

## Sylvia Ashton-Warner, 1908–1984

*Emily Dobson*

Sylvia Ashton-Warner was one of New Zealand's more colourful literary figures. Her insistence on living a life of originality and flare frequently came into conflict with what she saw as a dull, conformist society. Governed by an unconventional and uncompromising personality, she cultivated a bitter 'hatred' of her native country, and subsequently tended to polarize opinion there. She enjoyed international repute in her lifetime as an educator, primarily in America, but also produced several novels. Throughout her lifetime Ashton-Warner found it difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction, and her novels are strongly autobiographical. Her work is occasionally marred by uneven quality and a dated representation of Maori, but in general shows a skilful control of language. While Ashton-Warner's first novel, *Spinster* (1958), is still considered a minor classic, her greatest legacy is the superbly written autobiography, *I Passed This Way* (1979). On the whole, however, interest in Ashton-Warner's work has steadily declined.

Sylvia Constance Warner was born in Stratford, Taranaki, on 17 December 1908, the fifth child of eight—five girls and three boys. Throughout her life Ashton-Warner was haunted by the ghost of a first Sylvia who died four days after birth in 1905; the name and dates suggest that the Sylvia who survived was intended as a replacement child. Her father, Francis Ashton Warner, had arrived in New Zealand from England in 1877 at the age of 16 with a noble lineage (John Le Warner was a nobleman in the court of Edward III) and an impressive box of family heirlooms, but little else. After travelling the country as a manual labourer he managed to find work book-keeping in Auckland and there met his wife, feisty young school teacher Margaret Maxwell. The Maxwells were a poor Scottish family but, like the Warners, were rich in family legend. Storytelling, particularly the marvellous, exotic stories of her father, was a vital part of Ashton-Warner's childhood. She inherited an urge to fictionalise her frequently less than ideal situation into something more bearable. In 1904 Francis was left crippled after a sudden deterioration in his health, and Margaret became the sole breadwinner of their large family. Margaret was a determined and sometimes violent woman who followed an educational philosophy of discipline and rote learning. A result of Margaret's confrontational nature, the family came to expect trouble from school inspectors or landlords—they were often in debt—and their life was patterned by packing up and moving on. Margaret took her family to small rural schools all over the North Island, including Raupuha and Koru in Taranaki, Te Pohue,

Umutaoroa, Mangatahi and Hastings in Hawkes Bay, and Te Whiti near Masterton.

Ashton-Warner was a solitary child and thought herself ugly. Her personality was to become shaped by a sense of guilt and a profound craving for love. She sought the approval of others and did well at school under her mother, who instilled in Ashton-Warner a driving ambition to be the best. When Ashton-Warner was learning to write, under her mother's instruction, she was forced to use her right hand against her natural left-handedness. The practice was common at the time, but left Ashton-Warner with an ambidexterity that dazzled witnesses later in life. She could, for example, simultaneously write a sentence from both ends and join it neatly in the middle. Ashton-Warner also had a natural talent for art. In her final year of primary school, in addition to becoming dux, she won a prize at the Carterton Show for one of her drawings. Margaret insisted on giving her children musical encouragement; wherever they were she made sure they had a piano, and if payments lapsed and it got repossessed she went straight out and acquired another one. Music practice provided a welcome exemption from chores, and the family's happier moments were spent singing around the piano. Ashton-Warner dreamt of becoming a concert pianist.

Ashton-Warner's first term of high school was spent with her sister Daphne at Wellington Girls' College, but the girls returned to Te Whiti when their older sister Grace, with whom they had been staying, ran low on finances and patience. Wellington was Ashton-Warner's first experience of the outside world. During her time there she discovered a penchant for performing that she was to return to as a young woman. Back at Te Whiti, however, where she faced a long daily bike ride to Masterton District High School (later to become Wairarapa High), she withdrew from her classmates and is remembered as being somewhat aloof. She took refuge in the library. At her school prize-giving Ashton-Warner was awarded Mrs Scholefield's Girls' Essay Prize and was encouraged by the guest speaker to 'keep on writing'. On 31 January 1926, a few days before Ashton-Warner was due to depart for Wellington as a student teacher, her father died. His death affected Ashton-Warner deeply and was one of the few things she always found too painful to explore in her writing.

