

# Remembering Margaret Goldie

## - recollections of a grateful pupil, by John Hunter

It is now, at the time of writing this, some twenty-five years since Margaret Goldie died on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1997. There is a continuing interest in her and her approach to teaching the Alexander Technique, yet very little has been written about her by those who were her pupils, whether briefly or over a long period of time.

This essay is divided into four sections. Firstly, a few biographical notes about Margaret Goldie; secondly, some personal recollections of my own lessons with her over a period of around twelve years; thirdly, stories about her which came to my attention and will, I am sure, be of interest; finally, some comments about her way of teaching and what she was trying to convey to her pupils – necessarily subjective but based not only on my experiences during the time I was her pupil but also on more than forty-five years of studying the Alexander technique.

### Some Biographical Notes

**Ellen Avery Margaret Goldie** was born on 14th December 1905 in Bridge of Weir, a small town on the River Gryffe in the county of Renfrewshire, noted historically for its salmon weir, three tanneries and five golf courses. She moved to London in 1924 to study at the Froebel Educational Institute<sup>i</sup>, where she came to the notice of one of FM Alexander's strongest supporters, Miss Esther Ella Lawrence<sup>ii</sup>. Miss Lawrence was concerned about the evident frailty of Goldie and sent her off to have lessons with Alexander. Given her interest in both the ideas of Friedrich Froebel (who developed interactional educational processes resulting in the establishment of kindergartens) and those of Alexander, it was only natural that Goldie should later help Irene Tasker in running the Little School, firstly at Ashley Place and later at Penhill when it moved there. Both Margaret Goldie and Erika Whittaker became firmly established in Ashley place and the Little School in the late 1920's and were practically co-opted into the first teacher-training course when it began in 1931.

Goldie was highly independent and cared little for convention. When the "Ashley Place people" went together to the theatre and the national anthem was played, she would refuse to stand up<sup>iii</sup> and when FM would smoke a cigar after dinner, Goldie would sometimes have one too – something 'not done' in polite society in those days<sup>iv</sup>. She loved the Theatre, especially Shakespeare, and when FM put on his student productions at the Old Vic, she played Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice' and Ophelia in 'The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark'.

She travelled to the US with FM on several of his teaching visits and in later years they became very close, cohabiting when he was in London. The nature of their relationship is unknown but unlikely to have been intimate.

After FM's death and the fall-out over who should teach at Ashley Place, Goldie shared premises with Irene Stewart, John Skinner and Walter Carrington. At the time I knew her she was firstly teaching in premises in Soho Square and then, from 1990, at the Bloomsbury Alexander Centre in Southampton Row.

She seemed to be a very private person, not overfond of people but she took to those who had an individualistic streak. When Erika Whittaker went to have tea with Goldie in her room in Soho Square after the Brighton Congress, she had arranged to meet Paul Burge there afterwards. When Paul arrived, Goldie took an instant liking to him and insisted he stay for a while before he and Erika left.

In around 1990, she was invited to have a small, non-speaking *cameo* role in a French film: *Un Homme et Deux Femmes* (based on a short story by Doris Lessing) filmed, I believe, in Corsica. She played one of two elderly aunts of the main character. In one scene, the two elderly ladies are seen browsing in a shop and then leaving, and in the other they are in their sitting room where Goldie is reading a newspaper (and, one may opine, demonstrating "hands on the back of a newspaper").

In her final years, it became too much for her to travel into Central London and she continued to teach at her home in Richmond until shortly before her death on 25th January 1997.

### **My Lessons with Margaret Goldie**

About a year after I qualified as a teacher – so sometime in 1985 - I began to have lessons with Margaret Goldie. Friends who were already her pupils had spoken highly of this rather mysterious lady who had her first lessons with the Alexander brothers in around 1927. For quite some time the question of whether to see her (let alone whether or not she would accept to see me) hovered in the air. In many ways, I was rather comfortable with what I already knew. I was assisting on two London training courses and my work seemed to be appreciated. I was teaching at the Royal Academy of Music. I had a growing private practice and was a member of the STAT 'think-tank' which was advising Council on future policy. My new career seemed to be blooming. Nevertheless, I knew in some part of myself that there was a very significant gap between what I was attempting to put into practice, for myself and in my teaching, and what Alexander had written about in his books. I didn't know how to cross that gap. I was already familiar enough with what was going on in the other London training courses to know that, however positive and good it might be, it was not what I was looking for.

What I had already learned was subtle, skilful and helpful both for myself and for others, but it was not connecting with my daily life in the way that I believed it could. I was told by a colleague from Switzerland that some of the students on the course where she trained had even left the school after having lessons with Goldie, claiming that what they were doing in their training course was no more than a game. For sure, part of me did not want to be challenged in a way that might expose me as a fraud. Were those fears irrational? All of this was going on at an almost sub-conscious level and then one night I dreamt that I was having a lesson with Margaret Goldie. I had no idea what she actually looked like (nothing like the woman in my dream, as it turned out), nor do I remember anything much about the 'dream-lesson' – except that it was definitely with Margaret Goldie and that something quite different was going on. I don't hold much store by dreams so I did not think that this was some great message from the beyond, but I did think there must be

some reason for it. In any event, it was the prompt I needed to ring her up and try to get an appointment to see her.

