

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

E: Hello and welcome to Queer as Fact! I'm Eli.

H: I'm Hamish.

L: I'm Lara.

E: We are a queer history podcast that comes out on the 1st and 15th of every month, bringing you a topic from queer history from around the world and throughout time. Today we'll be discussing the writer and doctor Michael Dillon, who was the first transgender man to undergo a phalloplasty, and the first Englishman to be ordained as a novice monk in Tibetan Buddhism.

[Queer As Fact intro music]

So if you have listened to an episode of ours before, you might have noticed that there's a voice you haven't heard before – we have a special guest today, who's our very good friend Lara, and she's going to be bringing you an episode soon, so she's here to see how the inner workings of the blanket fort unfold.

H and L: [laugh]

E: Thank you for being here, Lara.

L: Thank you for having me.

E: That's alright.

Before we get started, we have a few content warnings. This episode contains general mentions of dysphoria and period typical misogyny and transphobia. Ah, and the latter includes talking about people being outed. We also discuss malnourishment and starvation, and there are also some descriptions of surgery. Ah, lastly there are some brief mentions of suicidal ideation and emotional abuse. So with the content warnings over, we can move on to talking about the life of Michael Dillon.

He was born on the 1st of May 1915 and his mother died of sepsis when he was 10 days old. It wasn't the done thing at the time for a single father to raise children, so he and 15-month-old brother are sent to live with their aunts. His father is pretty much out of the picture from there. He becomes an alcoholic and he dies when Michael's about 8.

So they live in a small town with their aunts. One of their aunts is very meek and isn't much of a presence in their lives, and the other one is very manipulative and controlling, and will do things like tell Michael that he doesn't love her enough when he tries to leave the house, and forbids him from having friends over and joining sports teams and things like that, and that effectively means that he's cut off from having any kind of social life, and he grows up without friends.

He said that like, when he gets a bit older, he'll ignore someone that he's been introduced to once because he'll assume that they don't want to talk to him and things like that, so it's got quite a lasting impact on him.

His older brother is sent off to a day school and then sent off to a boarding school when he's 8 so he's also not around all that much. So Michael reaches puberty, he becomes more dysphoric, he starts trying to bind his chest with a belt. As he's getting older people are telling him that he needs to act ladylike and he ignores it because he basically feels like it's irrelevant to him, and then one day he's walking along a country lane with a friend of his and the friend kind of like steps back and gestures for him to go first to get over a fence – as this kind of chivalric gesture – and he has this

horrible realisation that his friend views him as a woman. So he's kind of in this place now where he knows that he's a man but he doesn't have any context to explain the discrepancy that he's forced to live with.

So from a young age he reads voraciously and that includes on things like spirituality and philosophy, which are a life-long interest. He starts asking himself those questions that like, teenagers ask themselves, about like, "But what is the meaning of life?"

H and L: [laugh]

E: And—

H: He has an emo phase.

E: He.... Yeah. [laughs] He invents that too.

H: [laughs]

E: Yeah, the difference between Michael's philosophy phase when he's a teenager and most teenagers though is that it's not a phase; it sticks. He also begins teaching himself Ancient Greek out of a textbook, and he's been learning Latin as well with a tutor. The only friend he makes in his teens is the town vicar and when he gets to the point of leaving high-school the vicar really campaigns for him to go to Oxford like he did, and the aunts essentially want him to just live with them and take care of them and don't really do anything with his life, but eventually they yield and he goes away to university.

So Oxford is – I mean, what college is a lot of people, especially if they come from a boring town, or like an abusive family, whatever... He says that "someone has truly said that if you mentioned the word "Oxford" to an old Oxford man, wherever he may be in the world, at once a far-away look comes into his eyes and he becomes silent with a half-smile playing on his lips."

H: Uni was great.

E: Yeah.

[laughter]

E: Well, no, it wasn't. It's just – I think it is like, not just uni in particular, it is this kind of thing that people have about like, Oxford.

H: Hm.

E: But yeah, he is delighted to get away from this small town with these horrible women and to be at Oxford. It doesn't solve all of his problems though. He still isn't doing well socially – first of all because he was socialised terribly as a child, and also because whenever he goes to social settings he's with these young men who are really condescending to him and treating him like a woman and trying to like, put their arms round his waist and things, and he just doesn't want to have a bar of it. Also he enrolls in theology, and then he changes to classics, and the classics degree's insane. He reads so much in like, dimly-lit rooms of tiny Greek letters in his first semester that it ruins his eyesight.

H: Oof, wow.

E: Yeah.

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

L: Did he study philosophy?

E: He starts to and then he decided to switch. He also very — I don't know if like throughout his entire life — will study it just kind of on his own, not at a formal institution or anything like that, and so there were a bunch of times where a source would be like "Back in his uni days, when he'd studied this." It's hard to differentiate when like, a formalised education was being referred to and when it was just him like, buying 30 books and binge reading them.

H: Mhm. This is also the second time in two podcasts that somebody has ruined their eyes reading Greek in dimly lit rooms.

E: Who was the other one?

H: During the Keynes podcast, one of his boyfriends—

E: Ohh yeah.

H: —was a papyrologist.

E: The description he wrote in his autobiography of the classics degree made me feel really ashamed of my classics degree—

H: [laughs]

E: —'cause it was nowhere near as hardcore. It was all of this massive lists of texts that you were just expected to know when you got there and be able to translate any paragraph of—

H: Oh wow!

E: —and I can't translate just like, any random paragraph of Homer if you like, spring it on me in a dark alleyway—

H: [laughs]

E: —and I feel bad about that now!

H: That's a great image!

E: Yeah. [laughs] No it's not!

He also had this quote I want to read to read to because it's very #relatablecontent in that I have literally seen this rearranged into a meme on the internet — that at Oxford there are three courses open to every undergraduate: to be social, athletic, or studious. Of these he can do any two at once, but no more, if he is to be successful in one of them."

H: Wow, that is a true statement!

E: Yeah, and it's literally the thing you see on like, Facebook or whatever where it's like "Sleep, socialising, studies — pick two." So that's been around for a century at least.

He does rowing—

H: Ooh!

E: —and he feels very strongly about rowing.

H: Yes, I feel very strongly about rowing. Hello rowers out there.

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

E: Yeah, so he joins the women's rowing team. He is enormously competent at it; he becomes captain. He's really frustrated though with the fact that women's team is viewed as a joke at the time. They rowed downstream so they don't strain their wombs.

H: Wow.

E: Yeah!

H: [laughs] What... How were they... What were they... How were they holding the oars?!

E: So he petitioned the university - and also just like, anyone who would listen to him - passionately that they should be allowed to compete like the men's team did; so they should have uniforms and it should be like, upstream and everything.

L: They didn't have uniforms?

H: What were they wearing?

E: It's not really clear on if they didn't have a uniform at all or if they didn't have like, a proper uniform that he viewed as being like.... 'Cause he has this whole thing throughout his life about like, men's uniforms.

H: Right.

E: Right. So what they end up having is like a blazer and a cap and trousers and he's like, "Yes. This is what I wanted."

H: That's good.

E: So beforehand they were wearing like, bloomers and skirts and everything.

H: Okay.

E: And it sounds like something that would frankly be a bit of an annoying outfit to row in.

H: Yeah. Especially like, in the water.

E: I don't know if there was like an insignia somewhere on that outfit or something though.

