

No 10 Alexander's early supporters: *Margaret Naumburg, Ethel Webb, Irene Tasker*

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1. Today I am going to look at Alexander's very early supporters. I am often surprised at how little many teachers know about our heritage and how deeply and widely it reaches. We are not a passing fad.
2. In my view, the Technique is a richly woven continuity of tradition and influence. Alexander is of course at the heart of it but the more we know about the various people and ideas that have shaped it, the more secure we are in what we have. And the more unwilling we should be to hand it over to people who are ignorant of our heritage.
3. That was never a danger when Walter Carrington was alive to remind us. But now he is not here we have to fill in as best we can for ourselves.
4. Today I am going to look at three strong, enlightened and progressive women who came to the Technique in the years just before the outbreak of the First World War. The common factor in their getting to know each other and becoming involved in the Technique was their interest in Maria Montessori and her work on early childhood education.
5. I will start with an American called Margaret Naumburg (1890-1983) who became one of the founders of Art Therapy in the US. She was born in New York in 1890 and did her undergraduate studies at a small women's liberal arts school in New York called Barnard College. After that she went to the famous women's university, Vassar College, which is also in New York.
6. She then went on to do graduate studies in Columbia University in New York where she studied under John Dewey whom we will have a lot to say about later. He was Professor of Philosophy in Columbia and one of the most prominent liberal intellectuals of the time in America.
7. After completing her studies under Dewey, she came to London and studied with Sidney and Beatrice Webb at the London School of Economics. The Webbs were prominent social reformers and were among the founders of the Fabian Society. Together with a few other Fabians, including George Bernard Shaw, they had set up the London School of Economics in 1895.

8. They also became involved in the newly formed Labour Party in the early years of the 20th century and were very influential in its development and rise to power after the First World War.
9. So Margaret was right in the heart of the progressive social movement in England at the time. Since education was one of her major interests and the name of Maria Montessori (1870-1952) was becoming well-known in progressive circles, she went to Italy and spent some time studying with Montessori in Rome in 1913.
10. While there she met a woman called Ethel Webb – no relation of Beatrice. Ethel came from the famous Mappin and Webb jewellery and silversmith family – they've still got a shop in Regent Street.
11. Ethel Webb (1866-1952) originally trained to be a concert pianist but had to abandon her career because she developed a bad back. She read an early version of *Man's supreme inheritance* which Alexander had published in 1910 and had lessons with him. These made such a dramatic difference that she decided to give up the idea of piano playing and devote her life to helping Alexander.
12. He took her up on this and trained her in the Technique. She became his first qualified teacher in 1914. She weaves in and out of Alexander's story for the next forty years until her death in 1952 at the age of 86.
13. In addition to her music, Ethel was very interested in child-education and believed there were affinities between the teachings of Alexander and those of Montessori, which was why she was studying with Montessori. When Margaret Naumburg arrived, Ethel told about Alexander and urged her to have lessons with him.
14. Also working as an observer of Montessori's teaching methods at the same time was another young woman called Irene Tasker (1887-1977). She had been sent there by a committee formed to make the work of Montessori better known in England.
15. She suffered from a bad stoop and Ethel Webb also told her about Alexander and gave her a copy of an *Man's supreme inheritance* and urged to have lessons with him.
16. When she returned to London, Irene went to see him. Ethel Webb was back acting as his secretary and introduced her. Recalling their first meeting Irene said:

I remember very little of that interview. I had always been shy – and was probably very self-conscious – but I do recall his interest in my short-sightedness which had been my chief handicap up till then, and he also commented on the bad stoop I had.¹