When I finally called to ask if I could take lessons with her, I half expected to find her in some sort of 'guardian of the gate' role but as I was able to say that a friend, already a pupil of hers, had recommended I contact her, she readily agreed to see me. A week or so later, off I went to her premises in the West End of London.

The room was at the top of a five-storey office block in one corner of Soho Square next to the French Protestant Church. The lift went up only as far as the fourth floor, which meant that you, and she, had to use the stairs for the last flight. If you were lucky, you might catch a glimpse of her seeming to float effortlessly up them – despite her eighty-odd years of age.

There was a largish waiting room which Goldie shared with John Skinner, an Australian teacher trained by FM and then later his secretary. He had his own teaching room in another part of the building and Goldie's room was, it seemed, a section of the waiting room partitioned off with stud-walls which, incidentally, provided hardly any sound-proofing. A climbing plant of some sort had been trained all around the picture rail. Although there were lots of chairs, I think I only once or twice encountered another person waiting there for a lesson with John Skinner.

In her small room, the furniture all seemed tiny; a writing bureau, some chairs, a small couch in one corner for the extremely rare lying-down turns, a portrait-style photograph of FM on one wall, a small attic window looking out at the adjacent London buildings. Sometime later there arrived on the floor beside her bureau a rather large doll of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle – the hedgehog washerwoman from Tales of Beatrix Potter – who stared at you surrealistically while you were trying to 'not react'.

I had been warned not to adopt a wide 'Macdonald' stance in front of the chair but, even so, I was immediately asked to put my feet closer together. I fell straight into the trap of moving my feet as if the end were all that mattered and not the means. It was clear right from the start that everything that happened in her teaching room was grist for the mill and that I would not get away with any unconscious activity.

At the end of my lesson, I asked what I owed her. Sitting at her little bureau she looked at me with those extraordinary blue eyes and said that I should think about what the lesson meant to me and how I valued it, then I could tell her what I wished to pay.

"I used to have a fixed fee" she said, "but some people don't have two stones to rub together and can't even afford the bus fare; and rich people – well, they don't appreciate anything unless they pay through the nose for it."

I suggested a fee which felt right to me, and she said that would do fine. I did wonder what she might do if someone offered her an amount too little. Some years later, I found out. I also discovered that from some people she refused to take any money at all.

Early on in my journey with her, perhaps my second lesson, she said, “Now I am going to ask you to make a decision, and it will be the first decision you’ve ever made.” At the time I found this a very strange thing for her to say. Had I not been making decisions all my life? Had I not decided that very day to get out of bed, to get on the tube and to come and have a lesson with her? We assume that because we end up taking one course of action rather than another that we have “made a decision”. But is that the case? Perhaps we have merely acquiesced to impulses following the path of least resistance. The evidence I was to be presented with in her teaching room, however, clearly demonstrated that I could *not* decide to *not get out of a chair*, in fact decide *not to do*, so what real decisions could I make about my life.....?

Miss G’s assertion opened a question for me about what decisions really are, a subject to which, as I later discovered, Erika Whittaker also attached a great deal of importance, telling me on more than one occasion that “...what Alexander *really* wanted from his pupils was that they would learn to make their own decisions”.

I always experienced a degree of anxiety when on my way to my lessons. She seemed to take away all the little tricks I had unconsciously developed to have what I believed was better use. That which I thought was the application of the Technique was now being challenged as actually just another set of habits.

Certainly, one of the most inadvisable things to do, for the worrying sort of person that I then was at any rate, was to arrive late. After an agonising wait for the lift there was that extra flight of stairs to negotiate to get to the fifth floor – but all of that paled into insignificance compared to the dramatic confrontation that was about to ensue: not, I must in all fairness say, with Miss G but with oneself when, standing in front of her chair and with her calmly looking at you or placing a finger lightly on the back of your neck, all the inner mental turmoil and over-stimulation of the nervous system – aggravated by, but certainly present already, the last-minute rush – came sharply into one’s field of awareness.

This was not a phenomenon limited to arriving late, of course; there was even something to be gained from the hard-won struggle to find, perhaps only at the very end of the half-hour, a moment of real inner quiet. But it was arguably more productive to arrive early and allow some time to settle before the lesson. The distance between her and you was then slightly shortened and some of the subtleties of the inner psychic processes at play might better be glimpsed. Besides, arriving early one might be fortunate enough to have a “waiting-room experience”.

Because the stud-walls separating her teaching room from the waiting room were so thin, one could hear more or less everything that was going on. Miss G would usually be putting someone through their paces. Occasionally, one might hear a pupil making some kind of doomed objection to her critique, though it was more usual to find them agreeing with her; “Yes, Miss Goldie!” One wondered, of course, who it was she had with her in there and on more than one occasion I was very surprised to see a familiar face coming out of her room, though with perhaps a very unfamiliar expression on it.

In one of those early lessons, she asked me to take my shoes off and get on the table – the narrow couch up against the wall in one corner, which was not moved away from the wall, so she worked only from one side and from the top end. There seemed to be several telephone directories under my head. Miss Goldie sat on a high stool at the top of the table and I had the impression that she was just pulling my head. But unexpectedly at some point my back came with it and lengthened out.