So they wear blazers and little caps and things now, so he's pleased.

So it's probably worth mentioning early on that his upbringing - like, he's a member of the minor nobility, which will become important later; he is an Oxford man and everything, and that like, not just being a man but being like a very particular kind of man is very important to him, and he's got a lot of like, class hang-ups.

L: I'm sensing that, yes.

E: Yeah. Yeah.

E and L: [laugh]

E: It is something that he kind of later on in his life, especially when he starts dwelling more and more on the nature of soul and things like that, that he views as kind of something holding him back—

H: Hm!

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

E: —and he has a lot of time where like, he ends up working on ships a lot later, which we'll get to, and he like, certainly isn't hesitant to just kind of do whatever work needs to be done, even if it's below his station there. But like, he is still nevertheless quite classist, and I felt it was just worth mentioning it earlier 'cause it'll be around in the background the whole time.

H: What year is this?

E: So he's born in 1915, so this is kind of like the mid-30s by now.

H: Okay.

E: So he's increasingly expressing himself in like, more and more masculine ways and that's partly just 'cause he's living independently now — he can do that — but he's still not really had like a big realisation or anything like that, it's just sort of like, more like inevitable self-expression developing rather than like a conscious decision to try and take on more masculine roles or anything like that. A friend of his at Oxford tells him that he's obviously a lesbian, and he kind of mentally tries that on for size and never really feels at home with it. He's got all these lesbians telling him that he needs to like, take a woman.

H: Well... It is the 1930s at Oxbridge, and as we've seen it was an intensely gay place.

E: Yeah. And he is just kind of like, "Mm.... No. No." He falls for a few women but they're all like, straight women who are looking for suitors and one of them is like, "Oh, you know, if you'd been a man would could have got married, but...." And then she goes and marries someone else, and he's like, "That was encouraging and also not."

H: Yeah, that's the worst.

E: Yeah. [laughs] So he kind of after a bit of that is left with this understanding that he's not a lesbian but he's like, something. He wants to start ingratiating himself into male circles but he just doesn't know how to do it, and then he meets a fellow undergrad whose name is Bill, who is from a lower class, and he's on a scholarship and what-not, so he's also an outcast because that's how having not the right accent at Oxford in the 1930s goes. And so they become friends and Michael tells him that he wants to live as a man and Bill's like, "Alright. Cool." And they go shopping for men's clothes and he smuggles Michael into boxing matches, which were things that women weren't allowed to go to then! And he buys him a motorcycle.

H: Man, Bill sounds awesome!

E: No, no, no. Like, Michael buys a motorcycle. Bill was, like, pretty awesome.

H: [laughs]

E: Like, that's all the facts I know about him, but you know, he sounds like a cool guy. And he starts to feel like he's kind of carved out a bit of a niche for himself, and then he graduates! More relatable content! [laughs]

H: Yeah. Then he finds a podcast...

E: [laughs] Oh no.

So he gets job at a research lab in a country town where they dissect brains, and he's good at it, and he's—

H: Wait. Didn't he study classics?

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

E: Yeah!

H: Okay.

E: Mm!

H: 30s science, ladies and gentlemen!

E: Yeah. I don't know he's actually dissecting the brains or what. I don't know. But whatever work he's doing there, it is medical in some way, and he likes it and is good at it. But he didn't make any friends, and he's kind of at this point where people on the street can visibly tell that he's not a woman but he's not passing for a man, and so like, children are laughing at him, and people will like, get on the bus and sit down and immediately start having a debate about his gender and things like that. And he's essentially in this position where he can't really make his way in society, and he wants to transition but there is not, like— that doesn't exist. There's no established way to do that.

So he hears about a doctor who specialised in sex problems and he decides to make an appointment. This doctor... his name is George Foss. He's been using testosterone - which has been synthesised like, four years ago or something - to treat women, chiefly those who were experiencing like, constant menstruation and things like that, and to him Michael represents this big opportunity 'cause he can experiment with it more on someone who actually wants what women would view as uncomfortable side-effects.

H: As opposed... Sorry, the way you phrased that made it sound like "Here's someone who actually wants to be experimented on, as opposed to the 13 people—"

E: Well—

H: "—locked in his basement."

E: [laughs] I mean he kind of does want to be experimented on.

Michael goes to him and explains and Dr. Foss is like, "Alright, I'll help you out if you meet with a psychiatrist colleague of mine" and Michael agrees, and he goes and sits through like, a million questions, and then he goes to another appointment with Dr. Foss and he finds him completely changed; he's no longer willing to help him. One of Michael's biographers speculates that he's probably been like, warned off by his colleagues 'cause this a bit too controversial to be getting into, but he does - in what is clearly good and ethical medical practice - just like, toss Michael a bottle of testosterone pills—

H: Oh wow!

E: —to say, "Just take them and see what happens!"

H: [laughs]

E: And Michael's like, "I guess I will!"

H: That's super dodgy.

E: Yeah.

L: Did he learn about these doctors through his work dissecting brains?

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

E: I don't know. Yeah. It's not said anywhere. It could have literally just been like, "Ah, look at this tiny little interesting article in the paper."

And then the psychiatrist that Michael had gone to see gossips about him at a dinner party, and all of a sudden everyone in this tiny little town knows all of his business and is like, laughing at him in the streets and things. So Michael flees to Bristol and he gets a job and a garage. So now this is during World War Two, so all of the men are leaving for the front, and like, women can get jobs, which is very novel. And so he gets a job in a garage, and this includes watching it at night and putting out any fires that arise because of the Blitz.

So he does start taking these testosterone pills, and just sort of seeing if they work. And they do.

H: Hooray!

E: And his voice begins to deepen and he puts on muscle mass from that and from all of the like, manual labour he's doing, and he grows stubble and things like that, and within a few months he's passing among strangers as a man

H: Does he have a lot of these or does he run out?

E: Yeah, so he clearly just keeps getting them from somewhere.

H: Okay.

E: Nowhere is it recorded how. It is the case that testosterone is I think pretty much available over the counter at this point.

H: Okay.

E: It was mostly at this point kind of viewed as a thing to put the spring back in the step of like, old men.

H: Right.

E: Yeah.

H: That makes sense.

E: So once he's passing as a man I think he can pretty much just go to a chemist and be like, "Yes, I need the testosterone" and they're like, "Sure, here. Have this medication that we should probably be....you know—"

H: Yeah.

E: "—regulating in some way."

H: They did the same thing with arsenic and cocaine.

E: Mmhm, yeah.

He can pass amongst strangers and that's a big relief but the men that he is working with at the garage know his situation, and whenever someone new comes there they tell them about Michael in order to laugh at them, and they'll tell like customers and things like that, until the boss tells them not to; not out of protection for Michael more just out of like, "The customers are confused and you're holding things up. Shut up and get on with it."

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

Michael recounts how there's even someone who starts working there who's completely deaf and they like, make sure to write it down, and give it to him on a note so he also can laugh at Michael. He describes the four years he ends up working at the garage as being the worst of his life. He.... To the extent that he has a tin hat that he's meant to wear during the bombings in order to protect him somewhat, and he won't wear it, 'cause he doesn't care if he dies.

H: Jesus!

E: So while he's like, waiting at the garage all night he starts to study medical texts. He's reading up about all of this crazy new science that's going on with sex hormones, and he starts writing a book on endocrinology. He still doesn't have like any medical training at this point.

