
**What's in a Name? –
The Naming of the Sylvia Ashton-Warner Library at the
Auckland College of Education**

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On a Tuesday afternoon in May 1986, I walked out of the Civic Theatre into a sunny Queen St and thought 'It isn't right, something ought to be done.' That night I wrote a brief proposal to the Management Team at the Auckland College of Education urging that the college library be named the Sylvia Ashton-Warner Library.

The film I had just seen was *Sylvia*, a Michael Firth film starring Eleanor David, Tom Wilkinson, Nigel Terry and Mary Regan based on the writings of Sylvia Ashton-Warner. The fact that this important figure was invisible at the Auckland College of Education where she had trained as a teacher in 1928 to 1929 (when it was the Auckland Teachers Training College) just didn't seem right.

My interest in Ashton-Warner was sparked in the late seventies by the urgings of a colleague Ian Mitchell with whom I had worked in various ways. He had written a piece about her in the professional journal *Education* [Mitchell, 1980 #11] and passionately believed that her thinking was central to our understanding of teaching in diverse settings. The result of several summer's reading was a paper, *Releasing the Native Imagery*, (Middleton, 1982) which I completed for the 1982 Conference of the *New Zealand Association for the Teaching of English* in Christchurch. This survey of her thinking and writing was written to serve as an easy introduction to her work. It was received well at the conference and I subsequently received a letter from Sylvia Ashton-Warner herself in which she described the summary of her work as 'the most comprehensive and detailed I've seen.....Yours is the only summary I would call complete' (Ashton-Warner, 1982).

A year spent in England shortly after that saw little further progress in my interest but on my return to the college in late 1983 I subsequently taught an Education Option course in the secondary Diploma of Teaching programme on *The Educational Philosophy of Sylvia Ashton-Warner*. The course was repeated in 1984 and the outline reveals that it drew heavily on her writing and in particular on *Teacher* (Ashton-Warner, 1980) and *Spearpoint* (Ashton-Warner, 1972) (which was subsequently published in a British edition as *Teacher* in America).

The film brought it all back. I was determined that something be done.

My memo to the Auckland College of Education Management Team shows in hindsight the degree to which I expected others to simply respond positively to what I thought was a 'good idea'. It turned out not to be so easy. The memo follows:

I propose that in conjunction with the adoption of the name "Auckland College of Education" (and to coincide with inauguration events planned) the Auckland Teachers Colleges Library be renamed the Sylvia Ashton-Warner Library.

Reasons which I put forward to support this proposal include the following:

- Sylvia Ashton-Warner is arguably the most prominent graduate from this campus with a reputation and prominence in North America and Great Britain matched only by the degree to which she has, until quite recently, been ignored and rejected in this country.
- Her great skill in the fields of literature, education and biculturalism reflect major concerns of the campus library;

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- The spirit with which she challenged prevailing ideas and establishment customs is one which should be recognised and celebrated on this campus;
 - Our own work on the campus should be informed by her professional working formula (adapted appropriately): “*release the native imagery of the child and use it for working material*”;
 - She was a notable victim of what is now recognised as sexist discriminatory practices. She herself wrote with justification about her constant battle with the P.S.B.M.E.H. (i.e. the permanent solid block of male educational hostility). Naming the library after her would be especially appropriate at this time;
 - While there has been a generation of people who have rejected attempts to recognise her work both as an educationalist and as a writer this is now changing. A major paper I wrote on her in 1982 is constantly being requested, women’s studies and education courses at Waikato University have promoted her work and encouraged students to complete research on her, a major book is being written about her by Lynley Hood, a PhD thesis about her work has been completed at the Sorbonne, and so on. There is a responsibility on us to see that future generations, free of the bitterness and prejudice which has characterised the view many people have had of her, properly respect this important New Zealander;
 - I was profoundly moved by the film Sylvia. All the creative energy of her books was there. I was excited by the prospect that the lives of future students on the campus could perhaps be enriched were they to ask the question “Who was Sylvia Ashton-Warner?”. And no other

library on any other campus in the world should be better placed to give a coherent answer.

- The colleges have established a precedent for naming facilities after people. I would argue that a strong case could be made to justify naming the library after Sylvia Ashton-Warner on the grounds of her contribution to education and to literature in a world-wide sense which compares favourably to the splendid contribution to the campus made by the previous principals after whom facilities have been named.

