

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

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1. Last time, I mentioned that among Alexander's earliest supporters were three highly progressive and enlightened women who met each other through their interest in Maria Montessori and her work on early childhood education.
2. Today I would like to look at why given that beginning, the Technique subsequently failed to make the breakthrough into the wider world of education that one might have expected.
3. The central figure in the story was an American called Margaret Naumburg (1890-1983). She was born in New York in 1890 and went to Vassar, the famous women's College.
4. She then did graduate studies in Columbia University in New York under John Dewey whom we will have a lot to say about later. He was Professor of Philosophy and one of the most prominent liberal intellectuals of the time in America.
5. After completing her studies under Dewey, Naumburg 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 set up the London School of Economics in 1895.
6. They also became involved in the newly formed Labour Party and were very influential in its development and rise to power after the First World War.
7. 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 work of Maria Montessori (1870-1952) was becoming well-known in progressive circles, she went to Rome to study with her in 1913.
8. While there she met Ethel Webb (1866-1952) – no relation of Beatrice Webb. Ethel came from the famous Mappin and Webb jewellery and silversmith family – they've still got a shop in Regent Street.
9. Ethel had trained to be a concert pianist but was forced to abandon her career because of a bad back. She read an early version of *Man's supreme inheritance* which Alexander had published in 1910 and as a result 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 him.

10. 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.
11. In addition to 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 had gone to study with her. When Margaret Naumburg arrived at Montessori's school in Rome, Ethel told about Alexander and urged her to have lessons with him.
12. Also working as an observer of Montessori's teaching methods at the same time was another young English 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.
13. 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.
14. When Irene Tasker came back to London, she went to see Alexander. Recalling their first meeting she 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
15. 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.
16. 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. This became known as

¹ Tasker (1978)p10

“The Little School” and later transferred to Alexander’s country home near Sidcup in Kent and to the US during the Second World War.

17. In 1935, Tasker emigrated to South Africa and established the Technique there. Her most famous pupil 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.

Tasker came back to England in 1949, and gave a talk 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 is well worth reading.

18. She also has one piece of advice which she had picked up from a book by William James, the psychologist, long before she had any involvement with the Technique.
19. I think it applies to all of us here and was very much part of Walter Carrington’s philosophy. She said she had forgotten much of the book:

*...but one maxim I have always remembered ‘Never discourage! Discouragement is the devil’.*²

20. She and Ethel Webb played a major part in the early decades of the Technique. Apart from their teaching they provided assistance to Alexander in writing the revised version of *Man’s supreme inheritance, Constructive conscious control of the individual* and *The use of the self*. When Alexander was working on his last book, *The universal constant in living*, Irene Tasker was in South Africa but Walter Carrington worked on it with Ethel Webb.
21. Returning to Margaret Naumburg, when she finished her time with Maria Montessori, she returned to London in 1913 and 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.
22. She herself went back to New York and in 1914, she set up a progressive children’s school which she called 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.

² Ibid.p9

23. The school was greatly 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.³

24. At that time, Naumburg had become interested in Jung, the occult, psychodrama and the use of art as therapy. She was the founder of the Art Therapy movement which is still thriving – as you will see if you Google it.

25. Her chance to help Alexander came soon after she returned to New York.

26. After the outbreak of World War I, in 1914, the number of Alexander's pupils in London fell off and he felt that this would be a good time to go to America.

27. 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.

28. 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.

29. Dewey was a big celebrity at the time. 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.⁴

³ http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_sc/assignment1/1914naumburg.html

⁴ Dewey, Vol 2 (1998)p ix

30. Dewey's wife was already having lessons with Alexander but Dewey himself was too busy. So Margaret Naumburg set up a dinner party, to which she invited the Dewey's and Alexander who got on very well together and Dewey signed up for lessons.
31. 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 in the United States.
32. But after Margaret had set up the meeting with Dewey, there was a cooling of relations between Alexander and her. He basically did not approve of her educational methods.
33. He does not mention her by name but it is clear that his criticisms of child education in Chapter VII of *Man's supreme inheritance* 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.⁵

34. Although this was very crusty and reactionary, Alexander nevertheless had a serious point. He was basically worried that allowing children complete freedom to sit in their own way and 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. Finding the right balance between freedom and guidance is something anyone involved in child education has to think about very seriously.
35. Despite the cooling of personal relations with Alexander, Margaret nevertheless seems to have stuck with the Technique. She published a book in 1928 called *The child and the modern 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."

⁵ MSI p79

36. The dialogue 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.

37. Here is an extract from the twelve-page discussion they have 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.⁶

38. At a certain practical level, Naumburg 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.

39. I myself have wondered whether her ventures into Jung, the occult and art therapy conflicted with Alexander's ideas on the psychophysical unity of the human organism were the problem, He was very dismissive of psychoanalysis and anything which seemed to imply a separation between the mind and the body.

40. But I do not think it was anything as complicated as that in his attitude to Margaret Naumburg's work, it was simply that he felt that if you did not provide small children with clear guidance in the proper use of themselves, they would pick up all kinds of ways of misusing themselves.

41. He thoroughly approved of the calming and hands-on work done in the Little School where Irene Tasker

...gave them lessons in the Technique, and ensured that they did not 'pull down' during schoolwork, and encouraged them to be patient and never to try to

⁶ Naumburg (1928)p268

achieve 'ends' until they had thought about the 'means'.⁷

42. Early years education was the lens through which these women saw what Alexander was doing. For them, his work was not a therapy or a cure for anything but 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.
43. I do not think they influenced Alexander's approach. He saw himself as the sole practitioner of his Technique and it was only in the 1930s that he was reluctantly persuaded by Dewey and others to train people as teachers.
44. But what we can say about these three women is that in their own different ways they provided support for him at crucial times.

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⁷ Bloch (2004)p131