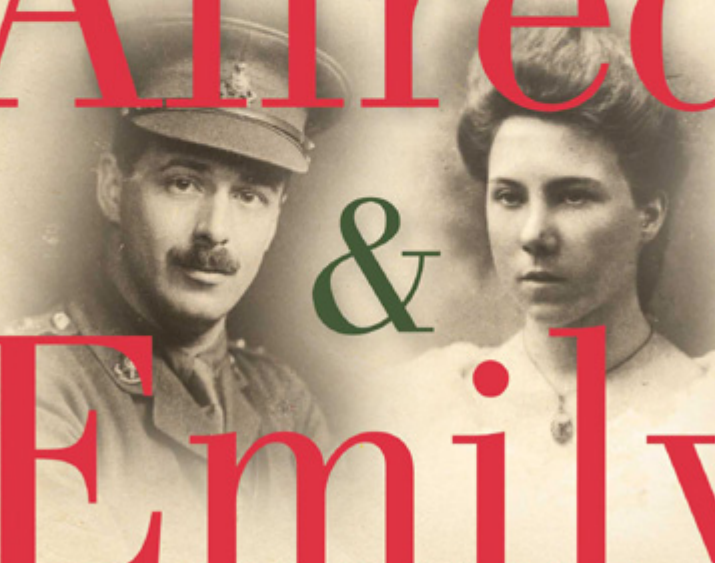


Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 2007

DORIS LESSING



Alfred  
&  
Emily



Alfred  
*and*  
Emily

DORIS LESSING

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## FOREWORD

My parents were remarkable, in their very different ways. What they did have in common was their energy. The First World War did them both in. Shrapnel shattered my father's leg, and thereafter he had to wear a wooden one. He never recovered from the trenches. He died at sixty-two, an old man. On the death certificate should have been written, as cause of death, the Great War. My mother's great love, a doctor, drowned in the Channel. She did not recover from that loss. I have tried to give them lives as might have been if there had been no World War One.

Easy for my father. He grew up playing with the farmers' boys in the fields around Colchester. He had wanted to be a farmer, all his life, in Essex or in Norfolk. He did not have the money to buy a farm, so I have given him his heart's desire, which was to be an English farmer. He excelled in sport, particularly cricket.

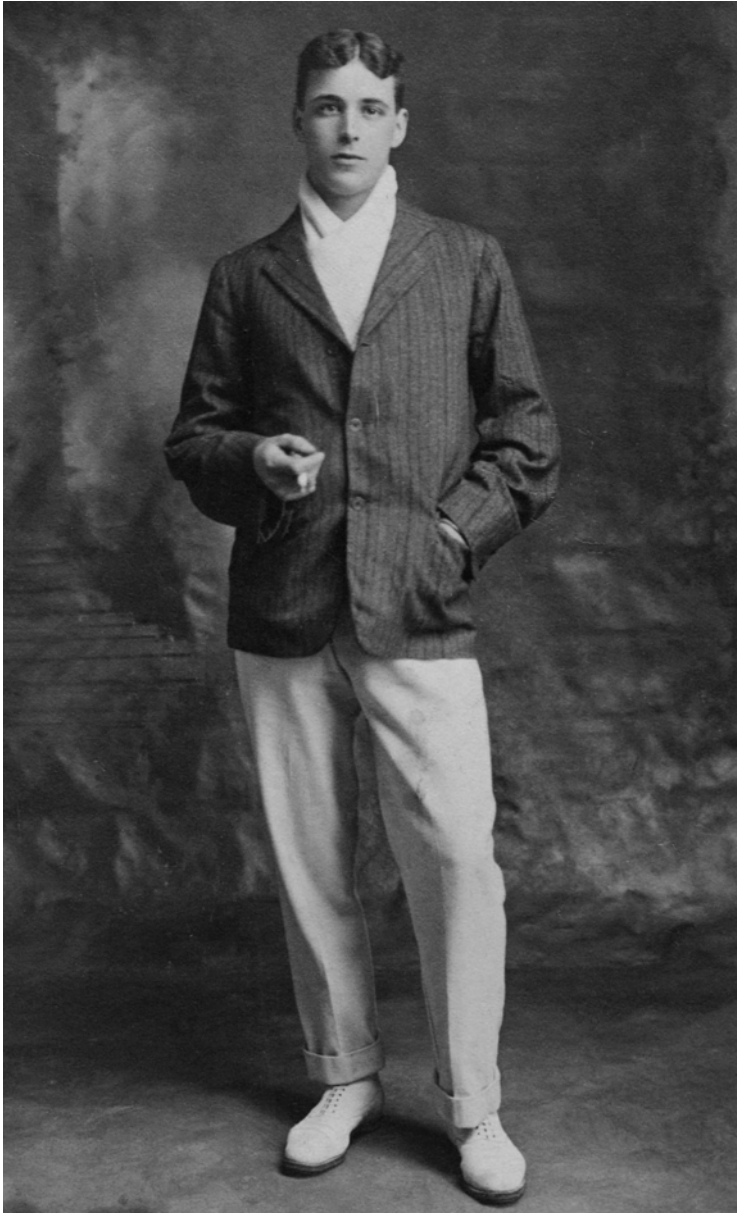
My mother nursed the wounded for the four years of the war, in the old Royal Free Hospital, which was then in London's East End. When she was thirty-two, she was offered

