

# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE GROWTH OF THE ALEXANDER COMMUNITY

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The F.M. Alexander Memorial lecture, 2002

**delivered by Alexander Murray**

to the American Society for the Alexander Technique (AmSAT)

Published version in AmSAT News, no. 57, pp10-12 (Fall 2002)

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The first time I had the opportunity of talking to the Alexander community was 20 years ago, in London, when my subject was “John Dewey and F.M. Alexander, 36 years of friendship.” Thirteen years later, in San Francisco the title was “F.M. Alexander's Teaching: Our Supreme Inheritance.” At the time, I had been in correspondence with a Dutch eccentric, Jeroen Staring, who was busy writing a biography of Alexander with the intention of proving that he was a plagiarist, eugenicist and racist. In spite of the title of Alexander's first book, *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, I did not get the impression that he was ever accused of male chauvinism.

My subject today is an attempt to circumvent any such accusation by paying tribute to some of the women who were (and are responsible) for the continuing success of the Alexander Technique (or “the Work” as it was originally known).

In the first chapter of *Freedom to Change [The Development and Science of the Alexander Technique, Mouritz, 1997]* Frank Pierce Jones writes, “for many years it was not possible to study the technique except with him and his brother [Alfred Redden Alexander].” Frank did not know that F.M.'s sisters helped in the early days of the technique and that Amy, Marjory Barlow's mother assisted him in London until her marriage in 1914. This is only one of the interesting facts which emerge in the recently published Alexander family history, the work of Marjory's niece Jackie Evans [*Frederick Matthias Alexander—A Family History, Phillimore & Co, 2001*] which I commend to you all as necessary reading to correct some of the mis-information circulating in connection with Alexander, his life and work.

During the time of his training with the Alexanders, Frank was working on a paper, published in the *Classical Journal*, March 1944, on the role of classics in the emancipation of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Ethel Webb was of assistance in this project, telling him of the excitement among women when in 1887 the highest honors in the Classical Tripos at Cambridge was won by Agnata Frances Ramsay a student of Girton College. Girton was founded in the year of F.M.'s birth 1869, with six women students. 1887 was the birth year of another classicist, Irene Tasker, to whom I would like to give thanks for the

connecting links she has provided in my ongoing study of the work which brings us all here today.

Perhaps I should begin with a few words on Ethel Webb, the first non-Alexander to work closely with F.M. I owe most of my information to Jackie Evans who gives a fascinating biographical sketch placing her in the historical context of both the Alexander work and world events. Ethel was born in 1866 of unusually liberal parents, her father the Webb of **Mappin and Webb**, the Bond Street jewellers. Studying the piano in Berlin, she became friends with a young American pianist, Alice Fowler, through whom she lived and taught for sometime in NY, teaching pupils from families of the Washington Square set. Her NY connection later became helpful to Alexander during his wartime stays in America.

She began lessons in 1913 after reading "Conscious Control" (published the previous year) subsequently becoming Alexander's secretary and assistant. During that year she visited Rome where Dr Maria Montessori was teaching an International Course on her educational methods. There she met Irene Tasker and Margaret Naumberg (of Walden School fame) both of whom became pupils of Alexander after reading his pamphlet. This trio of educated women, unusual women played an active part in the dissemination of the technique in educational circles. Margaret Naumberg enabled Alexander to take off to a flying start when he came to the USA during the first World War. She was also responsible for introducing him to John Dewey. Margaret Naumberg invited Irene to teach in her little NY school when, because of the wartime conditions Irene was unable to continue teaching at a teachers's college in the North of England where she had introduced the Montessori ideas. (My aunt was a student about the time at the same Darlington Teacher's College).

Irene was able to study with Dewey at Columbia. Erwin Edman, a student in the same class (which included Alfred Barnes) tells the following anecdote:

There was among the group a young lady who had come from England where she had studied philosophy with Bertrand Russell at Cambridge. She listened patiently for weeks to Dewey's varied insistence that the truth of an idea was tested by its use. One day she

burst out toward the close of the seminar in the sharp clipped speech of the educated Englishwoman, "But professor, I have been taught to believe that true means true; and false means false, that good means good and bad means bad; I don't understand all this talk about more or less true, more or less good. Could you explain more exactly?"

