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**Title: Sylvia Ashton-Warner: 'Who is Sylvia, What is She'?**

**Abstract**

This article explores the life, work and writings of the New Zealand artist, writer and educator, Sylvia Ashton-Warner, focusing on her contribution to the teaching of Maori children. During the drafting process, I found that it was impossible to consider Ashton-Warner in isolation – that when I tried to write about this fascinating, difficult and controversial woman and put to rights her (still) relative obscurity, the shadowy figures of other New Zealand women writers, such as Katherine Mansfield and Janet Frame circled around Ashton-Warner, rather like the ghost of Banquo. Instead of quashing these interlopers I found myself becoming increasingly distracted and then haunted by them, and so what finally emerged was a consideration of Ashton-Warner as a case study of a writer within a much larger tradition of New Zealand literature.

There are themes which girt around the three women: all three had difficult yet passionate relationships with their native country; all experienced sustained periods of physical and/or mental ill health; all left a rich heritage of auto-biography and fiction in the form of short stories, novels and/or poetry. There were also entirely unexpected connections very satisfying to the biographer. I discovered, for example, that Janet Frame's mother had worked as a cleaner in the Beauchamp household, the parental home of Katherine Mansfield. What started as an

exploration of a solo act thus ended with a trio – an analogy which, as musicians, I hope would have pleased both Mansfield and Ashton-Warner.

## Introduction

Janet Frame's first novel, *Owls Do Cry*, published in 1957, 'was hailed', declares Jane Campion, as New Zealand's 'long-awaited first great novel' (ix) and dislodged Katherine Mansfield from (arguably) the top of New Zealand's literary pantheon. Alternately viewed as a 'masterpiece' and/or a depressing novel in tone and content, *Owls Do Cry* split the New Zealand literary fraternity, as did the publication of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's novel *Spinster* in 1958, which unleashed what Ashton-Warner (1980) perceived as 'an underground stream of hostility' (p. 56) from New Zealand educators and teachers. The country, Ashton-Warner wrote, had 'turned it down' (p. 355).

Nowadays, Frame, Mansfield and Ashton-Warner rightly take their places in the *oeuvre* of New Zealand women authors, alongside other writers such as the diarist, Catherine Adamson, (1868-1925), whose journals are a vital resource for any biographer wishing to research the founding and pioneering mothers of New Zealand. The novels of the teacher, journalist and writer Mary Jane Mander (1877-1949), particularly *The Story of a New Zealand River* (1920), are important for their evocation of New Zealand's cultural and physical landscapes. Sylvia Ashton-Warner's relative obscurity calls to mind the words of Shakespeare's poem-song 'Who is Sylvia, What is She?' from Act IV, Scene 2 of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Borrowing Michael Erben's declaration (1998), that the general purpose of biography is to 'provide greater insight than hitherto into the nature and meaning of individual lives

or groups of lives' (p. 4), this article aims to shed insight on the life, contributions and place of Ashton-Warner in New Zealand's literary landscape.

### **A 'soul-searing silence'**

Sylvia Constance Ashton Warner was born in Stratford, a small and remote village in the Taranaki region of North Island, New Zealand in 1908, the 6<sup>th</sup> of 10 children born to a teacher-mother of Scots descent, Margaret Maxwell ('Mumma') and a 'gentleman' father ('Puppa'), Francis Ashton Warner of so-called noble English lineage, which, according to Ashton-Warner (she hyphenated the two names when she began writing), went 'back to the Wars of the Roses, when his ancestors fought on the king's side' (1980, p. 25)

At the turn of the twentieth century, New Zealand was a ramshackle collection of small, remote, rural settlements and small towns dotted around the landscape of North and South Islands with only a few cities, e.g. Auckland and Wellington to disturb what the novelist Mary Jane Mander, according to McGregor, (1998), described as an overwhelming provinciality, which Mander found stifling, as did, in their turn, Katherine Mansfield and Ashton-Warner. Small towns such as Hamilton, Hastings, Dunedin, Cambridge, etc., were relentlessly 'Old World', stolid, reassuring to many and – deathly. Mander longed to escape what she called the 'brain numbing, stimulus-stifling, sense-stultifying, soul-searing silence of provincial New Zealand' (1).