the job of matron at St George's Hospital, then one of the greatest hospitals anywhere. It is now a hotel. Usually women had to be in their forties to be offered matronhood. She was formidably efficient. I used to joke, as a girl, that if she were in England she would be running the Women's Institute or, like Florence Nightingale, be an inspiration for the reorganization of hospitals. She was also musically talented.

That war, the Great War, the war that would end all war, squatted over my childhood. The trenches were as present to me as anything I actually saw around me. And here I still am, trying to get out from under that monstrous legacy, trying to get free.

If I could meet Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh now, as I have written them, as they might have been had the Great War not happened, I hope they would approve the lives I have given them.







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PART ONE

Alfred and Emily: a novella



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## 1902

The suns of the long summers at the beginning of the last century promised only peace and plenty, not to mention prosperity and happiness. No one remembered anything like those summer days when the sun always shone. A thousand memoirs and novels averred that this was so, and that is why I may confidently assert that on that Saturday afternoon in August 1902, in the village of Longerfield, it was a splendid afternoon. The occasion was the annual celebration of the Allied Essex and Suffolk Banks, and the place was a vast field lent every year by Farmer Redway who usually kept cows in it.

There were different focuses of activity. At the end of the field, excited cries and shouts told that here were the children's games. A long trestle table laden with every kind of foodstuff stood under some oaks. The main arena of attention was the cricket match, and around the white-clad figures clustered most of the spectators. The whole scene was about to be absorbed by the shadows from the big elms that divided this field from the next where the expelled cows watched the proceedings, while their jaws moved reminiscently like those of

gossips. The players in their fresh whites, which were a bit dusty after a day of play, knew their importance in this summer festival, conscious that every eye was on them, including those of a group of townspeople leaning over a fence, who were determined not to be left out.

Not far from the cricket pitch there were, sitting on the grass with cushions, a large, fair woman, whose reddened face said she did not enjoy the heat, a tiny shred of a girl, her daughter, and a girl who had just leaned forward, her eyes on Mrs Lane's face to hear what she was saying. 'It is a very serious thing, my dear, quarrelling with your father.'

At this moment, a youth was coming forward to stand with his bat at the stumps, and the fair woman leaned to send him a wave, which he acknowledged with a smile and a nod. He was strikingly good-looking, dark and well built, and that there was something especial about his standing there was shown by a sudden silence. The bowler sent down a ball and the batsman easily knocked it well away.

'Sssh,' said Mary Lane. 'Just a minute, I want to see ...'

Daisy, the little girl, was already leaning forward to watch, and now Emily McVeagh, the other girl, watched too, though she was certainly not seeing much. She was flushed with excitement and determination, and kept glancing sideways at the older woman, hoping for her attention.

