
Releasing the Native Imagery

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Few people in the New Zealand education system have attracted such strong negative criticisms and so few appreciative appraisals as Sylvia Ashton-Warner.

In 1980 in running a short course for graduate pre-service teacher trainees on her educational philosophy, I quickly became aware that there exists in the education system an almost unlimited capacity to scorn and to reject the work of this writer/teacher. I became aware that many older teachers based their views on second hand anecdote, on a rejection of what she wrote because it was not 'new' or on some reported slight visited on a friend, relative or friend of a relative by her. I also became aware that few teachers had actually read her work and that even fewer teachers had attempted to assess what she said in terms of what is now understood about teaching.

In attempting to do this it has been necessary to limit this survey of her ideas to those related to what we call English teaching. Her wider views on freedom and responsibility in education and her romantic criticism of education await study on some other occasion. Her novels have still not received the critical attention they deserve. It is hoped that a by-product of the recent interest in allowing women to play a more properly balanced role within the education system (and the development of women's studies programmes in the universities) will be the thorough and serious study of Ashton-Warner's work.

This paper will allow Ashton-Warner to express her views through her various works and will compare those views with current theories on reading writing and language. In suggesting that Ashton-Warner displayed considerable vision in presenting such views and theories when she did, it will go on to speculate as to why these views were rejected and to consider the curriculum context within which she worked. Implied throughout all of this will be clear guidelines for the teaching of Maori (and by extension other culturally different groups) children.

What Sylvia Ashton-Warner Said

Sylvia Ashton-Warner found herself teaching new entrant Maori children to read.

The reading books I found there for the primers that first Monday morning began with four nouns on the first page: horse, bed, train and can, briefly illustrated. Horse they could understand as nearly all of them rode to school along the beach or from over the range, but a train they had not even heard of. Some of them had beds at home but some slept on the floor or the earth while a can was straight-out enigma to all; the sketch showed one of those little watering-cans you stitched in fancywork on old-time tea-cosies which I hadn't seen myself for decades. On the second page, regardless of having used the can as a noun, it suddenly became a verb: I can skip, I can run and such. "It's funny thing, K, but I can't teach some of these little Maoris to read".

(I Passed this Way¹ : 262).

This experience lead to the conclusion:

What a dangerous activity reading is; teaching is. All this plastering on of foreign stuff. Why plaster on at all when there's so much inside already? So much locked in? If only I could get it out and use it as working material. And not draw it out either. If I had a light enough touch it would just come out under its own volcanic power.

(Spinster : 45).

From the earliest moment there was the feeling that it was wrong to impose these 'alien reading books which had originated in America, Janet and John', on her children. It seemed to her, in her conversation with her children that there must be a way of making contact with the energy being wasted on the irrelevant materials and with the world so far removed from that of Janet and John.

¹ Throughout this paper the titles of Ashton –Warner's books are used in references

And more and more as I talk with them I sense hidden in this converse some kind of key. A kind of high-above nebulous meaning that I cannot identify. And the more I withdraw as a teacher and sit and talk as a person, the more I join in with the stream of their energy, the direction of their inclinations, the rhythms of their emotions and forces of their communications, the more I feel my thinking travelling towards this; this something that is the answer to it all; this... key.

(Spinster : 67).

She continued to work toward making her material more local.

Cheerfully enough I put the local words on small cards, words like beach, sand, cart, fish and bread - not lawnmower - and sized them over for preservation and taught from them tentatively, though the Dewe's children and Jasmine didn't need them who could read the set books by now and, for extras, liked words like baby, pram, daddy and house while Da went for truck, car and boat. The other little Maori children, however, began to see daylight with the local words though I still thought they should have done better. As for Sammy no words clicked at all.

(I Passed This Way : 264).

At this point the thing that would make words click was not clear. She continued to work with music and art, convinced now that there was somewhere a trick, a technique, and experience which would help the Maori children into the world of European education, especially that part of it called 'reading'. She explains to an inspector

"I-I bring them up on Maori work first," I explain. "They can't bridge the gap between the pa and the European school without it. They learn to read from books about themselves first, coming to love reading early. Then they go on to the imported books."

(Spinster : 130-131)

And to her surprise she finds some encouragement.