Professor Dewey looked at her mildly for a moment and said: "Let me tell you a parable. Once upon a time in Philadelphia there was a paranoiac. He thought he was dead. Nobody could convince him he was alive. Finally, one of the doctors thought of an ingenious idea. He pricked the patient's finger. 'Now, he said' are you dead?' 'Sure,' said the paranoiac,' that proves that dead men bleed ....' Now I 'll say true or false if you want me to, but I'll mean better or worse."

In the fall of 1917, her studies at Columbia completed, Irene joined F.M. as an assistant. In 1918 she travelled with the Deweys to California where Dewey was to deliver his lectures on "Human Nature and Conduct" at Stanford University. In spite of her extreme natural shyness, she was able to give talks on the effects of the war in Europe in the Hollywood Town Hall and to various Women's Clubs, raising quite considerable sums for the British Red Cross.

My own interest in John Dewey stems from a conversation with Irene, in which I asked her if his writings bore any relevance for a student of the technique. She told me she thought his work of the utmost importance. I have spent some thirty-five years familiarising myself with his immense output, thanks to another remarkable woman, Jo Ann Boydston former Director of the Dewey Center. She has made his work available in exemplary form, and appreciates Alexander's influence, in great contrast with much of the philosophical community. I am grateful for Irene's opinion, with which I now wholeheartedly concur.

The book which F.M. considered his most important, CCCI [*Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*] was carefully read by John Dewey and emended and edited by a team of women, Ethel Webb, Irene Tasker, Carla Atkinson and Edith Lawson. The proofs were corrected by Mary Olcott. In her 80<sup>th</sup> year Irene wrote, "I read at regular intervals Dewey's introduction to CCC

to remind me of the high standard he has set down for all teachers of the technique.”

In 1924 the year after the publication of CCCI, the seeds of the “little school” were sown, when Irene's young nephew was sent from India to her guardianship. She asked F.M. if she could “link his lessons in the Work with application to all his school lessons”. F.M. consented and Irene and her charge were joined by other children having lessons with F.M and A.R. The “little school” prospered and when John Dewey was in Britain in 1929 for the Gifford Lectures, he spent a morning watching the proceedings and on leaving, said, “It is quite evident what you are aiming at – and I wish I were a pupil in this class!”

The development of the “little school” led to the establishment of the first Teachers Training course which was given a public send-off by one of Alexander's medical protagonists, the [eye] surgeon, Mr Rugg-Gunn, in an article entitled “A New Profession” in *Women's Employment*. Interestingly, Jackie Evans suggests that this is the period when “the Work” became referred to as “the Technique”.

Of the nine students in the first year of the class only two were men. Five of the seven women went on to long and productive teaching careers. They were, Marjorie Barstow who needs no introduction to American teachers, Margaret Goldie, recently celebrated in *Not To Do* [Camon Press, 1999] by a grateful student, Fiona Robb; Irene Stewart, one of the team of teachers at Staflex House when my wife and I first had lessons with Walter Carrington in 1958; Lulie Westfeldt whose book *F. Matthias Alexander: The Man and his Work* appeared in 1964. Lulie was the teacher of Judy Liebowitz and an important pioneer of the Work in New York; Kitty Wielopolska, whose conversations with Joe Armstrong [*Never Ask Why, Schizophrenia and the Alexander Work, The Life Adventure of Kitty Wielopolska as told to Joe Armstrong*, Novis Publications, 2001, eBook 2014] detail a fascinating life history interwoven with the Alexander technique; and Erika Whittaker, niece of Ethel Webb who spent several years in Australia and whose odyssey has been chronicled in *Taking Time* [*Six Interviews with first generation teachers of the Alexander Technique on*

*Alexander teacher training*] edited by Chariclia Gounaris.[Novis Publications, 2000, eBook 2014].

Margaret Goldie, a student of the Froebel Training College in 1927 was sent to Alexander by the Principal, Esther Lawrence one of three notable women students of Alexander who had their first lessons from Amy in 1911. The other two were Lucy Silcox, a Cambridge Classical scholar, and Elizabeth Glover, a graduate in Medieval and Modern Language, both of whom retired as Heads of prestigious girls' schools.