Another ball sped down towards the handsome youth, another prompt rebuff, and now there was a ripple of applause.

'Well done,' said Mrs Lane, and was ready to clap, but the bowler had begun his run forward.

Again ... again ... a ball came close to where they sat and the fieldsman ran to retrieve it. The innings went on, there were several scatters of applause, and then a burst of clapping when the youth sent a ball almost as far as the children's games.

It was time for tea. The long trestle table was besieged, while a woman stood by the urn and handed out cups.

'I could do with one, Daisy,' said her mother, and the girl ran to join the queue.

Now Mrs Lane remembered that very much more was being expected of her by the girl Emily, so she turned her attention to her and said, 'I don't really think you know yet what you are in for.'

Mrs Lane was a woman with influence, friends in useful places, and she had been finding out from a dozen different sources just what Emily McVeagh was in for.

The girl had defied her father, and said to him that, no, she would not go to university, she would be a nurse.

'She'll be a skivvy among skivvies,' Mrs Lane had said to herself, shocked at the girl's decision.

She knew John McVeagh well, knew the family, had watched Emily's triumphant schooldays with admiration tinged with regret that her daughter was not as clever and with as much presence and attack. The girls were friends, had always caused people to marvel at their unlikeness. One was retiring, easily overlooked, apparently frail, the other immediately mistress of herself and of circumstances, always first in everything, head girl at school, carrying off prizes: Emily

McVeagh, friend and champion of little Daisy.

‘I know I can do it,’ said Emily, calmly.

‘But why, why?’ Mrs Lane was wanting to ask, and perhaps would have done, except that the youth who had been earning applause came up to her and she leaned up to kiss him and say, ‘Well done. Oh, well done.’

There was a little history here.

He accepted a cup of tea from Daisy, and a vast piece of cake, and sat down by his friend, Mrs Lane. She had known him all his life.

Two brothers: the older one, Harry, was adored by his mother. She was known to be discontented because her husband, the boys’ father, a bank clerk and hating it, spent every moment of his spare time playing the organ in the church. Instead, it was clear, she felt, of trying ‘to get on’. He was unambitious, but the elder son had been offered a job, much more than most schoolboys could expect, before he had even finished school. He, too, had been the clever one, easily passing exams, winning prizes. But this mother had not liked her second son, Alfred, or behaved as if she didn’t.

Beating children in those days meant no more than an intention to listen to the wishes of God. ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child.’ But Mrs Lane, observing, had been shocked. She, too, was the wife of a bank clerk, a senior one, but her husband was a pillar of the Church, and involved with local activities. Alfred’s misfortune in his mother had long been known, discussed, and the boy was given all kinds of indulgences and special favours from people who were sorry for



him. If he was not interested in school, he was very good at games, particularly cricket. He had turned sixteen a week or so before, and he was too young to play in the men's game. But he was here, playing, and if Mrs Lane had had a good deal to do with persuading influential people that he should be given the chance to distinguish himself, then who would ever know it? Alfred's mother was sitting with the spectators, and when people congratulated her on her brilliant son she looked discomfited, obviously feeling that it was the other son who should always be applauded.

Alfred was being given a chance to show himself and his prowess and Mrs Lane was delighted with herself and with him. She had said often enough that she loved the boy as if he were her own, and she wished he were. She much disliked Alfred's mother, though in this community, everyone knowing the others, this was not something she could often express.

'Alfred,' she said, fanning herself with the programme of the day's events, 'Alfred, you've done us all proud.'

And now Alfred was being summoned from the pitch – and he hastened off, with smiles at the three, Daisy, who adored him, like her mother, and this other girl, to whom he had not been introduced.

Over on the pitch a little conference was going on, with Alfred, and while she watched this, Mrs Lane was again turning her attention to Emily.

'It is very badly paid, very, you have no idea,' said the older woman. 'You'll do skivvy's work, dreadful, and the hours are long. And the food is bad, too.' Another objection she did not

find it easy to bring out. The girls who became probationers were the lowest of the low, she could have said, the roughest of working-class girls. And you, Emily McVeagh, have had an easy life, you've always had the best of everything, and you are going to find it very hard, very.