I've always believed there should be some kind of bridge between the pa and the European infant room. And ... I've always believed that theirs is a bridge needed between the pa and the European environment. I believe you have got something here : a transition.

(Spinster : 130-131)

She is encouraged to search further:

It occurred to me 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? They'd all read in no time. But the main idea in Maori schools was to promote the English culture and it was not so long ago that Maori children were strapped for speaking Maori at school.

(I Passed This Way : 264)

It's an arduous undertaking trying to turn one race into another, involving both force and failure, so for little other reason than to make teaching easier I plunged in and made hundreds of Maori infant reading books. Since the little dark maidens were always drawing houses and mothers and babies I made a set of four on this subject, in sequence and graded, and with a Maori content; illustrated exuberantly. Four of each on account of the numbers in the room. At least the J and J gave me a lead in techniques like word recurrence, sentence length, page size and gradation, though, on examination, they often erred by their own criteria and had no line of thought, not having been made by a writer.

(I Passed This Way : 327).

Of course the work with music and art was as vigorous as ever. Then one day Hinewaka was reading of the Maori books.

"He came to the line, "Kiss Mummie Goodbye, Ihaka."

"What's this word?" he asks.

"Kiss."

A strange excitement comes over him. He smirks, then laughs outright, says it again, then tugs at Patchy nearby and shows him. "That's 'kiss'," he says emotionally,
"K-I-S-S."

Patchy lights up too in an extraordinary way. They both spell it. The reading is held up while others are called and told and I feel something has happened although I don't know what.

The next morning Patchy runs in, his freckles all agog.

"I can till pell kitt!" he cries. "K-i-et-et!"

Tame simply gallops in. He brushes past me, snatches the Ihaka book from the table, opens to the page and points out the word to others nearby. "Look," he says profoundly, "here's 'kiss'."

Why this sudden impetus in the reading, I wonder, putting up the words from the imported books on the blackboard for the day? What's this power in a word like "kiss"?

But it is not until my mind is turned the other way and I am engaged in something else that the significance begins to unfold. Playing some Tchaikovsky for dancing I see that this word is related to some feeling within them; some feeling that I have so far not touched ...

I don't hear the steps coming in, since the music manages to continue. I don't know the Senior is standing here with the typewriter for my turn. I'm well on

through the Nutcracker Suite before I feel a touch on my shoulder that is not from a small hand and I jump, throw up my hands then cover my face. Too sudden a transition...

Later I say, "This word 'kiss'. Look what it does to them." I call Tame and Patchy and Reremoana and reach for the book.

"It's got some relation," I say, "to a big feeling. I can't put my finger on it."

"Do you mean it is a caption?"

Caption! Caption! ... caption ...

"I've got to drop in on Mr Reardon. We'll have to try to get hold of the Meeting House for an extra class and an extra teacher."

Caption... The whole question is floodlit. This word is the caption of a very big inner picture. "We've got plenty of room," I reply from the surface of my mind. "We've got two stories : the floor and the tops of the tables. Sandy uses the top storeys."

"Why not a third storey? A few slats over the rafters?"

It's the caption of a huge emotional picture. "What I'm going to ask the Chairman to ask the Board for next is a rope from the roof with a seat on the end so that we can cross the room by air."

Spinster : 178-179)

And on top of this tower I see this shape that has been hovering above, ungraspable for two seasons; this key. And it is no longer mysterious and nebulous. It is as simple as my Little Ones. The whole system of infant room vocabulary flashes before the inner eye as though floodlit. As I walk alongside

the Senior, engaged in conversation on the surface of my mind about the regimentation in many schools, I am realising what this captioning of the inner world is. It's the vocabulary I've been after. And as the two men set themselves in the suave car and ease off down the road I christen it the Key Vocabulary.

(Spinster : 189)

So is born the key vocabulary; the central concept around which was to develop the notion of organic reading and, in turn, organic teaching.

In essence it is a simple idea. Each child has within him or her certain feelings which give rise to imagery peculiar to that individual. This key vocabulary represents ...

Captions of the action and pictures in the mind of our child. As the pattern of any physical movement is from the body outward, so is the flow of the KV from the mind outward, from the inside out.