“Do you see?” she said. “Head forward and up and back lengthen and widen are part of the same thing.”

I didn’t see, but I felt a new sensation in my spine.

Then something quite odd happened. I had by this time become deeply quiet, my body almost in a meditative state but my mind still alert. She had a finger lightly touching one knee. My eyes were half closed so I couldn’t see her, but while her finger was still on my knee, or so I thought, both hands arrived at the back of my neck. The sensation in my knee was still so clear that I was, for a moment, very confused. How could she be in two places at once?

After about 15 minutes she asked me to get up, reminding me that it was “still part of the lesson” and to put my shoes on.

It was the only **table-turn** I received in twelve years.

“Trees have roots” she suddenly announced in one lesson, “which connect them with the ground.”

I had heard lots of teachers speak about ‘rooting to the ground’ – but never Miss Goldie. I was surprised, but somehow felt on more familiar ground. “Trees... roots.... yes, I know about all that...”

Then, as if to shock me out of my complacency, she stood back a foot or so and added, “But we are not trees. Legs are *not* for support; they are for *movement*.”

“Quiet throughout, with particular attention to head, neck and back” came the familiar mantra as she gently tapped the back of my head with one finger. After a minute or so (one’s sense of time was very different in her teaching room) she asked me, somewhat incongruously – and almost in a tone of curiosity, as if we were chatting over a cup of coffee, “Have you heard of an American singer called Francis Sinatra?”

“Yes Miss Goldie,” I replied, wondering where she was going with this.

“Then are you familiar with a song he recorded entitled ‘I Did It My Way’?”

“Yes Miss Goldie”, my attention dancing now between the anticipation of what might be coming next and the call back to the quiet energy that flowed, under her touch, between my head and spine.

“Well ...” she said, stepping back so I no longer had that external reminder to ‘not interfere with head, neck and back’, her voice rising now in a crescendo, “... he got it quite wrong you know! It’s not about doing it *your* way. It’s doing it *your* way that’s got you into the mess you’re in today.”

Meanwhile I’m saying to myself, “Don’t react! Stay quiet! Head, neck and back.....”

“You want to stop doing it *your* way. Not your way!”, her voice quietening now, her hand coming back to my head/neck area.

“Not *your* way, but *Nature’s* way.”

I began to see that inhibition and direction are two aspects of a way of being. They are inextricably linked.

“Now you are doing it again!” she once said in a later lesson, with more than a little exasperation in her voice.

She stepped back so that she could look at me and pronounce her verdict.

“John, you are such an *unbeliever!*”

Well, that was not what I was expecting to hear. All sorts of reasons had been flooding through my head as to why it just wasn’t working: it was because I was doing or not doing this or that, or that she was doing or not doing this or that, but the idea that it could have anything at all to do with my beliefs – or lack of them – had never occurred to me ...

And yet, she was right. Because I didn’t *feel* what I expected – had even been ‘trained’ to feel when getting out of the chair, I didn’t believe it was possible. I was used to “keeping my back back”, but this was brought about with the help of a strong stimulus from the teacher who provided the opposition, thereby stimulating the anti-gravity response. But Goldie didn’t do that. She was not going to make it work for you, and if the usual signals and sensations were not there, then I didn’t believe something could happen.

So, Alexander was right: “Belief is a matter of customary muscle tension”.<sup>v</sup> I didn’t see this all at once: it was a gradual realisation, but one that was set in motion by that remark of Goldie’s. In this regard, I remember that in one lesson she told me that the man who had just left had said that if his neck was free then he felt that he wasn’t there at all, and asked me to reflect on why that may be so. The only explanation I could come up with was that his sense of self was so linked with his familiar tensions then when they weren’t there, neither was he - or so he believed.

### **From Soho to Bloomsbury**

On the third or fourth floor of the building was a men’s washroom which was usually locked. On one occasion, I fortunately found it open and went in. There was a ‘seriously suited’ elderly gentleman in there, looking very much like one of Charles Dickens’s less

loveable characters; one thought of Mr Murdstone. He glared at me suspiciously. “I suppose you have a key?” he challenged me. “Well, no I don’t, actually” I replied. “Hmm! Then whom are you here to see?” he growled. “Miss Goldie” I answered. His manner then changed entirely. Mr Murdstone disappeared and there before my very eyes stood none other than Mr Pickwick.

“Oh, Miss Goldie!” he said. “Well, that’s all right then. Take your time and I’ll send someone to lock up. Do have a good lesson.... but I am sure you will. Good day!”

I believe the gentleman owned the business which leased the building and that he gave Miss G and John Skinner their rooms at a very favourable rate. Some years later, however, the lease expired and Miss G and John Skinner had to go. They moved to the Bloomsbury Alexander Centre in Southampton Row near the British Museum. Several of Miss Goldie’s pupils helped her to relocate, and it was pleasant to see her in another context than ‘the lesson’. I drove into Soho Square to take some things in my car to Southampton Row. My then girlfriend, who was also having lessons with Miss G, came too. There was a touching moment as we parted from Miss G when my girlfriend, being Spanish, moved towards Miss G to embrace her. Then, just as Miss G moved forward in response, Elena hesitated – thinking that she oughtn’t to - Miss G hesitated ... and the moment had gone.