Ashton-Warner's personality blossomed in Wellington, where she boarded at the YWCA. She discovered make-up and dating, and though she tolerated teaching—a year at Wellington South School and a year at Wadestown School—she continued to dream of life as an artist or concert pianist. At the end of 1927 Ashton-Warner passed the Teachers D examination (she was marked 95% for blackboard drawing) which qualified her to attend Auckland Teachers' Training College. Her classmates there remember her as daring

and unconventional: she wore make-up, smoked, and wore exotic outfits to social events. They were charmed by Ashton-Warner's magnetic personality, and impressed by her artistic and musical talents. Ashton-Warner attended night classes at the Elam School of Art but did not find the inspiration she had expected there. She spent the summer vacation at her sister Muriel's house in Golden Bay, and was temporarily employed at the local mental hospital. She later claimed that she had learnt more about the human mind there than at any other time. While in Auckland, Ashton-Warner's dreams of an artistic career gradually seemed to fall away, and, although she had never seriously considered writing to be an option, it now appeared to be her best hope of achieving something important. At the end of her second year at Teachers' Training College, in addition to receiving an unprecedented 99% for an art assignment, Ashton-Warner won second prize for a poem in the annual student magazine competition.

Ashton-Warner had a number of boyfriends in Auckland, but felt most seriously about Keith Henderson, also a student at Teachers' Training College. Keith, the second son of a Methodist minister, was reportedly good-looking, hard-working, and dependable. In 1930, Ashton-Warner was placed as a probationary assistant at Cornwall Park School in Auckland, while Keith—one of only two students that went straight into permanent employment—became the sole-charge teacher at Whareorino School in Taranaki. The night before Keith left he proposed to Ashton-Warner and she accepted. The couple maintained their relationship with long letters and occasional visits. At the end of 1930 Ashton-Warner became a fully qualified teacher, but the Great Depression had begun and teaching jobs were scarce. Ashton-Warner spent a happy year painting until her money ran out and she returned home emotionally drained to her mother, now in Lower Hutt. She was eventually appointed to Eastern Hutt School. Early in 1932 Keith took his fiancé to Christchurch to meet his parents. That winter, impatient to marry, he sent her an engagement ring. Sylvia and Keith were married by Keith's father in the Methodist church in Taranaki Street, Wellington, on 23 August 1932.

The newly married couple lived at Whareorino, where Keith taught for a term before they transferred to Mangahume, still in the Taranaki region. Ashton-Warner had no interest in the domestic arts, so the cooking and cleaning duties fell to her husband. In 1935 Ashton-Warner gave birth to their first child, Jasmine. When she became pregnant again within a year there were concerns for her ability to cope and the pregnancy was aborted. A boy, Elliot, was born in 1937. Ashton-Warner began to express a wish to return to teaching—it was her suggestion that she and Keith should apply at a remote Māori School. At the time, this move was generally considered undesirable: it was not professionally conducive and usually involved a high degree of

isolation. The Native Schools Service was still a separately administered branch of the Education Department; many Māori School teachers were not certificated and until 1934 were denied membership of the New Zealand Educational Institute (the teachers' professional organization) because they were not considered to be real teachers. In choosing this path Ashton-Warner may have been seeking to regain the rural freedom she enjoyed as a child, or perhaps enjoyed a romantic image of herself working tirelessly at the frontier of civilization.

Whatever the reason, in 1938, after awaiting the birth of a second son, Ashton, Ashton-Warner joined Keith in Horoera, near Te Araroa on the East Coast of the North Island. She became a member of the Women's Institute and learned to speak Māori, but found teaching difficult. She began to suffer from insomnia and in 1939 had a nervous breakdown. She saw Doctor Donald Allen in Wellington, who introduced her to the notion of there being two opposite forces at work in the world: survival of the individual and survival of the species. Ashton-Warner re-labeled these forces Fear and Sex, and the concept became crucial in the development of her ideas about teaching. Dr. Allen also encouraged Ashton-Warner to write as a form of therapy.

In 1940 the Hendersons moved to Pipiriki, on the Wanganui River. By 1942 Ashton-Warner, with the help of her friends and family, had cleaned up an old disused *whare* (dwelling) and was spending a great deal of time in it writing. She called it 'Selah', a Hebrew word from the Old Testament Psalms which meant, for Ashton-Warner, a pause or rest. Having such a space for herself was important for Ashton-Warner's internal well-being. Wherever she happened to be, seeking out and claiming a Selah became a tradition she maintained for the rest of her life. In the security of Selah Ashton-Warner worked on a novel called *Rangitira* and kept a detailed diary, which she was not afraid to embellish. She reworked material from her diary into short-stories and in 1948 the *New Zealand Listener* eventually accepted 'No longer Blinded by our Eyes'. Although the story was published under her married name, Sylvia Henderson, she went on to publish as Sylvia Ashton-Warner. Following the example of her sister Grace, she had adopted this name during the 1920s to distinguish herself from the other, more 'common' Warners of the world.