Katherine Mansfield, on returning to New Zealand in 1906 after finishing school in London, pined for London and 'Life' (Boddy, 1996 & Gordon, 1994). A dominant discourse in Ashton-Warner's auto-biography *I Passed This Way*, is that of the 'road', which is both a noun for a long, unremitting, un-metalled dirt-track to and from school and a metaphor for an extensive, dreary and dull provinciality.

A poor road infrastructure necessitated long and complex journeys around the contours of the richly varied New Zealand landscape, with horses or shanks' pony playing a vital role in the daily and wearisome travel to and from home, school and work for New Zealanders. Coast-lines, gullies, high hills, undulating countryside, mountain ranges, creeks and impenetrable forests give way to deep lakes, interspersed with thick brush and bracken, ever-present sheep-tracks, and plains country. The travel through and negotiating of landscapes moulded by earthquakes, bush fires and great winds is a frequent discourse throughout Sylvia Ashton-Warner's childhood, shaping her autobiography, painting and fiction.

Ashton-Warner's father was disabled by rheumatoid arthritis when Sylvia was a toddler. Unable to work and make any financial contribution to the family's upkeep, Francis Ashton Warner appears as a shadowy back-drop to Ashton-Warner's childhood, a figure of pathos, 'carrying his life on his crutches, sitting by the stove browning the potatoes in the iron pan...' (1980, p. 14) but coming to life in the evenings when music was both a solace and source of life:

Recall the sources of inspiration. The music most nights around the rickety piano, Mumma at the keyboard and Puppa on his crutches balancing at the back of the group singing to the chorus a tenor obbligato; Mumma quoting

poetry at the table and Puppa stirring the porridge. (Ashton-Warner 1980, p. 17).

### **'Shifting'**

The burden of subsistence fell wholly on Sylvia's teacher mother, with occasional financial contributions from the older Ashton Warner children who were working away from home. In 1905, the Ashton Warners moved to Raupuha, a tiny settlement in the lowland hills of Taranaki in the mid-north west of North Island, where Margaret took sole charge of a school of 20 children. The family stayed at Raupuha for 5 years – it was to be their last taste of stability for 18 years.

Margaret's feisty temperament resulted in frequent fallings out with New Zealand's education inspectorate, a system informed by the 'Old Word' culture which had begat it. Her stubborn nature, an unshakeable belief in her right to teach as she saw fit, combined with what Ashton-Warner refers to Margaret's 'willful and passionate impulses to make a change' (17) led to her being frequently dismissed.

The family, as a result, would fall behind with rent payments – a state of affairs, which, however sympathetic and helpful their neighbours were, inevitably led to evictions. 'Home' for the growing Ashton Warner family thus became a series of temporary and primitive wooden shacks sat squat in a variety of landscapes.

The Ashton Warners took on the life and existence of nomads, wandering across the New Zealand landscape from school to school, from home to home.

The younger children revelled in the constant moves, freely roaming the countryside around their various homes. They, Ashton-Warner writes:

*loved* (sic) 'shifting'. New places to find, new things to do, new rivers to swim in, new horses to ride. I was round five, six, seven at the time and I'd already known four schools; now we were off on our way to another. Marvellous. (Ashton-Warner, 1980, p. 17).

The landscape yielded many joys, as she describes:

Playing wild animals on all fours in and out among the rushes,...climbing those pine trees...building houses with manuka, building dams in the creeks, slogging and sweating out the passion of our imagery unhindered. Tobogganing down the sheeny hillsides when the grass was dry on cabbage-tree tops...bird-nesting; we knew every egg of every bird in every tree for miles; trotting barefoot in formation along soft-dust sheep-tracks (ibid, 76)

A move to Koru, on the north Taranaki coast in 1910 was followed by another move to Te Pohue, Napier in 1912. Thereafter, the family upped sticks and moved frequently. By the time Sylvia was 11, she had attended 10 schools.

