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extra

Laurence Michael Dillon of Lismullen: world's first transsexual man

Aidan Collins

Dum Spiro Spero ("Whilst I breathe, I hope"). This was the motto of the Dillons of Lismullen, Co. Meath in Ireland. So it was for Laura Maud Dillon, born on 1 May 1915, the only daughter of Lt Robert Arthur Dillon (RN) and Laura Maud Reese. Her father Robert Dillon was the younger brother and heir to Sir John Fox Dillon 7th Baronet of Lismullen of Lismullen Park, now the site of the Lismullin (sic) Institute, a Retreat Centre operated by Opus Dei.

Laura spent her childhood between the family estate at Lismullen near Tara, Co. Meath and Folkestone, Kent before entering St Anne's College in Oxford for her undergraduate degree. A tall, athletic, rather androgynous woman, she represented Oxford in rowing and was president of the Ladies Rowing Club there, taking a Blue in 1938. Her brother Robert William became the 8th Baronet in 1925.

Never feeling comfortable with her sexuality, Laura experimented with the male hormone testosterone from 1939 and spent the war years adopting male societal roles before coming to the attention of the pioneering plastic surgeon Harold Gillies, who agreed to consider her case. She continued testosterone treatment, underwent bilateral mastectomies and in 1944 had her birth certificate amended, becoming Laurence Michael Dillon.

Michael Dillon became a medical student in Trinity College, Dublin in 1944. Between 1946 and 1949 he underwent 13 gender reassignment surgeries. In 1946 he published *Self: A Study in Endocrinology and Ethics*, which was the first work to address the difficulties associated with transgender issues. *Self* brought Dillon to the attention of Robert (later Roberta) Cowell, who would become the first to undergo male to female gender reassignment. Dillon himself performed the orchidectomy (testicular amputation) on Cowell, although he was still only a medical student. Their relationship became an affair, although ultimately Cowell rejected Dillon.

Dillon represented Trinity in men's rowing and after qualification in 1951 he became a ship's doctor. This suited his wish for relative obscurity. He made an error in this regard by producing his amended birth certificate to *Debrett's*, the journal listing aristocratic titles and lines of inheritance. In 1958 Dillon was listed as the next male in line for the baronetcy at Lismullen and the discrepancy between *Debrett's* version and *Burke's Peerage* led to a scandal that caused him to flee to India. There he involved himself in monastic life and wrote on aspects of Buddhism. He died in the Punjab in 1962 aged 47.

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