They were starting to play again, and the handsome boy was back at the wicket.

'If I understood why,' said Mrs Lane, coming out with it. 'If you could say why, Emily. You know, there aren't many fathers who want their girls to do university. He must be so disappointed.'

She did not much like John McVeagh, a pompous man, she thought, full of himself, but he was so proud of Emily, boasting about her everywhere in and out of season, so now he must be feeling ...

'He told me, "Never darken my doors again,"' said Emily, turning bright tear-filled eyes on her mentor. 'I wish she was my mother,' she had said often. This motherless girl, with an unkind stepmother, had made for herself a mother in Mrs Lane, who was now looking at her with deep disappointment. 'Do think, Emily, do think.'

But Emily was starting work as the lowest of the low, this coming week, at the Royal Free Hospital in the Gray's Inn Road in London. She could no longer stay at home: she had been formally thrown out.

'Never darken my doors,' she had heard. Repeating it now there was a satisfaction in it, as if in the repetition she was rolling her father, John McVeagh, out of her mouth, goodbye.

‘He said I must not consider myself his daughter any longer,’ she said, and it came out wildly, forlornly, and now the tears were running.

‘My dear,’ said Mrs Lane, putting her arm around Emily and kissing a cheek that was hot and wet with tears. ‘But it doesn’t matter what he says. You are his daughter and nothing and nobody can change that.’

From the cricket pitch came more applause. The handsome youth had been caught out, but obviously not disgracefully because he retired to join the spectators while people clapped. He was not surprised to see that his mother, who had been just there, watching him, had gone.

Mrs Lane, looking past Emily’s head, also saw that the unkind woman, Mrs Tayler, had gone.

When Alfred came over to Mrs Lane, she let Emily go, to give him a hug, which said she was trying to make up for his mother.

‘You did so well,’ she said. ‘Well done, Alfred.’

Alfred hesitated, saw that the girl whose name he did not know was crying and removed himself to a chair.

‘Oh dear,’ said the kindly Mrs Lane, again hugging Emily. ‘Oh dear, oh dear, I wish I understood it.’

Alfred watched the cricket, but not so that he didn’t hear the girl whose head was on Mrs Lane’s shoulder say, ‘I know it is the right thing for me. I know it is.’ Alfred seemed to need to escape, but changed his mind and from the tea urn fetched more cups of tea, which he handed to the three women, with a bowl of sugar. As he gave her cup to Daisy, he asked, very

low, 'Who is she?' and Daisy said, 'She's Emily,' as if nothing more need be said. 'She's my friend,' she added.

Oh, so that's Emily, Alfred thought, for of course he knew all about Emily, had heard so much. As often, faced with the reality of a real person – in this case a sobbing and dishevelled young woman – he was thinking that it was not easy to see, looking at her, why she meant so much to Daisy.

He was about to sit down again, his eyes already on the cricket, when his attention was drawn by a noise at the fence. The adults had gone on their way, but children were there now. Even from where he was, some yards away, it could be seen these were poor children. The girls were in raggedy dresses and bare feet. Some boys tried to climb the fence, their eyes on the trestle full of food.

'Take them something, Daisy,' said her mother. 'Take the sandwiches. I brought them,' she added, because the woman behind the tea urn was about to challenge her. Women, seeing the situation, were coming up to the trestle and Mrs Lane called out, 'Only what I brought, nothing else.'

Alfred and Daisy lifted plates of sandwiches and a couple of sponge cakes to the fence where the children snatched them. They were hungry.

The women who had arrived stood with tight lips.

'Only what I brought,' called Mrs Lane, smiling, but angry. She said under her breath, 'Their precious cakes are safe from me.'

'They are gypsies,' said one of the women. 'I wouldn't want my best sponge cake to go to them.'

‘Well, even gypsies have to eat sometimes,’ said Mrs Lane, and she was red with anger now.

