

NO 24 ALDOUS HUXLEY (1894-1963) (I)

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1. Those of us who did our training during the Carrington years used to enjoy it greatly when Walter reminisced about the various famous people who supported the Technique. He and Dilys knew many of them and it was interesting to hear about them.
2. But Walter's purpose was also to give us a sense of historic rootedness of the AT. We are not just a passing fad or fancy. We have been round a long time. One of the points of these talks is do the same thing to the best of my ability and give you some sense of our history.
3. Today I am going to talk about the English writer Aldous Huxley. Arguably he did more to put the AT in the public eye than any other of Alexander's supporters.
4. He had his first lessons from Alexander in 1935 and weaves in and out of the AT story for the rest of his life.
5. He knew the Carringtons well. One of his uncles or his father wrote a poem to Dilys praising her name which she showed me once. I cannot remember the details but now that the archives are coming under control I hope to find it.
6. Alexander mentions him in various places and *The universal constant in living* includes an article by him Called *End-gaining and the means-whereby* that was published in *The Saturday Review of Literature* in 1941 a prestigious magazine like the *London Review Of Books*.
7. Two of Huxley's own books, *Eyeless in Gaza* and *Ends and Means* have substantial references to the AT. Because of Huxley's own fame as a writer, the *Saturday Review* article books greatly raised the public profile of the Technique
8. Frank Pierce Jones says that reading Huxley was the reason he began to take an interest in the AT. The same was true of Wilfred Barlow.
9. Huxley was also a devotee of the Bates Method of vision improvement. He wrote a book called *The Art of Seeing*¹ which provided enormous publicity for the Bates Method of vision improvement and hugely annoyed Alexander.

¹ Huxley (1943)

10. Because Huxley was such a famous figure, there is any amount of material on his life. I have used a very comprehensive biography called *Aldous Huxley: an English intellectual* by Nicholas Murray published in 2002².
11. There is a biography by Sybille Bedford, a lifelong friend. There is also a memoir called *This Timeless Moment: a personal view of Aldous Huxley* written by Huxley's second wife and widow – Laura Archera Huxley – that deals with the last eight years of his life.³
12. But before getting into any further detail, it is useful to cast our minds back to the AT scene at the time Huxley had that first lesson.
13. There were five teachers of the Technique in the world. There was Alexander himself who had arrived in London in 1904. His younger brother Albert Redden – known as AR – had learned the Technique by working as FM's assistant in Australia⁴ and had followed him to London.
14. His sister Amy who had been AR's assistant in Australia had also come to London and joined Alexander's practice until her marriage to a wealthy ivory merchant called George Mechin in 1914.⁵
15. The other two teachers were Ethel Webb who had lessons from Alexander in 1910. She persuaded him to train her as a teacher and she worked with him for the rest of his life. The other was Irene Tasker who had lessons with Alexander a couple of years later and also devoted herself to him and the Technique for the rest of her life.
16. As for Huxley himself, he was born in Surrey into an upper middle-class intellectual family in 1894. He was the third son of Leonard Huxley, a classics master at Charterhouse School – a well-known public school.
17. His paternal grandfather was Thomas Henry Huxley, an eminent Victorian scientist and strong supporter of Darwin who was known as "Darwin's bulldog". On the maternal side, his mother's uncle was the poet and literary critic Matthew Arnold. Her sister, Huxley's aunt, Mary Augusta, was a well-known

² Murray (2002)

³ Laura Huxley (1968)

⁴ Bloch (2004)p44

⁵ Ibid.p91

Victorian novelist who wrote under her married name of Mrs Humphry Ward.

18. Aldous was the youngest of three brothers. The oldest became famous as Sir Julian Huxley, an evolutionary biologist who became Secretary General of UNESCO and was one of the founders of the World Wildlife Fund.
19. Aldous was a bright boy growing up in a cultured household. But at the age of nine he was sent to a dreadful preparatory boarding school. The teaching was awful, and there was a huge amount of bullying. This is what the English upper middle class did to their children. Aldous survived it, partly by withdrawing into himself, and reading a lot.
20. At the age of fourteen he went to Eton, the top English public school. In his first year there, his mother, to whom he was deeply attached, was diagnosed with cancer and died quite quickly afterwards at the age of 45. This was a huge blow to him. He grew up a shy and retiring boy and his continued sense of loss is often reflected in his writing.
21. In 1911, when he was sixteen, he suffered an attack of *staphylococcus aureus*. This is a common bacterium which causes a wide variety of ailments from relatively minor things like boils through to very dangerous things like meningitis.
22. In Huxley's time, before antibiotics, it was quite difficult to cure. It then became easy to cure when penicillin became available but then it became resistant to penicillin and they had to use methicillin against it. It has now become resistant to methicillin and is known as MRSA – *methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus*.
23. As a result of his attack Huxley suffered severe inflammation of the cornea – the hard clear bit – in both eyes. When the infection died down, he was suffering from opacity of the cornea in both eyes. The condition is known as *keratitis punctata*.
24. His right eye was nine-tenths blind and the other was affected quite badly. He was also diagnosed as suffering from astigmatism and hyperopia – long sightedness.⁶ In effect, he was almost completely blind. This meant that he could not read – which was a huge blow.