I urge the management team to consider this proposal urgently and seriously. I would welcome the chance to discuss this with you.

(Middleton, 1986a)

The idea received a positive initial response from the Management Team, due in large part to the support for the idea from Peter Smith (Principal : Co-ordination) and Dennis McGrath (Principal : Secondary) who referred it to the Campus Library Committee chaired by Rae Munro (Dean of Secondary Teacher Education) who was also a positive sponsor of the proposal.

At that point a number of issues were raised and the reaction from the Library Committee seemed to weigh heavily against the proposal. Key objections revolved around the workload and expense of such a name change, the confusion that might be caused, the appropriateness of choosing Sylvia Ashton-Warner when others might be more deserving of such an honour, and so on.

This last issue was one that was to re-appear at pretty well every discussion in these early stages. I recall attending one meeting at which someone present made an impassioned speech proposing someone else for the honour. The response given by Peter Smith, who was chairing that particular meeting, was that the proposal was to name the library specifically after Sylvia Ashton-Warner not to open up a general investigation of suitable

names for it. My notes from that meeting indicate some frustration that I was feeling at the difficulties that seemed to me to be exaggerated in order to defeat the proposal.

Other issues seemed to me to easily resolved and I responded to the Management Team with a further memo in July, making some additional points:

A Transition *ACE Library* to *Sylvia Ashton-Warner Library*

The library committee considered the work-load and potential upheaval of changing the name of the library. I would make the point that such a change would be more gradual than it would be dramatic.

- Obvious public notices would reflect the fact;
- The college schools would diligently use the name in their internal and external communications and publications;
- Perhaps a sticker would note the fact on the library letterhead until supplies were exhausted;
- Stationery would use the new name as it came due for replacement;
- And so on.

The cost of this would be negligible.

B The Focus on the ACE Community

Essentially and in the first instance, the new name would be have most significance to the ACE community and only over a longer period of time would the name *Sylvia Ashton-Warner Library* come to assume a higher

profile with other groups. Some groups outside the ACE community might always refer to it as the “Auckland College of Education Library”. Note for instance that within the legal and medical communities the names *The Davis Library* and *The Philson Library* have a significance. To those of us outside those communities they remain the *Law Library* and the *Medical School Library*. Other examples are the Nga Tapuwae College Library (*the Hugh Lambie Library*), Auckland Normal Intermediate School (*The James Stenberg Library*) and, of course, the Christchurch Teachers College (*Henry Field Library*). There are a few named libraries that do become known by the ascribed name rather than by the name of the institution, e.g. *The Hocken*, *the Alexander Turnbull*. Since the name of Sylvia Ashton-Warner is a high profile name it is not inconceivable that one day people, especially in the education field, might refer to our library as *The Sylvia Ashton-Warner*.

C Policy on Equity

With the adoption of the policy on equity it would be a decision which shows some flair, to name the library after a person who has made such a unique contribution to language in a bicultural setting.

D Lost Opportunities

It seems inevitable to me that Sylvia Ashton-Warner will be honoured in this kind of way somewhere. If we don’t someone else will. Later might be too late.

An anecdote: the swimming pool in Otara is named after Norman Kirk. The other day I took the boys for a swim at Otara. As we walked into the building Jackson asked “Who was Norman Kirk?” That’s why you name buildings after people – so they won’t be forgotten.

I have hope that the Management Team creates a role for the Auckland College of education in seeing that Sylvia Ashton-Warner is not forgotten by naming the college library after her.

(Middleton, 1986b)

Good ideas have a power and with the key support from senior staff they won the day. Rae Munro, Chair of the Library Committee subsequently advised the Auckland College of Education Council in November 1986 that the Management Team had resolved that the college library shall be named the ‘Sylvia Ashton-Warner Library’.

The memo noted that:

.... the decision was reached after consideration of representations made to it, over a period of time, which made the following points:

- Sylvia Ashton-Warner is a most prestigious graduate of this college having been a student at the Auckland Teachers College in 1928-29;
- She is widely regarded through the education world as a significant influence in the development of current perspectives in the field of language education;
- She is one of New Zealand’s most famous teachers;
- Her work represents a fine balance of education, literature, biculturalism and equity which fits well into the emphases of the college;

- It is fitting that her work receives this recognition.