H and L: [laugh]

H: I mean, I feel like he may have some ethics, which is maybe one up on everyone else though.

E: Yeah, yeah. So he's basically just compiling it from whatever medical books he can get his hands on and things like that, and he's arguing for a form of medical ethics that is decades ahead of its time, that we pretty much haven't accepted today, which is that the only way to know someone's gender is to ask them. It might not be just completely based on their physical sex, it would have to do with what he describes as their like, psychological build, which is what we would call someone's gender identity today; and that the person who should have the final say over their medical treatment is that person. These ideas regarding transgender people are generally credited with being down to people like Harry Benjamin, who is a fairly revolutionary doctor in terms of treating transgender people, who's working in like the 50s onwards I think. But Michael beat him to it and beat the rest of them to it by like a couple of decades. It's probably also worth noting that terms like transgender, we have no sign that he ever knows about these words at all. He uses terms like hermaphrodite and intersex and things like that. It's probably worth noting that hermaphrodite is a term that we'd consider like, outdated and pejorative now, but this is all he has in terms of terminology to talk about this, and quite often he'll just kind of say things like "the issue" 'cause he really is just kind of inventing this as he goes along.

H: Yeah.

E: It's quite common for trans people who were transitioning in this early stages medical transition existing to conceptualise it as a kind of intersex condition, which I guess is just pretty much because that's the closest thing to a framework that existed at that time.

So then an orphan boy whose name is Gilbert Barrow comes looking for work at the garage and he's made Michael's partner at his night-time watch job. So they're sleeping in the garage together and they become close friends and then Gilbert gets called up to go to war and so Michael decides that he's going to broach the topic of his gender with Gilbert and he discovers that the other garage workers had told Gilbert, but that Gilbert had defended him; he said that he's just as much a man as any of them and he'd threatened to punch anyone who said otherwise.

H: What a good egg!

E: Yes. I love Gilbert.

So he leaves and goes off to war but they stay in touch for the rest of Michael's life and then when Gilbert has a son later on Michael like helps support him through going to like a good school, 'cause Gilbert seems to get stable but he's never like, particularly well-off, and his son seems to be like, quite bright and intellectually inclined, so Michael pays for him to go to a good school, and Gilbert

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

and Michael periodically go on like, cycling trips together and things, and I'm going to read you a quote about one of these trips because I thought it was funny. So he says, "One night we camped by Lake Trasimene and went to sleep on hay damp from a thunderstorm, hoping to dream of the Roman legions which were routed there by Hannibal, and to hear the tramp of marching feet, but all that happened was that we got colds and mine turned into laryngitis."

H and L: [laugh]

E: [laughs] So let that be a lesson to you.

But yeah, that's far off into the future for now. He's working at this garage and he hates it and he would quit and get work elsewhere but he'd have to show ID and things and that would immediately out him to anyone who he was applying to a job with, and so he doesn't really know of anywhere to get into a better situation than the one he is in now, and there isn't, again, an established framework to go about changing your name because you were assigned the wrong gender at birth. So he's just kind of stuck.

Then in 1942 he faints and is taken to hospital and is diagnosed with hypoglycaemia and to the best of my knowledge that's when you have like, a very sudden drop in blood sugar, and you become lightheaded and you know, in Michael's case, faint.

And so the doctors, of course, need ID, and he has to out himself to them as well, and then one of them is a plastic surgeon who comes by and says like, "Hey! Do you want a double mastectomy?" and Michael's like, "Oh! Yeah, cool. Thank you, I would like that very much."

H: [laughs]

E: So that occurs.

H: "No prob, mate!"

E: Yeah. And then he's talking to Michael and is like, "Hey! Why don't you reregister?" and Michael's like, "Beg pardon?" and it's like, "You know, like reregister as male and change you name and things." And Michael's like "*Beg pardon?*"

H: [laughs]

E: And so why this doctor knows about a path do that we'll get into in a minute but yeah, Michael finds out that this is a thing he can do, and then in 1943 he legally becomes Laurence Michael Dillon, and he goes by his middle name generally for his whole life.

H: That's exciting.

E: So he starts taking classes at a technical college to go to medical school for real this time, and he's still working at the garage at night, and so at the like, technical college he's amongst people who know just as a man without knowing his history for the first time, and he describes that being "an indescribable relief". He is wanting to finish his classes and then apply to a real medical school. He's just taking these classes because he didn't study medicine at university, so he needs to make that up now, and he's worried about applying for universities because all of his college records are under his birth name and so one of his tutors from Oxford convinces the uni to change his records to his initials and to lie, essentially, and say that he graduated from a male college, and they do that, and he applies to Trinity College in Dublin and he gets in.

H: Hooray!

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

E: Yes. So he goes there and he is doing pretty similar things to what he did at Oxford – he’s studying non-stop and he’s rowing, except on the men’s team now, and on a local one that’s not affiliated with the uni. He’s still having social problems because everyone’s like, 10 years younger than him, and just doesn’t really fraternise with him, but you know.

L: Mature age student problems.

E: Yeah. He’s got most of his records tidied up under the right name now. There’s one exception which we’ll get to in like, quite a bit.

H: Was it an LP that he released in his ill-advised youth?

E: Yeah. No, that’s a—

H: Yeah.

E: Yeah. God, imagine if this had just veered off into his, like, “And then he pioneered rock ‘n’ roll!”

H: [laughs] I would definitely listen to that podcast!

E: Yeah. So now all he’s really got left to worry about is his genitalia. He can’t shower with other men; he’s worried about the fact that he faints periodically and is taken to hospital.

H: Is that a related issue or is that just a different condition that also exists?

E: Um.... I don’t think so. I don’t think it’s related, yeah. Like, I don’t know, it could be, like, who knows what testosterone’s doing to his body at this point.

H: Yeah.

E: Yeah, no, I don’t know. I do know that we don’t take testosterone as pills anymore ‘cause it like, destroys your liver.

H: Right.

E: Yeah.

H: That could have something to do with it. Or just like, the unregulated dose of testosterone that he’s taking.

E: Yeah, like medically this time’s a mess—

H: It’s the first one.

E: —as all past times are.

H: Yeah. Welcome to history.

E: Yeah! It’s not the worst medical stuff we’ve had actually.

H: No.

E: No.

H: Do you remember the emperor who was poisoned by a concubine because the aphrodisiac she was giving him was poison?

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

E: [laughs] Yeah. I just had a violent flashback to all of the times I read about Anne Lister having like, leeches suck her blood, that I didn't put into the podcast. Ugh.

So the plastic surgeon who casually came up to Michael and like changed his life introduced him to Dr. Harold Gillies, the best reconstructive surgeon in Britain at the time. Before Harold Gillies there hadn't really been any effort to help people who had birth defects or were in terrible accidents and things like that - it was just sort of like, get on with your life - and there's increasing need for this kind of thing as the World Wars happen, and have a terrible toll on young people, and so he sets up a wing of a hospital and he essentially goes about like, making up plastic surgery as he goes along. So he's operating 12 hours a day—

H: Oh wow!

E: He's chain-smoking two packets of cigarettes as he's doing it.

H: Jesus Christ!

E: Anaesthetic is super terrible at the time so they're essentially just chloroforming the patient, and sometimes the fumes are so much that the doctor and the nurse are just half out of it themselves.