The nomadic existence of the Ashton Warners, together with their self-reliance as a large family unit, meant they were often outsiders in curious and conservative New Zealand. The family was, as Ashton-Warner describes them, 'one large, highly visible, irregularity wrecking the social landscape' (26).

For one thing, our father was a cripple (sic), a rank disgrace, since nice fathers could not only walk, but went out to work on legs without crutches. Next, our mother was a teacher, who went out to work instead, which was ranker still, as nice mothers were to be found in their kitchens making cakes all day. (ibid, 26)

'We were' she writes, 'not only poor but seen to be poor, which was unacceptable, so that although people were not without genuine goodwill, generosity and much patience, we came to be titled what in fact we were: the Warner tribe' (ibid, 26).

At the age of 11 Ashton-Warner became 'Dux' of her 11<sup>th</sup> school at Te Whiti, a feat which prompted her elder sister Gracie, working in Wellington as a teacher, to take



on the responsibility of Sylvia's and her sister Daphne's education. Gracie whisked the girls away to Wellington and enrolled them at the state-funded Wellington Girls' College but the drain on Gracie's financial resources was too much and the sisters were sent back home to attend Masterson High School, Sylvia's 13<sup>th</sup>. The journey to and from Masterson High School and home was a long and wearisome eleven miles over pitted dirt tracks and a horse interchanged with a bicycle was the main means of transport. Travel by horse had, however, some fringe benefits. Ashton-Warner found that:

'Ambling on the grass at the side of the road continued to be a good time to learn aloud French and Latin grammar.... I rode Creamy more often than the bike on account of the hilly terrain in the foothills and because you could hold a book on a horse. I did much work on horseback. Corner after corner, hill upon hill, mile upon mile on the drowsy Creamy' (Ashton-Warner, 1980, p. 102).

The long journey also became profitable in other ways – she composed poems and pictures in her head which 'found release per colour and keyboard in Mumma's schoolroom at the weekend' (ibid, 101). At this time 'Mumma' was appointed to a larger school with a better 'glebe' (school-house), within reach of Masterson High School and the family's wanderings appeared to be over. The family felt a sense of stability – they had a proper modern house instead of a wooden shack and the joys of a bathroom for the first time. Trees were planted and a garden established. Mail and bread were delivered. It was, Ashton-Warner writes, 'luxury indeed' (ibid, 100). Aged 15, Ashton Warner's focus was set on getting through school 'in order to be done with the road' (ibid, 97). The luxury of settlement proved transitory, however, and the family moved again, this time to Bideford in the foothills of the Tararua range, 'extravagantly treed....between the plateau and the road was a softly painted

river carved deep in the gully, overhung by native bush and willows, a swing-bridge high above and a ford down below....my eleven miles to school were now fifteen and Mumma wept' (ibid, 126).

The isolation fueled Ashton-Warner's desire for adventure and the lure of the city increasingly drew her towards 'Life', as it had done Katherine Mansfield. Passing her 'matric' aged 16 'by one mark' she set her sights on a 'far-fabled city and real work', which would, she said, 'have to start with commercial art which paid, since the real stuff didn't' (ibid, 126). Ashton-Warner had been taking music lessons with the goal of becoming a concert pianist but her daydreams were more prosaic. She dreamed:

Think of it. A studio of my own and sweet new friends. What I would buy first would be a frying pan, a pound of sausages, a teapot, a cup and saucer. Felicity. (ibid, 126)

A life of painting all the way, wearing bohemian smocks. I dream of a room to myself in the city with just enough for one; a bed, table, stove, an easel and something to wash myself in. (ibid, 141).

'Mumma', however, had other ideas. She wanted her daughter to get her Higher Leaving Certificate and to become a teacher like her sister, Gracie. 'Back on the road' Ashton-Warner lamented, 'But a fifteen-mile stretch this time'. (ibid, 126).

