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Pioneer of sex change surgery

Reviewed by Julie Foster
Sunday, March 18, 2007

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The First Man-Made Man

The Story of Two Sex Changes, One Love Affair and a Twentieth-Century Medical Revolution

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By Pagan Kennedy

BLOOMSBURY; 214 PAGES; $23.95

Laura Dillon faced a double conundrum. She knew she was different from everyone else. She also knew there were no words to express that difference. Born into an upper-class British family in the early 20th century, Dillon came to believe that she was a man trapped in a woman's body.

"The First Man-Made Man: The Story of Two Sex Changes, One Love Affair and a Twentieth-Century Medical Revolution," by Pagan Kennedy, is a well-sculpted account of Dillon's remarkable life amid the buttoned-up attitudes of her times.

Kennedy splices in fascinating side stories associated with Dillon's saga. She details the rage for a bizarre sex operation, the Steinach, popular during the 1920s, that was performed on W.B. Yeats and Sigmund Freud; the rise of organology, a bogus field of medicine whose purpose was to raise the level of hormones and thus increase a man's vigor by "grafting slices of chimpanzee testicles into their gonads"; and the forgotten climate of tolerance in 1920s Berlin that fostered cross-dressing and the founding of the first center devoted to research of sexuality and gender.

Dillon's story also establishes a framework from which today's attitudes and practices can be viewed. Consider a recent Chronicle article detailing San Francisco's role in providing insurance coverage for sex-change operations for its employees. Since 2001, when the city took the lead in providing such coverage, 67 major corporations decided to cover the surgeries, hormone therapy, short-term leave, medical visits and mental-health services for transsexual employees. The article concludes that, while emotional and psychological complications are still formidable for people who opt for surgery, today the largest hurdle is financial.

Kennedy reminds readers how, at the beginning of the 20th century, "the ovaries and testicles were still shrouded in mystery." Estrogen and testosterone had not yet been identified. In England, the idea of a transsexual, "a person who used hormones to change his sex and then lived happily ever after," had not yet been imagined. Even Dillon's lesbian friends at Oxford University had it wrong. One advised her to seduce a woman. Dillon was attracted to women, but they were always straight, and usually on the threshold of marriage. So she gave up trying. Instead, after beginning testosterone treatments and living as Michael Dillon, he published a prescient book titled "Self: A Study in Ethics and Endocrinology," synthesizing his ideas on transsexuality.

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"Dillon became one of the first scholars in the world to work out a classification system for sexual identity and sexual desire. He suggested that homosexuals who cross-dressed (for instance, butch lesbians) belonged in a completely different category from transsexuals." Dillon objected to psychiatrists' insistence that people be dissuaded from their core identity and suggested that sexual identity was developed while people were still in the womb. The only true way to determine a person's sex was to ask. "True sex may have nothing to do with the appearance of the body; rather, the sense of being male, female or something in between results from a 'psychological build.' "

Dillon's story also illustrates the shift in attitude toward plastic surgery. Mainly because of a young doctor during World War I, who persuaded the British War Office to provide him space for reconstructing ravaged faces, it became an acceptable branch of medicine. Dr. Harold Gillies established Rooksdown, the first clinic dedicated to plastic surgery, where after 13 operations Dillon became the first "man-made man."

Dillon went on to obtain a medical degree from Trinity College in Dublin. While there, he fell in love with Roberta Cowell, the first male-to-female transsexual in England. Kennedy details the strange and doomed romance and its shattering effects on Dillon when it collapsed.

Later, fleeing possible revelations of his life story by the British tabloid press, Dillon retreated to India and embraced Buddhism. By 1962, he had completed his autobiography. He left nothing out, except for his romance with Cowell. The book was never published, being blocked by Dillon's estranged older brother. Later that year, Dillon died under mysterious circumstances in Dalhousie, an Indian hill station on the border of Kashmir. He was 47.

As turbulent as Dillon's life was, Kennedy reminds readers, he was flying solo. Christine Jorgensen didn't transfix the world until 1953 after undergoing treatments that transformed her from a gawky boy to a lush blond. In 1974, Jan Morris skillfully told her story of striving to succeed as a rugged world-traveling man, knowing all the while that he was in the wrong body. When Dillon began his quest, however, he struggled alone. Had his autobiography been published or he'd survived to live openly, Dillon could have been a model for others. Thanks to Kennedy, his story has finally been given a life.

Julie Foster also reviews books for Publishers Weekly and is a member of the National Book Critics Circle.

*This article appeared on page **M - 3** of the San Francisco Chronicle*

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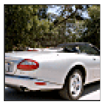

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