(Spearpoint : 33)

Consequently Ashton-Warner's thesis is:

... whatever our child is, that's what his education is when you use his own imagery as working material; not wholly, but enough to keep it alive. Whether spearpoint or tail-end generation, his education cannot help suiting; keeping pace, keeping in character with him.

(Spearpoint : 39)

Thus:

The professional formula - "Release the native imagery of our child and use it for working material" - remains timeless, changeless and axiomatic, but the application of it needs constant variation.

(Spearpoint : 40)

The words of the key vocabulary, so-called because they unlock the mind, mirror the flow from the inside outward. Ashton-Warner did not claim to have unearthed some

startling discovery about man. 'Organic reading is not new' are her first words on the subject (Teacher: 22) and on another occasion (Spearpoint: 14) she says 'Organic work is not new but as old as man.' And in qualifying her comments she goes on to say:

Of course, as I'm always saying, it's not the only reading; it's no more than the first reading. The bridge.

It's the bridge from the known to the unknown; from a native culture to a new; and, universally speaking from the inner man out.

(Spearpoint: 14)

It is this notion of 'a bridge' which seems to have been new at the time in Maori schools.

The method of teaching any subject in a Maori infant room may be seen as a plank in a bridge from one culture to another, and to the extent that this bridge is strengthened may a Maori in later life succeed.

This transition made by Maori children is often unsuccessful. At a tender age a wrench occurs from one culture to another, from which, either manifestly or subconsciously, not all recover. And I think that this circumstance has some little bearing on the number of Maoris who, although well educated, seem neurotic, and on the number who retreat to the mat.

Another more obvious cause of the social failure of Maoris is the delay in the infant room. Owing to this delay, which is due to language as well as to the imposition of a culture, many children arrive at the secondary-school stage too old to fit in with the European group and they lose heart to continue. From here, being too young and unskilled to do a competent job, some fall in and out of trouble, become failures by European standards, and by the time they have grown up have lost the last and most precious of their inheritances - their social stability.

With this in mind, therefore, I see any subject whatever in a Maori infant room as a plank in the bridge from the Maori to the European. In particular, reading.

So, in preparing reading for a Maori infant room, a teacher tries to bridge the division between the races and to jettison the excess time.

Children have two visions, the inner and the outer. Of the two the inner vision is brighter.

I hear that in other infant rooms widespread illustration is used to introduce the reading vocabulary to a five-year-old, a vocabulary chosen by adult educationists. I use pictures, too, to introduce the reading vocabulary, but they are pictures of the inner vision and the captions are chosen by the children themselves. True, the picture of the outer, adult-chosen pictures can be meaningful and delightful to children; but it is the captions of the mind pictures that have the power and the light. For whereas the illustrations perceived by the outer eye cannot be other than interesting, the illustrations seen by the inner eye are organic, and it is the captioning of these that I call the "Key Vocabulary".

I see the mind of a five-year-old as a volcano with two vents; destructiveness and creativeness. And I see that to the extent that we widen the creative channel, we atrophy the destructive one. And it seems to me that since these words of the key vocabulary are no less than the captions of the dynamic life itself, they course out through the creative channel, making their contribution to the drying up of the destructive vent. From all of which I am constrained to see it as creative reading and to count it among the arts.

First words must mean something to a child.

First words must have intense meaning for a child. They must be part of his being.

How much hangs on the love of reading, the instinctive inclination to hold a book! Instinctive. That's what it must be. The reaching out for a book needs to become an organic action, which can happen at this year formative age. Pleasant words won't do. Respectable words won't do. They must be words organically ties, organically born from the dynamic life itself. They must be words that are already part of the child's being. "A child", reads a recent publication on the approach of the American books, "can be led to feel that Janet and John are friends." Can be led to feel. Why lead him to feel or try to lead him to feel that these strangers are friends? What about the passionate feeling he has already for his own friends? To me it is inorganic to overlook this step. To me it is an offence against art. I see it as an interruption in the natural expansion of life of which Erich Fromm speaks. How would New Zealand children get on if all their reading material were built from the life of African blacks? It's little enough to ask that a Maori child should begin his reading from a book of his own colour and culture. This is the formative age where habits are born and established. An aversion to the written word is a habit I have seen born under my own eyes in my own infant room on occasion.