Intermittent boarding helped but was expensive. 'The road and I again. My habitat', she writes. Ashton-Warner did not achieve her Higher Leaving Certificate. It was, she wrote 'a box on the ears' (ibid, 137).

The idea of teaching was anathema to Sylvia Ashton-Warner, as it had been to Mary Jane Mander and would be for Janet Frame. It was, however, a means to a financial

end, guaranteeing an income. Mander became a pupil-teacher in 1892, but by 1899 she had had enough and resigned her position to write her first novel. Janet Frame wanted to write poetry but, seeing no future in it, decided to opt for teaching and enrolled at a teacher training college in Dunedin. Unable to cope with the schools' inspection regime she abandoned the school-room. 'The last thing in God's heaven or earth I wanted', wrote Ashton-Warner, 'was to become a teacher. If I had one hate it was the inside of a schoolroom. I'd finished with schools as from now on and forever' (141). However, seeing it as a sure way of getting to Wellington and achieving her dream of a room of her own and an artist's easel, she capitulated and was appointed as a pupil-teacher. After a year's apprenticeship in several primitive primary schools, Ashton-Warner entered Auckland Teachers' Training College in 1929.

Whilst Ashton-Warner was at Teachers' Training College she met and fell in love with another student, Keith Henderson and found herself at an emotional and professional crossroads. They were 21, young and impecunious and she was faced with a stark choice – to marry her love and become a teacher's wife with financial security and the chance to teach 'little ones', or plough her own uncertain economic furrow and retain her independence. It was a huge dilemma. Ashton-Warner knew that to marry a man who had a deep sense of vocation would almost certainly mean a life 'buried' back in the remote, small-school landscapes of New Zealand and the subversion of her own ambitions to loyal wife-hood and motherhood.

## **'Buried'**

Other New Zealand women writers have written of the sacrifices of women for duty. Katherine Mansfield's character 'Beryl' in one of her 'New Zealand short stories 'The Prelude' written, according to Ian Gordon, between 1915-1917, experiences a sense of deep shock at a move to a house in the country, which her brother-in-law, Stanley Burnell has purchased 'on the cheap'. Beryl lives with the family and both she and her sister Linda, Burnell's wife, are increasingly but differently disillusioned, Linda with the physical side of marriage from which she longs to escape, and Beryl, with the rural isolation she finds herself in. Beryl pens a letter to a friend, Nan, in which she writes:

Buried my dear. Buried isn't the word. We have got neighbours but they are only farmers – big louts of boys who seem to be milking all day....it's pretty certain nobody will ever come out from town to see us, because though there is a bus it's an awful rattling old thing with black leather sides that any decent person would rather die than ride in for six miles. Such is life. It's a sad ending for poor little B. (1974, 57)

Twelve years later, the 21-year old Sylvia Ashton Warner would echo the feeling of being 'buried':

to marry the love of my life would be to return to the obloquy of the country schools circuit in the foothills of New Zealand's ranges, whereas I'd already trodden that track (1980, 215).

Mindful, however, that achieving her teacher's certificate would give her a qualification and some ability to earn her own living, Ashton-Warner set to and attained her Teacher's Certificate. As she acknowledged: 'the first step, remained from sheer survival logistics, to be qualified in something before I went anywhere' (216). Henderson went away to join his first school and to save some money for their marriage. Ashton-Warner made the most of his absence by seizing it as an

opportunity for a period of independence, joyfully renting a studio in Auckland and setting herself up as a commercial artist painting slogans for Dunlop Tyres, asserting that 'it's not love my goal, it's freedom'. (ibid, 217)

However, the Depression of the early 1930s led to little call for commercial artists and two years later, aged 23, Ashton-Warner found herself unemployed. The choice was made – Ashton-Warner married Keith Henderson and they moved to a tiny one-room school in Whareorino, close to the rocky coast of the mid north-west of North Island, where he would be his 'own headmaster' (ibid, 237). At first sight,

Whareorino failed to impress Sylvia:

...the forest giants are jagged carcasses with nothing more to say...instead of the rolling foothills are the stark ranges of a country geographically young, stripped bare to its backbone like a very thin horse. Nor can you see the Tasman ocean, only hear it beating the beaches (ibid, 237).