In her classroom, Ashton-Warner's educational ideas were also taking shape. Like many Māori teachers at the time, she found the subject matter of the standard infant reading books too removed from the real-life experiences of the Māori children in her care to be useful. Ashton-Warner decided to make use of the children's own—and often violent—personal stories to encourage them to learn to read. She produced a series of infant reading books that featured Ihaka, a young student who had made an impression on her. Ashton-Warner believed that a child's destructive urges could be redirected into

creative output, and put a strong emphasis on art, music, and dance. Her end-of-year concerts consistently made a profound impression upon both the students involved and their audience. Ashton-Warner's creative impulse also found expression in her own increasingly pronounced eccentricities—she was once seen dancing naked in the moonlight, for example. She was notorious for her absences from school and had developed a growing problem with alcohol.

In 1949 Ashton-Warner and Keith transferred to Fernhill in Hastings where Ashton-Warner's ideas about an infant reading method reached their peak. She sent the little books she had made to A.H. and A.W. Reed. After various obstacles had been overcome, including the publisher's frustration with Ashton-Warner's unpredictable temperament, the books were set to be published in 1953. More complications arose, however. The momentum was lost and the project abandoned. In 1954 Ashton-Warner submitted a new manuscript, *Spinster*, to Whitcombe and Tombs. *Spinster* tells the story of Anna Vorontsov, a sensitive and talented teacher with a somewhat mysterious past, working in a small New Zealand School and struggling with an oppressive authority. Whitcombe and Tombs saw merit in the work, but the small population of New Zealand meant it was economically risky to publish, and they suggested she try an overseas publisher. In 1955 Secker and Warburg of London accepted *Spinster* and Ashton-Warner retired temporarily from teaching. In 1955 and 1956 the New Zealand magazine *National Education* published her teaching scheme 'The Maori Infant Room—Organic Reading and the Key Vocabulary' in five installments. Ashton-Warner returned to teaching in 1957, when she and Keith took up positions at the largest and most prestigious Māori school in the country in Bethlehem, near Tauranga. Teaching, however, slipped increasingly into the background as Ashton-Warner's writing career took off.

*Spinster* was published in February 1958 to highly favorable reviews. The first printing sold out in a fortnight and the second within a month. Ashton-Warner signed a contract with Simon and Schuster in New York, where *Spinster* sold twenty thousand copies and was ranked by *Time* magazine as one of the ten best books of the year. Its New Zealand release in July was hugely anticipated and hailed as part of an exciting new wave of New Zealand novels, which included Janet Frame's *Owls do Cry* (1957) and Ian Cross's *The God Boy* (1958). Although Ashton-Warner was not unique in her innovative ideas about teaching, *Spinster* took the international educational community by storm. Among her New Zealand colleagues, however, those who were familiar with Ashton-Warner's inconsistent and often deplorable behavior in the classroom found the depiction of a lone heroine harder to accept. New Zealand critics found fault with the novel's emotionalism and, the

literary climate at the time being one of rigorous regionalism, its foreign protagonist. Despite the criticism, responses to *Spinster* were in large part positive. According to Ashton-Warner's biographer, Lynley Hood, it was 'more discussed and praised in the media than any previous New Zealand novel'.

Ashton-Warner reacted to the enthusiastic reception of *Spinster* in New Zealand with a compulsive need for rejection. For years she had been fostering an increasingly vehement hatred of New Zealand based on a conviction that she had been rejected by her native country. She could not cope with such unqualified acceptance and recoiled from invitations and honours—including membership in the writer's organization PEN and an entry in *Who's Who in New Zealand*. Near the end of 1958 Ashton-Warner was awarded the State Literary Fund's prestigious Scholarship in Letters, which, after adamant attempts to refuse, she reluctantly accepted.