It's not beauty to abruptly halt the growth of a young mind and to overlay it with the frame of an imposed culture. There are ways of training and grafting young growth. The true conception of beauty is the shape of organic life and that is the very thing at stake in the transition from one culture to another. If this transition took place at a later age when the security of a person was already established there would not be the same need for care. But in this country it happens that the transition takes place at a tender and vulnerable age, which is the reason why we all try to work delicately.

Back to these first words. To these first books. They must be made out of the stuff of the child itself. I reach a hand into the mind of the child, bring out a handful of the stuff I find there, and use that as our first working material. Whether it is good or bad stuff, violent or placid stuff, coloured or dun. To effect an unbroken beginning. And in this dynamic material, within the familiarity and

security of it, the Maori finds that words have intense meaning to him, from which cannot help but arise a love of reading. For it's here, right in this first word, that the love of reading is born, and the longer his reading is organic the stronger it becomes, until by the time he arrives at the books of the new culture, he receives them as another joy rather than as a labour. I know all this because I've done it.

First words must have an intense meaning.

First words must be already part of the dynamic life.

First books must be made of the stuff of the child himself, whatever and wherever the child.

(Teacher : 26-28)

It is their first words which have such critical importance.

They are more than captions. They are even more than sentences. They are whole stories at times. They are actually schematic drawing. I know because they tell them to me.

Out flow these captions. It's a lovely flowing. I see the creative channel swelling and undulating like an artery with blood pumping through. And as it settles, just like any other organic arrangement of nature it spread out into a harmonious pattern;

Out pelt these captions, these one-word accounts of the pictures within. Is it art? Is it creation? Is it reading? I know that it is integral. It is organic. And it is the most vital and the most sure reading vocabulary a child can build. It is the key that unlocks the mind and releases the tongue. It is the key that opens the door upon a love of reading. It is the organic foundation of a lifetime of books. It is the key that I use daily with my fives, along with the clay and the paint and amid the singing and quarrelling.

It is the key whose turning preserves intact for a little longer the true personality.

It is the Key Vocabulary.

MAXIMS

In the preparation of Maori Infant Reading

The Key Vocabulary centres round the two main instincts, fear and sex.

The Key Vocabulary varies from one locality to another and from one race to another.

Backward readers have a private Key Vocabulary which once found launches them into reading.

The power content of a word can be determined better from a backward reader than from an average reader.

In the presentation of key words to five-year-olds, illustrations are to be shunned rather than coveted.

The length of a word has no relation to its power content.

In all matters in a Maori infant room there is a Maori standard as well as a European one.

(Teacher : 32-35)

(This last point is open to misunderstanding and the word 'standard' needs careful handling.)

Organic reading however could not exist by itself. Writing also proceeds best if started from that rich source of energy, the key vocabulary.

Creative writing follows on from the Key Vocabulary. Whereas the Key Vocabulary is a one-word caption of the inner world, creative writing is a

sentence-length or story-length caption. From schematic writing they progress towards the representational.

(Teacher : 42)

... At last I'm beginning to see what these surprising writings are that the bigger ones indulge in during the morning output period. they're captions too. Two-word captions : my shoes. Three-word captions : I want you. And story-length captions. I take up Matawhero's book. His letter formations are almost unintelligible, being a boy who does far more with his tongue than with his hands, and they are not made any clearer by frequent rubbings out and doubling. But I can read it. I can read him without writing at all if it comes to that.

"Yesterday I came home
late. My Daddy
gave me a hiding.
Then I start to cry.
Then I have to go to sleep."

"When I went to sleep
the ghost went on our
kitchen. It had big fat
eyes. It had a
white sheet."

I take up the standard imported books and turn curiously to the page where he is reading.

"Mother went to a shop.
I want a cap, she said.
I want a cap for John.
She saw a brown cap.
She saw a blue cap.
I like the blue cap, she said."

(Spinster : 213)

And Ashton-Warner is excited by Irini's piece of writing.

"Mummie said to Daddy
give me that money else I
will give you a hiding.
Daddy swear ta Mummie.
Daddy give the money
to Mummie. We had
a party. My father
drank all the beer by
hisself. he was drunk."

