

No 40 Walter Carrington (1915 – 2005) and Dilys Carrington (1915 - 2009) (I)

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1. It occurred to me recently that, apart from teachers, and a couple of you who started their training a long time ago, none of you had any direct contact with the Carringtons. You must be fed up with our constant references to Walter and Dilys.
2. I therefore thought it would be a good idea to fill in some of the details of their lives and why we go on so much about them. It will also give you a history of this school which was their creation.
3. As to information sources, no formal biography of either of them has yet been written. There have been several publications by Walter which provide insights into his thinking about the Technique. He kept a diary of his work with Alexander from March to November 1946 which was published fifty years later by the Sheildrake Press in 1996 under the title *A Time to Remember*.
4. He wrote a paper on the relevance of George Ellett Coghill to the Technique in 1941 and on the relevance of Rudolph Magnus to the Technique in 1950. Both of these were published by STAT Books in 1994 under the title *The Foundations of Human Well-Being and The Work of Professor Magnus and the F. Matthias Alexander Technique*, as far as I am aware without any significant changes.
5. He does not appear to have written anything else. I asked Dilys why and she said that after Alexander's death in 1955, the school and his teaching took up all his time and energy.
6. More information on Walter's thinking is provided by two of conversations between him and the Alexander Teacher, Sean Carey, that were published by Mouritz, which is run by Jean Fischer, under the titles *Personally Speaking* in 1986 and *Explaining the Alexander Technique* in 1992. Mornum Press which is run by Jerry Sontag in the US, has published edited collections of his talks, *Thinking Aloud* in 1984, and *The Act of Living* in 1999.
7. Walter also gave a vast number of talks at the school. Four times a week, he would come into the room where everyone was assembled at midday, lying on the floor or the tables, sitting on the chairs or standing round against the walls.

8. He would have a copy of one of Alexander's books, usually a well-worn vintage issue with the cover hanging off. He would open it at the exact place where he had finished the previous time. He would start to read and as a thought struck him he would break off into an explanation, or reminiscence about Alexander, whom he always referred to as FM. He also had a stock of jokes which we knew very well.
9. The talks were very relaxed occasions and plenty of people nodded off. He took questions but never got into arguments or detailed discussions. Exactly on the half-hour he would draw the talk to a close.
10. He believed that everyone who became an Alexander teacher should have read the books and this was his way of ensuring that it happened. A complete reading of the books took about eighteen months which meant that students were exposed to about two cycles during their training. Nothing in the text itself was skipped and everything else, including footnotes, introduction, preface was also read.
11. But in no way were these critical readings. If you asked a question about something that was obviously wrong, like Alexander's description of the evolution of the eye, Walter would blandly say "*Well, you must remember, he was a man of his time.*" It was perfectly clear he idolised him and would not hear a word against him.
12. Dilys did not publish anything formally but she put some of her thoughts on paper that circulated as photocopies among teachers and students and I helped her with tidying some of them after I qualified. Jean Fisher has assembled a collection of these papers with a view to publishing them and I assume that this will happen in due course.
13. She also kept a diary but and was always able to check exactly when something happened. But I do not know where it is or anything about it.
14. I did my training between 2000 and 2004 so both the Carringtons were well into their declining years – they were both 85 years old – when I first got to know them. Walter was always extremely pleasant; he had a wonderfully benevolent smile. He tended to call people, male or female, "*My dear*". But he was quite a private individual and I always felt that I had very little idea about what went on behind that charming exterior.

15. Dilys was much more open and willing to talk about things and give you her frank views about people, especially if she felt they were pretentious or full of their own self-importance. I asked her once what she thought of Aldous Huxley whom she had met many times and she said: *"An awful show-off"*.
16. So what I am giving you is my personal view of Walter and Dilys, based on a mixture of written sources, anecdotes from those who knew them, and my own memories, especially of Dilys whom I got to know quite well in the last nine years of her life.
17. They were born in the same year, 1915, and by coincidence came into the Technique in 1939 though by quite different routes.
18. Walter was born in Selby in Yorkshire, the son of a vicar. The family moved to London in 1917 when he was two years old and Walter spent the rest of his life here.
19. He received his secondary education at St Paul's School in Barnes west London. St Paul's is a very famous independent secondary school for boys between the ages of 13 and 18 and was founded in 1509.
20. Round this time he became interested in Catholicism and after St Paul's he left secondary school, he began training to be a Jesuit.
21. His introduction to the Technique came when he brought his mother to have lessons with Alexander. She had suffered a variety of long-term ailments and was becoming bed-ridden.
22. When Walter saw the effects the Alexander lessons had on her, he was so impressed that he gave up his Jesuitical studies and decided to become an Alexander teacher. He joined Alexander's second teacher-training course in 1936 and qualified in 1939.
23. Others on that course included Wilfred Barlow, Elizabeth and Dick Walker who became a very well-known and popular husband and wife team – Elizabeth only died in September 2013 – and Alexander's niece, Marjory Mechin.
24. Dilys – her full name was Dilys Mary Gwyneth Jones – was born and grew up in the small town of Stourbridge in Worcestershire to the south of Birmingham. It has now been absorbed by the spread of the city.

