

## Australian Dictionary of Biography

### Lawson, Louisa (1848–1920)

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Louisa Lawson (1848-1920), newspaper proprietor, was born on 17 February 1848 on Edwin Rouse's station, Guntawang, near Mudgee, New South Wales, second of twelve children of Henry Albury, station-hand, and his wife Harriet, née Winn, needlewoman. Baptized an Anglican, Louisa was educated at Mudgee National School where J. W. Allpass proposed making her a pupil-teacher. Instead, she was kept home to help to care for her younger siblings and she resented the drudgery. On 7 July 1866 at the Wesleyan parsonage, Mudgee, Louisa married Norwegian-born Niels Hertzberg Larsen who called himself Peter. A handyman and gold digger, he was fluent in several European languages and teetotal. They joined the Weddin Mountain gold rush and later selected forty acres (16 ha) at Eurunderee. By the time of Henry's birth in 1867, they had anglicized the spelling of Larsen.

Between 1867 and 1877 Louisa bore five children. Peter was often away, either at the goldfields or contract building with his father-in-law; Louisa took in sewing, sold dairy produce and fattened cattle. She was an expert four-in-hand driver. The women in her family believe that she was the original for the hard-working, resourceful, kindly and long-suffering bushwomen who feature in her son's stories. The Lawsons joined a Mudgee spiritualist group. Louisa had had a strict Methodist upbringing and though she ceased to attend church she remained deeply religious. When she and the children moved to Sydney in 1883, she found friends through the Progressive Spiritualist Lyceum at Leigh House. She kept up a pretence of being separated from her husband by misfortune, but the marriage had ended.

Peter sent money irregularly to help to support the children and Louisa considered taking legal action. Instead she did sewing and washing and took in boarders. In 1887 she bought the ailing *Republican* (1887-88). Her father though illiterate was a great story-teller. She shared that talent and her poetry, inspired by the death of her infant daughter, had been published in the *Mudgee Independent*. She and Henry edited and wrote most of the *Republican's* copy using 'Archie Lawson' for editorial purposes. In 1888 she started *Dawn*, announcing that it would publicize women's wrongs, fight their battles and sue for their suffrage. It offered household advice, fashion, poetry, a short story and extensive reporting of women's activities both locally and overseas. Louisa added a political editorial on the importance to women of the divorce extension bill. *Dawn* was an immediate commercial success. On 31 December 1888 Peter died, leaving £1103 to Louisa. She enlarged her printing plant and accepted job printing. In 1889 Mrs Lawson was employing ten women, including female printers.

The New South Wales Typographical Association, which refused membership to women, tried to force Mrs Lawson to dismiss her printers. It appealed to advertisers to boycott *Dawn* and harassed the women at their work. Louisa countered with a proclamation of her support for trade unionism. In a different context she advocated the protection of a union for married women and crèches for the benefit of the overworked mothers of large families and those forced to take paid employment. Her practical philanthropy included the Sydney Ragged Schools for which she organized the collection of old clothes and the seeds, bulbs and a prize for a floral competition.

In May 1889 Louisa launched the campaign for female suffrage and announced the formation of the Dawn Club. Who ordained that men only should make the laws which both women and men must obey, she asked, but her case rested on more than abstract justice. Woman's vote was needed to change evil laws and to protect women and their children. At the Dawn Club women met regularly to discuss 'every question of life, work and reform' and to gain experience in public speaking; she persuaded the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts' debating clubs to admit her and encouraged other women to join. In 1893 she became the first woman elected to its board of management. Through *Dawn* she created the public knowledge of women's affairs which helped to move opinion towards enfranchising women. She revealed the instances where the law failed to protect them or where by other means they were prevented from making a reasonable living. She blamed prostitution on men and evil laws and urged parents to equip daughters to earn their living and not keep them at home as unpaid domestic labour. In editorials she presented feminist arguments for opening the legal profession to women, appointing them as prison warders, factory inspectors and magistrates, and giving hospital appointments to female doctors. She added advice on health and the care of children, stressing diet, rest and exercise, and in her fashion page and paper pattern service encouraged women to dress sensibly but attractively. *Dawn* had an extensive country readership and intercolonial and overseas subscribers. It was in regular communication with English and American feminists.