I turn to the imported Book Two and find the passage on the parents :

"Look at the green house.
Father is in it.
It is Father's home too."

"There is Mother.
She is in the green house.
She can see us.
Let us run to Mother."

"Come and read, Little One," I say.

She smiles with her head cocked on one side looking at me like a blackbird then she tosses back all this hair and snatches the book from me, in that vivid way children have who have not suffered too much discipline, and reads the two pages.

Then I give her her own manhandled page and to see her read this, her dug-in printing, her faulty spacing and childish lay-out, is to realise that legibility and expert setting run nowhere in the race with meaning. Indeed, it is to realise something else and it comes to me with the same relief from pressure with which the other realisations have been emerging : primer children can write their own books. They actually are.

Moreover we'll read these books. Every day. Think of it! New exciting books written every morning about the pa, with all the illustrations vivid in the infant room mind already!

(Spinster : 214-215)

She recognises the importance of audience :

I still think, however, that our writing could be better if for reading purposes only, as a medium of communication, in order that one can read his writing to another; so that there's a point in writing after all, telling another something on paper.

(Spearpoint : 118)

Her experiences in America confirmed for her what had become apparent when teaching those little Maori children :

... it remains true that books made from their own vocabulary, their own lives, own drama and their own locality have a natural and strong place in the organic work.

(Spearpoint : 128)

Reading and writing have meaning for them. Some might go on saying they dowanna; neither do we wanna at times, but we keep on because we know we need to. but when work ... in this case writing ... has meaning and interest, it cannot but endure whether we wanna or not. When the imagery is alive and active, it'll deliver itself anyway in some form.

(Spearpoint : 161)

Ashton-Warner, suffered from the shock and stimulation of working with American where she found ...

In the minds of the small children a redistribution of the instincts with some absent altogether. Parent love was replaced by dog love, while workaday fear was mostly not there. Was this latest stage American, a throw-up of the post-industrial society, the avant-garde of the race heading for space? I made my set of reading books all over again - began to make then I mean - with more time and more thought, introducing dogs to the theme, give or take a cat or racoon,

and still mean to put in a dinosaur, and played down family love which I'd featured in the first place; illustrated them more abstractly in the twentieth-century style, and called them the Aspen Books. By which time I'd brought my own little group of fives and sixes to write their own little books as the En-Zedders had done twenty years ago; which is the magic of the key vocabulary - it accommodates itself to any state of mind, any variant of the mind, any culture, any race; in a cave or on its way to space.

(I Passed This Way : 421)

Ashton-Warner ever the practical classroom teacher, is clear in describing the place of her organic work in a school programme.

The material in the organic vessel of the morning is the native imagery. The first part of the morning is the Output period, during which the captions of the imagery are released through any media we can lay out hands to : clay, sand, water, paint and timber ends for building; paper, chalk, crayons, singing, dancing and playing house; talking, plays and writing books; cooking or drama; conversations and the words of the Key Vocabulary. There is snow in season, a place to dig and timber pieces to hammer; the whole informed by and productive of spiralling thought and action. Release the native imagery of our child and use it for working material or, "Touch the true voice of feeling and it will create its own style and vocabulary," and I add, its fuel.

The second half of the morning after interval, from eleven to twelve, is the Intake period, during which the imagery released earlier on the KV and organic writing is used for working material in reading, spelling, phonics, co-operation and discussion, reading local readers, audiencing a play and ending up with a story. Output the doing time, Intake the learning time; Output the breathing out, Intake the breathing in. The organic morning is breathing of the mind, freedom of the mind within the shape of order. Nature has order, so why not we? You see it in the seasons, science and biology, in anthropology, in the passions of man.

The whole day is not organic work; only the morning. The afternoon has a different character, for, while in the morning we concern ourselves with material released, with the native imagery from the mind of our child, now we work with material from outside his mind, ideas new to him. And this time it is we who supply them. He encounters thought he hasn't known before, has a choice of skills he would not otherwise have come upon, reads and has read to him books he has not written himself, and is often taken on outing, summer expeditions and, in winter, skating and skiing. I call this "handing down the culture".