Ashton-Warner's next novel, *Incense to Idols* (originally titled *Bachelor*), was published in Britain and America in 1960, and released in New Zealand shortly after. Flying in the face of criticisms of *Spinster*, and flaunting Ashton-Warner's distaste for the average New Zealander, *Incense to Idols* again features a foreign protagonist—the beautiful and talented French concert pianist, Germaine de Bauvais—who has somehow ended up in the middle of small-town New Zealand. In between descriptions of her love affairs and zest for fashion the novel follows Germaine's obsession with an imposing clergyman, her subsequent moral crisis, and her eventual suicide. The book attests to Ashton-Warner's ambivalent feelings about New Zealand, displaying both caustic criticism of a conformist and repressive society alongside intimations of the pride she felt for what could be achieved in such a small, unassuming nation. The glamour and extravagance of *Incense to Idols* contrasted even more starkly than *Spinster* with the prevalent literary regionalism, largely characterized by heaviness and cynicism. Local critics lacked the vocabulary to deal with a novel like *Incense to Idols*. They misunderstood its comic aspects and were deeply shocked by the gruesome image of Germaine placing her miscarried fetus into a wine glass. They were resolute in their rejection of it.

Ashton-Warner made a solo trip to Sydney in 1960, with the intention of staying a month. She found the media attention overwhelming and frightening, however, and returned home after only a few days. Meanwhile, *Spinster*, the rights of which had been bought by Metro Goldwyn Meyer, was filmed in Hollywood. The original plan had been to film in New Zealand but this was prevented by the other movie commitments of the actors, Shirley Maclaine, Laurence Harvey, and Jack Hawkins. Ashton-Warner was disappointed by the movie. The fact that her forty-something Russian heroine had been transformed into a Pennsylvanian girl in her twenties particularly bothered her.

Ashton-Warner's other pursuit that year was to have her teaching scheme published as a unit. Her New Zealand distributor, Bill Moore at William Heinemann, took on the project and put a great deal of effort into it. The process was at an advanced stage when Ashton-Warner characteristically sabotaged it, sending the material—cartons of unsorted papers—to her New York publisher, Bob Gottlieb. The resulting book, *Teacher* (1963), included an introduction that made loud, bitter, and unfounded claims about Ashton-Warner's persecution at the hands of New Zealanders, and in particular of the New Zealand Education Department officials. Ashton-Warner also continued to frustrate her New Zealand readers by cancelling interviews and appearances at the last minute. The New Zealand public, feeling betrayed and attacked, was becoming increasingly disillusioned with Ashton-Warner. *Teacher*, consequently, did not make a very significant impact on the local literary scene. For Americans interested in alternative teaching methods, however, *Teacher* was seen as humane and creative, its author a hero. Ashton-Warner hosted various American visitors at Bethlehem. Though delighted with their host's charismatic personality, they were generally disappointed by the lack of educational innovation at her own school. In February 1963, shortly before the publication of *Teacher*, Ashton-Warner and her husband Keith had the honor of dining with the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh on board the H.M.Y. *Brittania* at Napier.

In 1964 Ashton-Warner worked on *Barren Radiance*, a novel which depicted a complicated web of relationships based on the author's own passionate internal love affairs. It failed to impress Bob Gottlieb and was never published. In 1965, however, Gottlieb published a new Ashton-Warner novel, *Bell Call*. Although perhaps the least autobiographical of Ashton-Warner's work, its characters were recognizable, drawn from a family the author knew. Set in a semi-rural New Zealand community, the action of *Bell Call* is centered around the local school but never explicitly within it: distinguishing the novel from *Spinster* while benefiting from Ashton-Warner's intimate familiarity with this environment. The bizarre anti-establishment activities of the artistically oriented Tarl and her young family are observed by the novel's protagonist, the writer Dan. The novel is a spare representation of ordinary New Zealand life, interwoven with an intricate exploration of what it is to be a writer. Ashton-Warner resisted the New Zealand release of *Bell Call*—possibly she feared legal action from the family involved—and it was not until 1971, with the book's British acceptance, that New Zealanders were able to read it. The delays in publication, the poor reception of *Incense to Idols* that preceded it, and the public's general disillusionment with Ashton-Warner resulted in a critical neglect of *Bell Call*.

