

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

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1. The last time we had reached a stage where the War was over and the various teachers were re-integrating themselves back into the civilian world in general and the Technique in particular.
2. Walter was working as Alexander's secretary and putting the teacher training course on a systemic basis. Wilfred Barlow had managed to get the Technique officially accepted by the Inner London Education Authority which paid student's fees.
3. But lots of things were changing. One was that the Barlows had a huge row with Alexander and neither of them ever spoke to him again.
4. Another other big distraction at that time, was the libel action in which Alexander had become embroiled. This became a cause of great worry and expense to him.
5. The detail is for another time. But broadly what happened is that the Director of Physical Education in South Africa, a man called Ernst Jokl, wrote an article against the Alexander Technique which appeared under the title "*Quackery versus Physical Education*" in an official government publication called *Manpower* in March 1944.
6. It said the Technique was "*dangerous and irresponsible*" if not "*criminal*". It said it was a cult and "*a typical example of group hystero-neurosis.*" It accused the followers of Alexander of wanting "*to elevate the Australian actor to an almost supernatural position.*"
7. It was clearly libellous and Alexander asked his old highly-placed friends, Sir Stafford Cripps and the Earl of Lytton, to approach the South African High Commissioner in London to get the magazine to withdraw the article and publish an apology.
8. They did so, but nothing happened and Alexander sued for libel in 1945. No one expected the case would come to court but the South African government decided to defend it.
9. The whole thing dragged on through the courts and even though the initial judgement was in Alexander's favour the South African Government appealed against it. It was only finally decided in Alexander's favour in March 1949. But it had put him under great nervous and financial pressure and towards

the end of 1947, just a year after Walter had rejoined the course, Alexander had a stroke.

10. Sir Stafford and Lady Isobel Cripps who were very strong supporters of the Technique were becoming increasingly worried about who was going to succeed Alexander. Lady Isobel knew exactly who it should be. It was her protégé Charles Neil who had developed his own version of the Technique.
11. She bought a house in Lansdowne Road and established the Isobel Cripps Centre there and put Neil in charge with a view to him taking over as Alexander's successor.
12. Alexander, however, made a good recovery from his stroke and resumed teaching but it was not to be for long. After a short illness, brought on by a chill he caught going to the races, he died at home on 10 October 1955, just a few days short of his eighty-seventh birthday.
13. After Alexander died there was a lot of confusion. In his will, he had nominated Walter and Margaret Goldie as his successors but in his last days he crossed this out and substituted his rather ruffianly brother Beaumont, known as Monty, as his sole heir.
14. Monty thought he saw an opportunity to make money and took a court action against Walter and the other teachers in Ashley Place in an attempt to charge them for using the Technique. But the court rejected his claim, leaving everyone to get on with teaching the Technique in their own way.
15. After some squabbling and disagreement, four centres of practice and training in the Technique emerged. Walter, Margaret Goldie and a couple of others were working in Bainbridge Street near Tottenham Court Road. Patrick Macdonald had set up in Alexander's old apartment in Ashley Place.
16. The Barlows had set up in Albert Court near the Albert Hall. And in the US, Marjorie Barstow had set up her own school in Lincoln, Nebraska.
17. Then Charles Neil who is remembered as something of a con-man, alcoholic and womaniser died suddenly in 1958.
18. When he died, the people in the Isobel Cripps Centre in Lansdowne Road were without anyone in charge. They asked Walter to take over the running of the school which he did.

19. He and Dilys were living in Chiswick at that stage and they had three children: Chris, Richard and Matthew. Dilys had completed her training with Walter and was now a certified teacher.
20. They bought the house in Lansdowne Road in 1960 with the help of a loan which they later repaid, and called it the Constructive Teaching Centre. They remained there for the rest of their lives.
21. In the forty five years they were there it became one of the best-known Alexander teacher-training schools in the world.
22. Walter was the famous one and people used to come from all over the world, especially the US, for lessons with him. When I started my training, there was a two-year waiting list for a lesson.
23. He was always charming and jovial. He called people, women or men, "*my dear*". We had our regular lessons with him during our training and it was always very exciting.
24. You went into his room which was full of old-fashioned furniture and books. There were photographs and mementos of Alexander – including his framed teacher-training certificate signed by Alexander – all over the room, so that you felt the continuity with him. There were also bookcases filled with books. Walter was deeply read and knowledgeable about nearly everything.
25. The house was one of those Georgian buildings with steps up to the front door. So when you were in Walter's room you looked out of the front window and down on to Lansdowne Road.
26. Walter stood you in front of a chair, facing the window and put his big strong hand on the back of your neck. "*Allow standing to happen*" he would say.
27. There was no sense of him using any force but there was nothing you could do except what he wanted you to do. He chatted amiably to keep you relaxed, took you in and out of the chair, adjusted you here and there and, without any sense of time passing, that was it.
28. He was in his late eighties by that time and my impression was that he had simplified his work down to its barest essentials. I used to think of old greats in other areas. Klemperer barely moving his baton, Matisse's cut-outs,

Beethoven's last quartets. Walter was the master obtaining what he wanted with the minimum of effort.