H: Oh wow.

E: He's essentially sketching a nose on the back of an envelope while looking at it and then going in and creating it on a human person. I love Harold Gillies so much.

H: He sounds like the dodgy horse-doctor that sews up mobsters.

E: [laughs] He's so good! I cut out so many stories about him because we didn't have time. He was an avid prankster.

H: Hopefully not the two together.

E: No! No, no. No. Dear God. But yeah, we just don't have the time and it's not actually all that relevant.

H: One prank?

E: Alright, fine. So he'd do this thing repeatedly apparently where he started to be given awards and things 'cause he's providing this wonderful service to the country, and so when the announcer was reading out, you know, "The esteemed Dr. Harold Gillies" and like really ramping him up, he'd duck under the table so when the spotlight came round to his seat there'd be no-one there.

H: [laughs] That's really good.

E: Yeah. And a bunch of stuff like that. He was great.

H: That is fantastic.

E: I love him. And so Michael goes to see Harold Gillies, and explains the problem, and Harold Gillies, who has just made up plastic surgery on the faces of thousands of young men goes, "Yeah, sure, I'll make you a penis. Whatever. Why not? But not until after the war's done 'cause—"

H: He's busy.

E: "—I'm operating 12 hours a day."

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

H: Yeah.

E: He'd actually constructed – or reconstructed, rather – plenty of penises before for soldiers who'd lost theirs in various like, war situations, and he didn't really think it was actually all that unprecedented from a surgical standpoint. From an ethical/political one it entirely is unprecedented, and so to avoid scandal he diagnoses Michael with acute hypospadias. Now what this is is an intersex condition where the opening of the urethra on a penis is not where it normally is on the tip – it's on the underside of the shaft somewhere, and can sometimes be like, quite a bit bigger than it normally is, and so—

H: That is super canny. As a diagnosis that's super canny.

E: Yeah. Yeah yeah yeah. So he's actually been seeing a lot of patients, some of who have been assigned female at birth, who have this condition, and I think other intersex conditions as well, and, you know, facilitating their lives in whatever way he can with surgery, and giving them notes so they can change their sex legally, and this is how Michael's able to do his – that they just are like, "No, it's totally fine." And he goes into the registrar's office and he things that it's gonna be this whole thing, and the guy's like, "Ah yeah, another one of these," and just changes it for him. So it's good, it's chill.

H: Sweet!

E: Yes. So now we're up to surgery time! And this is where we get into talking about scalpels and things, so skip it if you don't want that.

Basically in his plastic surgery career, Harold Gillies had been using this technique that was quite common at the time, where he'd like, cut a flap of skin and then just kind of move it around to wherever he wanted it and then let it heal, and obviously you need skin to have blood flow to stay alive, and so it would still be attached at some point near where it had been cut off, and then you just kind of had to wait for it to heal where you wanted it. And so while that was happening it was at tremendous risk of the underside of it becoming infected or drying out or whatever, and he noticed that these flaps of skin had the tendency to curl around at the edges and so was like, "Hang on a second!" and he would sew it into this kind of like tube thing, and then that meant that the underside of your skin that is never meant to see the light of day was protected and covered up and so it wouldn't dry out.

H: Ah!

E: And then you had this like tube and you could essentially, like a suitcase handle just end-over-end just move it around the body wherever you needed it.

H: Oh wow!

E: Wherever you needed skin, yeah.

L: Oh!

H: That's really cool!

E: It is really cool, and like, just like that he revolutionised plastic surgery, and I thought it was very cool, and so the convenient thing about a tube is that it superficially resembles a penis.

H: Hm.

L: Mmhm.

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

E: And so this is kind of fundamentally what he's doing here – he takes skin from elsewhere on his body and uses something similar to this method and does surgery things and performs the first ever phalloplasty on a transgender man.

H: Boom.

E: So Michael says in his records that it's 13 operations. It's between 1946 and 1949. Gillies it's 17 between '46 and '55. I'm inclined to assume the doctor had better records. Michael writes his autobiography considerably afterwards.

H: Okay, right. Yeah. 'Cause like, if he was writing in '49 for example, then I can see how that could happen, but...

E: But like, many operations. He's sometimes so debilitated by it that he has to like, walk with a cane—

H: Oh wow!

E: —and things like that, so like, it's quite taxing on him physically. So the results of this are essentially what Michael wanted – he doesn't have the problem of having to worry about showering with his like, rowing teammates anymore; he's not worried about if he ends up going to hospital again that he's going to have to out himself; there's not really anything standing in between him and just kind of living out his life as a man now. So he's happy with that. It is only like, literally just occurred to me to wonder about how much he paid for this.

H: Certainly given your description of this surgeon I wouldn't have disbelieved you if he'd said, "No, I'll give it to you for a discount. It's fine."

E: Yes, that's probably not accurate. Oh, he does... Actually I do remember that he does... So he is like making considerably good money off of people just being like, "I would like a different nose," and things like that, but he also does do cases just for free for people who can't afford it I remember. So maybe that. I don't know. Michael isn't poor, it should be stated though. He's like, a minor nobleman essentially, so. His brother is like the 9th Baronet of some small, not very good estate in Ireland.

H: Sure.

E: Yeah. You know. Like it's more to do with the fact that they can be like "Yes, I'm nobility" than with great wealth, but that's important to British people at this time.

Harold Gillies is kind of just like, "Look! You're good now! Go out! Find a girlfriend! Have fun!" but as we know, Michael is not the greatest hit in any given social scenario, so it's not that easy. He also has just never really socialised with women all that much, like, all of the friends he's had have been men, and he will like, invite women to a ball and dance there for that night, and then not really know how to pursue things further. He feels like he'd have to explain his entire history and he just does not want to do that. Like, he feels like he can't raise her expectations of marriage without explaining why he can't give her children.

H: Mm.

E: And he doesn't want to risk dating a woman and then telling her and then her taking it badly and then her like, telling the press or something like that.

H: Hm.

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

E: So sometimes women would try to pursue him further and he'd just give them the cold shoulder. He talks about how he assumes this kind of like awkward tactic of just treating them in what he calls a rough, brotherly fashion and just comes across kind of rude and gruff and gets a bit of a reputation for being a bit of misogynist, which probably wasn't entirely unfounded frankly.

H: It is the 40s, I supposed. I don't know.

E: Yeah. It's that interesting thing where he spent some time campaigning for like, women's rights because it affected him, and now it doesn't and he's like, "Yes, anyway. Male brains are better."

So in 1946 he publishes the book that he was writing in his garage Blitz job. He calls it *Self: A Study in Ethics and Endocrinology*. He starts getting all of these letters from gay men. One of them demands that Michael send him a list of every gay man in London.

H: [laughs]

E: I don't know why he thought he'd have this.

H: Well, I mean, as Keynes has shown us, some people did.

E: [laughs] And then he meets Roberta Cowell. So Roberta Cowell is quite an interesting person in her own right. I will not tell you about her because we'll do an episode on her at some point. Features include race-car driver and prisoner-of-war.

H: That sounds amazing!

