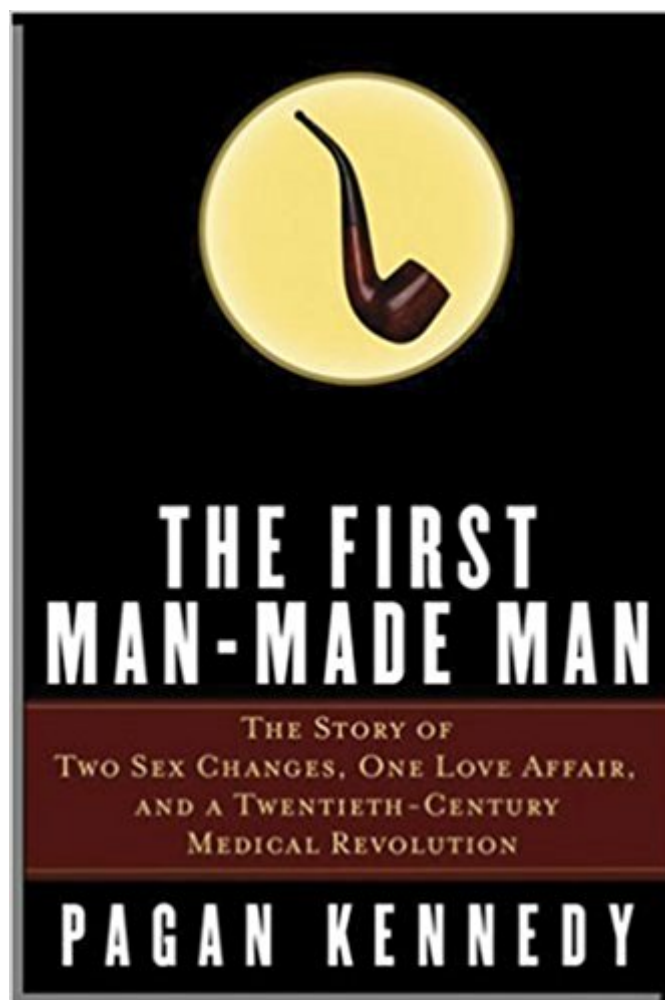




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# The First Man-Made Man: The Story Of Two Sex Changes, One Love Affair, And A Twentieth-Century Medical Revolution



## Synopsis

In the 1920s when Laura Dillon felt like a man trapped in a woman's body, there were no words to describe her condition; transsexuals had yet to enter common usage. And there was no known solution to being stuck between the sexes. Laura Dillon did all she could on her own: she cut her hair, dressed in men's clothing, bound her breasts with a belt. But in a desperate bid to feel comfortable in her own skin, she experimented with breakthrough technologies that ultimately transformed the human body and revolutionized medicine. From upper-class orphan girl to Oxford lesbian, from post-surgery romance with Roberta Cowell (an early male-to-female) to self-imposed exile in India, Michael Dillon's incredible story reveals the struggles of early transsexuals and challenges conventional notions of what gender really means.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 1950, Michael Dillon, a dapper, bearded medical student, met Roberta Cowell, a boyish-looking woman, for lunch in a discreet London restaurant. During the lunch, Dillon announced that five years earlier he was a woman named Laura, and Roberta stated she was on her way to full womanhood from being Robert. Eventually, Cowell (a former Royal Air Force captain) would garner fame as a glamorous woman and author of the 1954 bestseller *Roberta Cowell's Story*, while in 1958 Dillon began a long, rocky journey to become a Tibetan monk. But Kennedy (Black Livingstone) does far more than detail their short-lived, topsy-turvy transgender romance. She gives us an enlightening tour of how mid-century science conceptualized gender, hormones and transsexual surgery, as well as how advances in plastic surgery for men maimed in WWI became the basis for sex change

