

Michael Bloch's speech to the Alexander Congress at Oxford, 18 August 2004

F. M. ALEXANDER: THE UNWRITTEN BIOGRAPHY

Ladies & Gentlemen,

Addressing you tonight, I feel a certain humility. For you are Alexander teachers, members of one of the noblest of professions; whereas I'm a humble pupil, and one who has far to go before perfecting his 'use'. The late Patrick Macdonald used to say of the Alexander Technique that the first thirty years are the most difficult and I've just had thirteen! But my debt to the Technique is great. Studying the life of Frederick Matthias Alexander, one learns of so many people – including such names as John Dewey and Aldous Huxley – who were transformed by his work from wrecks into happily functioning individuals; and this too has been my experience. I shan't bore you with the sorry catalogue of use-related ailments which afflicted me before I took lessons. Suffice it to say that, whereas at thirty-five I was starting to feel that I'd seen the best of my days, I'm now, at fifty, just about as happy and healthy as a lazy and self-indulgent author, who avoids exercise as far as possible and eats, drinks and smokes to his heart's content, can reasonably expect to be.

For me as for others, the benefits of the Technique have not merely been in the realm of health. This journey of discovery in the territory of the self has brought a new dimension to my life, and new friends. It has also helped me as a writer. Like Huxley, I found that the book on which I was working when I started lessons proceeded much more smoothly as a result of those lessons. In Huxley's case, the book was *Eyeless in Gaza*, in which he paid tribute to Alexander by introducing a character based on him, Miller, the charismatic doctor by whom the autobiographical hero is 'saved'. When my book, a biography of the Nazi foreign minister Ribbentrop, appeared in 1992, it was read by Glynn Macdonald, then the wife of my teacher, Robbie Macdonald, and Chairman of STAT. She liked it, and suggested I think of writing about another figure of whom a biography was needed – F. M. Alexander. I was encouraged in the idea by Walter Carrington, who told me many fascinating things about Alexander during the monthly lessons which I was privileged to take with him during the following years. There can be few who knew and understood

F.M. better than Walter; and through his conversation, a vivid picture of the man was created in my mind long before I got down to the task of writing about him.

It's now almost fifty years since F.M. died in 1955; and one must ask why it has taken so long for a biography of him to appear. To be sure, much has been written about him down the years. Regarding his early life, two Alexander teachers in Australia, Rosslyn McLeod and Margaret Long, have published interesting research. Regarding his later life, several of his early training students, including Lulie Westfeldt, Marjory Barlow, Walter Carrington and Frank Pierce Jones, have left vivid accounts of him. A Dutch scholar, Jeroen Staring, has produced a controversial but well-researched book suggesting where the young F.M. may have found inspiration for some of his ideas. And one must pay tribute to the fascinating family history of the Alexanders by F.M.'s great-niece Jackie Evans, published three years ago. Although it does not claim to be a biography, it contains a wealth of new detail about his family background and his whole career, and it has been an invaluable resource for myself as it will be for all his future biographers.

In the past, several writers have set out to produce biographies of F.M. He himself twice embarked on a work of autobiography, but he evidently decided against publication, and the first manuscript seems to have vanished, whereas all that survives of the second is an anecdotal chapter about his Australian years. He also helped several literary pupils, such as Anthony Ludovici and Louise Morgan, write books about himself and his work, though the biographical information he provided was sparse and unrevealing. More interesting was the case of Ron Brown, a journalist whom F.M. commissioned, in 1950, to write a book about his recent successful libel case in the South African courts. Brown planned, apparently with F.M.'s blessing, to follow this with a full-scale biography; but he had not made much progress with either book when he unfortunately died. His biographical research was inherited by his friend Edward Owen, who tried to complete his work, interviewing many who had known the now deceased F.M.; but he too did not finally write his book. Since then, several others have broached the task, at least two of whom, an American Alexander teacher in the 1980s and a British academic historian in the 1990s, have done considerable research; but still no finished work has resulted.

Why were none of these projects seen through to completion? Personal reasons obviously played a part in each case; but there's also the fact, as I discovered myself, that it's an unusually difficult biography to write. F.M. was an intensely secretive man, who revealed very little of his private self to anyone, and always sought to cover his tracks. He was an actor by nature as well as by training, so what one saw of him did not always correspond to the underlying reality. And remarkably few of his papers seem to have survived: most of them are said to have perished in a fire in the 1960s, and it's hard to resist the suspicion that this catastrophe would not have been entirely unwelcome to his heirs, as the papers would surely have contained much which they would not have wished ever to be revealed. I suspect too that, down the years, many Alexander teachers have contemplated a biography of F.M., but have been deterred not only by the lack of source material, but also by the reflection that, if they dug too deeply, they might discover things they did not altogether like, and which might have done harm to the Alexander movement which was not always as solidly based as it is today.