E: Yeah! So look out for that one. So she was a trans woman who had obtained oestrogen from somewhere and was dosing herself with it. She is where Michael was kind of like a few years back, where she's not really passing as male or female anymore, and life is really difficult for her. She's struggling more than Michael did to obtain sex-reassignment surgery because there's this law at the time called the Mayhem Act that prohibited castration of a healthy male who might be enlisted to go to war. So she found the book, she read it, she contacted the author. They have lunch; this is in about 1950. And by the end of it Michael decides he going to trust her and he tells her about his entire past. He essentially ends up feeling like she's the only woman who could ever possibly understand him and he falls in love with her and is like "We should definitely get married."

She is never quite as taken with him.

H: Oh no!

E: Part of it is he assumes that of course she'll feel the same way, and also wants her to – once they get married – to take on this really traditional like, house-wife role. He's very intent on that kind of like, 2.5 kids and a good set of china and family Christmases and things, and you know, like, she was a race-car driver and everything; that's not the kind of woman she is.

They do have a kind of courting phase. We have some of the letters he wrote, but he appears to have, like lost or destroyed whatever all of her letters to him. But like, she goes and meets his aunts as a thing – not officially as his fiancée but like, that's clearly the implication when you take someone to meet your family in like the 50s. So they are courting to some extent.

L: So has he been staying in contact with his aunts this whole time?

E: So he comes out to his family when he starts medically transitioning 'cause like, he had to, and his brother essentially says, like, "Cool. Never speak to me again, and never tell anyone about this, and never come near my house." And he's like, "Alrighty." And his aunts are sort of like, immensely

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

embarrassed about him being seen and then he like, grows a beard and is like, “Look, no-one’s going to recognise me.” They’re like, “Good point!” They’re old and they need someone around to just like, you know, kind of help them upkeep their house ‘cause they’re quite old and frail ladies.

H: [laughs]

E: So they let him around again.

H: It sounds very Clark Kent.

E: Mmhm. [laughs]

H: Where he’s like “I’ll just grow a beard and put on a pair of glasses!”

E: Yeah. Yeah yeah yeah. The village that he grew up in seems to think that their niece just like, ran off and abandoned them and now there’s this like, cousin around.

So there’s this problem where they can’t get married – she’s not legally a woman, and he’s legally a man, and she can’t get surgery in this country, so he does it himself.

H: Ohhh.

E: Yeah! Surgery - I mean... no, no, no, like - *medicine* in the 50s!

H: Ohhh.

E: Yeah. So there’s a document that survives essentially being like “I, Roberta Cowell, know that Michael only has this much medical training and I absolve him of any responsibility” essentially in case she dies.

H: Yeah.

E: And then it appears to have just occurred in his house. We don’t know if anaesthetic was there; we don’t know what he used for it. But yep, he performs an orchidectomy on her, which is the removal of the testicles, and she lives, and then he refers her to Harold Gillies and she asks him to construct her a vagina. She also at this point becomes legally female, and also at this point Michael passes his medical exams. He’s a doctor.

H: They couldn’t have waited?

L: [laughs]

E: Um.... No.

H: Okay.

E and H: [laugh]

E: And he had just before his medical exams came up sent her a package and said “Don’t open it until I pass my exams.” And then he passes them and he sends her word, and she opens it and it’s a diamond engagement ring.

H: Aww.

E: Yeah. Mm.... So he expects to then just get married and become a doctor and everything’s coming up roses and he’s fine. And then she turns him down. She writes in her own memoirs that she never really thought of him as a man; in her opinion it would have been two women getting married so

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

that sort of put a damper on her in my eyes. And Michael just never writes about her; he never mentions her; he never thinks about her again as far as we can tell.

He accepts the first residency that's offered to him, which is at a 50 bed hospital in Dublin. It doesn't pay too well but he essentially I think just like finds a job and gets out of there, and moves up to Dublin.

Before Roberta leaves our story we'll just note that Gillies does perform surgery on her. He had never done this operation before either, except I think actually like, genuinely had *never* done this before, like with Michael he'd had some sort of precedent with men who'd had their penises damaged or destroyed. This is never done, so the night beforehand he gets a male corpse and he does a practice-run.

H: Wow.

E: And is like, "Yep! Sure. That seems legit." And then he does it the next day on a real person!

H: Ohhh.

E: I'm just so....

H: It's sounds almost like he kind of just had like, Wikipedia "Surgery" open in the background.

E: Except Wikipedia doesn't exist and he is writing Wikipedia as this happens!

H: [laughs]

E: But like it occurs and it's fine and she goes off and lives her life and we'll tell you about her sometime.

H: Great! That worked out—

E: Yeah, I—

H: Surprisingly.

E: I feel like Harold Gillies could so easily be the villain—

H: Yeah!

E: —of a movie but he manages to carry off being a mad scientist so he's not.

Michael is studying at a hospital in Dublin. With his family, like, it's enough of a problem with his brother that he has to like, meet him in a restaurant and be like "I'm going to live in Dublin, which is in the same country as you, and I'm going to need you to accept that." And his brother's like, "I'd rather you didn't, but fine. You just have to like, never tell anyone we're related." So that's occurring.

H: Mm.

E: When he is working at this hospital he comes face-to-face with poverty and that's quite shocking to him, like the extremes of poverty he's seeing, and he's does a lot of kind of like charity work to improve the lives of the people living in the hospital, and he starts giving away like a tenth of his income to charity and to question like, "Why do I have so much stuff? Like what's the point of all of this stuff?" which I mentioned because I feel like it ties in to his kind of like spiritual and philosophical questioning.

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

And then his residency there finishes and he signs up to be a doctor on a merchant navy ship that is sailing across the Red Sea for a year. He'd intended to just do that for a year just to kind of experience being at sea and then go and get a job in lab research, but he falls in love with it. This is where his kind of love of uniforms comes back – he describes like, looking in the mirror at himself in his uniform with his gold braid and just being like, "That's me!"

H: Aww.

E: Yeah. So he works on that for I think about like six years before he has a break. He also seems to do alright socially here. Like he's on a ship with a small crew of fellow officers and they have like cocktail hours and things so, I don't think he's like the life of the party, but he's got, you know, a social circle going, and I'm pleased for him.

After his first year he docks back in England and he contacts the editor of Debrett's Peerage, which is one of two well-known encyclopedias of the nobility at the time – the other one is Burke's Peerage – and they included the lineage of his family. This is the last remaining official document that lists his birth name, so it says, you know "9th Baronet of wherever it was, Robert Dillon, one surviving sister."

Now Michael, as a brother, should have been in line to inherit that title. Women could not do that. So his brother as you, you know, may have assumed from previous statements about his brother, had explicitly forbidden him from ever – I mean, even visiting the estate, but definitely from putting himself in line for the title, and if he did this he is putting himself at risk of discovery, but he decides, "No! I'm doing this, like, this is my birthright," and he explains the situation and the editor is very sympathetic, and he goes, "Yeah, of course I'll change it, and I'll back you when your brother dies if you need someone to back you—"

H: Hm!

E: "—in claiming this title, and surely the editor of Burke's is going to follow suit." So that's great and he goes off to sea again.

So he's had this lifelong interest in philosophy and spirituality and all of that, and while he's been on the ships he's taken to buying like, you know, 15 books about spiritualism or whatever and just like, binge-reading them, and he's loving them; he's becoming interested in Eastern philosophy, which he feels offers him things that Western philosophy can't, but he's finding his attempts at self-improvement to like, not be going so well on his own, and so he comes back to land and he decides to seek a teacher while he's on leave from his ship.

