

Stephen Donaldson (Robert A. Martin) (1946-1996)

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The outing of Robert A. Martin, who later chose to be known as Stephen Donaldson, came extraordinarily early, at the age of twenty, when he founded the first gay student organization in the history of the world. Later he became prominent as a theorist of bisexuality, an advocate of prison reform, and a determined opponent of the rape of males.

That was not all. For over the course of the half century of life allotted him, Donaldson played many roles: military brat, congressional intern, college student, gay and bisexual activist, journalist and cultural commentator, encyclopedia contributor and editor, poet, male prostitute, porn starlet, sailor, designer of war games, Buddhist priest and then convert to Hinduism, punk rock adept, user and advocate of drugs, rape victim, federal prisoner, crusader against violence, and lover of young men. His pivotal accomplishment, the founding of the Student Homophile League at New York's Columbia University, came while he was still an undergraduate.

Personally, he was a slight but appealing figure, retaining until the end the youthful quality he so much prized. Combining personability with eccentricity, in time he became an effective television spokesperson for the cause of prison reform. A punk brawl had inflicted a broken nose, lending an air of toughness he sometimes accentuated. Educated in the Ivy League, he could not disguise the fact that he was an intellectual through and through, although of a dissident, sometimes wayward sort. Long an extravert, he became somewhat reclusive in his last years, communicating often by e-mail. When necessary, he could recharge the skills of human contact acquired in his years as a journalist. This gift shone again in his final campaign against male rape, when he traveled for media appearances and conferences to Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, and other cities.

Some highlights of Stephen Donaldson's story emerge from his successive changes of the way in which he chose to be referred. Born Robert Anthony Martin, he never attempted to conceal his birth name after he adopted others. Of course pseudonyms are an old tradition, prudential in origin, among gay activists and writers, but Martin's reasons were more complex.

Stephen Donaldson was a designation he began to use in college and maintained throughout his public career. He created the surname after that of Donald B., a member of his high school baseball team in New Jersey who was his first love. The name incorporates the idea of sonship. Later he preferred to be called simply "Donny" so that he identified himself more closely with the beloved youth.

Two names refer to his religious interests. Sanghamitra Samanera refers to his training in Theravada Buddhist orders, while Swami Lingananda reflects his ultimate religious commitment, which was to Hinduism (more specifically a branch of the Shaiva faith, professed in Bangalore, India, in February of 1988).

His searing account of his 1973 gang rape in a Washington, DC jail appeared under the name of Donald Tucker. His interest in contemporary youth music transpires in his moniker of Donny the Punk; under this name he wrote columns in *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll* and other alternative press papers.

All this variety shows a remarkable capacity for reinvention of self, of which he was rightly proud. Working usually on several fronts at once, his activities were time consuming and poorly remunerated, if at all—exposing him to the ongoing wear and tear poverty imposes. At one low point in New York City he remained homeless for eight months.

Greeting him as he went each morning to breakfast in his kitchen was a motto: "Life is too important to waste on a full-time job." Sometimes though, he disappointed his supporters by abruptly dropping one commitment to fulfill another. For this reason his editing of the *Concise Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* never reached completion.

The one constant in Donny's life was his allegiance to the values and lifestyle choices of the American counterculture, itself ultimately rooted in nineteenth-century Bohemia. Exposure to the counterculture was almost inevitable for a young man growing up in comfortable circumstances in the 1960s. Working-class youths, whom Donny professed to admire, were less susceptible to the siren call. As was the case for many who followed the Pied Piper of the counterculture, he overestimated the staying power of that prominent but ultimately unstable social phenomenon. He also did not realize how keeping to the counterculture lifestyle, easy enough for an attractive young man just out of college, would become increasingly hard to manage as the years passed. A stance of perpetual insurgency at length becomes wearying. He had early donned a mask that suited him for a long time but that he ultimately could not take off. He hoped, of course, to retard the aging process. Indeed, he did not reach old age, dying just before his fiftieth birthday.

As has been noted, he was born Robert Anthony Martin, the first name that of his father. He came into the world in a naval hospital in Norfolk, Virginia, July 27, 1946. His father was a naval pilot (later a college professor); his mother had artistic gifts. Later, after his parents divorced, his mother was diagnosed with the mental disorder known as porphyria. A touch of madness colored Donny's makeup.