17. She arranged a set of thirty daily lessons with Alexander and the difference they made to her was so dramatic that she too decided to devote herself to helping him. She also weaves in and out of the Alexander story for the rest of his life and beyond it until her death at the age of 93 in 1977. She learned the Technique by working on pupils as an assistant to Alexander – in effect, an apprentice.
18. In 1924, she became guardian of ‘a nervous and excitable’ eight-year relative and he became the basis of a small private school mainly for handicapped children in Alexander’s apartment in Ashley Place in Victoria in which Alexander took a deep interest.² This later transferred to Alexander’s place in the country and to the US during the Second World War.
19. In 1935, she emigrated to South Africa and established the Technique there. One of the most famous people she introduced to it was the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of the Witwatersrand, the well-known anatomist and paleoanthropologist Raymond Dart who also became an enthusiastic supporter of the Technique.
20. When she came back from South Africa in 1949, she continued teaching the Technique in England and she gave a talk about her experiences to an audience in Lansdowne Road in 1967. She was eighty at the time. It was published as a booklet by the CTC in 1978. It is a really nice informal talk in which she quietly sheds a lot of light on the history and practice of the Technique. It is well worth reading.
21. She also has one piece of advice which I think applies to all of us here and was very much part of Walter Carrington’s philosophy. She picked it up as a young woman from reading a book by William James, the psychologist, long before she had any involvement with the Technique. She says of the book:

¹ Tasker (1978)p10

² Ibid.131

Much of it I have forgotten but one maxim I have always remembered 'Never discourage! Discouragement is the devil'.³

22. She and Ethel Webb played a major part in the early decades of the Technique. Apart from their teaching and practical assistance to Alexander, they were both involved in the writing of the revised version of *Man's supreme inheritance* and the writing of *Constructive conscious control of the individual* and *The use of the self*. By the time Alexander was writing his last book, *The universal constant in living*, Irene Tasker was in South Africa but Walter Carrington recalled working with Ethel Webb on drafting it.
23. Coming back to Margaret Naumburg, when she returned to London in 1913, she duly had her lessons with Alexander. She was so impressed with him that she offered to help him promote his work if he ever wanted to come to New York. This happened to be something he was very interested in doing.
24. She went back to and in 1914, she set up a progressive children's school which she called "The Children's' School'. She later renamed it the Walden School. She also married the now-forgotten novelist, social historian and political activist, Waldo Frank with whom she had a son but they were divorced in 1924.
25. The school was very advanced for its time and was influenced by her work with Montessori. It was based on the idea that:

The emotional development of children, fostered through encouragement of spontaneous creative expression and self-motivated learning, should take precedence over the traditional intellectual approach to the teaching of a standardized curriculum.⁴
26. At that time, Naumburg and her husband moved in avant garde circles in New York. She was interested in Jung, the occult, psychodrama and the use of art as therapy. It is easy to get drawn into the fascinating details her story, but the main thing from our point of view was her enthusiasm for Alexander.
27. Her chance to help him came soon enough. After the outbreak of World War I, in 1914, the number of Alexander's

³ Tasker (1978)p9

⁴ http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_sc/assignment1/1914naumburg.html

pupils in London fell off and he felt that this would be a good time to go to America.

28. He left his practice in the care of his brother, Albert Redden Alexander, who was usually known as AR, and Ethel Webb and set sail for New York in September 1914 in the *Lusitania*. That was the ship which was sunk off the south coast of Ireland by a German submarine nine months later in May 1915.
29. When Alexander arrived in New York, Margaret Naumburg delivered on her promise to help him. She arranged teaching rooms, fixed up contacts for him and recommended pupils to him from her big circle of prominent intellectual and artistic friends. It was an ideal beginning and Alexander quickly became well-known in very influential circles. But above all, Margaret decided that he must meet Dewey.
30. We have lots of celebrities these days but they are not celebrated for being wise or clever. It is more the winners of Big Brother or other shows who are famous for being famous but don't seem to have anything interesting to say about anything.
31. But Dewey had a lot to say about a lot of things and he was famous for it. An introduction to a compilation of his writings says:

*In addition to being one of the greatest technical philosophers of the twentieth century, John Dewey was also an educational innovator, a Progressive Era reformer, and one of his country's last great public intellectuals...it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for a generation no major issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken.*⁵
32. So getting to know Dewey was a big prize and Margaret Naumburg was determined to win it for Alexander. Dewey's wife was already having lessons with Alexander but Dewey himself was too busy. But when Margaret Naumburg set up the dinner party, he and Alexander got on very well together and Dewey signed himself up for lessons.
33. This was the beginning of a lifelong relationship with Alexander. There is no question that Dewey's support was a major factor in the spread of the Technique. But Dewey and

⁵ Dewey, Vol 2 (1998)p ix

Alexander also had important effects on each other's work. I will go into this interaction between the two men later.