Rumour had it that Miss G had brought her vacuum cleaner in with her on the underground to make sure she left the old place clean. I don’t know if it is true, but it would not surprise me.

By the time Miss G moved to her new teaching space at the Bloomsbury Alexander Centre in Southampton Row, I had been having lessons with her for quite a few years and she would not see me so often. I nevertheless continued to value those 25 minutes or so of exploring the human machine in that very rarefied atmosphere.

### **Some Meaningful Tittle-tattle**

Stories about Miss G abound. They are interesting, often humorous and give some insight into her individuality. Sometimes they demonstrate her capacity to lay bare something in the person with whom she was interacting. Here are a few that I heard, first or second hand, over the years.

One of my colleagues, with a background in sports training and the athletic physique to go with it, turned up for her first lesson with Miss G. She stood in front of the chair with her powerful legs wide apart – ready for whatever Miss G could throw at her. But she was little prepared for what did come her way. Looking her up and down in her inimitable fashion, Miss G said: “Good heavens! What are you doing with your legs? You look like the British Museum”

Another young teacher or trainee, a bit overconfident about his “style” of working, came along for his first lesson. Miss G, doubtless having sized him up as he came through the door, remained seated at her desk and said to him, “Just go and stand in front of that chair would you”. She then added, “But you are *not* going to sit down.”

The young man went over to the chair and, falling straight into her trap, immediately put his feet wide apart. She got up, came over and said,

“What on earth are you doing? Why have you put your feet so wide apart?”

Diving straight into the second trap he responded, “Yes Miss Goldie, but I find that having a broader base for the feet provides me with much better support for getting into the chair.”

“Oh, I see” she replied, “So you *are* sitting down, are you!”

A newly qualified young teacher from Israel came to have a lesson with Miss G. As was her wont, she spoke throughout about the need to “stop and be quiet; pay particular attention to the head, neck and back”.

The young teacher, not knowing Miss Goldie’s ways and probably thinking that she was holding out on him, could only take so much of this before interrupting her and saying:

“Miss Goldie! You do realize that I have just completed *three years* of full-time teacher training, so I think I know the basics.”

“Oh!” said Miss Goldie. “Three years! I see. Well, I have completed *sixty-three years* of training, and I still have to remind myself. So where does that put you and your three years?”

I heard one story from Marjory Barlow. A pupil of Marjory’s said to her one day that, having benefited so much from his lessons, he felt a deep appreciation for Alexander and his work and he wanted to know where he was buried so that he could take some flowers to the grave as a token of his gratitude. Marjory told him that Alexander had in fact been cremated and that she did not know what had happened to the ashes but, thinking that Margaret Goldie would certainly know, she would try and find out. Another of Marjory’s pupils, an Alexander teacher, was also having lessons with Miss G, so Marjory asked this person if she would, next time she saw Goldie, ask her if she could shed any light on the fate of Alexander’s ashes – adding that it was best not to mention Marjory’s name.

Sure enough, the next time this person was having her lesson with Miss G, she said that “a friend” had been curious about Alexander’s ashes and wanted to know what had happened to them.

“Well!” replied Miss G in a minimalist and dismissive manner, “There are lots of people who want to know all sorts of things!”

Several years later another of Miss G’s pupils, was able to supply the missing end to this story. It seems that she had her lesson directly after the pupil who had asked about the ashes, and Miss G had made some comments to her about the incident.



Miss Goldie, with one other person – most probably Irene Stewart – had scattered the ashes in a place which, she said, she would never reveal.

A friend of mine from Mexico would visit London regularly to have lessons with Miss G – sometimes seeing her twice a day. One year she was staying with me while Erika Whittaker was also visiting and told us a lovely story when she got back from her lesson. By that time Miss Goldie had stopped teaching at the Bloomsbury Alexander Centre and was seeing just a few pupils at her home in Richmond.

I wanted to take her something nice as a treat and went into a delicatessen that was just round the corner from Goldie's house. It seemed like such an intimate local area that I felt certain that the staff would know who Goldie was and what she liked, so I went in and asked a man who was serving what he could recommend for Miss Goldie.

"Miss Goldie?" he said. "You know Miss Goldie? Wait a minute!"

The shopkeeper then went to the door, put up the 'closed' sign, locked the door, pulled the blinds down and invited me into the back room for tea and biscuits. I was a bit worried but he seemed harmless, so I agreed. He then interrogated me for half an hour about Miss Goldie, this mysterious woman who had been coming into his shop for years and about whom he knew nothing at all. I told him what I knew and then went off for my lesson. Of course, I told Miss Goldie all about the incident, and she roared with laughter.

When my friend got back to my apartment, she could not wait to tell Erika and me this wonderful story.

"It was all so surrealistic!" she said. "I felt like I was back home in Mexico. I can't believe that such a thing could happen in *England*."

As I wrote earlier, Miss G did not have a fixed fee and asked new pupils to consider how much they valued what they were learning before deciding what they wished to pay for their lessons. She had apparently been known to tell some people that they needed to pay more, whilst from others she would refuse to take any payment at all. The issue really was one of valuation rather than money. One story I heard exemplifies a never-to-be-forgotten lesson given to a young man.