Following military orders, the family moved every two years, promoting adaptability in the boy. At the age of ten he was a streaker, his first indication of interest in nudity. In later life he would surprise visitors to his apartment, including middle-class social workers assigned to help him, by appearing unclothed.

The eldest of four brothers, he is a counter instance of the fashionable social science thesis that maintains firstborns are likely to be conservative, allying themselves with the parents, while those born later are the rebels. In fact, Donny, the firstborn, was the rebel. Of his three brothers, two are in law enforcement and one is a Lutheran minister. The military side is another seemingly improbable feature, although its imprint remained in his lifelong identification with sailors and seafaring. Most efforts to detect the causes in later character and accomplishments in early childhood are probably destined to fail, first because there are some things from that stage the observer cannot know, and second, and of fundamental importance, because people adopt to changing circumstances. In Donny's case the climate of the 1960s in America was vital.

A precocious loner, he began reading science fiction in his early teens, crediting this avocation with "expanding my creative imagination and stretching my intelligence." In later life he became an avid follower of the original television series *Star Trek*.

His homosexual life was practical before it became affectional. As a Boy Scout, during a camping trip in 1957, he was lured by a slightly older boy into sucking his penis. As a result he acquired instant fame as a "blow boy." Eventually, these activities became known, and he was drummed out of the Scouts at age twelve. This disgrace triggered a family crisis, resolved by sending the boy to live in Germany, where he could be watched over by his stepmother's relatives. (His father had married a German woman, who proved an affectionate and concerned replacement for his biological mother.) For three years Donny attended classical gymnasium (elite high school) in Berlin, acquiring fluent German. He continued his oral servicing of school-boys and a few adults but remained ignorant of the concept of the "homosexual." Donny observed the creation of the Berlin Wall in 1961. The city's location on a fault line of the Cold War fostered his interest in international politics.

In April 1962, at the age of fifteen, Donny sailed back to the United States to live with his grandparents in West Long Branch, New Jersey. In high school he was news editor of the school paper, an actor, and a student government officer. He also became active in politics as a libertarian conservative, supporting Barry Goldwater for president. His sport was baseball; he managed the school team for three years. A few dates with girls yielded no "action" and instead he had sex with a number of boys but without emotional involvement. Then, as he remarked, "in April 1965, the stars fell on me." He developed an enormous crush on Donald B., the shortstop on the baseball team. Donny stopped studying and dropped out of all activities but baseball. The crush was unrequited, but Donny decided to "read up" on homosexuality, coming out only to a few close friends.

As high school valedictorian in June 1965, he gave a speech against apathy. As the Bob Dylan song had it, the times they were a-changin'. On a school outing to New York City, he visited the headquarters of the Mattachine Society, then the leading gay organization.

Sent to live in Florida with his biological mother for the summer, Donny ran away to New York City, where he was in effect adopted by astronomer Frank Kameny, then a leading gay avant-gardist. In the fall he became a freshman at Columbia and came out—class of 1969. There he had to get a single room in Livingston Hall because his Carmen Hall roomies felt uncomfortable living with a "known homo." Political science and international affairs were what he studied; the aim, which he achieved, was to become a journalist. In 1966 he spent an impressionable summer at Cherry Grove, Fire Island, again under the tutelage of Kameny.

Growing wise to the ways of the city, he found that he could fund his education by working as a hustler, first at the infamous intersection of Fifty-third Street and Third Avenue, then as a call boy through a house. He claimed to have serviced several famous clients, including Rock Hudson and Roy Cohn (Senator Joseph McCarthy's counsel). He met a young woman, J. D. Jones, who became his lifelong friend and mentor. At that time a member of a psychedelic church, she turned Donny onto LSD. He in turn inducted others into the use of drugs, resolutely refusing to acknowledge that not every one of his acolytes benefited from the practice.