Whilst Henderson set to improving their residence, a one-room 'glebe', Sylvia sulked. She ran away 'over the hills, not out of sight, but he chases after me....I stop, but don't return. The hills curl on and they rear ahead to the backbone of the range and I hear the call of the ocean. West Wind pulls my hair and calls, Come away, wild spirit, over the sea' (ibid, 143). They were there just 4 months. Ashton-Warner found the isolation stifling and they moved to a school in the foothills of Mount Egmont. The move to Egmont was the first of the Hendersons' many subsequent moves to rural, remote, mainly-Maori small schools, where, unlikely as it seemed those first days at Whareorino, they were, over the next 10 years, to forge a reputation in the teaching of Maori children.

The fact there was a metalled road to their second school gave Ashton-Warner a feeling of 'rapture' (ibid, 243) and they stayed at Egmont for 5 years. By the time they took to the road again, Ashton-Warner had two young children and was restless, telling Keith that: 'what I used to call my soul has dissolved like soap in hot water and gurgled down the plug in the wash-house....hope for me is a wet nappy dripping on the line after three or four weeks of rain' (ibid, 244). Keith tried to reassure her that it would not always be like that, that he planned to take on bigger and bigger schools until they had the experience to take one in a city.

Ashton-Warner tried to convince Keith that if he would agree to take on a Maori school, she could join him in his teaching. ' "K, we could get a Maori school...and we'd both be at school together...you're allowed to take your children with you in Maori schools. They're called Domestic Science'." (ibid, 244). It was a notion that would shape the rest of her life. Keith tried hard to dissuade her, knowing that she cherished her friendships with the few white women friends she had, but Ashton-Warner was insistent, seeing the move not just in terms of additional economic benefits - ' "we'd come back with some money, a decent car" ' (ibid, 45) - but as a way of achieving an identity for herself away from dripping nappies. However, a deep social stigma was attached to teachers who retrained to teach in Maori schools:

We'd hear of other couples of our year who had dropped out of currency and to hear it whispered of someone we knew, 'they've done Maori teaching', was to hear of their doom and to register the professional stigma on us all. On the other hand, there must be something more than kisses and nappies and finding yourself pregnant (ibid, 245).

Keith eventually gave in and they sent off joint application forms to take over a Maori school in Horoera, a tiny settlement on the remote East Cape coast of the Gisborne region, North Island.

The Hendersons were eventually approved by the Native Schools' Department, the administrative body for Maori schools, to take up their positions in 1937. Keith's family, wrote Ashton-Warner 'were shocked white and my own people fell silent' (248). The location was remote, more so than they had been led to believe by the description of the school by the department's administrators, desperate to secure teachers for the school. 'There was no road', Ashton-Warner writes, 'metalled or otherwise; only eight miles of rocky beach along the ocean shore and two unbridged tidal rivers which had to be forged at low tide' (ibid, 248). The family transported their luggage by wagon, Keith going ahead of them on horseback, to set up base and to prepare the school. Ashton-Warner, pregnant with their third child, stayed behind with the two children, lodging with family until the baby was born. Keith wrote to his wife of the school, of 'gathering driftwood from the beach...and of his vegetable garden he'd begun in the sandy soil'. (249). If Ashton-Warner had misgivings, she smothered them in the joy of a family re-united on their way to a new life together:

Joy frothed in us to be together again. Nothing mattered as long as we were five and at least Keith Henderson was extended to his limit and liked it very much; he was happy all the time (ibid, 254).

As they travelled deeper into Maori country there were obvious differences in the people, 'the population thickening and darkening in an unnerving way'. She wrote:

To travel beyond civilisation was one thing but to abandon one's race was another. The dream that had lured me had left this out. All those loving arms and kisses, concerned eyes, warm homes....forfeited for three blank years. It had the implacability of iron jaws...and it was I who was responsible, not Keith (ibid, 255).