Young Mr X was asked after his first lesson to give some thought to what he wanted to pay. He made the mistake of "trying it on", however, and said he wanted to pay her five pounds. At his next lesson he was told, as soon as he arrived, to remove his shoes and lie on the table. Miss Goldie arranged his head on some books and then left the room to go and have a cup of tea. After half an hour she came back and told him to get up and go because the lesson was over.

"But you haven't done anything" protested the young man.

“Well,” she replied, “you wanted to pay five pounds, so you have had five pounds worth. Good day!”

### **Margaret Goldie and Erika Whittaker**

During the time I was taking lessons with Margaret Goldie, I had become a close friend of her contemporary Erika Whittaker. But more about that another time. Goldie and Erika were really like chalk and cheese. In the early days, as young women, they did not get on too well. Goldie had, said Erika, somehow got into what she called the “inner circle” at Ashley place (by which she meant the Alexander family, plus Irene Tasker and Ethel Webb) and did not mix very much with the other students.

According to Erika the children at the Little School were a little bit frightened of Goldie. One day when they were all being served with soup, none of them dared to start eating in case they had not “inhibited” enough. Then F.M. came in, sat down and said, “Eat, eat. It will get cold!”

“She had this way” Erika said, “of looking you up and down as if to say, ‘what are you doing here?’, and one felt an icy chill. The other students were all a bit frightened of her.” When, more than half a century later, they re-established contact, they formed a touching friendship. Erika, having found some strange things going on in the Alexander world after an absence of several decades, was very grateful to be able to talk to Goldie and be reassured that she was not alone in her critique. While Erika was staying with me on one of her London visits, she was invited to Goldie’s for lunch. She came back delighted.

“We had smoked salmon, Stilton cheese and champagne. My favourites!”

Goldie also valued the contact with Erika. When I told her on a later occasion that Erika was coming again to London, she became quite emotional.

“Oh Erika!” she said. “When we were at Ashley Place, she was always so light, so joyful and so free. Mr Alexander was always sending us off to go for a walk, saying we were too serious.

‘Why can’t you be more like Erika,’ he would say. ‘She understands.’

“But we couldn’t. We didn’t know how.”

I was very touched by Goldie’s humility, both then and on another occasion when she said how fortunate she and her contemporaries had been to learn from Alexander. I responded that I and my contemporaries felt lucky to learn from her. She said, “Oh, you wouldn’t say that if you knew him. You wouldn’t bother with me”.

It was during a later visit of Erika’s that I met Goldie for the last time. I only went to her house in Richmond once, and that was to take Erika to visit her. I dropped her off and returned a few hours later to pick her up. I went in and spent half an hour or so together with these two old ladies who had influenced my understanding of Alexander’s work so

much over the last twelve years. It was the only time I was to see them together and it was the last time I saw Goldie before she died.

She was sitting at her little desk under her bookshelves which were full of fascinating titles. You really got the sense that she was a thinker; someone who reflected on subjects which had concerned mankind throughout the ages. She looked very fragile and had bruises on her face after a recent fall, but with Erika's clever and considerate questions and prompts, the conversation was lively and Goldie happily reminisced.

She told us the story of her first lessons, when she was having each day one from FM and one from AR. She said she loved her lessons with FM, but hated the ones with AR. In desperation she wrote to her father who was paying for the lessons and said that she thought it was not right that he should be spending all this money when she was only benefiting from half of the lessons. His response was that he was paying all this money so that she could learn to face and deal with any problem that life put in her path, and this was one of them. Later, she said, she became great friends with AR.

Erika asked her, for my benefit really, how it was that FM could see and work with so many people in a day without seeming to get tired.

Goldie laughed. "It was because he wasn't doing anything" she replied.

"A lot of young teachers nowadays" continued Erika (and by "young teachers" she meant more or less anyone under the age of seventy), "are very concerned about getting more pupils and trying to make FM's work more popular. What's your view about that?"

Goldie smiled and said, "It was never meant for everyone. It is meant for the few who wish to evolve."

Interestingly, when I first shared that comment of Goldie's with people in the AT community, there were some accusations of elitism. Our attitude to Alexander's work is certainly different now to that of his early followers – particularly those who were with him day in and day out, at Ashley Place. There was at that time, certainly amongst some, a belief that they were, so to say, at the evolving tip of humanity. Readers may be familiar with Dr Wilfred Barlow's hypothesis about "Alexander Man" as described in his book *The Alexander Principle*. The great historian of dynamic psychiatry, Henry Ellenberger<sup>vi</sup>, gave clear examples of how the dominant cultural idea of an epoch coloured the way in which researchers viewed their ideas and discoveries, so it is not at all surprising that, at a time when Darwin's theories of evolution dominated scientific thinking, Alexander would situate his own discoveries in that domain. Perhaps it was that same mindset that was at the root of Alexander's unfortunate views about race and eugenics. Erika Whittaker, on the other hand, did not subscribe to the view that Ashley Place was the nucleus of human evolution; "There seemed to be a tendency at Ashley Place," she shared with us at Holy Trinity Brompton during her STAT Memorial Lecture in 1985, "to have the attitude that we were the clever ones and the people out there don't know anything...I wanted to find out what else was going on in the world."