‘They are so poor,’ said Alfred, frowning, speaking to Mrs Lane as if wanting an explanation. ‘They look as if a square meal is what they need.’

‘Yes,’ said Daisy, smiling at the boy she had known all her life, the scrubby schoolboy who was suddenly a hero.

Emily was disengaging herself from Mrs Lane, retying the black ribbon that held her hair back. She was eighteen, her hair was ‘up’, but on this afternoon, with such old friends, the schoolgirl style seemed appropriate.

‘I must go,’ she said. ‘I’ll miss the train.’

‘I’ll go with you,’ said Daisy at once.

Emily stood, smiling, blinking away tears. ‘It is the first step that is the hardest,’ she confided to Mrs Lane, taking command of her future, holding it safe from Mrs Lane’s grave, silently protesting face.

The two girls went to the fence, Emily with her shadow Daisy just behind her.

At the fence she looked for a gate or aperture – nothing.

The children were hanging about, hoping for more.

Emily gave a quick flash of a glance around, vaulted the fence, and stood, smiling, victorious, back at Mrs Lane and the woman with the tea urn, who was shocked at this unladylike behaviour. No gate, so Emily lifted Daisy over, ‘One, two, three,’ and the two girls went off to the station.

Alfred was back with the group near the players.

Mrs Lane was now sitting in deep shade and her reddened

face was returning to its normal hue.

‘It’s all very well ...’ she said, addressing perhaps some sparrows that were attacking the cakes. She thought of the girl’s wonderful vault over the fence, the grace of it, the ease, and for some reason seeming to say no to Emily’s rash and unthinking plan. ‘Oh, no,’ said Mrs Lane. ‘Oh, no. It can’t be. What a waste.’

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## August 1905

The scene is the same. The cows stand ruminating and watching. Alfred is batting. He is nineteen, and has been playing with the big men for two years. No nervous stripling now, no handsome boy, he is a young man and everyone is watching him, not only Mrs Lane, who is in a chair under her oak tree, fanning herself, and Alfred's mother, in tears that are intended to be seen.

If Mrs Lane's face shows varieties of ironic comment, then it is understandable.

On the day after we saw them all last, Daisy returned from London to say she intended to start with her friend Emily as a probationer at the Royal Free. Now it had happened, it was obvious that Mrs Lane could have foreseen it all. Daisy had always admired Emily, and had emulated her when her own talents would permit. Mrs Lane was shaken, shocked to the heart, and she could not stop weeping, until her husband, upset by his daughter, even more by her, called the doctor and told his wife, 'Now, my dear, that is really enough. You are taking it much too hard.' Mrs Lane did not know that anybody

could weep as she was doing. Her little girl, whom she often privately called her little fairy, her little angel, was in that hospital wiping the bottoms of the very poor. That Emily had chosen to do it was dreadful, but she was at least a big strong girl, but her own little daughter, that frail child ... When a parent weeps and is inconsolable because a child does not go in the direction the parent wants, then at least one question has to be asked. Why is she so checked, so overthrown, as if given a death sentence, or at least part of her has? Or, for that matter, him: John McVeagh was ill with grief, so it was said.

And Mrs Tayler was noisily weeping over there, near the pitch, in a position where she had to be seen by everyone. Her Alfred, equably batting while people admired and applauded – he had been offered a variety of jobs by banks as far as Luton and Ipswich, not because of his aptness with the pen or with figures, but because they wanted him for their cricket teams. And he was good at billiards too, at snooker, at bowls – this young star was being competed for, his mother was as pleased as when her other son was chosen for his cleverness, but Alfred said, no, he would rather die than be a bank clerk, he had hated every minute of his two years in an Allied Essex and Suffolk bank. He was going to work for Mr Redway, the farmer who yearly lent his field for this festivity. Bert Redway was his good friend, they had grown up together; Alfred had in fact spent his childhood playing with the farmers' sons, along the hedgerows and in the fields.

'He's going to be a farmer's boy,' wept his mother. 'He's just like his father. They only care about making me miserable.'



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