Donny first hatched the idea of the Student Homophile League (SHL) as a Columbia University undergraduate in October of 1966. His first idea for a gay group was as a chapter of Mattachine, but the Mattachine Society refused, reflecting a fear of anything remotely linked with pedophilia. Then came the idea of a completely autonomous group, the SHL, with the support of chaplain John Dyson Cannon. Not surprisingly, the powers that be at Columbia were none too keen. They demanded a list of members. As they well knew, this would be awkward because the list could be turned over to the

FBI. Donny passed the test by securing well-known "big men on campus" types (straight) as pro forma members.

After much foot dragging, Columbia finally acceded and SHL was accepted as an official group. Word got around and *The New York Times* ran a story with the headline: "Columbia Charters Homosexual Group." The publicity unleashed an avalanche of outraged letters on Columbia University authorities. On April 11, 1967, *Spectator*, the campus daily, published a two-page essay signed by Robert A. Martin, as he was then known, on the travails of being an out gay student at that time.

The Student Homophile League was a first in history (European countries, where the gay movement began at the end of the nineteenth century, generally did not have campuses, and therefore had few student groups of any kind). The SHL participated in the controversy over the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC), then a hot issue, helping to force the military group off campus. Under Donny's leadership the members "integrated" dances and started some of their own.

The founding of SHL preceded the well-known 1968 blowup at Columbia that signaled a wave of campus disturbance across the nation. On two occasions buildings were occupied, Columbia's President Grayson Kirk's office was "liberated," and, after much dithering that revealed deep division in the university community, the police moved in to arrest the occupier. Donny was arrested twice and politically he moved from liberal to radical. This radicalism, and the counterculture heritage of oppositionality (which some would term simple orneriness), were two albatrosses he could not shake off.

Much of what he did could not have been accomplished without the complicity, as it were, of the climate of the times. In some ways the era was freer than today. I speak from personal experience, as my own teaching stint at Columbia lasted from 1968 to 1974. At this distance it is hard to recapture the fervor of those years, and the swiftness and apparent finality of cultural change. Rivers of psychedelic drugs, new styles of dress and deportment, and relentless attention to the counterculture in the media—the whole atmosphere encouraged experiment. The melody of rock suffused everything. Music was all important: it was the Woodstock generation.

Other SHL chapters sprang up at Cornell University and New York University (where Rita Mae Brown, later to gain fame and fortune as a novelist, headed the chapter). Donny threw himself into work for the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations (NACHO), the only real national grassroots organization. In 1969-1970 he held an office in the group.

In 1970, having graduated, he decided to fulfill an old yearning by enlisting in the Navy in the ranks. He served mainly in the Mediterranean. When his gay sexual activities become known, he was given a general discharge on

June 2, 1972. To avoid surrendering them, he smuggled his uniforms out and later, in 1977, became one of the first to get his less-than-desirable discharge upgraded to honorable, which is essential for veterans' benefits.

Late in the 1970s he began to experience burnout, owing in part to the hassling he received about his bisexuality, which was a complicated matter. On one hand, his deepest friendship was with a woman, J. D. Jones. On the other hand, his bisexuality had something of a forced, theoretical quality: despite his small collection of heterosexual pornography (assembled mainly for straight boys to look at), it did not seem a gut phenomenon. One of his oldest friends commented that the military tradition he grew out of required heterosexuality and that he therefore sought to retain some aspect of it. Although he had sex with women from time to time, it is clear that his deepest erotic feelings came from his experiences with young men, usually in their late teens to early twenties.

He sometimes confessed that his displayed attraction to women made it easier to get to first base with the straight-identified boys he was attracted to, as this was something they ostensibly shared. In some ways his profession of bisexuality recalls the transitional exploration of identity that some people go through in late adolescence. He knew, however, that his heterosexual side did not run deep, and his claim to it is tainted with inauthenticity, one of the ways in which he belied his surface commitment to honesty in all things.

On graduating from Columbia University he took a full-time job with the Associated Press. An exposé of the telephone company offended his bosses there, and he was fired. Later he wrote for various counterculture and music journals, generally without pay. At the end of the 1980s Donny worked on the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* and the thirteen-volume set, *Studies in Homosexuality*, both under my editorship.