Alexander was certainly not alone in thinking that the next step in human evolution would be the evolution of consciousness<sup>vii</sup>. But the point here is that Margaret Goldie subscribed to the view outlined by Alexander in his books and did believe that his work was in the domain of evolution, albeit a personal one. This goes a long way to explaining, whether one agrees with it or not, her *critique* of many other teachers including her contemporaries. They had, she claimed, with their emphasis on physical aspects, no matter how subtle, turned Alexander's discoveries into what she termed "sophisticated physiotherapy".

### **What and how did she teach?**

To come into Margaret Goldie's teaching room was to enter a space of quiet presence. It was, in a way, like crossing a threshold into another world; one in which there could be some insight into the hidden laws which control human reactivity – and the possibility, if just for a moment, of becoming a little more free from them.

The form of the lesson did not seem so different from any typical Alexander lesson; you stood in front of a chair; you might sit down and stand up; you could be taken into "monkey" or work through "hands on the back of a chair". But there was no mistaking the fact that the *medium* (of the procedures) was not the *message*; the work was about what was happening in one's brain - a place where, it is worth remembering, there is no sensation - moreover, in parts of the brain which seemed to be stubbornly resistant to being accessed and activated.

People often ask about her hands, as though that were the benchmark of a teacher's knowledge and expertise. It seems that amongst those who studied with her, "recollections may vary", as the late Queen Elizabeth II once said. I recall one of my colleagues from the course where I trained objecting to being "pulled about" in a lesson with Goldie. Yet, another friend of mine, when asked about Goldie's hands after her first lesson, surprised herself by saying "Oh, she didn't use her hands". She later explained to me that of course Miss G had used her hands, but what she had experienced in the lesson was not about "hands"; it was about what was going on in her brain and nervous system.

A colleague from Germany, speaking of his lessons with Miss G, once said, "she grabbed your throat with her bony hands and you thought she was going to throttle you, but in time you learned to love those hands". Some people I knew, quick to judge according to their own criteria and not finding the soft, direction-giving hands they associated with learning the Alexander Technique, never returned after one lesson.

It is true that Miss Goldie did not give directions in the way most of us were used to. Apart from in those very early lessons, she didn't use her hands very much – just a light tap from time to time as a reminder to think in activity. In the early lessons she could be very firm in indicating a direction; she connected the head with the back and took the whole lot up; she indicated with her hands that the back should go back and up; in "monkey", which she described as "not a position but an evolution", she would clearly indicate the antagonistic pulls; head against hips, knees against hips. As I would sometimes explain to trainee-teachers, yes, do less but you have to know what it is you are doing less of. However, it

would be a misrepresentation to say that Miss G's way of teaching was based on pulling. On several occasions, to bring me out of "monkey", she would firstly tilt my torso and head back into the vertical plane and then tell me not to push with my legs in order to straighten the knees but to direct the head and back up until the lengthening reached the legs and brought them straight. Then I felt like Zebedee from the Magic Roundabout, ready to spring off into London. Over the course of time the work with her became increasingly subtle and gradually, as my colleague Maya Galai once put it, "a teaching emerged".

Compared to many of her contemporaries, Goldie was not especially gifted with her hands, or with giving directions. This was not her *forte*. People who criticised, or indeed lauded, this aspect of her teaching rather missed the point. Although the Macdonald/Westfeldt faction at Ashley Place (which included Marjory Barlow, Walter Carrington and, to a lesser extent, Marj Barstow) seemed determined to make the use of the hands to bring about change the central focus of the work, for Goldie and for others (Irene Tasker, Erika Whittaker, Irene Stewart, Sir George Trevelyan) it was not. My own impression was, like the friend I mentioned earlier in this article, that the hands were almost incidental; there was a contact on another level taking place which demanded a more active attention.

She told me that Alexander, speaking of his students after the training course one morning, complained that *'They are all in such a hurry to use their hands. I'm waiting for the one who isn't'*

In one of my later lessons with her, she clarified her view about teaching and using the hands. "It is not about the contact between my hand and the pupil, nor about the contact between the teacher's back and the pupil's back. It is about the contact between one human brain and another."

I, like most of my contemporaries, was used to the teacher making it all work for me – rather like a good dancing teacher can get your body to move in a way one struggles to find on one's own. But that was not Goldie's way. She was not going to make it work for you but was going to help you discover the processes by which you could make it work for yourself. Of all the first-generation teachers I had lessons with, it was only with Goldie that I did not always feel wonderful during or after the lessons. Far from it! Sometimes it all felt very static and pointless. On more than one occasion I could not wait for the lesson to end, swearing to myself that this would definitely be the last time I would put myself through such an excruciating experience. She was, of course, picking up this resistance and would sometimes comment that I should not concern myself with whether or not I felt it was working, or give way to an inner criticism that she was not up-to-scratch today, but I should just go on with the brainwork. She was fond of saying, with even a little dramatic expression, "And the brainwork more dynamic than ever!"

