

## NO 27 RAYMOND DART (II)

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CTC

18 June 2013

1. Last time I told you about Raymond Dart (1893-1988), his work as Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Professor of Anatomy at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, and how he gained his enduring fame as the discoverer of the *Australopithecus Africanus* fossil.
2. I then told you of the birth of his very premature son Galen in 1941 and Dart's determination to help him in his physical development. I also told you of Dart's nervous breakdown in 1943 and how excited he was by his discovery Alexander's books in that year.
3. At this time, Dart discovered that Alexander's long-term assistant and associate Irene Tasker (1887-1977) was in South Africa. Dart got in contact with her but she was already booked on a sea-passage to England. It meant that he was only able to manage a limited number of lessons with her.
4. This is how he described the experience, saying:

*...I received a series of daily demonstrations (extending over the months of September and October 1943) of Alexander's technique. She revealed to me how my own malpostured habits of sitting, standing, walking and lying down could be bettered by her manipulating my moving body concurrently with my consciously inhibiting that wrongful "intermeddling with reflex details" of such activities, mentioned by Sherrington, which previously had characterised their performance.<sup>1</sup>*
5. Dart became a fervent convert to the Technique but since he was completely on his own, and not lacking in self-confidence, he just continued to work things out for himself, using Alexander's books, together with what he had learned from Irene Tasker and his own anatomical and physiological knowledge.
6. He said:

*I continued studying the wrongful and rightful performance of muscular acts so intensively that it*

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<sup>1</sup>Dart (1996) p122

*became to some extent habitual. In the absence of my teacher I, too, had been forced to adopt a “do-it-yourself” technique.<sup>2</sup>*

7. Nor was he shy about sharing his ideas. Dart said:

*Within the next four years I had written three papers about what I had already learned therefrom – one for my anatomy students, one for my dental colleagues, and one for our fellow members of the medical profession.<sup>3</sup>*

8. In addition to using his ideas on the Technique with Galen, he was quite happy to have a go at putting them into practice with other people. One of his colleagues in the Medical School recalled going into Dart's room where he was working on a student who had a paralysed arm. He says:

*...I found him standing in the room with this student, a man of about twenty-five years, lying on the carpet, and I watched while Professor Dart put him through exercises which resembled movements of a primitive amphibian or fish...Then he would tell him to yawn deeply, because yawning is a very primitive activity. And in the middle of the yawn, he would roll and smack the paralysed arm against the carpet on the floor.<sup>4</sup>*

9. In 1949, Dart came through London with his wife. He met Alexander and had a lesson with him. It is interesting that as an anatomist, he seized upon the centrality of the head-neck relationship to Alexander's work. He said

*...Alexander's work is important because it is based on the fundamental biological fact that the relation of the head to the neck is the primary relationship to be established in all proper positioning and movement of the body.<sup>5</sup>*

10. As far as I know, that and the week's work with Irene Tasker were the only AT lessons Dart had. But he did become part of the AT community. Dilys Carrington told me of her excitement

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.27

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.27

<sup>4</sup> Wheelhouse (1988)p104

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.102

on the day she answered the door in Lansdowne Road to a small smiling man who said “I’m Raymond Dart.”

11. She and Walter became friends with him and they met him in South Africa and in the United States. In later years he used to have tea with her in Lansdowne Road.
12. I asked Dilys whether Walter had given Dart lessons and she said she presumed so but I am not so sure. Dart himself does not refer to having any lessons beyond those with Irene Tasker and the one with Alexander in 1947.
13. Through all this time Dart continued to work devotedly with Galen. As a boy, he progressed well but always had frail health. By his teens he was taller than his father but the spasticity continued to affect his right leg and foot and his speech was slow and deliberate.<sup>6</sup>
14. There is a family photograph taken in 1962, when Galen was 21, showing the four Darts at the airport on their way to an archaeological trip to Israel. It all appears very cheerful and normal and Galen looks to be a very attractive young man. But that seems to have been the high point.
15. The family had to return suddenly from the trip when Galen was taken ill. According to Frances Wheelhouse, Galen “*was placed in a hospital on a permanent basis.*”<sup>7</sup> He was diagnosed as suffering from dementia from which he never recovered.<sup>89</sup> This was a huge tragedy for the Darts.
16. Now for a look at the Dart Procedures which are essentially the exercises that Dart developed when he was working with Galen. They came into the AT because Alex Murray happened to be visiting Lansdowne Road in 1967 and was talking to Walter Carrington about the role of the jaw in head balance.
17. Walter asked him if he had read the paper Dart had written for his dental students which has the riveting title *The postural aspect of malocclusion* and lent him a copy. Murray said he was so impressed by it that he spent several days copying it out by hand.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Wheelhouse and Smithford (2001)221

