

LOUISA LAWSON

Louisa Lawson was the daughter of a station hand. She was born on 'Hungry' Rouses's Guntawang Station near Mudgee in New South Wales in February 1848 and baptized in the homestead drawing room. Louisa resented being kept home from school to care for her younger siblings. She married Niels Hertzberg Larsen (Peter Lawson) in July 1866.

Peter and Louisa joined the Weddin Mountain gold rush and then took up a selection near Mudgee. Louisa's five children were born between 1867 and 1877. As frequently happened at that time, one of their children, her beloved Annette, twin of her surviving daughter, Gertrude, died in infancy. Peter was often away on the goldfields or on contract work. Louisa fattened cattle, opened a store, and ran a post office at Eurunderee. Drought forced them off their farm in 1883. Louisa left for Sydney.

Louisa was only 35 when she arrived in Sydney. In Eurunderee, the centre of her life had to be her family, her house and the selection, the tenuous viability of which – grimly sustained by her towering will – gave life such meaning as it had. Stability for her family was still the centre but in Sydney, but now the centre became her aims and interests. Although the appearance of marriage was retained, the relationship may have actually ended at the time Louisa moved to Sydney.

Louisa's first home in Sydney was in Philip Street. To make ends meet, Louisa took in boarders and then moved the family to a larger house where she took in more boarders. Some of these were compositors from the government printing office. Her whole life had been a battle for sheer existence and her struggles continued. She was also forced to take in sewing and washing. In the 1880s, Louisa became very interested in spiritualism and was a regular visitor to the Progressive Spiritualist Lyceum at Leigh House where she met a variety of radicals, reformers and progressive thinkers. Louisa's true radicalism was the vision she had of the role women could play in a new order, a form of the Utopianism which was a feature of radical thinking in the 1890s.

Louisa's own home in Clarence Street became a meeting place for radicals and also followers of the temperance movement. She became caught up in enthusiasms such as socialism, republicanism, women's issues, poor relief and utopianism.

In 1887-8, with her son, Henry, Louisa edited the *Republican* and, in 1888, opened the *Dawn*, announcing that it would battle for women's rights, and the vote. The *Dawn* offered a mixture of service items – household hints and dressmaking patterns – and literary pieces. It was a commercial success. The *Dawn* turned out to be what Louisa had been seeking for so long. She wrote articles on marriage and even dared to point out that many marriages were not happy. An editorial in June 1892 said, for instance:

'Among the things which we women have to be thankful for stands the unhappy married life ... If the promise solemnly given 'to love and to cherish' were kept, then women would probably have settled down contentedly in their nests for another century or two, and never have evolved'.

In August 1891, a woman wrote to the *Dawn* that she had married because it was the only respectable way of getting a living within society's constraints.

The *Dawn's* mission was to help women to live a better, simpler life and to avoid dependencies of all kinds. Its advertisement proudly proclaimed:

The Dawn remains the only paper in Australia printed and published by women, and no effort will be spared to make and keep it worthy to be the Australian Woman's Journal. By subscribing you will help to enlarge the scope for employment of respectable working women in New South Wales.

The paper tackled many issues. In May 1891, it attacked the beauty cult 'Homely women are frequently good looking. Expression has a lasting charm'. In 1889, painful corsets were the target:

It has come to be believed that corsets are really necessary to the due support and bracing together of a woman; is the race when grown so limp and invertebrate? If anyone is unable to remain perpendicular without a steel waistcoat it is clear that the muscles responsible for her natural support have had no opportunity to develop¹.

In October 1896, an article appeared on how to ride a bicycle, considered an important skill because of the independence it could give and, in July 1891, an article on an issue of importance to all women – being overworked. 'Greater simplicity of life, dress, food and surroundings would at once mitigate, if not abolish, the evil'.

Peter died in December 1888 and left Louisa 1103 pounds which she used to enlarge her printing press and accept job printing. In 1889, the Typographical Association, which refused membership to women, tried to run her out of business. Her printers were all women, trained outside Australia, who were frequently harassed by the unionists.

Quite undaunted, Louisa established the Dawn Club for women in which became a suffrage society. She encouraged women to become practiced public speakers, trained by the Sydney School of Arts debating society which she persuaded to admit women. In her editorials, Louisa argued for the opening of the professions to women, among other more directly political topics, such as the need for all women to be equipped to earn their own living:

The 'bachelor' girl is now the term applied to the young woman who leaves the paternal home and strikes out for herself. She is a more numerous quantity than is generally supposed. In every city there are thousands of these 'bachelor girls' who are putting the bachelor men to shame by their industry and the self respect which they maintain under all circumstances².

Louisa joined the Womanhood Suffrage League when it was established in 1891. After sustaining injuries to her knee and spine in 1900, Louisa was bedridden for many months. She used this time to develop her invention of a buckle for fastening mail bags. The *Dawn* lost much of its spirit after 1901 and closed in 1905. Louisa retired to her cottage at Marrickville and supported herself as a freelance writer. Like Catherine Helen Spence's novel *Clara Morison*, Louisa's poems have recently been evaluated and received some belated acclaim. Louisa's photographs depict her as a tall, big boned, stern faced woman, attributes she regarded with some pride, as she informed the editor of the *Bulletin*. Louisa died in August 1920³.

¹ *The Dawn*, 1 July 1889, pp 5-6

² *The Dawn*, 1 July 1891, p.26.

³ L Rutherford and M Roughley with Nigel Spence, *Louisa Lawson. Collected poems with selected critical commentaries*, University of New England, 1996; B Matthews, *Louisa*, 1987; H Radi, 'Louisa Lawson' in H Radi, ed, *200 Australian women*, pp 51-3.