operations. Kennedy's slangy style—she describes presurgery Dillon as living in the "slushy canal between sexes"—also suits the material. Though her effort doesn't surpass other books on the topic—especially Joanne Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*—it's an entertaining and informative popular history. (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Adult/High School—Born into a wealthy family near the beginning of the 20th century, Laura Dillon attended Oxford University and went on to become a doctor, a published author, and, eventually, a man named Michael. At Oxford, she tried to identify as a homosexual, but that didn't quite fit; it would be years before the words transsexual or transgendered were coined. In 1939, Dillon began to experiment with a new drug, testosterone. Her life changed after meeting Dr. Gillies, a practitioner in the emerging field of plastic surgery, who performed several operations to reconfigure Dillon's anatomy. Upon meeting Roberta Crowell in 1949, Michael believed that he had found his soul mate. Born and raised as a man, Crowell was in the process of transforming into a woman. Following a failed love affair, Dillon traveled to India to study Buddhism. He died a pauper after finally discovering happiness among monks in Tibet. He left a legacy of notebooks, memoirs, and a groundbreaking treatise on the nature of sex and gender. These form the basis of Kennedy's narrative, which leapfrogs back and forth across Dillon's life. Kennedy traces the emotional isolation and triumphs throughout Dillon's struggle to define himself according to his own rules. The author peppers the text with historical details of early-20th-century medicine and evolving notions of gender in Western society. This story is fascinating to modern readers whether or not they have personal questions about gender.—Heidi Dolamore, San Mateo County Library, CA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

This book is amazing. The world first man made penis and the life of the poor man who was blessed with it. it opens history that most transgender people have never dreamed happened. And the truly sad story of the first female to male sexual reassignment surgery. Highly recommended  
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great read,,,,,,,,,

I've read any book on this topic I can get my hands on. Well written book, with enough pictures to

give me a sense of who Michael was and how desperately he wanted to live a normal life as a man. I wish his autobiography was available to read. I highly recommend this book!

This is neither a particularly insightful look into the general subject of the transgendered, nor a riveting account of these particular individuals. Much posturing, of the "as he gazed over the deck of the ship, he felt....." variety--describing in only the broadest, most hackneyed terms the inner monologues of personalities more difficult to fathom than most. And the over-hyped "love affair" chronicled between the two transgendered principals proves to be much more smoke than fire. All these paeans to Pagan are a mystery to me. The book's a bore.

Although I am involved in the trans community- both personally and professionally- and I am also a published writer, I generally am not impressed by the "trans biography" genre. Maybe because, although transitioning is a pretty big journey to an individual and in most cases requires a good bit of soul-searching and courage, you really have to do more than change your sex to make yourself a worthy subject for a good biography in my opinion. Dillon however, is a man who deserves it (a film too, hopefully, but they'd better cast a man to play him, this habit of women playing transitioned men just doesn't do them justice). Not only was Michael the first to transition to male before the word "transsexual" existed, before Christine Jorgensen came out, but he lived the life of a legend- outfitting the oxfords womens row team in mens uniforms and rowing them upstream, dodging bombs and putting out fires during the blitz, publishing the first book on the medical ethics of treating transexuality with hormones, becoming an MD and performing an illegal operation on another transexual, working on ships crossing the globe for months at sea, giving up all worldly possessions and fleeing to the cliffs of Tibet to live as the only westerner at the hellish Rizong monastery...trans or not, this guys life is as exciting as Hemingway's, and he deserves his place in the annals of modern western history. I was surprised I'd never heard of him before. One thing I did not like was that the author sort of gave him this "pathetic" flavor, which is commonly projected onto the lives of trans people. "Poor Michael Dillon, he just wanted to be normal and he never got peace and his penis was weird and he never got laid". It's sad that even a pioneering, dauntless, incredible individual who changed reality to conform to his vision, who lived a tumultuous, georgeous, meaningful life to rival any of the 20th century, is framed through this lens. I would give 4.5 stars- it could not totally avoid the "depressing tranny" trap. (It's true he was never fully happy in the end, but who would be after years of being reviled and treated like the elephant man? Irregardless, transition is not a panacea for all problems in one's life). Also, there was not enough about the love affair,