Certainly in the case of F.M., as in the case of many founders of movements, there's a gulf between the legend and the reality. But fifty years is a long time; and surely we should now be willing to confront all aspects of the reality, and celebrate this gulf as one of the intriguing aspects of an unusual life. During the remainder of this talk I don't propose to summarize the life of F.M., a story which you all know in outline and about which, after all, I've written a book which I hope some of you may decide to read. Rather I want to focus on certain aspects of that story which may in the past have caused his followers to shy away from the notion of a biography; and I want to show that these aspects should not be regarded as particularly to his discredit, and indeed that they make him all the more interesting, and are important to a proper understanding of both the man and his work.

We must start with the convict ancestry, of which we now have a fascinatingly detailed picture thanks to Jackie Evans. This of course was the great secret which F.M. was so desperate to conceal: and who can blame him? It's now fashionable in Australia to study and celebrate one's convict forebears; but this was not the case a hundred years ago, and it would have done F.M. little good if, arriving in London in 1904, he had announced to all and sundry: 'Guess what, all four of my grandparents

were transported to Tasmania as criminals about seventy years ago!' Moreover, Miss Evans shows us that, while F.M.'s two grandmothers may have belonged to what would then have been called 'the criminal classes', his paternal grandfather, Matthias Alexander, was a rather splendid pioneering figure. He was transported because, as a prosperous village craftsman with a radical conscience, he had shown solidarity with some hungry farm workers, and joined them in their riot; and having achieved early release through good behaviour, he became a classic colonial success story. He worked hard as a labourer to build up some capital; he became a gold prospector to increase that capital; he bought a large tract of heavily forested land in north-western Tasmania, and through sheer guts and determination turned it into a flourishing farm. He even founded his own little town, Alexandria, and he seems to have been the king of the locality. Unfortunately he died before F.M. was born, and all he had built up was dispersed between his twelve surviving children. I suspect that, in F.M.'s mind, the fact that, ten years before his birth, his grandfather had been the local 'squire' was at least as important as the fact that he had been a convict twenty-five years before that. Nevertheless, the convict background of his family was for F.M. a terrible secret which had to be kept secret at all costs, especially when he left Tasmania to make his way in the outside world; and this secretiveness, accompanied by a fear that anyone should find out too much about his past, became a general feature of his personality.

And so we come to his childhood in Tasmania. Although we have few details of it, much has been hinted about so-called 'dysfunctional' influences in his upbringing. It's true that he was brought up in an unusual environment, on the very edge of civilisation, so to speak, in a world which was somewhat haunted by its recent history. I'm not a psychologist myself – though I notice that fashions in psychology change, and I suppose that every few years one could write a different book about F.M.'s childhood influences according to the prevailing orthodoxies. To my mind, apart from the trauma of the convict past, there are two facts which stand out as undeniable and important. The first is that he was attached to his mother – literally so, since on moving first to Melbourne and then to England he was determined to have her join him while he rejected his father – again quite literally, since when he came to live in England he gave people to suppose that his father was dead, whereas in fact he was very much alive in Tasmania and would live on there for another thirty years. I think we must all make up our own minds as to how far these filial attitudes account for his

later behaviour and quirks. The second fact is that he was brought up in an atmosphere of fierce evangelical Protestantism which laid stress on four things: hard hard work, individual responsibility, right and wrong, and personal salvation – all elements which were to become associated with the philosophy of the Alexander Technique.