He finds a book called *The Third Eye* that is by a "Tibetan" – if you can't hear the quotations, there were quotations – mystic, whose name was Tuesday Lobsang Rampa. He claimed that he was able to read auras and the book tells this story about how he'd been chosen by Tibetan lamas to be the recipient of a mysterious operation that opened his third eye.

H: Hm....

E and L: [laugh]

E: Michael Dillon reads this and goes "This sounds wonderful!" and does not suspect a scam, so he finds the address – which is a flat in a fishing village in Ireland—

H: Okay...

E: Yeah. And sends him a fan-letter, and the guy writes him back and says, "Oh, like, do you want me to come and visit you and we'll have lunch?" and Michael's thrilled and he says, "Yeah! Come and

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

see me.” And so they have lunch and within an hour Michael’s convinced that this guy can read minds, and maybe even the future, and he goes and he visits him for two weeks in Ireland and they have this lovely time kind of hiking around the area and discussing like, all of these questions of the universe and things like that and then at the end of his visit the guy tells him, “So, here’s what you gotta do. You have to do one more sea voyage and then go to India and find a monastery where you can learn meditation,” and Michael goes, “Okay then, that’s what I’ll do.” So—

H: Is there a point where he asks him to transfer him one million pounds or—?

L: [laughs]

E: No no no. He doesn’t seem to actually be trying to like get anything out of this? Like he’s not extorting people or anything.

H: Okay.

E: Like, it’s fake, but if anything he’s really just in it for like, attention or something like that, like...

H: Or like, free lunches.

E: You know, he’s not like, terribly malicious or anything like that.

H: Okay.

E: So he – Michael signs a contract with a cargo ship that’s sailing between America and India and he’s gonna do that for a year and then go off and find a monastery.

So he’s docked at Baltimore one day and he gets a telegram that says, “Do you intend to claim the title since your change over? Kindly cable *Daily Express*.” And then the next day there’s several newspaper articles about him focussing on the fact that he has transitioned and that he might get to inherit a title. So obviously is incredibly stressful for him.

H: Mm.

E: He’s wondering who’s betrayed him but what it turns out to be is a clerical error. So the editor of Debrett’s Peerage had said to him that Burke’s would also follow suit in changing him name but they haven’t, and a reporter notices that there’s a discrepancy.

H: Hm.

E: So they go to his brother, “So like, do you have a brother or a sister? What’s up?” and at first he’s like “Oh God! Get out of my house!” and eventually he’s like, “Look, I have a sister. She’s a doctor. She’s off on a boat somewhere.” And eventually after they hound him for a while he tells them the name of the ship, so they look up who the doctor is – it’s a Michael Dillon - and then they hound him.

H: Right,

E: Yep. So after this is all in the papers for a day he sits in his cabin essentially like hiding out in his cabin and hoping that someone’s going to come by and tell him that they support him. No-one does and then the next day he decides to sort of find out for himself, and he goes to the second mate’s cabin at noon, which the second mate had said was like, cocktail hour, and everyone had a standing invitation to come and drink, and so there’s a couple of officers there and he says, you know, “Have you all seen the papers?” and they go “Yep. Yeah we have.” And he goes, “Are you with me, or... or not?” And in response the second mate pours him a gin, hands it to him, and toasts it and says, “You

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

know, we talked it over last night. We decided you've had a raw deal. We always liked you. It doesn't make any difference."

L: Aww.

H: Sweet!

E: Yes.

H: One of many problems that can be solved with gin.

E: If you've known that gin solves transphobia all this time and haven't spread this, I'm just like very angry.

H and L: [laugh]

H: You know me, I spread gin as far and wide as I can.

E: [laughs] So that's okay, but everywhere they dock he's finding that he's essentially trapped on the ship; reporters are like, you know, mobbing the docks trying to get a look at him, and he assumes that this is going to be the same wherever he goes in England and America. So he quits his jobs and also quits his gentlemen's club, assuming that neither of them are going to want anything to do with him. They both stay by him and they urge him to stay on, and despite this he feels like his only option is to essentially go off into exile, and he leaves the ship when it docks in India and he decides to find a monastery and essentially throw himself on the mercy of the people running it.

So he does this, and they turn him away, and they say, "You know, there's another monastery like, over on *that* mountain that's run by an Englishman who was a monk within the Theravada tradition of Buddhism. Go and study with him.

I don't know anything about Buddhism.

H: It's okay. Neither do I.

E: Yeah. Like I did some cursory reading for this, but I frankly didn't want to... like I was just imagining if someone did twenty minutes of Wikipedia-ing about Judaism and then tried to tell me about Judaism in a podcast and I was like "Oh!"

H and L: [laugh]

E: And I decided not to.

H: Legit.

E: I don't feel like the teachings of Buddhism are going to like, change this story much one way or another so, we're just going to carry on.

So he goes to that monastery and he meets this guy. He's an English monk who's called Sangharakshita. This guy's still alive. He's 91 now.

H: Oh, wow!

E: Yeah!

L: [laughs]

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

E: A woman named Pagan Kennedy wrote a biography of Michael like – oh I don't know when, like fairly recently, like a decade ago or something? – and one of her sources was like, writing letters to this guy. He came back to England and founded a society that's been incredibly influential in spreading Buddhism in the west.

L: So how old was he at the time?

E: Early 30s maybe?

L: Hm.

H: Okay.

L: He just decided to be a monk.

E: Yes. Like ostensibly that's what must have occurred.

L: [laughs] And how old is Michael at the moment?

E: I do not have the exact year written down here, but he's about a decade older than this monk; he's in his 40s somewhere.

H: Okay.

E: Yep. So Sangharatshita tells Michael that he can stay if he does chores and contributes a small sum for room and board, and he can study there and he can meditate and what-not. Michael takes a newspaper clipping out of his wallet and shows it to him and that's got his like, story in it and everything, and he wants him to be aware that like, maybe like, there's a vague possibility that tabloid reporters could find their way here, and the guy's like, "Yeah alright, whatever. Like I don't care, just get in."

Over the following weeks he tells him his entire life story basically. He clearly has immense trust in this guy. He says that like, he trusts him because he's both a monk and fellow Englishman, and he says that Sangharakshita promised that he would never tell anyone Michael's secrets saying it was as if it were in the confessional, or as if it was like, a doctor-patient confidentially type thing. Sangharakshita says that he never made any such promise.

H: Okay.

E: I don't know how to flag any more clearly that that's going to come up again. So as you can imagine Michael shows up in India with some pretty dodgy ideas about what Buddhism is because his instruction in it comes from—

H: Whosawhatsit.

E: Yeah, Tuesday. Who turns out to be a plumber's son from Devon.

H: [laughs] Okay.

E: Who has never been to Tibet.

H: Okay.

E: And it's around this time that Tuesday Lobsang Rampa is exposed as a fraud in the press, and also that Michael is learning something about what Buddhism really is. And so he remains very fond of

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

him for his entire life, but he is angry and disappointed and he's forced to reconcile the lies he's been told with like, the realities of what Buddhism is.

L: That is doesn't involve reading minds?

E: No!

L: [laughs]

E: No.

H: Although I suppose this might be the one time that somebody's been told by a fraud to go on a pilgrimage and it's actually worked out.

E: Yeah, just somewhat coincidentally.

H: Yeah.