(Munro, 1986)

Munro noted that the approval of her family had been sought and that her elder son, Elliot Henderson has written that:

...We, of course, are all delighted that you should wish to call your library the Sylvia Ashton-Warner Library. We are honoured that you should wish to honour our mother in this way. There is no doubt in my mind that this particular honour, one which comes from her own country and her own field, is one which would have pleased her most. (Henderson, 1986).

The council was advised that the family had donated to the library the books which were in the study of Sylvia Ashton-Warner at the time of her death and that they would form part of the way in which the library could honour her work through a special collection. The council was further advised that a suitable occasion would be held to mark the naming and that this was likely to be in August 1987 as this would suit the family.

Between that time and August 1987 the family put into the safe-keeping of the college a collection of illustrations completed by Sylvia Ashton-Warner and donated a portrait of their mother.

The occasion turned into a four day event culminating in the ceremony of renaming the library conducted by the Governor General Sir Paul Reeves in the presence of members of the Sylvia Ashton-Warner family. The film *Sylvia* was screened each day and the library had prepared a display appropriate to the occasion. The tempo of the celebrations built up on the Thursday with a programme called *Who was Sylvia Ashton-Warner?* The Expressive Arts group, under the leadership of Sally Markham, had developed a presentation based on the paper *Releasing the Native Imagery* (Middleton, 1982). This was followed by a talk from Lynley Hood who was at that time writing a biography of Sylvia Ashton-Warner.

Hood remembers the day.

I addressed the college students twice today on the topic of “Who was Sylvia Ashton-Warner?” Each talk was preceded by a fifteen minute presentation from the college expressive arts group. It was BRILLIANT – moving, vivid, powerful, polished, exuberant, funny and absolutely spot on with its message. When my turn came the audience was totally switched on to Sylvia. They laughed uproariously at the funny bits and were deathly silent for the sombre bits.

(Hood, 1990 :291-292)

In the evening a special meeting of the Auckland Reading association was held at the college where again Lynley Hood was the guest speaker. This evening was notable not only for the excellent and well-received speech but also for the presence of the person on whom the father in Bell Call (Ashton-Warner, 1971) was based. He spoke at length with me about how moved he had been and how he agreed with the analysis that Hood had put on events and actions in Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s life.

Hood also writes about the reaction of the family to the naming of the library.

Jasmine and Elliott are enormously moved and excited by the celebrations. It must be very affirming for them to see so much deep and genuine appreciation of their mother.

(Hood, 1990 : 292)

The actual naming ceremony was one characterised by a sense of healing as different parts of the whanau gathered together as a result of the rather serendipitous fact that a current student at the college was in fact a member of the Maori side of Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s family. There were other good things too such as the chance for family members to meet once again with the Opel of the books – a shadowy figure in the novels but less so in their lives.

Most importantly though was the sense of relief from the family that finally someone else was going to share the task of respecting the memory and keeping interest alive. At the ceremony Elliot Henderson spoke of the feeling they had that they were 'handing over the torch'.

Certainly the Auckland College of Education, in renaming its library the *Sylvia Ashton-Warner Library* has established for all time a tangible and appropriate reminder that Sylvia Ashton-Warner had once started her life's work at this college.

In the course of the 2000 academic year the Sylvia Ashton-Warner library was refurbished and its size more than doubled. A new wing was added and named the *Dennis McGrath Wing* after the former Principal: Secondary who had earlier so strongly supported the original proposal to name the library and who had gone on to be a distinguished Principal of the Auckland College of Education.

A highlight of the official opening of this 'new' library by the Prime Minister in 2001 was the opening of a permanent and professional exhibition on Sylvia Ashton-Warner in the library. Present on that occasion was a complete collection of the children, grandchildren and great-grand-children of Sylvia Ashton Warner.

As family gathered and members of the wider college community mingled the large pictures of Sylvia Ashton-Warner looked over the gathering and there was a sense that indeed she had passed this way.

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Dancing Song

Life in me singing!
Voice clear and ringing!
Take me to dance 'mid storm branches swinging!
Wind soughing, sighing –
Birds fleeing, flying –
Take me to dance 'mid storm branches swinging!

Moonbeams descending;
Colours soft blending;
Take me to dance o'er waves never-ending!
Sea rolling, rocking –
Round moon is mocking –
Take me to dance o'er waves never-ending!

Bright the lights glancing!
Lovelit eyes dancing!
Take me to dance to music entrancing!
Sighing and swaying –
Passion obeying –
Take me to dance to music entrancing!

Sylvia Ashton Warner

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