34. But after Margaret had safely delivered him to Dewey, there was a cooling of relations between Alexander and her. He basically did not approve of her educational methods.
35. He does not mention her by name but it is clear that his criticisms of child education in Chapter VII of MSI were aimed directly at her. He says:

Let me describe the practical procedure of a certain type of "free-drawing" lesson. Pencils, papers and the usual paraphernalia are placed on tables or desks in different parts of the schoolroom, in the hope that the child may be tempted to use them in drawing. Then one day, a pupil takes up a pencil and makes an attempt to draw, another follows his example and so on, until all the pupils have made some kind of effort in this direction....

I must confess that I have been shocked to witness the work that goes on in these schools.⁶

36. This sounds very crusty and reactionary and in some ways it was. But Alexander nevertheless had a serious point. He was basically worried that allowing children complete freedom to develop their own ways of using pens and pencils and other implements to perform complex tasks like drawing can embed harmful habits of use from a very early age.
37. Having been watching my infant grandson, I am astounded at the muscular plasticity and capacity for quite uncannily accurate imitation in humans babies and young children. They can acquire both good and bad habits of using themselves at an extremely early age. So there are interesting discussions still to be had on the whole subject of infant education.
38. Margaret Naumburg went on to have a distinguished career of her own. She resigned from the Walden School in the early 1920's and had a son. She and Waldo Frank were divorced in 1924. In the 1930s she became one of the founders and leading lights of the Art Therapy movement in the United States.
39. Despite the cooling of personal relations with Alexander, she nevertheless seems to have stuck with the Technique. She published a book in 1928 called *The child and the modern*

⁶ MSI p79

world. It consists of a series of imagined dialogues between contrasting figures. One for example is between “*the new-school physician and an old-fashioned children’s specialist.*”

40. The one that concerns us is the Thirteenth and is between the Director of a progressive school and a university professor of English. The Director is thoroughly Alexandrian and mentions Alexander by name.

41. Here is an extract from a twelve-page discussion they are having on balance:

*It would be necessary for me to convince you...how entirely mistaken your present mental attitudes and feelings concerning your own bodily actions really are. You would resist until I persuaded you to cease your misguided efforts to help me. When you were ready to inhibit your old muscular habits and permit me to place you in positions that would re-ordinate your body, you would then receive a fresh kinesthetic experience. It would be of a kind you could never give yourself and that you would never forget. I could place your mechanism in certain postures of equilibrium and train you to build up positions of tensionless balance.*⁷

42. She clearly understood what Alexander was getting at and it is a pity she did not take things further. She certainly had the time to do so. She lived to the age of 93, and died only in 1983. As it is she is an interesting and neglected resource for us.

43. These three women Margaret Naumburg, Irene Tasker, and Ethel Webb were absolutely convinced supporters of the Technique at a critical time in its development. I think it is significant that apart from the Technique, what they had in common was an interest in progressive education, especially of young children. It was because of that that their lives intersected in Maria Montessori’s school in the early years of the last century.

44. Education was the lens through which they saw what Alexander was doing. They saw his work not as a therapy but as a means of psychophysical education from a very young age and a route to a lifelong proper use of the totality of the self. It was this educational aspect which attracted them to the Technique.

⁷ Naumburg (1928)p268

45. No one knows how much they influenced Alexander but it is obvious that in their own different ways they provided support for him at crucial times. We can safely say that without them, the Technique would have been different from what we know – and it might not have survived at all.

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