25. She suffered from severe congenital kyphosis – an excessive curvature, or hump, in her upper back which they attempted unsuccessfully to correct with surgery when she was a child. It was always noticeable, and when she was lying on the table she used an alarmingly high pile of books.
26. She was obviously a strong and clever young woman. When she was only eighteen when she came to London in 1933 to study mathematics and psychology at Bedford College in Regents Park.
27. This was a women's college that had been founded in the 19th century by a social reformer and anti-slavery activist called Elizabeth Jesser Reid. It became a degree-awarding constituent college of London University in 1900.
28. It was a highly progressive institution and the young Dilys Jones thrived there. She qualified in 1936 and went to the University Appointments Bureau in Malet Street to look for a job. They were so impressed with her that they offered her a job working for them in Senate House.
29. But as the Second World War approached, the British government took over Senate House and she was out of a job. A young man she knew in Birmingham had told her about the Alexander Technique and having some unexpected free time because of the loss of her job, she decided to go to Alexander's apartment in Ashley Place in Victoria and see for herself what it was all about.
30. Alexander told her that his regular secretary was stuck in France because of the war preparations happening there and he did not know when she would be back. He offered her a free lesson a day if she was prepared to open the place up in the morning and keep things in order in his office.
31. She did this for a while and then got a job as secretary to the Director of the Physics Society.
32. Through her work at Ashley Place she got to know Walter. She said she was pretty certain he was the one for her but the problem was that he fancied Marjorie Mechin. But when Wilfred Barlow joined the course, Marjorie transferred her affections to him and Dilys said "*I saw my chance*".
33. The war was now fully on. The evacuation of British and French military forces from Dunkirk happened in May and June in 1940. Shortly afterwards Hitler launched an intense campaign of day and night bombing against London and other British cities which

became known as the Blitz. It began in September and went on day and night until May of the next year.

34. With constant air raids and evacuations into the bomb shelters or the underground lines at any time of the day or night, it was a scary time for Londoners and Dilys told me of walking along Piccadilly one day and seeing the swastikas on the aeroplanes flying low overhead.
35. Walter signed up for the Royal Air Force and began training to be a pilot. He and Dilys got married in 1940. When Walter had finished his training as a pilot he joined the Pathfinder Squadron in the RAF.
36. Their job was to fly in advance of the big squadrons of bombers which were now attacking Germany during the night-time and identify their targets for them by dropping flares on the darkened cities. This was the beginning of the air-raid campaign that led to the saturation bombing of cities like Dresden.
37. Walter's plane was shot down over Hungary in 1944 and he suffered a broken pelvis and other wounds. He was sheltered in a monastery and was eventually rescued and sent to a military hospital, where they fixed him as best they could.
38. But he was left with one leg longer than another and always had considerable difficulty in walking, and for much of his life suffered a great deal of pain.
39. He was demobilised with the rank of Flight Lieutenant and rejoined Alexander's practice in 1946.
40. Though Alexander was an extraordinary person to have lessons from, he had little idea about how to organise the teaching of a group of trainee teachers. He also got bored easily.
41. During the third year of the first training course, in the early 1930s, for example, he diverted the students into two Shakespeare productions. One was *Hamlet* in which Alexander played Hamlet and the other was *The Merchant of Venice* in which he played Shylock, both in an old-fashioned dramatic style.
42. They also put on charity performances of the *Merchant of Venice* in both Sadler's Wells and the Old Vic, via Alexander's theatrical connections in 1933.
43. This was fine for promoting Alexander as the actor and theatrical impresario which he had always wanted to be but

made for a rather distracted training programme with quite a degree of division and disaffection among the students.

44. When Walter rejoined the training course and became Alexander's secretary in 1946, one of his main tasks was to put the training on a more systematic basis. It was during these years that the pattern of activities that we now take for granted in this school, and those run by Carrington-trained teachers, began to emerge.
45. At the same time, Wilfred Barlow who had qualified as a medical doctor, was working to publicise the Technique in the medical profession. He also had managed to get the training course recognised by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) which paid the students' tuition fees.
46. This was when the three-years training and the 1600 hours were adopted. It had nothing to do with any assessment of the actual training needs of an AT teacher. It was to do with the existing framework of approval for vocational courses recognised by ILEA.
47. Since becoming an AT teacher is not just a matter of time, this is why the decision on when to award a teaching certificate is always up to the Head of Training.
48. This takes us to the end of our time for today, so I will stop here. Next time, I will pick up the story and tell you about Alexander's libel action, his stroke, the purchase of Lansdowne Road by Lady Isobel Cripps and then by Walter and Dilys, and my own memories of both of them.