When the school [the “little school”] was transferred from Ashley Place [the location of F.M.'s teachers training course in London] to Penhill [Bexleyheath, Kent] in 1934, Irene stayed but one term and then moved to South Africa. She carried with her a letter of recommendation from Dewey to Professor Alfred Hoernle, in which he wrote:

“I feel I am doing a public educational service in stating my judgement as to the great, even extraordinary, value of her work. Miss Tasker is an experienced teacher with a natural gift for dealing with children. In addition, she is a thorough mistress of the principles, methods and technique of Mr Alexander's work. Any child committed to her care will be sure of achieving intellectual and moral as well as physical improvement.”

Among the friends and students she soon found in Johannesburg was Vera Coaker, whose husband, Norman played a vital part in what was later to ensue in S. African legal history. Irene's educational connections led her to address the Annual Conference of the Transvaal Teachers' Association, an audience of about three hundred. She was asked to demonstrate but declined and offered to do so at home if teachers put down their names. Eighty responded and for eight weeks she demonstrated to groups of ten at her home in the evening. This seems to me to be a very appropriate way (means-whereby) for dealing with introducing the work in a new environment.

Irene returned to England in time for Alexander's 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday celebrations which she helped organise. Shortly afterwards she was back in Johannesburg working, in the words of her friend and assistant, Joyce Robert, "surrounded by a group of children in her workroom or under the tree in the garden, using the simplest of equipment, while Alexander's Technique was applied to the mere acts of sitting, speaking, rising to perform some ordinary task. The pupils were of all ages from five years, and many were handicapped by serious problems, but the concentration, self-control and awareness they displayed was awe inspiring".

In July 1942 she read a paper "An Unrecognised Need in Education" to the S.A. Association for the Advancement of Science, later published in their Journal of Science. In it, she gives a brief account of Alexander's discovery and the support given his principles, by Dewey in his preface to the books, and the nineteen medical men who wrote to the *British Medical Journal* in 1937. Summing up she writes:

"We have evidence all around us that present educational methods do not prevent children from developing bad habits of use and functioning in the process of being educated. Striking evidence can be found in a leading article in *The Star*, Johannesburg, dated May 16<sup>th</sup>, entitled "An Educational Indictment," based on the examiners' report in the Cape Senior and Junior examinations: 'Almost illegible handwriting,' 'slovenly work,' 'inability to understand the simplest question,' being some of the criticisms, and in a second article, dated May 21<sup>st</sup>, entitled "A Slipshod Crowd", based on a statement by General Smuts that 'We in S.A. are a slipshod crowd, do you ever see young men carry themselves properly in this country?'

"Both these criticisms are directed against young people whose education has been based on the artificial separation of the 'physical' from the 'mental'; 'mental' training in the classroom with intervals of 'physical' training outside. It does not seem to have worked too well judging by these published reports. As long as we assume that the child's organism can be separated into two parts, 'physical' and 'mental', and dealt with as such, so long shall we have with us the spectacle of children who, in spite of increased time being given to

'physical' drill and exercises, continue to sit slumped in their chairs and to huddle over their desks as they do their 'mental' work in school".

"The need for change in our conception of education was never so acute as it is today. If the results of basing educational method on the old conception of 'mind' and 'body' as separate entities, are proving so unsatisfactory, might not a change in the conception that the child should be educated as a psychophysical whole lead to a revolution in teaching methods generally? This is the conception which is fundamental to Alexander's teaching technique for the improvement of use. Every step in his procedure is based upon it as a guiding principle. John Dewey gives his personal experience of it in his introduction to *The Use of the Self*."

And so I verified in personal experience all that Mr Alexander says about the unity of the physical and psychical in the psycho-physical; about our habitually wrong use of ourselves and the part this wrong use plays in generating all kinds of unnecessary tensions and wastes of energy; about the vitiation of our sensory appreciations which form the material of our judgements of ourselves.....together with the great change in moral and mental attitude that takes place as proper coordinations are established. In reaffirming my conviction as to the scientific character of Mr Alexander's discoveries and technique I do so then, not as one who has experienced a 'cure' but as one who has brought whatever intellectual capacity he has to the study of a problem... The technique of Mr Alexander bears the same relation to education that education itself bears to all other activities. It contains in my judgement the promise and potentiality of the new direction that is needed in all education.