29. Those of us who learned our trade at the CTC would tend to say that the major formative influence on us as teachers was Walter via the talks and his lessons. But it was Dilys who ran the school in her own very distinctive way.
30. As the numbers of students built up and there was a waiting list, it was she who decided who would get a place. Men tended to be selected over women because she wanted to maintain a gender balance. She also preferred men.
31. She also selected people who had special skills that were of use in running an old house. If you wanted to be an Alexander teacher and were a man who was good at plumbing or electrics or gardening you had a good chance of being selected. I was an engineer and reminded her of her son Richard who was also one and lived in Kenya at the time.
32. During my training, she used me as her assistant in the "spirals group". This was based on a paper by Raymond Dart called *Voluntary musculature of the human body: the double spiral arrangement*<sup>1</sup>. She had met and very much liked Dart some time in the 1960s and he used to visit her and Walter to have tea with them when he came to London.
33. In the year 2000, when I started my training, the CTC had been going for forty years. There were about forty students and it was divided into two groups. Dilys looked after the first five terms, who came in at nine am – those with a teaching background thought of them as "*the morning children*".
34. The work was pretty much as it is now, with various teachers giving turns and taking groups in a big crowded room. Dilys put hands on everyone during the morning. She had an uncanny eye. She would come up to you and would poke you on the shoulder or chest with one of her long bony fingers and you would have a sudden feeling of release.
35. Where Walter was polite and amiable, she was his attack dog; she was quite intolerant of what she regarded as pretentiousness. I once asked her what she thought of Aldous Huxley and she said "*An awful show-off.*" She thought Krishnamurthi whom she went to hear giving a lecture was a fraud.

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<sup>1</sup> Dart (1996) pp57-72

36. She always brought a book with her when she went to events she suspected might be boring and told me that when they went to see Dart at the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential, she spent most of the time reading her book.
37. She was notoriously frugal and Ruth remembers being severely told off for using a half Jeye-cloth instead of a quarter one. She kept the heating at a level just about high enough to avert hypothermia. And yet as many would testify, both she and Walter could be extraordinarily generous if someone was having financial problems.
38. One of my later memories of her was after she had given up regular teaching in the school. Some of us had stayed on for a while after the end of the school day and I was lying on one of the tables.
39. She came into the room with someone helping her. She was very frail and had become almost totally blind as a result of macular degeneration. But somehow she saw me and came over to the table and gave me a poke in the chest which caused a kind of general release and exhalation.
40. *"You're getting very tight there, Gerry"* she said.
41. You know how keen I am on the science behind the Technique. But in that case, I think the most rational explanation is witchcraft.
42. She was an expert collector of early women's writing. Her room was filled with piles of them and they were all over the house as well. Many of them were quite rare and valuable.
43. But she was not a conventional bibliophile in the sense that she was after rare editions. She wanted her books because of who had written them and what they said.
44. Her old university, Bedford College merged with Royal Holloway around that time and by coincidence, my daughter who had just finished her degree at Royal Holloway, was the student representative on the merger committee.
45. A sub-committee of professors from the two colleges was set up to discuss the name of the new merged college and after six months they came up with the name Royal Holloway and Bedford New College which quickly defaulted to Royal Holloway.
46. As Dilys was getting older and her sight was failing, she decided that her books needed a new and loving home. She

would have dearly liked to give them to Bedford College and made some enquiries but a librarian came from Royal Holloway and looked at them and produced a preliminary catalogue which pleased Dilys.

47. But then Royal Holloway said they could not go through with the full job of cataloguing and integrating them into their own library fully without a financial contribution from Dilys. The books were a matter of real pride to her and she was rather put out by this. I do not know what happened to them after that.
48. Some time around then Dilys had a fall in which she broke the neck of her femur and had to spend time in hospital and rehabilitation. I visited her in the hospital and I remember her showing me the walking frame they gave her and the way it bent her over when she used it – just like the sign-posts which they put up where elderly people are crossing the road. She soon changed it for one in which she could come to her full height.
49. At that stage she had probably turned ninety and was on a downhill slope but it was extraordinary how she kept going. Even though she had become increasingly blind and feeble, there was no sign of her giving up on her involvement with the school and the students. She worked out a procedure for having students come up to her room for an experience of directing and lengthening.
50. I was one of her guinea pigs as she worked out how best to do it. You sat facing her in her chair with your knees touching hers. Dilys put her hands flat on her thighs, you put yours flat on top of them. She instructed you to lengthen your fingers and widen and go up in the front.
51. Strange things happened to your musculature and breathing. It must have been a very intimidating experience for a student if that was the first time you had encountered this very old and powerful old lady shrunken there in her chair.
52. As she declined, she went further back in her memories but always with sense of humour. I came into her room one afternoon and she smiled and said: *“I was going through my old nursery rhymes.”*
53. She had a friend called Margo who grew up with her in Stourbridge who fell in love with and married an American service-man. Although she lived her life on the other side of the

Atlantic, she and Dilys stayed in touch and remained good friends.

54. One afternoon, I came to see Dilys and she said that Margo had been in and had been telling her about her visits to her various relatives and great grand nieces and nephews all around the country. As Dilys was rather dutifully telling me all this, I said to her: "*How awful for you.*"

55. She stopped, gave a delighted cackle of laughter, squeezed my hand in both of hers and said: "*I knew you'd take it in the right spirit, Gerry.*"

56. For me it was a moment that summed up her wicked sense of humour, her self-awareness and her indomitable spirit. It is a memory that always makes me smile.

### **References**

R. A. DART (1996) *Skill and poise* - STAT Books, London