In 1966 Bob Gottlieb published two more Ashton-Warner novels, *Greenstone* and *Myself*, both set in Pipiriki. Based on her childhood and transplanted there, *Greenstone* is the second part of one of Ashton-Warner's earlier projects, the three-part novel, *Rangitira*. Featuring a romantic, crippled father and a dominant, violent mother, *Greenstone* reveals the bizarre circumstances of Ashton-Warner's upbringing. *Myself*, though claiming on the dust-jacket to 'hide nothing', is the somewhat fictionalized diary of her years at Pipiriki. It presents her increasingly fervent theories about the artist and the creative drive. Again, Ashton-Warner resisted the New Zealand release of these books—she was worried about the depiction of her mother in *Greenstone* and of a close friend in *Myself*. During the late 1960s Ashton-Warner's reputation in New Zealand underwent a sharp decline, and the local critical community paid scant attention to her latest two novels. *Greenstone* was attacked for its dated portrayal of Māori.

At this point in her life, in keeping with her much-voiced 'hatred' of New Zealand (and despite the entreaties of the New Zealand National Librarian), Ashton-Warner decided to donate her accumulated papers to the Boston University library. She was by now suffering the affects of heavy alcoholism, a lifetime of chain-smoking and strong tea-drinking, and a dependence on codeine and sedatives. In 1966 her husband Keith's health began to deteriorate and a cancerous bladder was removed at Auckland Hospital in 1967. Despite the assurances of his doctor, Keith's condition did not improve, and he died on 7 January 1969, age 60. As headmaster of Bethlehem School, Keith had earned the respect of the Māori community and he was honored with the only tangi ever held for a Pakeha without marriage ties to Ngai Te Rangi. Ashton-Warner wore bright green.

With Keith no longer there to take care of her, a lifetime of escapist fantasies became an imperative reality for Ashton-Warner. She left the country on 29 March 1969 and was met in Mauritius by her son Elliot, his wife Jacquemine (the eldest daughter of a noble French family who had fled to Mauritius during the French Revolution), and their son Vincent. Despite Ashton-Warner's initial enthusiasm for her exotic new surroundings, the novelty soon subsided. Six weeks before Keith died, Ashton-Warner had been invited to help set up a Rotary-sponsored peace school in Israel, and she made this her next destination. After a week-long stop-over in Bombay (now Mumbai), which she spent visiting schools, Ashton-Warner arrived in Tel Aviv—the city still bore the frightening presence of the 1967 Six Day War. She was well looked after by the chairman of the project, Wellesley Aron, and his wife, but perplexed her hosts with her contradictory character: she was ingratiatingly pleasant and obliging in person yet resolutely uncooperative over the work she had been consigned to do. An urgent cable from London



provided her with the excuse she needed: her son Elliot was extremely ill. He had picked up an amoebic infection of the gut in the tropics, and it had spread throughout his body. Faced with the possibility of losing her son only added to the emotional and physical strain Ashton-Warner had been under since her husband's death.

Although Ashton-Warner lost hope for his life, Elliot's health did eventually improve, and he was able to move back into his Clapham flat to recuperate. Ashton-Warner stayed on in the flat—ostensibly to assist her son's recovery though she spent the majority of her time writing. Elliot's wife Jacquemine also remained, despite tensions in their marriage. They shared the flat with an actor friend of Elliot's. The living arrangements were strained, but provided ample material for the new novel that Ashton-Warner was working on. She changed the names and occasionally departed into fiction to make the plot more interesting, but essentially, the manuscript was a direct account of her time in the flat, and exploited the tensions in the mother, son, and daughter-in-law relationship. It was also an intimate and moving portrayal of a woman recovering from the recent loss of her husband and her son's brush with death, and her subsequent struggle with grief, shock, loneliness, jealousy, guilt, and fatigue. Stylistically, the narrative shows the benefit of years of sharpening: seen particularly in the unswervingly economic use of language and Ashton-Warner's remarkable ear for dialogue. The discovery of the manuscript created further tension among the housemates, and Ashton-Warner subsequently vowed to destroy it. It was, however, eventually published as *Three* in 1970 by Bob Gottlieb, who had since moved to Knopf. Like *Bell Call*, *Three* suffered from Ashton-Warner's declining popularity and made little impact in New Zealand or overseas.

Ashton-Warner was experiencing increasingly severe panic attacks and a renewed, recurring desire to escape. When she received a letter from New Zealand telling her that the husband of her daughter Jasmine (seven months pregnant with her sixth child) had died, she returned home immediately. It was a difficult period: Jasmine was depressed and in poor health, her six children needed looking after, and Ashton-Warner herself was emotionally fragile. With funds dwindling she sent Gottlieb a manuscript based on her situation, but he was unimpressed. She fell into a deep depression and suffered a creative block. She was rescued from her unhappy circumstances by an invitation from a group of liberal minded parents in Aspen, Colorado, who asked her to help establish an alternative school there. Aspen had become a centre for America's growing counterculture. Ashton-Warner still commanded enormous respect in America and was to be the school's star attraction.