Ashton-Warner found the journey to the school terrifying. Still dressed as a 'glamour girl from the city in a tight tube skirt, high-heels and drop-pearl ear-rings' the family lurched in a buggy across the Awatere River at low tide. As they crossed the mouth of the river, Ashton-Warner thought, 'I'll never pass this way again. Good-bye to the world for ever' (ibid, 256).

### **'The Key Vocabulary'**

In the early days of the school at Horoera, Ashton-Warner experienced problems in teaching Maori children to read. The reading materials supplied by the Native Schools' Department were, she found, not suitable for Maori children. The reading scheme and set books, rooted in the pre-War English education system, contained nouns (such as 'train'), which described a world far away from the remote, rural, Maori *pa*, or homestead. If only, Ashton-Warner thought, the books 'had words in them such as 'sand, beach, sea or...or fish.....or cart, I'd be able to teach them' (ibid, 262).

Ashton-Warner decided to develop her own illustrated reading scheme, drawing on her artistic skills to create a series of vocabulary books containing recognizable Maori words. The set books would be fine for the school's few white children, including her own, but for her Maori pupils, she would use her own scheme, based on what she came to call the 'key vocabulary'. It occurred to her, as she explained, 'how



handy it would be if there were one common vocabulary for small children which suited everybody, and what if we had a whole set of books with their favourite words or even books in Maori' (1980: 264). It was a revolutionary idea for a highly conservative education system, and one which was negatively received. Inspired by Herbert Read, (1943), she started the crafting of what were to become four illustrated Transition Readers, based on the 'key vocabulary', later writing about the process through fiction (1958), pedagogy (1963) and autobiography (1980). The completion of the elaborately hand-painted Readers did not, however, give her any hoped-for recognition. Having been hand-bound at her expense and then passed to an initially interested education inspector, they were borrowed, she wrote, to 'help other schools working with Maoris', (1980, 354) then lost, then mysteriously burned 'by mistake', she wrote in a letter to her American publisher, '....but not by me' (1963, 25). The Readers were indifferently received by a disinterested and un-ready New Zealand education culture and were thus, as she eventually concluded, 'before their time' (1980, 353).

After three years at Horoera, the Hendersons relocated to a second school at Pipiriki, a move which Ashton-Warner ironically noted took them from one 'Maori fastness at the East Cape to another Maori fastness in the West' (1980, 291). Ashton-Warner continued to teach, but with increasing disillusion. By this time, she was experiencing extensive periods of despair and isolation. Her biographer, Lynley Hood, suggests that by 1939, Ashton-Warner became 'Keith's 4<sup>th</sup> child', spending more and more time in bed and less and less time in school (1988, 81). When Keith mooted a fifth move to a bigger school, at Waiomatatini, back East, Ashton-Warner

protested, 'I'm not a teacher, I'm an artist' (1980, 315). Further breakdowns led to her decision to give up teaching to focus on writing full-time and it was not until the publication of her novel *Spinster* in (1958) that her 'key vocabulary' eventually found the audience she sought. By the time *Spinster* was published, the Hendersons had been in their 6<sup>th</sup> school, Fernhill, near Hastings, for a number of years. Ashton-Warner wrote another two novels whilst at Fernhill, but neither was to gain the notoriety and then fame which *Spinster* did.

### ***Spinster***

The crafting of the illustrated Readers is told in *Spinster* through the narrator and central character of the novel, Anna Vorontosov. Anna is, like Ashton-Warner, a teacher of small Maori children in a remote community as well as an artist. A passionate woman and a source of fascination to men, she undertakes a labour of love to create the means through which her children will learn to read:

Day by day I seek the most vital words for a child to begin with. So much hangs on the issue. The love of reading for a lifetime for one.....Today I work on Rangi, a 5-year old Maori. Nothing will make him learn the first words of the imported books.....'Come and look'. 'See the boats'. 'Little dog'. 'See the aeroplane'....Wiki and Rangi and others like them, sit and smile and never recognise them (1985, 196).