This handing down of the culture in the afternoon is largely the concern of the parent-teachers who bring in their varied and fascinating skills; drama, pattern work, math, puppetry and all manner of arts. Some take groups out and away and regularly to winter sports. These projects are a matter of choice, and go on and on and on.

If we don't hand down the culture, as has happened to nations in history when stifled by their own affluence, civilisation will return to the dust again, to rocks and waterlessness.

(Spearpoint : 170-171)

How Modern Are These Views?

How do the ideas described by Sylvia Ashton-Warner relate to modern views of reading, writing, and language in general? Holdaway (1979 :31) is unequivocal in his judgement.

Working in the look-and-say era, but with insight far in advance of current belief, a quite remarkable figure emerged in outback New Zealand. Sylvia Ashton-Warner, committed to teaching new entrant in a rural Maori school, brought her exceptional sensitivity as a novelist and artist to bear on the problems of leading non-European, rural children into literacy. Her work received little recognition in her home country - except among a responsive few - and it was not until the publication of her two novels, *Spinster* (1958) and *Teacher* (1965), that her ideas gained the recognition they deserved.

Basically, her insight was that reading should be motivated by the deepest springs of meaning in the human heart. Working from the tradition of look-and-say and language-experience, she provided her children on request with those words which most powerfully engaged them, words from the centre of their deepest fantasies - kiss, fight, beer, hit, Mum, aeroplane, fast car, blood, skeleton. These were once-seen-never-forgotten words which established an initial vocabulary for both reading and writing. In addition she broke down subject barriers over the whole curriculum and integrated all the arts both for their own sake and in the service of literacy. Placed in a context of modern linguistic insight, and broken free from the factional limitations of the time, Sylvia Ashton-Warner's insights are a joy to saddened hearts.

This 'context of modern linguistic insight' maintains that reading is not only or even essentially a visual process. Rather it is the strength of meaning generated in the mind of the reader by previous experiences (some of which will be education) which provides him or her with the ability to 'comprehend' a piece of writing. In short, and as the modern slogans go:

- Children learn to read by reading
- Children get meaning from print by bringing meaning to print
- Reading takes place behind the eye
- Reading is an inside-out procedure.

Are their understandings any different from those of Ashton-Warner? Do psycholinguists such as Smith and Goodman take us much further in our understanding of reading than Ashton-Warner does? It is quickly acknowledged that they express their views in terms and language generally which relates easily to modern academic disciplines - but is their message significantly in advance of Ashton-Warner? John Dewey (quoted in Smith, Meredith, Goodman 1976) in criticising the coming and going of theories about reading complained that ...

The simple fact is, they all lack the essential of any well-grounded method,

namely relevance to the child's mental needs. No scheme for learning can supply this want. Only a new motive - putting the child in a vital relation to the things to be read - can be of service here.

Ashton-Warner would, in my view, have met his demands. There, has long been criticism of the artificial language used in beginning readers. Ashton-Warner saw the artifice as arising not just from the fact that the language was not real but also from the cultural irrelevance of the material.

A recent text (Smith, Goodman, Meredith 1976) which summarises current theories comes up with the kinds of statements that might now seem commonplace.

- Reading materials must contain real language as close as possible to the language the child already knows.
- The child needs to be talked to, listened to, understood. He needs opportunities to communicate his wishes, feelings, emotions and ideas.
- The child must always hear and use language in conjunction with his experiences - to express himself to others, to use language as a medium in which to think reflectively about his experiences.

.... and so on and so on.

It is my view that Sylvia Ashton-Warner articulated a view of the reading process, of the writing process and of language generally which is at the present time consonant with current views and which were quite in advance of that line when first she propounded them thirty years ago.

The System She Worked In

Perhaps Ashton-Warner was merely reflecting of a forward-thinking and liberal education system. A common rejection of Ashton-Warner is based on the view that what she said was not new.

Ewing (1970) gives the impression that a considerable degree of liberality permeated the planning of the New Zealand education system. He also paints a picture of consistent

lack of success in getting liberal ideas implemented in classroom programmes and of regular retrenchment.

Very early aims for the teaching of reading were ...

... to impart to the pupils the power of fluent reading, with clear enunciation, correct pronunciation, tone, and inflexion and expression based upon intelligent comprehension of the subject matter : to cultivate a taste for and an appreciation of good literature; and accordingly to lead the pupils to form a habit of reading good books.