F.M. left his Tasmanian village at seventeen; he spent three years working as a clerk to a Tin mine; and with money saved, he moved to Melbourne, where he trained to be a professional reciter. And now we come to the most powerful thing he ever wrote, the opening chapter of *The Use of the Self*, where he describes how his budding reciting career was almost wrecked by his mysterious loss of voice; how through a long and heroic process of self-investigation he discovered that this disaster was attributable to ingrained faults in his postural use; and how he eventually overcame these faults by evolving the procedures and habits of mind which we know today as the Alexander Technique. From the viewpoint of both literature and science it's a marvellous piece of writing, which can be read and enjoyed again and again. The problem is – how far is it true? *The Use of the Self* was published in 1932; and the loss of voice episode must have taken place forty years earlier, between 1891 and 1893 – for in 1894 and 1895 he undertook successful reciting tours of Tasmania and New Zealand, by which time his voice had presumably been sorted out. But if we look at the sort of things he published at the time – newspaper advertisements, pamphlets, occasional articles – we find practically nothing of the story which he later relates in his book. Indeed, the first articles in which he describes something which we can recognise as the Alexander Technique date from 1908. Before that, he represents himself as a voice trainer with a breathing method, and although he claims that his method is novel, it's not made very clear how it differed from the many others which were on offer at the time. Furthermore, although F.M. in his book gives us to suppose that he evolved his method in a spirit of scientific enquiry, his contemporary advertisements are written in the style of the proverbial snake-oil salesman; and although he later insisted that he never cured anyone of anything, the advertisements make free use of the dreaded 'c'-word and claim to cure a great deal.

It's impossible to know anything for certain, for there's so little to go on – all we have are these unsatisfactory writings advertising his method, and quite a number of

testimonials, which are by their nature suspect, though some of their authors are of an eminence which make it unlikely that they would recommend him unless they believed in his work. My own hunch, which can't be proved or disproved, is that quite early on F.M. did evolve a system which was recognisably the forerunner of his later Technique: certainly an element of what he would later call 'inhibition' was present, for even the dreadful advertisements state that his method involves the eradication of bad habits. The thing to remember is that he was a genius as a teacher, but no genius as a writer. His discoveries were by their nature difficult to write about anyway, and it took him a long time to find a language in which to express them. He was also understandably reluctant to 'give them away' until they had become established. But in order to establish them, he had to bring in the customers; and in that rough colonial world, he would probably have regarded virtually any puff as justifiable if it encouraged people to sign up for his treatment. The question remains – how true is the story of the lost and recovered voice? Something of the sort must have occurred – but it's unlikely that he worked out the solution to his problems in quite the systematic way he suggests, and the process of discovery which he relates certainly took place over many years. Perhaps we should regard his account in symbolic rather than literal terms, like the story of the Creation in the Bible. After all, what better way of explaining the Technique to someone who wants to know about it? When I read the chapter soon after starting lessons, I, like so many, was gripped.

In any case, one of Sydney's leading surgeons, W. J. Stewart McKay, was sufficiently impressed by Alexander's work to encourage him to take it to England, where F.M. arrived on 13 June one hundred years ago. And the next ten years in London were his heyday – 'my beautiful years', as he called them. He was phenomenally successful – he won the support of a number of eminent doctors, and of the leading actors of the day (including both Irving and Tree), and soon the rich and fashionable were flocking to him, paying the enormous rate of four guineas for half an hour – the equivalent, taking income tax into account, of about £300 today. Then, when the European war broke out in 1914, F.M. took his work to New York – where again he enjoyed huge success, amassing a considerable fortune. He also transformed the life of the man who probably counts as the greatest of his supporters, the American philosopher John Dewey. Dewey was fascinated by the Technique which had so spectacularly sorted out his own problems; as well as writing introductions to three of Alexander's books,

he wanted to have his work scientifically investigated. At first, F.M. seemed thrilled by this idea; Dewey went ahead and secured funding from the Rockefeller Foundation; but once there was a prospect of something actually happening, F.M. showed considerably less enthusiasm. In the end, he created so many difficulties, and attached so many conditions to the proposed investigation, that the whole idea was simply abandoned, and his friendship with Dewey effectively came to an end.

Why did F.M. behave like this, thus alienating his leading supporter? To some extent, one has to accept that his attitude illustrates one of his less attractive characteristics – his jealous guardianship of his work, which he didn't really want to share with anyone else, least of all with clever scientists who might have shown up his lack of education. But I think there's more to it than that. F.M. knew that, through an empirical process, he had developed extraordinary skills in his hands, which enabled him to transform the functioning of pupils through subtle postural adjustments. He also believed that he could convey at least some of this skill to others – hence his establishment of a training course in London in 1931. But was it possible for the human mind, even in an era of great scientific advancement, to grasp all the minute physiological and neurological complexities of why his Technique had the effect that it did? He may have been right to be sceptical. His work largely concerns the question of how messages get transmitted around the nervous system – an area of science about which practically nothing was known then, and not all that much is known now. After both F.M. and Dewey were dead, Frank Pierce Jones did conduct a scientific investigation into the Technique – and the results are generally considered to be of limited value. I think one just has to accept that his Technique works in practice; precisely how and why it works may be for future generations to discover.

