

# SYLVIA LAWSON FAHA

1932–2017



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In recognition of her contribution across cultural spheres often deemed separate in the academy Sylvia Lawson was elected as an Honorary Fellow to the Australian Academy of Humanities in 2000. She successfully fused cultural history, literary studies, creative writing, film, media and cultural studies through a life-long practice of cultural journalism. For 60 years Sylvia Lawson was one of Australia's foremost literary journalists contributing in no small way to the shape of Australian letters as a journalist, academic, public intellectual, film reviewer, editor, essayist, novelist, feminist, and activist for various causes.

An essayist of great range and distinction, two of her books, *Demanding the Impossible* (2012) and *How Simone de Beauvoir Died in Australia* (2002), are collections of essays crafted around particular issues such as feminism and the May 1968 Paris demands for cultural, social and political change. Her earlier book *The Archibald Paradox* (1983), for which she won the NSW Premier's Prize for Non-Fiction, is simultaneously an historical account of the formative national newspaper *The Bulletin*, and a biography of its editor J.F. Archibald. This work is still our most incisive analysis of the claims the weekly/fortnightly

newspaper has for our attention as a cultural form for representing and intervening in the world. For this book Sylvia drew on her own journalistic experience as one of the core editorial group around the fortnightly national newspaper *Nation* over its life (1958–1972). She combined this with her training in close reading and Australian literary history honed in the English department at the University of Sydney to provide a detailed textual examination of its journalistic writing and practice. She also exercised a cinematic sensibility fashioned as a film critic to attend to the newspaper's visuality, sequences, cuts and juxtapositions, and sense of unfolding in time with the material rituals of reading and handling print. Finally, she capped her analysis with a judicious negotiation of then new currents in what we came to call the 'new humanities' in a nascent cultural and media studies. As this book's 1987 and 2006 republication demonstrates, it has remained as relevant and powerful as when it was first published.

Despite all these achievements, Sylvia is best known as one of Australia's finest film critics. She wrote film reviews, on and off, through the 1960s for *Nation*, and in the early 1970s for *The Australian*; film essays for *Filmnews* in the 1970s and 1980s, and for *Australian Society* in the 1980s. Her last concentrated stint of film reviewing was for *Inside Story* from 2009 to 2016. No matter how many films she had seen right to the end she saw herself as a student of a cinema that could always surprise and challenge her.

In her film writing Sylvia created a space for public conversation on contemporary cinema moving beyond the day and date review into extended criticism. She not only provided in her reviewing insightful reasons as to why the cinema continues to matter but she was also an advocate for a range of cinema, and most particularly for an Australian cinema sensitive to place and local culture, a cinema that could 're-imagine (our) reality'. She championed the work of various filmmakers and entered into a sustained dialogue with their work – whether Robert Connolly's 2009 dramatization in *Balibo*, covering the 1975 killing of five Australian journalists during the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, or Helen Grace's feminist essay-film *Serious Undertakings* (1983) foregrounding the lack of Australian women's voices in the very construction of our cultural and historical record. In her *Nation* film columns, in two high-profile

articles for *Quadrant* and in various public forums and festivals (she was at one stage the director of the Sydney Film Festival), she advanced the case for an Australian cinema. Through this 1960s advocacy she created the conditions for Federal and State government investment in Australia's film revival of the 1970s.

In addition, the Australian Screen book series Sylvia edited for Currency Press over the 1970s and 1980s saw her commissioning and nurturing the first generation of Australian film scholars and creating a lasting market for scholarly writing on Australian film. Sylvia also played a formative role in the development of film and media studies as it entered the academy through her stint in the University-sector from 1976 to the early 1990s first at Griffith University and then at the University of Technology Sydney.

Her one book on film is for the Australian Film Classics series, a study of John Heyer's landmark 1954 documentary *The Back of Beyond*. In that 2013 book she weaved together an account of what it was like to be among the first audiences viewing this film and what it meant to re-view the film today. She wanted the reader to know what it was about *Back of Beyond* that has allowed it to transcend the time and space of its production, enduring in a way that no other Australian documentary has. She found the answer in its historical reckoning with indigenous sovereignty, the bush, a liminal pastoral frontier and its aesthetic realization of the Australian natural and built environment.

Sylvia brought to her consideration of cultural criticism a strong sense of vocation. For Sylvia being a journalist was not simply a job description but an ethical path, a way of being in the world. This journalistic turn directed how she engaged as a critic and scholar. In reviewing Ivan Sen's *Mystery Road* (13 November 2013) for *Inside Story* Sylvia would observe that "within every strong feature film"—and *Mystery Road* was such a film—"there's a documentary, the whole film's grip on the world".

This same documentarist tendency is also evident in the twists and turns she took to explore the wider cultural significance of the building of the Sydney Opera House. Her longstanding interest and focus upon this most famous of Australian buildings began as a cultural history of the iconic building and the cultural and historical events associated with its development, it progressed through a film treatment and script, and eventually became a novel *The Outside Story* (2003). In each iteration she was seeking the best vehicle for disclosing and considering the central truth and lessons she saw in the story. Eventually narrative fiction offered her the best means. But even in writing a novel she was exercising the sensibility and ethics of the committed, unrepentant journalist she never stopped being, seeking in this particular story "the best grip on the world".

Sylvia is survived by her daughter, Morgan Thomas and her two sons, Julian and Nicholas Thomas.

TOM O'REGAN FAHA