E: But yeah, he throws away his pipe, he shaves his beard, and he changes his name to Jivaka. He lives in the monastery performing chores and learning to meditate and essentially performing like secretarial work for Sangharakshita who's writing his own autobiography. And it's around here that Michael starts writing the first draft of his autobiography which is now published and in the world.

Michael's very dependent on Sangharakshita. They live in a very isolated area; Michael doesn't know anyone else; doesn't speak the local language – and so they get this like, quite close relationship together. And then Sangharakshita is going to travel around for the summer doing lectures in various places and he leaves Michael at a monastery for some months, and here he is able to basically do what he likes, and he essentially binge-reads all of these Buddhist texts which he hadn't been allowed to do at the monastery he's been living in, and he essentially begins to question it more and to try to like assert himself and aspires to actually become a novice and to start to rise within those ranks.

L: I sense a theme here that Michael seems to have a bit of a problem with binge-reading.

E: I don't know if it's a problem. Oh! I mean it kind of is in that he definitely isn't like learning this stuff, like any kind of genuine or thorough understanding of it, he's just kind of – yeah, like, tearing through anything he can get his hands on. He actually starts writing books about Buddhism after studying it for like five months, which just feels incredibly presumptuous to me.

L: Especially since his basis for first learning about Buddhism was just a fraud who knew nothing about Buddhism.

E: Yeah... Yep. So he seems to like genuinely want to learn about it and want to live by it and what-not, but this is where like, his aristocratic upbringing is coming back, because he basically finds that that's not compatible, and he really struggles to kind of overcome that as well. But yeah, nevertheless he decides that he wants to be a monk, and in order to become a novice monk you have to get rid of all of your property, and you're no longer able to earn money from practising medicine. So that if you have like grown up in this community is a reasonable thing for a person to do, but he has no real connections here, doesn't speak the language, he doesn't really have any way to support himself – so it's quite an extreme thing to do. But nevertheless he writes to his lawyers and he tells them that they should give away all of his inheritances and all of his savings, and they are so shocked by this that they like, stall for about a year.

H: Wow!

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

E: But they do it, and he is now penniless. And this is when he starts like, writing about Buddhism and so forth, basically earning kind of a tiny bit here and there in order to get a little bit of money to kind of eke out an existence. He goes back to the monastery when Sangharakshita returns from doing his like lecture tour type thing, and he expects him to be really supportive of his progress and his goal of becoming a monk, but he's not. He says as far as he's concern Michael is a woman and women can't become monks. They have a massive fight and Michael decides that he's going to return where he'd been left over the summer to study and he's going to live there instead.

So he goes there. He's not worried particularly about the monks there having the same objection – he just kind of assumes that they'll view him as a man – and then he finds a text that mentions that members of the “third sex” aren't able to become monks as well. He can't find anything explaining exactly who is included in this category but he has you know, essentially like a sneaking suspicion that this might be relevant. So he goes to the monks who he is living with and he explains the situation, and they tell him, “Yeah, you can never be a monk” and he's devastated.

It's around this time that Tibet is annexed into the People's Republic of China, and there is obviously enormous political unrest and there are thousands of Tibetans fleeing into India and he's spending a lot of time with this community of people, helping refugees, providing like free medical services to anyone who needs them.

He is at this time also just living in complete abject poverty. He's quite malnourished and in spending a lot of time with really learned Tibetan men he decides that he wants to become a Tibetan monk. So if you remember the people he'd been learning with were part of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. So becoming a Tibetan monk was an incredibly tall order – no Westerner had ever done this. But he forges a friendship with a man named Lama Lobsang who was very influential and had a lot of connections in the area, and he volunteers to be his translator and to guide him in achieving this goal.

He doesn't speak Hindi very well and this guy doesn't speak English very well but he communicates as best he can his situation and why he hasn't been allowed to become a Theravada monk, and he doesn't care, and neither do the monks that he takes Michael too. But he's also not like a hundred percent sure that they fully understand, but you know, he's done his best and they don't seem to care and a date is set for his initiation.

So, Michael writes a letter to Sangharakshita and he says, you know, “This is what's been happening with me. Can you come to the ceremony?” and he thinks that he'll be proud of him and want to come and see him be initiated, and instead he's very upset and he writes letters to all of these prominent people in the community Michael's in now and says, you know, “This is his background. You cannot ordain this man.” And in his mind he has like a moral obligation to do this because according to him Michael's a woman and women can't become monks. Michael sees it as a betrayal, and this is where, like, whether or not Sangharakshita had sworn never to tell anyone becomes relevant and we really don't know. It's just like two men's words against each other, and one of them's dead, and... Mm. But that's the situation.

So, his ordination's called off, not because they actually care that he's transgender still, but because it's seen as just a bit politically risky now that someone's expressed so much outrage over it, and so they say, “Well, you know like, we'll do it, but just wait.” And so he's very upset. He's worried as well that word of this is going to reach the publishers that he'd been working with and put an end to his writing career which is really like the only thing stopping him from starving at the moment, so he flees again.

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

This time he goes off to an incredibly remote monastery in Rizong, which is in like the very far north of India, and it's arranged that he'll be able to live there as a novice, and so it's here that he becomes a novice monk. He's essentially on the level of like children who are doing all of the chores and like serving tea and things like that, but he's tremendously excited, he thinks that the discipline will be good for him. So he travels there – it's up this incredibly precipitous mountain – and he starts to work. He like, scrubs the floor and fetches wood and sweeps, and he learns enough of the local language and with that and sign-language manages to kind of get along and communicate with all of the men and the boys he has to work with, and he finds that he loves it. It's very hard as a life – like he's not getting a lot of food and he's doing constant manual labour, but he has this like, genuine camaraderie with the men and the boys he's working with. You know, he finds that he's able to like, learn to laugh at himself for the first time. And so it's really good for him! He doesn't have this problem, where he's essentially slowly starving to death.

L: Does he still have hypoglycaemia?

E: Like, I guess? I mean, it doesn't come up. It is mentioned when he's in the part of his life where he's like sailing around on ships that he carries glucose with him just in case he faints, so it's clearly an ongoing problem, yes.

H: Also, in the same vein, does he have access to testosterone here?

E: I don't know.

H: Okay.

E: I can't imagine that he could have just stopped taking it, but it's not something that's mentioned, so I don't know.

L: I don't know how readily available it would be, like in remote monasteries.

E: Yeah. Yeah. And it seems unlikely that it could be like, "Alright, well I'll, you know—"

H: "—bring a six-year supply to India with me."

E: Yeah. Especially as he left on a whim. So maybe he does just stop taking it which is just like, medically—

H: —inadvisable.

E: Yeah, he's definitely just not doing well for himself, like regardless of the fact that he's just not eating enough food. So the other novice monks who are these like, fairly young boys, are from the nearby community and although they're also having like a very small diet provided for them they're having extra food being slipped to them by their families. Michael doesn't have that.

H: He's also several times larger.

E: Yeah, that's true. So you know, he comes there malnourished. He receives hardly any food. He's not doing well physically. He becomes like, increasingly weaker over the course of his stay there, and then eventually his permit runs out and he has to leave. The political situation's still very volatile – he can't get another one straight away; he has to plan to go and live elsewhere. But the head of the monastery tells him that, you know, "Come back the following spring, we'll ordain you as a monk and you can just stay here and live in the monastery, study in the library. That can be your life." And he goes, "Cool. Great. I will do this."