⁶ Murray (2002)

25. His biographer Nicholas Murray says Huxley always believed this damage to his eyes was the most important single determining event in his early life.⁷ It probably had a lot to do with the fact that he developed an extremely good memory.
26. The immediate result was that he had to leave Eton and live at home. He was provided with a variety of private tutors including the young Kenneth Clark who became the famous art historian.
27. Huxley was always a determined and brave character and instead of brooding on his misfortune, over the next two years he kept himself extremely busy. He quickly learned Braille so he could continue reading – he said it took him only three or four weeks.⁸
28. He spent some time in Germany learning German. He also spent a month in Grenoble learning French – which his biographer said he could always speak and write effortlessly.⁹
29. After about two years, his sight had recovered sufficiently for him to be able to read with a powerful magnifying glass. Using this to study, he passed the entrance exam to Balliol College Oxford in 1913.¹⁰
30. At the end of his first year in Oxford, his older brother Trevenen, to whom Aldous was very attached, committed suicide. This was the third major blow he suffered in his youth and he was deeply and permanently affected by all three.
31. But again he quickly picked himself up and joined the brilliant intellectual set surrounding the famous literary hostess Lady Ottoline Morrell who lived in Garsington Manor near Oxford. There and later he got to know all the literary figures of the time, including Bertrand Russell, T S Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, J M Keynes and the rest of the Bloomsbury set – as well as D H Lawrence who remained a lifelong friend.
32. Huxley had grown up to be extremely tall – 6 ft 4 inches (193 cm) – incredibly thin, and stooped. Virginia Woolf said when he was sitting down in an armchair he looked like a giant grasshopper.
33. The First World War began in 1914 and he volunteered for military service but was rejected as completely unfit for it. He

⁷ Ibid.31

⁸ Ibid.33

⁹ Ibid.36

¹⁰ Ibid.35

continued his studies and left Oxford with a first class degree in 1916. He then had to find a way of making a living but since he hated paid work and only wanted to be a writer this was difficult.

34. The Morells employed him as a labourer on their farm in Garsington Manor. Given his physical state, it was a rather improbable job. He was always beautifully dressed and his brother Julian's wife said *...he looked absent-mindedly but absurdly romantic and beautiful.*¹¹ Apparently he liked chasing escaped pigs and chopping wood.
35. The Morell farm probably did not benefit greatly from his services but during this time, he wrote his first book of poems.
36. During the next couple of years, he had short spells working as a government clerk and as a teacher in Eton. Neither was a great success. The fact that he could not see his pupils made for some classroom difficulties in Eton. But, during this time, he managed to publish two more books of poems.
37. He married Maria Lys, in 1919. She had grown up in Belgium and he met her in Garsington. They had a rather open marriage, typical of the literary set to which they belonged. She was bisexual and one of the features of their marriage was that she worked to win the affections of attractive young women so that both she and Aldous could have affairs with them.¹²
38. She also devoted herself totally to looking after him. She made his arrangements, read to him, drove him everywhere, and they remained happily married until her death in 1955. She had plenty to do as they lived an extraordinarily restless life, changing house and even countries, every two or three years.
39. They had a son Matthew who was born in 1920 but whatever their financial problems, they employed a maid to look after him. He does not seem to have unduly interfered with their life and they went off for an eleven-month tour of the Far East in 1925 when he was five.
40. Despite it all, Matthew turned out well and became a prominent anthropologist and epidemiologist and died in 2005 at the age of eighty-four.

¹¹ Ibid.74

¹² Ibid.140

41. Meanwhile, Aldous managed to get work as a writer with *House and Garden* magazine and in 1921, published his first novel *Chrome Yellow*. In all, he published fifty books as well as loads of magazine articles, book reviews and film scripts. This is an average of over a published book a year, for the forty-seven years he worked as a writer.
42. Through the 1920s, he produced a sequence of smart, cynical novels including *Antic Hay*, *Those Barren Leaves* and *Point Counter Point* plus various travel books and collections of essays.
43. The novels are bright, sharp satires on various aspects of the upper middle class English world of his time. They do not have any great depth of character but they are clever and well-written. I remember really enjoying them in the 1950s. Huxley himself said “*By profession I am an essayist who sometimes writes novels and biographies.*”¹³
44. The novels were quite daring for their time and were satisfactorily denounced by the right-wing papers, so Huxley became increasingly famous.
45. It was during that time that Aldous and Maria met Sybille Bedford who was living near them in the South of France. She was actually German and Aldous encouraged her ambition to become a writer. One of the things she wrote was an article critical of the Nazis in 1933.
46. When the Nazis discovered that she was Jewish, they revoked her passport. It was a dangerous time for a Jew to be without a passport in Europe. The Huxleys arranged a marriage for her to a gay English army officer called Terry Bedford. The marriage ended quickly but it meant she had a passport and she adopted her husband’s name
47. Meanwhile Huxley was continuing his book a year. His best-known was *Brave New World* which was published in 1932. This is set in the far future and people are specially bred in test-tubes for their job and place in society and are kept happy by drugs and sex. This was an enormous success.
48. In 1934, he began writing *Eyeless in Gaza* - the name comes from a dramatic poem by Milton called *Samson Agonistes*. Huxley’s book tells the story of a Huxley-like character called Anthony Beavis, who is a very clever social

¹³ Ibid.161

theorist but is deeply cynical about people. According to the blurb of the book, “...he betrays friendship and toys cruelly with the affections of women.” But in reality he is afraid of becoming involved in real life.

49. This novel was Huxley’s way of trying to work out a way forward for himself and for his developing ideas about society but he became stuck. His eyes were giving him enormous problems and he had terrible insomnia. His normal shyness and dislike of speaking in public became acute.
50. He was in a dreadful mental and physical – psychophysical - state. He found he could only work on the book when lying on his back with the typewriter on his chest.¹⁴
51. He then discovered Alexander.
52. Next time I will tell you what happened.

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¹⁴ Jones (1976)55