In August 1973, while employed as a journalist in Washington, DC, he was arrested at a Quaker protest at the White House. Left unguarded in jail over the weekend, he suffered two traumatic gang rapes. Refusing to hide his misfortune, he courageously held a press conference after being released. This set of experiences led to his subsequent commitment to enhancing public awareness of male rape, a commitment made more vivid by a four-year prison stay, 1980-1984. His imprisonment on a federal charge resulted from a semideranged incident at a Veterans' Hospital in the Bronx. Having been denied medicine for a sexually transmitted disease (STD), Donny returned with a gun and fired it. Instead of prudently assuming a state of contrition at his trial, he self-righteously excoriated U.S. policies and culture. The judge threw the book at him.

Continuing to brood over what had happened to him, he wrote graphically about his experiences. Although some felt that he permitted himself to be dominated by the consequences of traumatic interventions not of his own

making, he ultimately found the strength to make a sustained contribution to a cause that had long been taboo: the rape of males.

Still, the personal cost was high. From his ordeal in prison Donny developed a taste for abjection, the still mysterious condition whereby one comes to relish one's own humiliation. This might also be labeled masochism, but it was more than that. To the dismay of some of his associates, his refrigerator housed bottles of urine collected from favorite youths for later imbibing. This was only one of the counterproductive things that he did that complicated—and perhaps ultimately shortened—his life. He was reluctant to modify conduct that conflicted with his larger goals.

Donaldson's interest in South Asian religion scarcely ever flagged. He sometimes appeared in the flowing yellow robes of a Shaivite holy man and once, during a distressful episode, he was arrested in New Jersey in full regalia and sent to a mental hospital for observation. His youthful disciples were supposed to become "chelas" (Hindu-style disciples), but they usually had no understanding of the concept. During his stay in India in the 1980s, he was sometimes excluded from Hindu holy sites because he was Caucasian. He also found the spicy food difficult to tolerate.

His interest in the youth music scene, along with his sexual interests, brought much anguish, as the mainly straight youths he was attracted to were at best puzzled, at worst enraged by his interests. On several occasions he was beaten up, after being falsely accused of child molestation. His efforts to gain acceptance as one of the boys in the punk scene, for which he gained a local media award as "best punk," had its pathetic side.

In the mid-1980s he joined Tom Cahill in the leadership of the organization Stop Prisoner Rape, Inc., eventually becoming president in 1994. In a *New York Times* op-ed piece of December 29, 1993, titled "The Rape Crisis Behind Bars," Donaldson helped bring the issue to national attention. Here his activist energies found a significant outlet and the organization continues, offering public education and counseling for victims.

The problem of the rape of males raises questions regarding sexual identity that are yet to be answered, for in many instances neither the perpetrator nor the victim consider themselves to be homosexual. Similarly, a substantial number of the same-sex acts that are being performed every day involve individuals who do not consider themselves gay. One might argue that this self-concept was a delusional holdover from earlier times when to be identified as homosexual was a deep source of shame and social stigma. More disturbing, however, the rejection of the gay identity may fit with the post-modernist rejection of categories altogether. Most would agree with Donaldson that prison rape must be stopped, but it raises a series of difficult questions for which there is no answer.

Donaldson's last recorded speech, however, was to a New York City group opposing the death penalty. In his remarks he trenchantly observed that anyone entering activism for a social cause must expect that the work itself is its own reward. Expectations of fame or monetary gain must be "checked at the door." This caveat notwithstanding, Donny is in fact well remembered—by students, the punk rock community, bisexual theorists, and—above all—the movement for prison reform.

Stephen Donaldson died of AIDS complications, just a week short of his fiftieth birthday, on July 19, 1996.

His stormy career causes one to wonder whether an early attraction to causes exposes a vein of madness? Certainly mental disturbance was in his background even though his brothers are eminently conventional. It is perhaps more likely that Donaldson's creative madness, if so it is to be termed, was triggered by the times. He came of age just as the twin rebellions of the antiwar movement and the counterculture were cresting. When all is said and done, however, only a person of exceptional dedication and imagination could have founded Columbia's Student Homophile League, a first, and one that has happily produced many thorns in the sides of stiff college administrators and tight-assed alums everywhere. Today the "Queer Lounge" of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community of Columbia-Barnard bears a plaque to his memory dedicated on November 15, 1996.

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