Dillon was educated at home by a series of maiden aunts and coached by a friendly vicar; she talked herself into a Classics degree even though (like most women at the time) she had little Latin or Greek.

At Oxford Dillon also began to explore sexuality. As he recalled, it was a place where "people who looked like me were not quite so rare".⁸ The word "transsexual" would not be coined by Harry Benjamin until 1956. A female "fellow and graduate" raised the possibility that Dillon was homosexual. "This was a new word to me and I investigated it and thought she was probably right, but it did not occur to me that, even so, one did anything about it".⁹ The consequences of doing something about it could be devastating. Dillon fell "madly into calf-love, primarily with one of the coxes who closely resembled Shirley Temple", nicknamed the Babe. Dillon's "dream world crashed" when the Babe became engaged. She confided that had Dillon "been a proper man she would have been hard-put to choose between us". Did that plant the seed for the later transition? Dillon subsequently articulated a conventional distinction between "moral" and "immoral" homosexuals: the former "deny themselves the fulfilment of their desires".¹⁰

Even Dillon's modest presence in St Anne's reveals a story he sought to hide in his lifetime: when he applied to study medicine at Trinity College Dublin, Oxford commendably supported Dillon's identity by issuing a new degree certificate. The problem of graduating from a female college was circumvented by substituting Brasenose, while the initials L.M. concealed his former

name. Perhaps Dillon's partial disappearance from Oxford memory can be explained by something familiar from women's history: the difficulty of tracking individuals whose names change. But Dillon sought to conceal his past, erasing his undergraduate years. Therefore he could not take credit for his enduring legacy for life at Oxford: turning women's rowing into a competitive sport, with rigorous training and matching uniforms.

We believe that Dillon deserves to be remembered. Eighty years since graduation passed without notice last year. Why wait for another decade? St Anne's should prominently display his photograph with an explanatory text. Speakers could be invited to talk on his life. His biographer, Liz Hodgkinson, has discovered intimate correspondence between Dillon and Roberta Cowell.¹¹ Jay Prosser, Reader in Humanities at Leeds, gave Dillon a key role in his landmark book on transsexual autobiography.¹² These suggestions are just a start. It is time for Dillon's presence to be recognised in all its complexity—as part of trans history and also as the story of a unique individual.

¹ <https://www.glam.ox.ac.uk/out-oxford>

² <https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/transgender/transgenderguidance/7practicalissuesfortransstudents/>. Dillon is mentioned also on the personal webpage of the second author.

³ Michael Dillon/Lobzang Jivaka, *Out of the Ordinary: A Life of Gender and Spiritual Transitions*, Fordham University Press, 2017.

⁴ Michael Dillon, *Self: A Study in Ethics and Endocrinology*, Heinemann, 1946, p. 50.

⁵ Dillon, *Out of the Ordinary*, p. 29.

⁶ Dillon, *Self*, p. 101.

⁷ Dillon, *Self*, p. 53.

⁸ Dillon, *Out of the Ordinary*, p. 89.

⁹ Dillon, *Out of the Ordinary*, p. 81.

¹⁰ Dillon, *Self*, p. 44-45.

¹¹ Liz Hodgkinson, *From a Girl to a Man: How Laura Became Michael*, Quartet Books, 2nd edition, 2015.

¹² Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Columbia University Press, 1998.

The tenacious frog

*A surimono poetry print of 1822 in the
Ashmolean Museum*

The calligrapher's brush
swept a little green frog
upwards into a willow tree.

It stretched for a twig
but grasped only air.
Splash! – back in the pond.

Scattering droplets, it leapt again,
touching the willow then falling back,
repeating its leap over and over.

Ono no Tofu put down his umbrella
to watch. His black court hat flopped
in the rain. Drops pinged on his ceremonial sword.

His kimono billowed over his tall wooden clogs
sinking in the mud. *Now it will give up*,
he thought. The frog focused again.

Once more it launched into the air.
Its haunches bulged. Its limbs quivered.
The willow bent down and the frog grasped hold.

It heaved its body onto a branch and clung on.
The branch lifted in the wind and waved the frog up.
The frog lay on its perch, panting.

Ono no Tofu went back to his studio.
He picked up a brush and painted the frog
in the willow tree, with its reflection in the pond.

Then, with his finest brush, he penned his poem.
It rippled down the willow tree,
ending in a flourish just above the water.

A dyeing art

Your paper is pulped flax; protect it from fungi.
Size with cucumber seeds; dye with mulberry juice.
Burnish with metal tools; scent it with myrtle.

For ink, use lamp black: gather soot with a feather.
Mix with water and green vitriol from copper.
Add gum arabic from acacia, gall nuts from oak
trees.

Bray the mixture in a mortar. Learn to judge
which ingredients to modify. For red ink
use madder root, or cinnabar for vermilion.

For ink reluctant to leave the nib, choose
broad-nibbed pens. Employ your finest calligraphy.
Centuries hence, the world will marvel at your art.

DEBORAH MASON