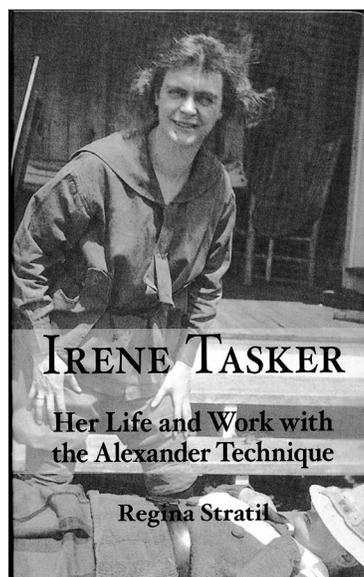


Irene Tasker

by Regina Stratil, reviewed by Genoa Davidson & Joe Alberti

Irene Tasker: Her Life and Work with the Alexander Technique, by Regina Stratil. Gratz, Austria: Mouritz, 2020.



IN THE VERY FIRST LINE of the introduction to this biography of Irene Tasker, author Regina Stratil states that Irene Tasker was “an extraordinary person” (2020, ix). This is amply proven in the following 458 pages of this book, which incorporates history, letters, photos, and a large and priceless index of Ms. Tasker’s papers, both previously published and new.

In a Zoom interview attended by the reviewers, Stratil revealed that she

had been working for the Walter Carrington Educational Trust, an archive of Alexander Technique papers and resources, when she began to look through some of Irene Tasker’s notebooks that had been gifted to the Trust some years before. The fire of interest was kindled, and the result is a thoroughly comprehensive and highly entertaining account of a crucial part of the history of the Alexander Technique. While there is no official biography of Stratil in the book, we learn in the forward that she has a background in historical comparative linguistics and worked in the library of Indo-European Studies at the University of Vienna as a student assistant and is an Alexander Technique teacher, a combination that makes her an ideal candidate to research and write a book such as this.

One of the most impressive aspects of the book is the prologue, which offers a comprehensive history and explanation of the Alexander Technique that will be of particular interest to those who are new to the subject. However, even those who have been teaching for many years will appreciate the clarity and depth of Stratil’s understanding.

Irene Grace Tasker was born in 1887 during the Victorian period of England, a time when women could not vote or obtain the same college degrees as men and when career choices were extremely limited. Photos of her as a child reveal a tall and sturdy young person with close-cropped hair and determined eyes behind thick, round glasses. In 1897, ten years after she was born, the Cambridge University Senate voted to grant full degrees to women, though they were still denied degrees equal to men and could not be full members of the university (13). Tasker not only set out to attend college but eventually graduated with honors from Cambridge’s Girton College with

a full classics education (12). Her graduation in 1910 started her off on a path that led, almost inexorably, to her first meeting and lessons with F.M. Alexander in the fall of 1913. She became one of his first trainees, a lifelong advocate for the Alexander Technique, and a trusted friend.

It would strain the word limit of a review to try to include comprehensive coverage of everything included in this book. It provides detailed and well-researched information from Tasker’s birth to her death from pneumonia in 1977, at the age of ninety. Some highlights include descriptions of her early lessons with Alexander, the origins of the “Little School,” which she founded in London in 1934 and which was the first school for children based on Alexander’s principles, and details of the 1945 South African libel suit filed by F.M. Alexander against the South African Journal *Manpower*, which he eventually won. Photos of the children in Tasker’s school offer a previously unseen glimpse at the results of the teaching: youngsters seriously at play, painting, and reading and writing with beautiful ease of use as they go about these tasks. Also included are delightful personal letters from F.M. Alexander, revealing his deep respect and affection for Tasker, as well as Tasker’s certification of her graduation from the training course, signed by F.M. in swooping calligraphy.

This is a book of great value not only for Alexander Technique teachers or those interested in studying it but for anyone who wants an entertaining and true story of an unconventional woman who made her own life at a time when it was difficult to do so. It was eye-opening to discover her immense contribution to F.M. Alexander’s books as an editor, as well as the details of her teaching in South Africa and her training with Maria Montessori in Rome.

There have been many books written about F.M. Alexander and the Alexander Technique in general. So, it might be easy to assume that he developed and wrote about his Technique in a vacuum, but this is far from the case. As Stratil’s book shows, he was surrounded by a network of women whom he trusted and who provided a lifetime of quiet support. It is about time they are recognized for their contributions. In addition to Tasker, Margaret Naumburg, Ethel Webb, and Margaret Goldie edited his books, trained with him in the Technique, and spent their lives teaching and advocating his work throughout the world. (For more on Ethel Webb and Margaret Naumburg, see Ruth Diamond’s papers in the *AmSAT Journal*, nos. 17 and 18.)

At almost five hundred pages, with extensive notes and appendices, this book is a serious, scholarly work of historical significance that also succeeds as a fascinating read. We recommend it without reservation and hope many more such books about the women who contributed to the Alexander Technique are forthcoming.