which seemed unrequited and slightly disappointing. I found the info about the beginnings of plastic surgery and sexual medicine/psychology to be fascinating. What was also fascinating to me, is the sheer magic of him- even in this day and age, when there are laws in many cities to protect trans from discrimination, when there are trans bars and shows and dating sites and guidances for treating transition- it is very difficult to convince person after person to change your identity documentation and records. In the 1920's, before Harry Benjamin, before Christine Jorgenson, before even Hirschfield- Michael Dillon was able to convince a doctor to give him testosterone, convince legal personnel to change his papers, others to change his name in the peerage books that list noble family trees and make himself heir, convince an army surgeon to perform surgery on him, convince a couple of tibetan monks to accept him as a white transsexual despite their taboos. He did this all above board, explaining himself. This succession of feats suggests that despite the way the author fleshes him as nerdy, somewhat arrogant, sort of socially pathetic- that he must have also had a level of charisma or personal power that is not accounted for. I now find myself compelled to respond to comments made by other reviewers, in the context of Dillon's biography: The suggestion by another reviewer that Michael would have been satisfied today living as an athletic or lesbian woman is just preposterous. (Although lesbianism is currently the height of glam, more FTM's are transitioning now than ever. It's possible that as a trans man today, he would not have gotten a phalloplasty- as today you can live a full happy life as a man with a tiny clit-dick and male ID and father children with donated sperm- but who knows, some guys still want the phallus. ) With a blooming gay/lesbian club scene in Berlin that would rival modern San Francisco, an athletic androgynous look that would make him a hot butch, and a family with nobility/wealth he could have played absentee daughter and lived out some ultra cool peter pan fantasy as an androgynous tomboy dyke with an Eton haircut. Instead he spent years of his life "hunting" doctors and chasing false leads, studying chemistry and medicine and mysticism. He spend every ounce of his energy-physical, mental, emotional, spiritual- to virtually bend time and space and other people's minds- in order to obtain what he needed to transition. This was his life's work, and in the end he was both doctor and patient, both threshway-crosser and gatekeeper. Transitioning -especially in that time and place- is \*much\* less acceptable/desirable, much more arduous, and required many more sacrifices than being gay would have. To say that he would not have done the same today is just obnoxious. Another reviewer admits that someone not being able to adjust to reality and taking such drastic measures to change their sex, especially had they not heard of a precedent seems, well, crazy. Perhaps that is why it is in the diagnostic manual. Many trans people will tell you that if they were locked in a room alone for the rest of their life, they would still prioritize transition. That it

is not a choice. Trans may have more in common with an eating disorder, extreme sport, or spiritual discipline than it does with being gay. Having a compulsion to change the physical sex characteristics of one's body at any cost does not "make sense", and it probably never will. But that doesn't mean it shouldn't be acceptable to transition. And it doesn't mean that otherwise reasonable people afflicted by this compulsion are totally demented or doomed. The Mystery of Transsexuality is one of our modern archetypal Mysteries (in the spiritual sense of the word). That it does not "make sense" is why Michael Dillon, as a reasonable person, spent hours scrawling in notebooks trying to figure out the link between gender and hormones while bombs were literally falling around him during air raids, it is probably what drove him to medicine as a career, and it is definitely what drove him to Tibet. What's important to remember is that a Mystery can never truly be comprehended. It can only be reconciled.

They say that truth is stranger than fiction and this book proves it. How in 1940s London two of the first sex reassignments could find each other and have their lives intertwined is almost beyond believe. And for those interested in the history of transsexualism this book fills in a lot of details you will not find other places, for instance, Laura/Michael Dillon was the first natal born female on whom phalloplasty was attempted. I read this book in one sitting on the plane to S.F. to have surgery with DR. O.

One of the most fascinating books I've ever read. Kennedy manages to take on a variety of subjects and plot lines than in another writer's hands could come across as, well, callow or, as Dillon feared his entire adult life, exploitive. The heartbreakingly story of Michael Dillon's continuous quest for acceptance and identity, whether it be gender driven or spiritual, is deftly portrayed by this generous and brilliant writer. Even in the most curious aspects of this story, Kennedy remains a historian, never giving judgment, but simply reporting the complicated facts of the story in a beautifully written narrative. Pagan has written several outstanding works of fiction and non-fiction (I especially love *The Exes*), but this is truly a masterpiece from one of the most original and exciting writers of our time. I can't wait to see what she tackles next.

*The First Man-Made Man* is a remarkable, poignant personal story that Pagan Kennedy has skillfully woven in with the medical, scientific and social history of the mid-20th century. Anybody who's ever felt hemmed in by gender roles will be able to relate to Laura Dillon's dissatisfactions with being a girl in pre-WWII England, and Kennedy's compassionate writing carries us along the rest of the

bizarre trip. The story is full of rich, novelistic details: Laura's mother dying giving birth to her; Laura living as a man in a garage putting out fires during the Blitz; Laura/Michael's surgeon figuring out how to construct a penis; Buddhist monks' attitudes toward members of "the third sex." It's impossible not to race through this fascinating book, but it lingers in the mind long after.

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