

A BIOGRAPHY IN PROGRESS

LOUISA LAWSON

By Michelle Scott Tucker

ELEVEN LOST DAWNS – PAGE THREE



Earlier this year, as a visiting researcher at the State Library of NSW, I noticed something was missing from its collection. A series of somethings, in fact.

I didn't quite believe it. According to the astonishing cabinet of wonders that is the library's online catalogue, they were all there.

But when the librarians brought out the relevant journals for me, carefully wrapped in archival paper, it became clear that eleven editions of *The Dawn*, one of Australia's first newspapers for women and which ran monthly for over seventeen years, were missing.

There's an eleven month gap; eleven missing Dawns.

It's as if a slice had been carved out of Nolan's painting of Ned Kelly, or if one of the stone towers was removed from the Harbour Bridge.

To be clear, I did ask a librarian to check. Nope. Then the library doubled-down and double-checked. Still nope. We checked online, on Trove, where digitised editions of *The Dawn* were published as the result of a magnificent fundraising push in 2012. Nope, those eleven early editions are missing from Trove too.

And so it has become clear to me, and to the library itself, that the Library's collection of *The Dawn* is missing nearly a whole year of editions.

Perhaps if the missing editions were from the middle years of publication it wouldn't be so bad. But these are all from the first year of *The Dawn's* production. The library has the very first edition, of May 1888, but then no more until May 1889, which opens with an editorial saying how well the first year has gone.

So, as a researcher, I've no sense of how *The Dawn* evolved across those crucial first months, or of what literary gems they may contain

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But so what? Why is that important?

It's important because *The Dawn* is important. Like that Ned Kelly painting, like the Harbour Bridge, The Dawn is a genuine Australian treasure and a valuable window into our not-so-distant past.

Successfully written, printed and published between 1888 and 1905 by Louisa Lawson (yes, mother of the famous Henry but so much more interesting), *The Dawn* broke new ground, confidently assuming that its female readership was interested in all the things – the political as well as the personal.

The Dawn included editorials on why women should be granted the right to vote. It published articles about the first women to graduate from Sydney University; about raising the age of consent; and about the urgent need to employ women as warders to oversee women in jail. It advertised places of shelter for Sydney's destitute women and sex workers who, it assured its readers, were more "sinned against than sinning."

But it also discussed the proper care of gloves, and provided tips on how to ensure your home smelled nice. Family finances, home remedies, cheese making, short stories and poems, instructions on how to ride a horse, advertisements for baking powder; a section especially for children – *The Dawn* educated and entertained but never, ever condescended.

It was very much the prototype for subsequent magazines like *New Idea* and *The Australian Women's Weekly*.



The Dawn was no vanity project, such as the short-lived periodicals sometimes published by ladies of private means. Louisa Lawson was a working class widow who relied her newspaper to provide an income for her Sydney-based family.

"Here then is *The Dawn*," wrote Louisa Lawson in her inaugural May 1888 editorial. "A phonograph to wind out audibly the whispers, pleadings and demands of the sisterhood. Here we will give publicity to women's wrongs, will fight their battles, assist to repair what evils we can, and give advice to the best of our ability."

Hers was a journal that had to earn its keep through subscriptions, advertising and mail-order services. In fact within its first year or two, *The Dawn* was successful enough to form the foundation of Lawson's wider printing enterprise, where she employed ten women and took on a variety of commercial print jobs.

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The New South Wales Typographical Association, a union which (like most others at that time) denied membership to women, was appalled. During the 1880s the overall percentage of women workers doubled and by the end of the decade they represented 25% of all wage earners. Combined with the Depression of the early 1890s, the union saw women as a serious threat. Its leaders tried to force Lawson to dismiss her all-female workforce, unsuccessfully appealed to advertisers to boycott *The Dawn* and harassed the women at their work.

All to no avail. *The Dawn* continued to flourish, attracting subscribers throughout Australia as well as from New Zealand, Fiji, Britain, Europe and the USA. *The Dawn* could be found in private homes as well as in the many community libraries that sprang up around the time of Australian Federation.

So, given *The Dawn's* widespread popularity, the State Library of NSW is undertaking a nationwide call-out on Monday 12 August, the 104th anniversary of Louisa Lawson's death. The Library would like YOU to check your cupboards for copies of it. Or your sheds. Or those boxes under the house.

We'd also like those wonderful community libraries that in many places still exist – often called Schools of the Arts in New South Wales and Mechanics Institutes in Victoria – to double check their archives. Surely someone has those missing copies of *The Dawn* stashed away somewhere?

If that's you, then the Library can't wait to take your call.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



The next edition in this series will land in your inbox in September.

The SMSA thanks Michelle Scott Tucker for her generosity in sharing her work with us.