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

So he goes away from Rizong, and he's again trying to eke out a living writing and then selling that writing for enough money to just kind of just get by on. He catches typhoid fever in 1961, and he receives treatment but like, he as a doctor knows that the treatment they're giving him isn't going to help.

H: Hm.

E: So he's quite weakened by that. And then he sets about trying to obtain a permit to get back to Rizong. There's this problem where he's incredibly evasive about his past, and that and his nationality and the political situation make people think that he's a spy.

H: Mm.

E: So there's some interest in the local press with people trying to figure out who he really is, and then there's this article saying that like, he used to be a quote-unquote "lady-doctor" with like a hyphen.

H: Okay.

E: And he writes the Sangharakshita and he says, "Look, I don't know where this came from but I'm holding you ultimately responsible for it. Can you send me the autobiography that I wrote when I was living with you?" and that he'd left in like a trunk in his house. So he sends him his autobiography and he starts going over it and editing it and saying that like, if this blows up he'll be able to publish this and then he'll kind of get his own say out there.

H: Hm.

E: But it doesn't blow up. It just kind of goes by unnoticed. So nevertheless he prepares the manuscript and he sends it off to his publisher back in England and then he sets off again to talk to people to find a way back to Rizong. And then at the end of May that year his friends in England receive word that he has died on the 15th of May 1962.

There was an article published at the time that said he had succumbed to illness, which is quite believable, but there's no details about the precise circumstances. Sangharakshita would later say that he'd poisoned, but there's not proof of that, and it seems unlikely that he didn't just die from the fact that he was quite ill and malnourished.

H: Yes.

L: Poisoned by who?

E: Look, I don't know.

L: [laughs]

E: He was cremated according to Buddhist tradition and his ashes were scattered over the Himalayas, and then in the summer his agent – who's name is John Johnson, incidentally—

H: [laughs] Okay.

E: —receives a package with his manuscript in it and he decides that he's going to publish it. Michael's brother makes it clear that he will do literally anything he has to to prevent this from happening, and he demands that it be handed over to be burnt, and Johnson refuses, and he defends Michael's right to tell his story in his own words, in his own time. He pitches it to various

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

publishing houses and they all refuse to publish it. His brother's made clear that like, a court case would ensue and no-one wants to mess with it.

So it wasn't published. But it was never lost. Johnson left the literary agency and then his successor kept it. So yeah, it's made available to Liz Hodgkinson in the 1980s and she writes the first biography of Michael and then again to Pagan Kennedy who I've mentioned before. And then Pagan Kennedy gave a book-reading of this and then two students from the Harvard School of Divinity – I think it actual was – who were both transgender men, Cameron Partridge and Jacob Lau – express interest in it and she actually gave them photographs that she had of all the pages and they published it. It was published this year.

L: Oh wow.

H: Oof!

E: Yeah, it took that like. I actually when I started reading this, didn't know that, and like, just stellar timing there, and I'm very pleased.

H: Mm.

E: It is, incidentally – his biography is available in its entirety on JSTOR.

H: Oh, really?

E: So if you have access to JSTOR, yeah, you can get it there!

H: Do we have any good records of trans people in the 10 years before this first surgery?

E: So there's this kind of difficulty with studying trans people. First of all in that there is really that idea that like, trans people were invented in 1930-whatever-the-hell when testosterone and oestrogen were synthesised, but also in that when we get much earlier than that we don't have a hell of a lot of like, first-person accounts of like, people describing their lives. We have a few, but a lot of it is, like we will have records of someone and they will live their entire life as a man and no-one knows any different and then after they die when they go to be like autopsied or whatever the doctor finds out that they were biologically female. And also like the just huge category that is like you know, generally called "passing women", where it's people who are assigned female at birth and then dress as male and live as male. And, you know, some of them would have been trans men, and some of them were, you know, women who were trying to find like increased like work opportunities and things like that, and some of them are women who have a woman that they want to marry, and the easiest way to do that is to do that. Yeah, it's quite difficult, but I also think that it just kind of hasn't been done. We're going to struggle going back further. It is just that kind of thing where you know, we have to interpret people's experiences and it's hard.

H and L: Mm.

E: Like, we have this even just looking at other types of queer people, where, you know, like women in like a Boston marriage for example, if we don't have their own words on it it's quite hard to speak to individuals.

H: Hm. History, ladies and gentlemen!

L: The other thing that I found interesting was that was well as Michael's transition in terms of gender he also seemed to have quite an interesting transition I guess in terms of his career from basically being your traditional arts student, and quite classist in many ways with those sort of very

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

traditional.... like, seeking his nobility and that sort of thing. And then going from that to pursuing a medical degree, which I think we have this tendency to think of, you know, arts and science – I don't know if this is like a very modern conception – but as being quite a dichotomy. And then from medical school to being a monk!

E: Yeah.

L: In India!

E: And it's so soon before he goes off to a monastery in India that he's actively asserting his desire to claim that title after his brother dies.

Just with the typical arts student thing, like he even does the thing where he gets there and immediately changes his major.

[laughter]

E: But yeah, he very much conceptualises his transition as being quite a similar thing to his, like, life-long struggle with his spirituality and trying to like find something that suits him there, and trying to find a way to make his like meaningful. His biography is split into – I can't remember the exact wording off the top of my head, I apologise – but it's like, along the lines of *Reforming the Body* and the second part is *Reforming the Mind*.

L: Hm!

E: Yeah. And he does talk about it like, "So I've managed to you know, completely overhaul my body, and it's fine now, and then I turned to doing that with my mind and it was much harder!"

L: [laughs]

E: So yeah, it's definitely something that he had noticed himself.

H: Hm. That's interesting.

E: Yeah. He wrote a few – as I said – like, books about like Buddhism and things, and he also wrote a memoir that was somewhat fictionalised about the few months he spent at Rizong, but yeah, like he fictionalised it because he didn't want people to be able to figure out who he was and then find where he was. So yeah, if that's something that you or anyone else is interested in you can go and track those down.

L: The other question that I had – I don't know if you'll know the answer to this - is—

E: Probably not.

L: [laughs] —is, can females become monks now?

E: I.... Yeah, I don't know.

L: [laughs] I hope so.

E: I also was interested to see how like, common it was now for a like an Englishman or a Westerner to become a monk in Tibetan Buddhism, because I don't know if that's something that really wouldn't raise any eyebrows, or if it's still something that's like quite rare or what, but I couldn't find this out with like a lazy Google search.

[laughter]

Queer as Fact Episode 11 Michael Dillon

H: Huh.

E: So yeah, I don't know. He's certainly – Michael Dillon, I mean – is certainly notable in that he goes to like, very remote places where he doesn't speak the language or anything like that, and I can't imagine that some of the, like the lengths he goes to are ones that many other British men have followed in his footsteps of doing since, but – you know, who knows.

Thank you very much for listening to this episode of Queer as Fact. As always, you can find our social media on Tumblr as Queer as Fact, on Facebook as Queer as Fact, and on Twitter as Queer as Fact. If you want to email us directly you can do that at queerasfact@gmail.com. We'd love to hear from you.

Thank you again for sitting with us today, Lara, and you guys should all listen back, you know – we'll tell you when - when we know – to Lara's episode.

We'll be back on the fifteenth of September with our next episode on Josephine Baker, the performer, activist and French Resistance spy during World War II, and Alice will be bringing you that one.

[Outro music plays]