

Sylvia Ashton-Warner had an intensely ambivalent relationship with the land of her birth. Despite receiving many accolades in New Zealand – including the country’s major literary award¹ – she claimed to have been rejected and persecuted, and regularly announced that her educational and literary achievements were unappreciated or insufficiently acknowledged by her compatriots. In her darkest moments, she railed against New Zealand and New Zealanders, even stating in one television interview: “I’m not a New Zealander!”²

This book makes Sylvia’s relationship with New Zealand its central focus.

Today, Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s 11 books – the last of which was published in 1986 – are all out of print. When they appeared at the end of the 1950s, her novels *Spinster* and *Incense to Idols* made *Time* magazine’s best books lists; in 1963 her teaching scheme, *Teacher*, was favourably reviewed on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*. But by 2002, C.K. Stead, a leading figure in New Zealand literature, could see no sign in academic or literary circles of “serious interest in her work – a fact all the more puzzling when considered against the background of 1980s feminism and the determined search in universities for neglected women writers” (2002, p. 4). Similarly, New Zealand educationist Alison Jones found that in 2006 amongst “dozens of teacher-trainees, teachers, and teacher-educators in Auckland, most had only a vague idea of who [Sylvia] was” (2006, p. 15).

One of our aims in this book is to introduce Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s work to a new generation of readers in literature and education. For those unfamiliar with Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s life, we have provided below a short biographical narrative as a guide to the events and places mentioned in this book.

The book’s chapters originated as research papers, memoirs or live interviews presented at the International Sylvia Ashton-Warner Centennial Conference – an event held in August, 2008, at The University of Auckland’s Faculty of Education to mark the centenary of Ashton-Warner’s birth. The conference attracted literary scholars, artists, schoolteachers, academic educationists, and biographers – from the USA and Australia as well as New Zealand. As with Sylvia’s own writing, the conference crossed genre boundaries between the literary and the pedagogical, and between fiction, biography and theory.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s refusal to fit any one category may provide a clue to the surprisingly low visibility of her work: it falls between disciplines. Journal articles, reviews, and book chapters produced in specialised fields have treated her writing as either educational *or* literary, not as both. But her work itself always defied such simple categorisation: her fiction was autobiographical and her autobiographies were

often fictional. Her educational theory was expressed in the form of novels (*Spinster*; *Bell Call*) or as autobiography (*Teacher*; *Spearpoint*). Her non-educational novels (*Greenstone*, *Incense to Idols* and *Three*) are largely unknown to an education audience, yet these also include elements of her educational thinking.

Lynley Hood's award-winning 1988 biography, *Sylvia! The Biography of Sylvia Ashton-Warner*, meticulously traces her life and her complex personality, but it does not interrogate Sylvia's educational or literary contributions, or the relations between the two. So a second objective of this book, and of the conference in which it originated, is to pull together some of the strands of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's writing by examining it within the context of its production.

Other Works

Portrayals of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's life are scattered through visual and print media.³ Her life has been the subject of New Zealand radio and television interviews and documentaries, and two fictionalised films.⁴ Her own self-portrayals are in two autobiographies (*Myself* and *I Passed this Way*), as well as being woven into all her novels. Lynley Hood's excellent biography retraced the convoluted paths of Sylvia's autobiographical narratives, interrogated their historical accuracy, speculated on their psychological underpinnings and reviewed her work's reception. Hood also published a personal account of her research process, *Who is Sylvia? The Diary of a Biography*.

Aside from biography and autobiography, only two full-length books have been written about Sylvia Ashton-Warner, both from an educational perspective, and both from outside New Zealand. Sydney Gurewitz Clemens' 1996 book, *Pay Attention to the Children: Lessons for Teachers and Parents* is an American handbook for teachers.⁵ A 2006 collection is *Provocations: Sylvia Ashton-Warner and Excitability in Education* edited by a Canadian (Judith Robertson) and an Australian (Cathryn McConaghy). Three chapters in that collection focus explicitly on Ashton-Warner's New Zealand context: Sue Middleton places Ashton-Warner's theoretical writing on education in wider sites of educational writing and publishing in New Zealand; Alison Jones explores the philosophy and practice of her pedagogy which, considered in the light of today's social anxieties in New Zealand about children, make Ashton-Warner's teaching methods both compelling *and* dangerous for contemporary educators; and Tess Moeke-Maxwell offers a reading of the bi-racial character Huia in Ashton-Warner's novel, *Greenstone*.

While *Pay Attention* was a practical guide, aimed at American classroom teachers, *Provocations* was more theoretical, for academic readers. In their introduction to *Provocations*, McConaghy and Robertson (2006) noted a shift in focus "from subject to theory" in studies of Ashton-Warner. Sylvia herself rejected classification as teacher or theorist. Describing herself as an artist rather than a teacher, she claimed to read "nothing on teaching" or education and expressed a dislike of academic educational theory's "unintelligible multisyllabic jargon" (1980, p. 471). Refusing to acknowledge other educationists' contributions to her ideas,

she claimed intellectual autonomy: “I am my own university, I my own Professor [sic]” (1980, p. 354).