She arrived in San Francisco in October 1970, exhausted. For two days she endured a busy social program organized by her American hosts before

continuing on to Aspen. There again, the reality of what she was expected to contribute was in stark contrast to Ashton-Warner's idealized expectations. The community provided a house for her, and had raised the funds to pay her a salary (many of the people involved worked for very little or voluntarily), but Ashton-Warner was unprepared for the scale of the project and the amount of practical hard work it entailed. She considered the group's leaders to be disorganized, and found teaching overwhelming. In addition to the less-than-ideal physical situation (the Physics Institute in which the school was housed was long, narrow, and unsuitable for the job) Ashton-Warner had difficulty relating to the American children: she strongly believed that their inner lives had been desensitized through overexposure to television. She also had to struggle with the low oxygen level of Aspen, at eight thousand feet, and the fact of her own aging body. After spending a socially exhausting Christmas in Phoenix with friends, Ashton-Warner returned to Aspen and began to withdraw from the school. At this time she was busy writing a new book, *Spearpoint: Teacher in America*, based on her experiences there and published by Knopf in 1972. Turning a blind eye to the actual philosophies of Aspen's free-thinking community, the book focused on Ashton-Warner's uncompromising theories about the desensitization of Americans. Ashton-Warner concluded the book with the fictional collapse of the school. In reality, despite its teething problems, the school went on to become hugely successful.

In June 1971 Ashton-Warner had conflicting plans: she had booked a sea voyage home to New Zealand having also agreed to speak at a Reading Conference in Boulder. She characteristically attempted to pull out of the latter engagement but did eventually attend. After a last minute attack of nerves she managed to get on stage, dazzling her audience and even returning for a repeat performance. Although she continued to book journeys home, Ashton-Warner returned to Aspen, where she worked in a more agreeable role as a 'Teacher of Teacher-Trainers'. She set up her living room as a model infant room and took groups of trainees in a 'Key Vocabulary' lesson. As she had done in her Māori infant classrooms, Ashton-Warner encouraged her students to find the words that held the most significance for them. Those who took part greatly enjoyed the sessions, and Ashton-Warner soon had a social network of adoring fans. After convincing them of her brutal treatment at the hands of the Aspen Community School, they hatched a daring plan for her escape—one of the trainees volunteered to drive her to San Francisco, leaving in secret in the middle of the night. Another trainee, Selma Wasserman, had suggested that Ashton-Warner return with her to Vancouver where she could take up a position at Simon Fraser University, and within five days it was all organized. In November 1971 Anton Vogt, a Norwegian-born

New Zealander on the staff of the University, took Ashton-Warner to Vancouver.

Against university policy, Ashton-Warner insisted she work from home, in a similar arrangement to that of Aspen. The twice-weekly sessions were immensely popular; participants found them both unusual and invigorating. The theories were implemented in 'The Vancouver Project', which introduced the method into several Vancouver primary schools. Ashton-Warner's happiness in Vancouver took a sharp downturn when several of her close friends left. She increasingly took on the persona of five-year-old 'Mary' (or Mere, the Māori equivalent). At the beginning of 1973 she cancelled her workshops, and began a repetitive process of resigning from the university, booking trips home, and then promptly cancelling both decisions. She also briefly ran a pre-school in her home and underwent a painful and ineffective facelift. Two of her granddaughters arrived in May to look after her. Ashton-Warner's worsening relationship with the university eventually resulted in her final resignation in June 1973. In September she and her granddaughters set sail for New Zealand.

Back at her home in Tauranga, which she shared with her daughter Jasmine (who had since remarried) and her family, Ashton-Warner again fell into a deep depression. There were tensions in the living arrangement, particularly with her new son-in-law, and she retreated into her alcoholism. In 1974 she spent five weeks in traction at Tauranga hospital for a hip problem. Shortly after she returned from hospital Jasmine and her family moved out in frustration. Despite feeling abandoned and alone, Ashton-Warner did enjoy correspondence and friendship with several New Zealand writers, among them Ian Cross, Ruth Gilbert, Barry Mitcalfe, and Bruce Mason. Maurice Shadbolt had a memorable visit, departing with a car boot filled with Ashton-Warner's large stash of lager. Before she left Canada Ashton-Warner had given a collection of her children's stories and songs, *O Children of the World*, to her friend Dan Rubin, and although she characteristically tried to pull out at the last minute, she had signed a contract and he published 1000 copies in 1974.