The 1913 revised syllabus thought that 'children should be led to express themselves freely and naturally' and to be lead into spontaneous activities 'as suggested by their own natural activities and imagination'. Hogben's influence was clear but his liberal ideas were to have diminished influence as consultation with teachers diminished and central control increased through the twenties.

The *1929 Red Book* syllabus was the first to apply to Maori schools and its liberal intent was seriously compromised by the continued existence of the Proficiency examination. Writing was still seen as developing in excellence form 'the intelligent study of good models'. It was not until 1946 that the question of 'free expression' was raised. It was approved of - provided it showed some restraint! Reading was discussed and individual difference was high-lighted. However, the response to noting individual difference was to state that :

'The teacher will be most successful who can fit the right book to the right child'.

It is interesting to note the statement in the *1954 Written Expression* syllabus on free expression.

In this connection the statement in the English Board of Education's Handbook of Suggestions for Teachers is opposite : 'The chief criterion by which the pupils' composition will be judged will be their truthfulness in the widest sense - the truthfulness with which they record their experiences and impressions; the

accuracy with which they describe things or scenes; and the honesty which they show in stating, when called upon to do so, what they really think or feel, and not what they imagine they are called upon to think or feel'.

So long as what the pupils write meets the test given above, they may be encouraged to express themselves with the utmost freedom and originality. As their control over language increases, they will, if properly guided, wish to experiment with different modes of expression, and can derive much satisfaction from doing so. Guidance, however, remains necessary both as an encouragement and as a check. Vague, poetic descriptions ('Looking like a speck in the distance, the quaint old ferry steamer wended its lazy way across the sparkling waters of Port Nicholson, which were as still as a mill pond') should be tactfully questioned, and more freshness and precision asked for; but attempts at original graphic description like that of the child of eight who, having seen a fall of snow, wrote, 'The snow looked like little pieces of white rag, snatched every way, ragged and torn,' should be commended.

Beginning reading was rightly recognised as a crucial time for the formation of attitudes towards reading. Much of the 1950 manual was concerned with Janet and John the new 'look and say' books. They were an English adaptation of an American series Alice and Jerry further adapted for New Zealand.

I have taken time to suggest that the curriculum context with which Ashton-Warner worked while having some claim to being liberal in intention was, in all probability as dull and, for Maori children especially, as disastrous as she paints it. Teachers in classrooms tend to be markedly more conservative than the curriculum they claim to serve. There seems to be good grounds for asserting that Ashton-Warner was a quite exceptional teacher. Ewing (1970) calls her 'a gifted teacher', Holdaway (1979) in his tribute quoted above sees her as 'ahead of her time'. Stead (1981) describes her as a teacher...

who is at once brilliant and erratic, reluctant and original, failing to satisfy the pedestrian requirements of a system which itself fails to foster the true individuality and needs of the growing child.

Actually Stead is talking about the central figure in much of her work. This paper has declined to make any distinction between that figure and Ashton-Warner herself.

The Failure to be Recognised

Why was it then that she at best failed to gain recognition in New Zealand and at worst was rejected? She herself (*I Passed This Way* : 245) refers to the stigma attached to working with Maori children. New Zealand has in the past and often even now been inclined to reject ideas or to recognise expertise developed in a non-European setting. Teachers in such areas are in the 'B team' and in Ashton-Warner's day teachers in Maori schools were probably not even considered to be playing the game!

A central theme of Ashton-Warner's novels is the place of women in society and her own autobiography emphasises repeatedly the disadvantage faced by teachers who wished to 'challenge the system' and were women. The 'Permanent Solid Block of Male Educational Hostility' is relatively easy to accept as having existed.

Shallcrass (1980) in reviewing her autobiography says that it would be wrong to think of her as a trail blazer. This comes immediately after stating that 'she had discovered for herself the importance of a child's own language long before the linguistics scholars gave it respectability' and that her 'notion of the organic curriculum was still years away from realisation'. To deny her the status of a pioneer merely because Strachan, Somerset and Darracott were doing similar work in other parts of New Zealand at about the same time or earlier is to gloss over our stupidity as a nation in failing to learn from those amongst us. Shallcrass redeems himself by placing her 'in the front rank of the compassionate critics of education'.