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.266

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.p276

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.p286

<sup>10</sup> Murray (1988)p69

18. When Murray got back to the US, he and his wife Joan became friendly with Dart who at this stage had retired from the University and was spending some of his time in the US.
19. At that stage the Dart procedures were only in hand-written form. The Murrays had them typed up and the diagrams redrawn and presented them to Dart for his approval.
20. But before talking any further about the Dart Procedures you need to know something about what is called *recapitulation theory* which underlies a lot of Dart's thinking including the Procedures.
21. Recapitulation theory was developed by a 19th century German anatomist called Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) who was a prominent supporter of Darwin and evolution.
22. Haeckel's idea, which he proposed in 1866, just seven years after the first appearance of the *Origin of Species*, was that the human embryo as it develops in the womb passes through, or recapitulates, the same physical patterns as the evolution of the human species from its earliest pre-human beginnings.
23. It was Haeckel who coined what is usually referred to as the "well-known" expression "*Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny*" – though I confess I've never overheard it in the pub. Ontogeny is the entire sequence of events involved in the development of an individual organism from conception through to maturity whereas phylogeny is the sequence of events involved in the evolution of a species.
24. Haeckel believed that the human embryo passes through various evolutionary stages in the womb in which it has the characteristics of a fish, a reptile, a mammal and finally a human. If you look at pictures of the development of the human embryo you can see such resemblances – at one stage, for example, it looks very like a little fish.
25. Even in Haeckel's time, recapitulation theory was never widely accepted or seen as credible at a scientific level. The growth and development of an individual are not the same as the long-term evolution of a species. Each embryo develops in accordance with its own innate characteristics rather than going through a process of evolution.
26. Another reason for its loss of credibility was that Haeckel was accused of touching up his drawings of the different stages

of the human embryo so that they looked more like the embryos of fish, reptiles and so on than they really do.

27. Recapitulation theory had fallen out scientific favour by the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but the idea of the embryo passing the various evolutionary stages has continued to linger on. I remember it from some of the popular science books I used to read as a boy and even today you still see references to it.
28. An interesting aside is that if you look up Haeckel on the internet, there is an unexpectedly large amount about him, devoted to demolishing his ideas. This is because some American creationists seem to think that Haeckel is a key figure in evolutionary theory and if they can discredit him, they are undermining the whole idea of evolution.
29. What is not in question is that the human embryo and the human infant go through a series of stages of development in the womb. If premature birth occurs, the infant has to go through its early development in the hostile open world rather than in the protected environment of the womb.
30. This was the case with Galen. The challenge was to find a way of helping him to develop outside the womb.
31. Dart seems to have had a deep belief that recapitulation theory provided that way forward. In her article in *Direction* magazine Frances Wheelhouse quotes him as saying about damaged children:

*By correcting any maladjustments from birth, due to possible wrongly promoted actions, either accidentally or deliberately, a series of exercises based on our ancestral movement, often right back to amphibious days, could help in readjustment. Even relaxing in some ancestral way and moving on ancestral all-fours can solve problems for some, and also assist the healthy.* <sup>11</sup>
32. I think recapitulation theory was a wrong turning in Dart's thinking and we need to be aware of this when we are reading him. We certainly should not think it lends any scientific credibility to the AT – quite the contrary.

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<sup>11</sup> Wheelhouse (1988)p105

33. Going back to the Dart Procedures, they are a set of body positions and movements. Some of the positions are quite familiar to us like semi-supine and fully supine but they also include lying fully prone and getting into a foetal crouch on the floor.
34. There is a set of rotational movements involving rolling from fully supine to fully prone, getting into a foetal crouch and rolling from face down to face up with the hands behind the head. There is another series of movements from fully prone to crouching, and even performing headstands.
35. Obviously these have little to do with the AT as described by Alexander in his books which were all written before the Procedures were known about.
36. According to Robin Simmons who trained in the CTC, Walter Carrington was originally quite keen on them but changed his mind. In the *Direction* journal issue on Dart, Simmons says
- Although Walter showed us much of the basic Dart procedures he later decided to stop giving them out. Because it is so easy to make the Dart procedures into a set of “exercises” that can be done he now omits to teach them and to my knowledge, only uses crawling procedures in a very non-doing and back-strengthening way.<sup>12</sup>*
37. The Murrays have used them in their own training school for a long time and have demonstrated them in the CTC and around the AT circuit. But Alex Murray is quite modest about them.
38. In his *Direction* magazine article said of them:
- ...working with these Procedures will not teach one the Alexander Technique, but patient and intelligent investigation by one with no Alexander experience may still lead to a certain enlightenment by revealing inefficient patterns of movement and helping to discard them.*
- Undertaken with the guidance of a skilled Alexander teacher, they are a constant source of insight and a point of reference in one’s patterns of behaviour. One can continually return to these as to Alexander’s*

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<sup>12</sup> Simmons (1988)p84

*“positions of mechanical advantage” in which category they certainly belong.<sup>13</sup>*

39. Robin Simmons takes more or less the same line and I think sums it up neatly when he says

*In themselves they are no more essentially Alexandrian than are Yoga postures, for example. However, in my experience they have great deal going for them, particularly in respect of self study and as a resources for exploring aspects of Alexander work with some pupils.<sup>14</sup>*

40. A great deal of what we do in learning and teaching the AT is to do with heightening our own and other people’s awareness of how we use ourselves. If we use the Dart Procedures in this way they can be useful but we need to be aware of the danger of turning them into exercises. And as for the idea that they have special merits because crocodiles used them a few hundred million years ago, I have my doubts.

41. Next time, I will tell you about the latter part of Dart’s life, and about his writings on the AT in the *Skill and poise* book.

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<sup>13</sup> Murray (1988)p6

<sup>14</sup> Simmons (1988)p84