McConaghy and Robertson’s text focused on what they termed “the psychic” rather than on the “historical and sociospatial conditions” (2006, p. 5) informing Sylvia’s work and commentaries on it. Sylvia’s “sociospatial conditions” have long bewildered foreign commentators who, from a distance, allow themselves to see Sylvia’s New Zealand as suffocating. American teacher Sydney Gurewitz Clemens wrote (1996, p. 23): “Astonishingly, it was in conventional, dutiful New Zealand that Sylvia Ashton-Warner began a lifelong habit of listening to her inner voice, embarking on the journey toward abundant life in 1940!” Similarly, speaking from France, another critic argued: “In the fifties her ideas were revolutionary. At a time when the curriculum was binding and the individuality of the pupils was largely ignored, her theories disturbed the establishment” (Durix, interviewed in Connor, Radford, & Robertson, 2006, p. 158). Indeed, there are repeated assertions that Sylvia’s educational theory was “in confrontation ... with the time and place in which she lived” (Clemens, 1996, p. 28).

Less Than Strictly Accurate

Our book takes a critical position with regard to this depiction of Sylvia’s environment. The crushing conformity was something she herself painted with flair, but it was a less-than-strictly-accurate portrayal of New Zealand educational conditions, which in fact often reflected the international Progressive movement in encouraging children to express (up to a point) their own lives and passions. Indeed, it could be argued that the New Zealand education establishment’s attention to Sylvia the teacher arose from its interest in how to put these ideas into practice.

But Ashton-Warner repeatedly claimed that New Zealand teachers, education officials, and publishers had rejected her educational theory, pedagogical techniques, and her educational writing. Although conclusively disputed by the research of Lynley Hood and others, impressions of Sylvia’s exclusion and rejection continue to be perpetuated in New Zealand and overseas. Accordingly, in Chapter 2 we have reprinted Ashton-Warner’s original 1950s teaching-scheme articles from *National Education* (the magazine of the national primary teachers’ union, the NZEI) published some years before *Spinster* and *Teacher*. Our reprinting makes the original version of her teaching scheme readily available – as it was when it first appeared in 1956, and welcomed by the educational establishment. Lynley Hood records that

since [Sylvia’s teaching scheme’s] serialised appearance in 1956 [in *National Education*], training-college lecturers had been recommending it to students, and inspectors had been recommending it to teachers. And since the advent of *Spinster*, requests for more information on the key vocabulary had streamed in (1988, p. 170).

This Collection

Our book's title, *The Kiss and the Ghost*, refers to Sylvia Ashton-Warner's famous key vocabulary reading scheme. On the basis of her work with Maori children in rural and often-remote Native Schools⁶ in the post-war years of the 1940s and early 1950s, she argued that literacy was best achieved when children found words for their experiences of fear and sex, the two great Freudian drives. The most powerful words, she argued, were "kiss" (a sex word) and "ghost" (a fear word). Venting the fear/destructive drive through captions (the child's key vocabulary) and other expressive arts could, she believed, prevent violence and war. This was the theory she elaborated in her novel *Spinster*, and in her descriptions of her work in *Teacher*.

The contributors to this collection position Sylvia Ashton-Warner as an educational and literary figure in the New Zealand landscapes in which she lived, taught, thought, loved, and wrote for most of her life. Sylvia's eldest son, Elliot Henderson, recalls vividly his mother in various rural settings; her biographer Lynley Hood confesses to personal struggles with writing a biography of such a contradictory and enigmatic character; and John Kirkland, Sylvia's then-assistant, provides insights into Sylvia's teacher training methods at Simon Fraser University in Canada.

Merimeri Penfold and Iritana Tawhiwhirangi are Maori teachers who worked briefly alongside Sylvia in Waiomatatini in the 1940s. They provide a sense of how Sylvia was understood within Maori communities. Penfold recalls her own radical teaching that stimulated Maori children to speak their own language in the classroom, a practice genuinely and actively rejected by the New Zealand educational establishment. Tawhiwhirangi provides insight into why Sylvia and other teachers taught in English at that time, and – interestingly – names Sylvia as "a seed" for the kohanga reo movement, a preschool programme in Maori language.

Literary scholar Emily Dobson examines Ashton-Warner's status within New Zealand literature by mapping the development of critical responses to her work, and also provides a literary critique of two of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's novels, *Incense to Idols* and *Bell Call*. Geraldine McDonald carries out forensic work on the production of Sylvia's *National Education* articles in New Zealand (reprinted in chapter 2) and their reappearance in *Teacher* in the United States. Sue Middleton explores the ideas and texts available to Sylvia in the environment in which she lived, taught, studied and wrote. Middleton argues that as a teacher, educational writer and theorist, Sylvia Ashton-Warner grew *in*, and not in spite of, New Zealand.