Consciousness of need has ever been the first step in the making of change. Might not Alexander's discovery, that it was what he was doing wrong in the use of himself that was standing in the way of his success, prove to be the starting point for an investigation into what



lies behind the difficulties and disappointments encountered by all who are engaged in the work of education?"

In April of the following year the President of the Transvaal Teachers' Association, Mr. I.G. Griffith, addressed the Annual General Meeting with "The F. Matthias Alexander Technique and Its Relation to Education," in which he reinforced the points made by Irene and gave accounts of some of the remarkably beneficial effort of her teaching which he had observed. The influence in liberal educational circles stimulated a reaction in the National political camp which took the form of an article published in March 1944 "Quackery versus Physical Education" which ended in the famous libel case for information on which I must refer you to Jackie Evans.

At this time, Professor Dart and his family were students of Irene. To this happy conjunction we owe Dart's writings on the Alexander Technique and my wife and my collaboration with him from 1967 on.

Irene returned from S.A. in 1949 after which time she taught in Cambridge, London and Hove. Our paths crossed in 1958 when Charles Neil, with whom Joan and I had began lessons three years earlier, died. One of his assistants, Lois Caink, a former physiotherapist took over his small training course, of which my wife (somewhat reluctantly) was a member. The responsibility was too much and Lois had a breakdown. During her recovery she was helped by Irene Tasker, recently moved to London from Cambridge. Irene suggested that Lois send her students to Walter Carrington and as a result Joan and I began our Alexander lessons. We soon realised that Charles, who claimed to have "gone on from Alexander" had "gone off Alexander".

Some time later, with Walter's encouragement, I had a lesson from Irene who had just recovered from a broken ankle and was living in Holland Park, within walking distance of Lansdowne Road where Joan was in the training course [Walter Carrington's training course]. The one instruction I remember from her is related to her biographical address to the Society of Teachers [Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique, STAT] in 1967, published by Walter in 1978, the year after her death – "Connecting Links". It was a note she made of one of F.M.'s lessons given to her brother on his return from India. After

explaining how the coming forward movement in the chair always makes people cramp the chest and shorten, he said, "Never let the body overrun the head in coming forward. Never let the head overrun the body in coming backward."

We regretted not being able to attend Irene's appearance in 1967 as we were by that time teaching in Michigan State University which pleased Irene who mentioned it in her talk as good news. We were about to make another "connecting link" with Professor Dart. If my memory serves me, we had dinner with Irene before we left for the States. At that time she had a houseguest, a former singer from Covent Garden whom I had known well sixteen years earlier. Ann Findlay was enthusiastic about the help she had been given in dealing with the vicissitudes of her career by Irene. Irene also told of her work with oboe students of Janet Craxton at the Royal Academy of Music where there is now a flourishing Alexander class.

The last time I saw her, she was in the Royal Homeopathic Hospital, nearly ninety years of age. I was living in London and teaching in Holland which was during the period 1976-7. She had been bed-ridden for some time but was cheerful and optimistic and told me that she lay in bed "directing."

Not much of her work has been chronicled, but what little she wrote and is recorded as having said is well worth reading and digesting. She is one of the unrecorded heroines of the Alexander Technique.\*

When I first realised that Alexander's sisters were also involved in his early teaching the germ of the idea for today's homily came to me. In considering the extent to which the technique is now in the hands of women, I did a rough count of the membership of the American Society and the British one. In America one in four teachers is male, in Britain two in seven – very similar figures. I was hoping to have gained inspiration from a forthcoming book on Alexander's niece *An Examined Life [Marjory Barlow in Conversation with Trevor Allan Davies]* Mornum Time Press, 2002] but publishing delays prevented that. I hope you will all read it when it appears and that you will read and appreciate the study and devotion that produced the family history of Frederick Matthias Alexander by his great niece, Jackie Evans.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity of reconsidering my brief relationship with Irene Tasker.

\*A chronicle of Irene Tasker's life became a reality in 2020 through the meticulous work of Alexander Technique teacher Regina Stratil who dedicated a book of 480 pages to the memory of a worthy predecessor: *Irene Tasker - Her Life and Work with the Alexander Technique*, Mouritz, 2020.

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For further information about the people mentioned in the talk, "the little school" and the "South African Libel Case" see *The Companion to the Alexander Technique*, mouritz.org