Anna discovers that Rangi's father is a pugilist and often in trouble with the police, Rumours of ill-treatment of Maoris by the police filter through to the children and frighten Rangi. His fear forms the basis of his key-words, as Anna explains:

Rangi, who lives on love and kisses and thrashings and fights and fear of the police and who took four months to learn 'come', 'look', takes four minutes to learn 'butcher-knife', 'gaol', 'police', 'sing', 'cry', 'kiss', 'Daddy', 'Mummie', 'Rangi', 'haka', 'fight'.....His mind is unlocked, some great fear is discharged, her understands at last and can read" (ibid, 197).

When a team of inspectors visit Anna's school, a senior and sympathetic school inspector, Mr Abercrombie (based on a real inspector, D G Ball, who initially championed Ashton-Warner's 'key vocabulary'), is impressed with Anna's work and her illustrated reading books. He assures her that she is a 'wonderful teacher' and that her work is of a very high standard and 'unique in his Board' (1985, 251).

When Anna's inspection grade arrives, however, she has not been given an upgrade and she disconsolately and angrily sets her Readers aside. Completely disillusioned, she has a breakdown and decides to leave New Zealand. Anna's experience reflects that of Ashton-Warner: both are worn down by the cultural isolation of their respective situations, their frustrated longings to be an artist and the stress of teaching against the cultural grain. Both increasingly seek solace in drink and fall prey to insidious depression.

In 1963, 26 years after arriving at her first Maori school, Ashton-Warner published *Teacher*, a seminal work in which she explored her development of what she came to call her 'organic' teaching and the development of 'the key vocabulary'. *Teacher* was initially published in America and acclaimed as a radical approach to teaching.

In 1969, Keith Henderson died and Ashton-Warner, free now to travel and lauded by a newly-appreciative international education community (an appreciation which New Zealand was arguably slow to reciprocate), visited Israel, London and then travelled onwards, by invitation, to Aspen, Colorado, to advise on the opening of a new community school. She moved on to a brief tenure at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver and returned to New Zealand in 1973.

## Conclusions

By the 1960s, Ashton-Warner and the New Zealand education system had ideologically clashed and fallen out. New Zealand was not ready, she was to claim, for her radical idea of using the Maori culture as the key to unlock children's learning. Ashton-Warner dared to challenge the 'Old World-centric' education culture pervasive in New Zealand from the 1930s through to the 1970s. 'If you were a child', she asked, 'which vocabulary would you prefer? Your own or the one at present in the New Zealand teaching rooms? Come, John come. Look John look. Come and look. See the boats' (1963, 41). The language of New Zealand pedagogy was, as she explained, 'the vocabulary of the English upper middle class. Two-dimensional and respectable'. It was a respectability which, by the time she wrote *I Passed This Way*, started during her sojourn in America, she felt isolated from and which she felt had rejected her. 'From this country abroad', she wrote, 'I can say I'm one who's been both rejected by and who has rejected my country' (1980, vii). That New Zealand turned out to be the 'one place where I wish to be' (180, 499) was a huge irony that was not lost on her.

The parallels between Ashton-Warner, Katherine Mansfield and Janet Frame are writ in their literary heritage. All were exiles of New Zealand in cultural, physical and/or psychological terms. All felt the pull of the county in spiritual terms despite the very provinciality which smothered them in different ways. It incarcerated Janet Frame in a series of mental asylums, caused Katherine Mansfield to flee its shores and rendered the split between Ashton-Warner and New Zealand's education system. That all turned to their native country to shape their literature is therefore highly

significant. As Ashton-Warner wrote, if New Zealanders try to 'deny the springs of home the spirit withers and dies....within us as we wander or settle abroad remain the springs of home...the tale of New Zealand' (1980-vii-viii).

### Acknowledgements

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