While the contributions by New Zealand writers are based on memories of Sylvia Ashton-Warner, or research carried out in New Zealand, others who have engaged with her from afar document the impressions Sylvia created of this country elsewhere. Our collection includes a transcript of the video-link discussion at the conference between C.K. Stead (New Zealand novelist, poet, critic and scholar) and the New York-based publisher of *Teacher* and almost all of Sylvia's books, Robert Gottlieb⁷ who had been unaware that Sylvia had previously been published in New Zealand.

Short Biography

Sylvia Warner was born in Stratford, Taranaki, New Zealand, on 17 December 1908. Her father, crippled with an arthritic condition, was unable to provide for the family, so, unusually for the time, her mother supported her husband and 10 children by teaching in small, often sole-charge, rural schools. The family moved frequently. Often taught by her authoritarian mother, Sylvia attended 10 different primary schools. After attending secondary school in Masterton, she became a pupil teacher at Wellington South School (1926-7). While at Auckland Teachers' Training College (1928-29) she met her future husband, fellow student Keith Henderson. The couple married on 23 August, 1931. In their first years of marriage, Keith taught sole-charge schools in Taranaki, and Sylvia gave birth to three children – Jasmine in 1935, Elliot in 1937, and Ashton in 1938. In his chapter in this volume, Elliot Henderson recollects childhood memories of life with Sylvia.

At Sylvia's suggestion, she and Keith applied to teach in what was at the time referred to as the Native School system and they took up their first position in 1938 at Horoera Native School, on the remote East Cape, eight miles from the nearest village, Te Araroa. At this time Sylvia experienced what was described as a severe "nervous breakdown". Her Wellington neurologist, Dr. Allen, introduced Sylvia to psychoanalytic theory and encouraged her to write.

In 1941, the family moved to Pipiriki Native School, up the Whanganui River valley, in the western-central North Island. It was here that Sylvia became a serious writer (see Middleton, chapter 3). The diary she kept during those years would later be published as *Myself*. From 1945 to 1948, the couple taught at another east coast school at Waiomatatini (see Penfold and Tawhiwhirangi, in chapters 8 and 9). It was here that Sylvia began publishing short stories. Her first major publications were produced when she was further down the east coast at Fernhill School, Omaha, near Hastings (from 1949 to 1957), including the first, serialised, New Zealand version of her teaching scheme, published under the name 'Sylvia' (reprinted in chapter 2. See also McDonald, chapter 5). The pen name Sylvia Ashton-Warner first appeared in 1958, on the original, British (Secker and Warburg), edition of her novel *Spinster*.

When Keith was appointed headmaster of Bethlehem Maori School near Tauranga in 1957, Sylvia began to work full-time on her writing – and established a relationship with New York publisher Robert Gottlieb (which Gottlieb discusses in chapter 6).

After Keith Henderson died on January 7, 1969, Sylvia embarked on her first overseas travel. A period in London with her son Elliot inspired her final novel, *Three*. In late 1970 she took up an invitation to establish a community school at Aspen, Colorado, where she spent one year. Her final book about education, *Spearpoint: Teacher in America*, was her account of this experience. During 1972-73, Sylvia was employed at Vancouver's Simon Fraser University, where she ran courses on her teaching methods. John Kirkland in chapter 7 describes his experiences as an assistant in this programme. Sylvia's book of short stories *O Children of the World* (1974) was written during this time away, and work was started on her autobiography *I Passed this Way*.

Sylvia returned to Tauranga, where she completed *I Passed this Way* (1979) and advised on the production of the film, *Sylvia*. In chapter 11 Hood discusses her encounters with Sylvia during these years, as she researched her biography (Hood, 1988, 1990⁸). Sylvia Ashton-Warner died in Tauranga on April 27, 1984.

NOTES

- ¹ Her autobiography *I Passed this Way* won the non-fiction section of the 1980 New Zealand Book Awards.
- ² Jack Shallcross interviewed Sylvia Ashton-Warner on television in 1978 (Barnett, 1978).
- ³ The best source of references to textual portrayals of Sylvia's life is in Hood (1988, p. 256–258) Television programmes include *Three New Zealanders: Sylvia Ashton-Warner* (Barnett, 1978) (a copy is held by the New Zealand Film Archive) and an interview on *Kaleidoscope* (Interview, 1980).
- ⁴ One film was *Two Loves* (Walters & Maddow 1961), based on her first novel *Spinster*, and starring Shirley MacLaine. The other was the 1985 New Zealand-produced *Sylvia* (Firth & Fairfax) based on her autobiographical writing.
- ⁵ Clemens provided for the conference a DVD of her lecture entitled "Sylvia Ashton-Warner goes to Reggio Emilia".
- ⁶ For information about the New Zealand Native Schools, see Barrington (2008); Simon (1998); Simon & Tuhiwai Smith (2001).
- ⁷ Gottlieb, at Simon and Schuster and later at Knopf and elsewhere, went on to invent the title *Catch-22*, edit Toni Morrison's work and Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, as well as John Cheever's posthumous collections, and Bill Clinton's autobiography, to name a few of his achievements.
- ⁸ The 2008 editions of Lynley Hood's books about Sylvia Ashton-Warner were launched at the conference, published by Penguin and Longacre respectively.

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