Then, perhaps several hours later the same day – and quite unexpectedly – some new discovery would emerge; a clarity of thought, a more vivid perception, or an unknown part of my spine would suddenly wake up. I was coming to understand that what she called "brain-work" was bringing about changes from inside the brain rather than through muscles or nerves. One of Alexander's aphorisms began to make sense:

“When the time comes that you can trust your feeling, you won’t want to use it.”<sup>viii</sup>

Brainwork, it must be stressed, did not mean intellectual activity. It meant an active attention that included the projection of what she called “brain-thought-messages”.

It is evident that she taught different pupils according to their needs – as any good teacher should. I knew more than one female pupil of Goldie’s who was reduced to tears in the lessons. Yet the gratitude they later expressed for whatever it was they were shown in those moments was heartfelt.

It would indeed be an error to postulate a whole methodology based on one’s own lessons. Nevertheless, with that caveat in mind, I will share some of my experiences of what and how she taught, “recollected in tranquillity” several decades later.

In the early lessons, moving me a few centimetres backwards and forwards in the chair, she would use her hands very lightly on the back of the neck, near the atlanto-occipital joint, to ensure there was no tightening there – and sometimes lean me back just far enough to be out of my comfort zone, which stimulated a tendency to tighten for support. By keeping me there and reminding me not to stiffen, the body mechanisms which should be giving support were persuaded to work. Sometimes she would place a cigar box covered in velvet (probably one of the cigar boxes which Alexander used) between the back of the chair and my back but caution me not to press against it.

I was surprised to be taken quite a long way forwards before rising from sitting. It is generally accepted that at Ashley Place all the teachers took their pupils straight up when rising from sitting. This was my experience in lessons with several first-generation teachers: Marjory Barlow, Patrick Macdonald, Elisabeth Walker, Peggy Williams and Erika Whittaker. Even at the Constructive Teaching Centre, where they largely take people forward to rise to standing, Dilys Carrington told me that in the early years they also would take people straight up from or down into the chair, but they at some point decided it was better to, as she put it, “keep them in balance” during the movement, by inclining them forwards. This became the norm for teachers trained at the Constructive Teaching Centre.

I have heard it reported that this was how Miss Goldie taught<sup>ix</sup>. It was not. In retrospect I think she worked like that with some of us from the Macdonald line to break a habit many of us had of staying back by subtly pressing or stiffening against the teacher’s hand. Once I had learned to inhibit that tendency, she took me straight up and down in chair work. This was a mental challenge.

Although there was little obvious outer movement, there was movement none-the-less; the movement of thoughts, of nerve-impulses, of energies normally well below the radar. It was a revelation to see just how much of the *unnecessary* was taking place. She showed us young teachers that sensations, be they ones of muscular release or of directed energy, depending, perhaps, on one’s training background, did not, on their own, address the great problem which – to Alexander – was at the heart of his work; namely, human reactivity. It became clear that FM’s concept of ‘Man’s Supreme Inheritance’ did not mean going through life with a more upright posture, a lengthened spine, a feeling of gravity in the

pelvis or of contact with the ground, or any other kind of sensation – however subtle; it was the developed capacity to make choices and decisions; “the transcendent inheritance of a conscious mind”.<sup>x</sup>

And the key? Stopping! “Stop doing your thing”, she would say again and again. “Quiet throughout, with particular attention to head, neck and back! Not *you*, doing *your* thing!”

She held out the promise of a kind of ideal: one in which ‘stopping’ meant the absence of interference with the workings of the organism at a very deep and fundamental level; not just muscular tensions but habits of thought, uncontrolled emotionality, attitudes, the functioning of the internal organs – everything. I theorised once that the appendectomy I had at 12 years of age had affected my posture as I grew, but she was of the view that it was my use that had aggravated my appendix in the first place.

She said once, rather enigmatically, “If we could stop – really stop, all our difficulties would simply disappear!”

She often talked about the giving and withholding of consent, as did Alexander, and a key moment for me was in one particular lesson. I had, with different teachers and on my own, explored giving directions, finding an expansion of the organism almost at will, directing a flow of energy to parts of the body, even inhibiting some of my reactions and entering into a quieter state, and letting my head lead as I went into activity. But I had not explored what Margaret Goldie, and Alexander, really meant by the giving and withholding of consent: the secret of “letting do”.

I was sitting with my hands resting palms-up on the tops of my legs. She took one arm, moved it around – up and down and rotated it in a particular way that she had – and let it rest at my side. Then the brain work!

“Not you *doing* it!” she quietly insisted.

“You are going to give consent to letting your hand come back up on to the top of your leg, but *you* are not going to *do* it.”

By now I was not distracted by “unbeliever” thoughts. I just listened to her and followed her instructions as exactly as I could.

“Not you doing it! You are going to give consent to allowing your hand to move. Give consent and let *it* do it!”

Then suddenly, effortlessly – my hand floats up onto the top of my leg. How? Not, evidently, by using the familiar pathways I associated with such a movement.