As we all know, one of the purposes of the Alexander Technique is to help people achieve a greater control over their impulses; and F.M. wrote much along these lines in what he regarded as the best of his four books, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, published in 1923 (and just reissued in a splendid new edition by Jean Fischer). Yet there's no doubt that F.M. was himself, to some extent, a man of uncontrolled impulses. He was obsessed with horse racing: in her recently published interviews, Marjory Barlow gives us an extraordinary picture of him in the 1930s, when he seems to have devoted every spare minute to the frantic business of placing

bets, following the racing news, and studying form. This obsession probably explains why, although he earned huge sums at various periods of his life, he never remained a rich man for long. And there are many other examples of his behaving impulsively. Throughout his life, he was notorious for outbursts of temper. There were two occasions in his later life when impulsive decisions led to serious consequences. In 1923, rather than pay for a defective motor car, he allowed himself to go bankrupt – and he technically remained bankrupt for the rest of his life. And in 1946, rather than ignore an attack on his work which had appeared in an obscure South African journal, he sued for libel; and he got so worked up by the nightmare case which resulted that he suffered a stroke.

How is this paradox to be explained? I think all we can say is that F.M. was not a paragon, but a human being; that he himself had originally had a rather uncontrolled nature; and that one of the things which drove him to develop his Technique was a desire to find a way of imposing control upon himself – or rather, finding a source of control within himself. In later years, he seems to have been highly controlled as a rule – but his original nature reasserted itself in various ways. And it must be said that he generally managed to be uncontrolled in a very controlled way. He watched a race with the icy calm of the seasoned gambler. His secretary John Skinner recalls an occasion when F.M. interrupted a terrible outburst of rage at a pupil to leave the room and calmly ask one of his assistants to place a bet for him on the 2.45. And as we all know, he both won his libel case and made a remarkable recovery from his stroke.

I want to conclude this tour of difficult points in the biography of F.M. by considering his failure during his lifetime to set up any body to promote and regulate the teaching of his work. After the Second World War there was considerable pressure on him to do so, from eminent supporters such as Sir Stafford and Dame Isobel Cripps, as well as from some of the teachers he had trained, notably his nephew-in-law and niece, Wilfred and Marjory Barlow. In the summer of 1948, he did in fact agree to the setting up of a Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique, with himself as Chairman and Barlow as Secretary; but by the end of the year he had changed his mind, much to the dismay of the Barlows and the Crippses. I understand that Dr Barlow's diaries are shortly to be published, which should cast light on the episode. Here again, we are confronted with F.M.'s jealous reluctance to share control of his



work; but again, I think there's more to it than that. He himself was never a joiner of societies, and did not like the idea of them; a great individualist, he saw his work as something which should simply be taught by individual teachers to individual pupils. He certainly believed in the careful certification of trained teachers; and I'm sure he would heartily have approved of gatherings such as this congress, where teachers from all over the world come together to meet and exchange ideas. But he seems to have feared that a society risked developing into something which might compromise his principles; and I know there are some teachers today who would say that such fears showed foresight, that even in an age of regulation the teaching of the Alexander Technique is perhaps becoming just a bit too regulated, and that societies such as STAT are losing sight of their original purposes. As a humble pupil, I've no view to express myself except to say that some of the literature which, as an associate member of STAT, I've recently been getting through my letter box might have caused F.M. a certain amount of surprise.

Ladies and gentlemen – in this talk, I've focussed on a number of curiosities and contradictions in the life of F.M. with a view to suggesting why it has taken so long for a biography of him to appear. But it goes without saying that he was a very great man, a benefactor of humanity; and his story is an inspiration to us all. Coming from the back of beyond, with little formal education, he made one of the outstanding discoveries of his time; he succeeded in establishing his work in the face of every obstacle; and he transformed the lives of many people, which he continues to do from beyond the grave. Although his personality had its disconcerting aspects, he possessed considerable kindness and charm. To be sure, he was something of a mystery man. The element of mystery makes the task of writing his biography difficult, but at the same time challenging and fascinating. I don't advance any great claims for my book, which is just one attempt to make sense of largely known facts. I hope it will encourage others to carry out further investigations into F.M.'s life, and that it will be the first of many biographies.