The reaction of the literary establishment in New Zealand to her novels was generally only luke warm and only one major study of her work, that of McEldowney (*Landfall* 91 1969) has been published in this country. Similarly little has appeared in the educational literature of this country about her work. Mitchell (1980) sensitively and

sympathetically pleads the case for secondary teachers to read *Teacher* and suggests that what that book advocates has relevance for all levels of the system. *English in New Zealand* (1980) has in an editorial and an article drawn the attention of teachers to the usefulness of her views.

Teacher received its 'official' review in *Education* by David P Ausubel (1963). He is scathing, describing it as ...

A patchwork of scattered impressions, fragmentary vignettes, and miscellaneous comments about teaching and Maoris that provides neither a cogent account of her educational philosophy nor an illuminating picture of the contemporary Maori cultural scene. The book as a whole makes little or no contribution to pedagogic theory and method, or to the difficult problem of teaching in a setting of acculturation. For the most part it is an impressionistic self-portrait, in sensitive and poetic language, of an imaginative and dedicated teacher who has passionate and somewhat unorthodox convictions about teaching, and sufficient energy, individuality, and strength of character to put these convictions into practice in a country that places a very high premium upon conformity to bureaucratic authority.

However, there is a feeling that he lowers his guard and steps well outside the role of reviewer in a final paragraph which reveals plenty about his own views and those prevalent at the time and rather less about the book under review.

True, one could hardly have expected an academically sophisticated pedagogic treatise from a person of Miss Ashton-Warner's background and temperament. But would it have been expecting too much to find a carefully reasoned and systematic exposition of principles, a clear statement of underlying rationale, a more detailed description of the method, and some attempt at critical evaluation or comparison with other methods? Recast along these latter lines, the resulting document might have been somewhat less artistic, but would have constituted a more useful contribution to the literature of education rather than an exercise in

impressionistic autobiography. In the present era, more than the enthusiastic personal testament or articles of faith of an inspired teacher are required to effect change in prevailing educational doctrines and practices. Without some objective evidence one is at a loss to distinguish between the pedagogic effects of exposure to a dynamic personality and talented practitioner, on the one hand, and the intrinsic merits of a proposed method, on the other. Teaching is still enough of an art for an enthusiastic and ingenious teacher employing inferior methods to produce results that are equal to or better than those of a mediocre teacher employing the most efficacious techniques.

This needs no further comment. It damn's itself!

Ashton-Warner, in her autobiography is highly critical of many aspects of New Zealanders, especially of their caution. Despite this, her book testifies her love of the country and indeed celebrates the energy and excitement she derives from being in New Zealand and being a New Zealander.

The education community at large could well consider its willingness to reciprocate the professional relationship offered by a writer who concludes :

On the journey through life I'd often come upon some inn by the wayside which gave me shelter from the Pacific cyclones, but none had been quite the haven I'd sought, though sweet and bountiful enough, yet all the time the idea, the perfect had been waiting for me in my own-build home in Godzone. Whatever my disasters in this country, surrounded by a wilderness of ocean, these islands turn out to be the one place where I would wish to be, and Whenua the one inn I desire.

(I Passed This Way : 499)

In short, English teachers in New Zealand today would do well to recognise that a most important philosophical figure in the development of its English curriculum has been

Sylvia Ashton-Warner. It is not too late to recognise this prophet in our own land and to show that we are glad she passed our way.

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The Artist

A wondrous artist there might be
With fingers wondrous light
 Who paints the summer's laughing day,
 The winter's weeping night;
Who paints the morn a waking rose,
The eve a throbbing red,
 In living colours blending soft
 Like music o'er the mead.

So who can then the artist be
With magic brush in hand,
 Who paints a dreamy sobbing sea
 Surrounding every land;
Who paints the hills a mystic blue,
The fields a sleeping green
 That fade away the dying day
 Till night alone is seen?

God is the artist great who paints
Our sky – our sea – our land.
 To show us how our souls He formed
 With softest brush in hand;
And though the tempests o'er them sweep
To leave us dark and sad,
 He'll paint these pictures e'en again
 Till hearts are ever glad.

Sylvia Ashton Warner