For the first time (though not for lack of opportunity), Ashton-Warner agreed to participate in a feature television documentary. In January 1975 she took an assembled group through one of her trademark 'organic mornings' in front of a film crew. Very little of the footage was usable. Although she had initially refused to do an interview, she relented upon learning it was to be conducted by Jack Shallcrass, a friend she trusted. The resulting television program was a success. From 1975 Ashton-Warner was also regularly visited by the New Zealand film producer Michael Firth. Unfortunately she never got to see the

motion picture he was working on (based on *Teacher* and *I Passed This Way*) as it was not completed until after her death.

Ashton-Warner continued to send material to publishers but was unsuccessful until she sent a portion of her autobiography—which she had been periodically working on for some time—to A. H. and A. W. Reed. She received a grant from the New Zealand Literary Fund, and for the next three years applied herself to the project with fresh vigour. After panicking about the extent to which her life was going to be exposed to New Zealanders—her ‘persecutors’—she withdrew the manuscript from Reed and sent it to Knopf. In 1977 and 1978 she continued working despite health problems—recurrent hip pain and the removal both of cataracts and a malignant growth from an eyelid—and completed the manuscript in time for her seventieth birthday. She eventually agreed for it to be co-published with Reed, and *I Passed This Way* (1979) went on to win the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International 1980 Educators’ Award and the non-fiction section of the 1980 New Zealand Book Awards.

During the completion of *I Passed This Way* Ashton-Warner began to experience bowel trouble: a benign tumor was removed but there was little improvement. Her son Elliot returned from London in September 1980 and spent a year on sabbatical at her side. Despite her poor health Ashton-Warner enjoyed the attention that the good reception of her autobiography had generated, even agreeing to a television interview. In 1981 Ashton-Warner was diagnosed with inoperable cancer. Though she had suffered a writer’s block since finishing *I Passed This Way*, she needed something to be working on, and the following year enrolled in a scriptwriting course with the International Correspondence School under the pseudonym Lili Williemi. She gained high marks for her work throughout 1982 and 1983. In 1982 Ashton-Warner received an M.B.E. in the Queen’s Birthday Honors List. In early 1983 Ashton-Warner chose Lynley Hood as her biographer and met with her during the final months of her life. Her health deteriorated rapidly from the end of 1983, and at seven thirty on 27 April 1984, at home in Selah, Ashton-Warner passed away with her son Elliot and daughter Jasmine at her side.

*Sylvia! The Biography of Sylvia Ashton-Warner* (1988) went on to win the Goodman Fielder Wattie Award and the PEN First Book of Prose Award. Although the biography strengthened the small cult that had developed around Ashton-Warner’s idiosyncratic personality, it ultimately did little to stem her dwindling literary reputation. The posthumously published *Stories from the River* (1986) earned a ‘publish and be damned?’ from the New Zealand literary magazine, *Landfall*. In 1981 the New Zealand writer/essayist C. K. Stead had attempted to revive interest in Ashton-Warner with his essay, ‘Sylvia Ashton-Warner: living on the grand’, published in his collection of

essays, *In the Glass Case*. When the article was revised and republished in *Kin of Place* (2002), Stead's introduction revealed his bafflement that his advocacy had produced no response, 'a fact all the more puzzling when considered against the background of 1980s feminism and the determined search in universities for neglected women writers'.

Though her influence and importance are now relatively small, Sylvia Ashton-Warner nevertheless occupies a key place in New Zealand literature. Her former international fame and success was something of a phenomenon and occurred at a formative period in New Zealand literary history. Her autobiography is a substantial contribution to this country's literature, and is of enduring historical value with its revelations about life as an artist in New Zealand. Ashton-Warner has come to represent a challenge to a society that has been characterized by a distrust of emotion, restriction of opportunity for women, and an authoritarian control of non-conformity.

## LINKS

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### PAPERS

Earlier papers of Sylvia Ashton-Warner are held in the Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Centre in Boston University. Her later papers are held in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington. Further material collected by Ashton-Warner's biographer, Lynley Hood, is held in the Hocken Library in Dunedin.