It’s all there in one of Alexander’s Teaching Aphorisms:

*“The reason you people won’t give consent is because none of you will give consent to anything but what you feel.”*

This led to many personal experiments and gave me new insights into Alexander's work, in particular the similarity with aspects of Taoism.<sup>xii</sup>

**Inhibition** is the doorway. Once you pass through it you can experiment with giving consent to what you wish to do – volition – and then “letting do”, allowing activity to take place using unfamiliar pathways. Given that so many of our “identity habits” are embodied, this challenges our sense of who we think we are, opening us up to a world of new possibilities.

The emphasis in Goldie's approach was on the negative: "Not to do!", "Not the head back! Not the chin down!". "Not you doing your thing!" Whereas Macdonald was primarily affirming, all about the up, expansion, flow, Goldie was more about stability, not reacting, being quiet. One of my contemporaries, I forget who, once referred to Goldie and Macdonald as the Yin and the Yang of the Alexander Technique.

She spoke to me on one occasion about the Little School and working with the pupils, explaining that they would show the children that if the head went forward and up it became easier to write or do whatever else they were engaged with.

Then if Goldie's hands-on work was not her forte, what did she have to offer we young teachers that we did not feel they were getting elsewhere? Did the other first-generation teachers, with more informative hands than Goldie, actually transmit the full package of Alexander's discoveries.

Each person must answer this question for themselves, if they wish. For myself, something Goldie once told me about Alexander was quite illuminating. She said that he was what one might call an artistic type; highly-strung, extremely sensitive and prone to react. Through his technique he had learnt to control this. Goldie herself was, in her youth, fragile, which is why Ester Lawrence sent her to Alexander in the 1920's. I saw for myself that she had a reactive streak which she needed to manage. What she gave to nervous, sensitive types such as I was at that time - as were many of the others I knew who benefited from their lessons with her - was the quiet calm of reorganising one's thought processes in such a way that the nervous system and musculature responded. And it was one's own processes, not those from the teacher's hands.

Then did Goldie have the “whole package”? Did she convey the real teaching of FM Alexander? I always felt that both she and her contemporary Erika Whittaker had important, what one might call, pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that anyone trying to understand Alexander's work tries to reconstruct. But no, Goldie had her gifts and her limits, like the rest of us. Any glimpse of truth is always partial, one aspect of a many-sided diamond. I am so grateful to have learned from her but equally to have learned from those others who reflected different aspects. Alexander's discovery was something very big and cannot be limited by the understanding of one person at the expense of another. We are all scratching at the surface. “In the end”, as Elisabeth Walker once said to me, “it's really



about being yourself”.

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<sup>i</sup> In 1892 the Froebel Educational Institute opened in Talgarth Road, West Kensington with plans for a fee-paying demonstration school and a free kindergarten. It later moved to Roehampton and eventually became part of what is now the University of Roehampton. See <https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/colleges/froebel-college/froebel-history/>

<sup>ii</sup> Esther Lawrence (1862–1944) was the second principal of Froebel College (from 1901 to 1932) and an ardent supporter of Alexander

<sup>iii</sup> Told to the author by Erika Whittaker

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid

<sup>v</sup> Some references to belief and muscle tension.

- “Do you know what we have found that belief is? A certain standard of muscle tension. That is all”. (The Bedford Lecture, in *Articles and Lectures*, p.174, Mouritz (1995))
- “I remember one morning his coming briskly into our classroom, looking very pleased with himself, and saying, ‘Belief is a matter of customary muscle tension.’”  
‘F.M.,’ I said, ‘Don’t you mean that belief about what you can do with the body is a matter of customary muscle tension?’ The discussion was on. He kept talking while he worked. Finally at the end of the morning’s work F.M. said, ‘Yes, belief about what you can do with the body is a matter of customary muscle tension.’ Lulie Westfeldt, F. Matthias Alexander, *The Man and his Work*, Mouritz 1998, p.68
- “Was FM’s aphorism that belief is a matter of muscle tension simply designed to shock people, or was there a more serious element behind it? He was perfectly serious about it, because he equated belief with fixation. In his experience a rigidity of mind corresponded to a rigidity of body.” (Walter Carrington on the Alexander Technique in discussion with Sean Carey, 1986, p.45f)

<sup>vi</sup> *Discovery of the Unconscious*, Henry Ellenberger. Basic Books, New York, 1970. ISBN-10 : 0465016723, ISBN-13 : 978-0465016723

<sup>vii</sup> See, for example, Theillard de Chardin’s *The Phenomenon of Man*. Éditions du Seuil (France). Harper & Brothers (US). William Collins (UK). Publication date 1955. Published in English 1959.

<sup>viii</sup> *Teaching Aphorisms: The Alexander Journal No 7*, 1972, published by the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique. Also published in *Articles and Lectures* by Mouritz (1995)

<sup>ix</sup> Anthony Kingsley interview with Robert Rickover: see <https://youtu.be/IHnIjc1dCPc> (14mins. 10secs. in)

<sup>x</sup> *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*, FM Alexander. Chapter III, *The Processes of Conscious Guidance and Control*. Published by Mouritz, London 1986.

<sup>xi</sup> *Teaching Aphorisms: The Alexander Journal No 7*, 1972, published by the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique. Also published in *Articles and Lectures* by Mouritz (1995).

<sup>xii</sup> The concept of non-doing in Taoism – Wu Wei – has been understood in different ways throughout its long history. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wu\\_wei](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wu_wei)