When Mrs Dora Montefiore formed the Womanhood Suffrage League of New South Wales in 1891, Louisa was invited to join and was elected to its council. She allowed it to use *Dawn's* office for meetings and printed its literature free of charge. She frequently spoke at league meetings and although she had enormous energy she was reported in need of a rest by the end of the year. About this time her relationship with Henry became strained although his first volume of verse was published on the *Dawn* press in 1894. She was a savage critic of drunkenness.

Again busy in the campaign in 1892, Louisa was a member of the league's delegation to the premier in October. Her outburst that women needed the vote 'to redeem the world from bad laws passed by wicked men' was unfavourably reported in the press. She was again exhausted and took a well-earned holiday. The failure of the Australian Joint Stock Bank caused her some financial difficulty but *Dawn* survived. She was drawn into the dispute in the league over allowing speeches on subjects other than the suffrage at its meetings. When her friend Lady Windeyer was outvoted and resigned as president, Louisa in December 1893 withdrew from its council. Although she gave as her reason her recent move to Tempe, she had wept on hearing of the president's resignation. She remained a financial member of the league and continued to do its printing and supply publicity in *Dawn*.



Louisa Lawson, 1880s

State Library of New South Wales, 889803

In 1895 and 1897 Mrs Lawson took out a miner's right, presumably to demonstrate an inconsistency in the electoral law. At the celebratory meeting after women were enfranchised in New South Wales in 1902, she was publicly acclaimed as the originator of the suffrage campaign. She had become involved in protracted legal proceedings in an attempt to protect a patent which she had taken out on a mailbag fastener and for which she was meagrely compensated. She was thrown from a tram and suffered a fractured knee and injured her spine in 1900, taking over a year to recover, but in 1902 she was again active politically. On the council of the Women's Progressive Association she resumed her campaign to secure appointment of women to public office.

Following her accident she lost some of the vitality and inventiveness which had helped to make *Dawn* a success. Her friend Mrs E. J. Todd, who had been one of her journalists, remembered her as 'so full of original ideas that she always seemed to have plenty to spare for others'. Novelties disappeared from *Dawn* and there were fewer lively short-paragraph news items. Advertising fell away and in 1905 *Dawn* closed.

Afterwards Louisa lived in lonely and increasingly impoverished circumstances. She secured a publisher for two volumes of verse and sold a few poems and a number of short stories. She enjoyed her garden in which she had planted natives. Her 'Dolley Dear' poems capture the humour and warmth of the old woman's love for children. Louisa died in the Hospital for the Insane, Gladesville, on 12 August 1920. She had been living alone before being admitted in 1918, her memory failing but still strong willed. She was buried with Methodist forms in the Anglican section of Rookwood cemetery. Her estate, valued for probate at £629, was left to her son Peter who was father of nine of her beloved grandchildren.

A block of Housing Commission flats at North Bondi was named after her in 1952. In most surviving photographs, she is stern faced. Big-boned, as befitted a countrywoman, she is to be remembered for her reply to the editor of the *Bulletin's* 'Red Page': 'And why shouldn't a woman be tall and strong?'

### Select Bibliography

- B. Kiernan, *The Essential Henry Lawson* (Melb, 1982)
- E. Fry (ed), *Rebels and Radicals* (Syd, 1983)
- *Woman's Budget*, 28 Aug 1920
- *Australian Literary Studies*, 9 (1980), no 3, 10 (1982), no 4
- *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 17 Oct 1892
- *Nation*, 25 Oct 1958, 14 Dec 1962
- Louisa Lawson papers, scrapbook and poems (State Library of New South Wales)
- B. Lawson, *Memoir of Henry Lawson* (State Library of New South Wales)
- G. O'Connor, *Louisa Lawson and Her Life Work* (State Library of New South Wales)
- Rose Scott papers (State Library of New South Wales).

### Additional Resources

- [Trove search](#)
- [is the publisher of Dawn, a new monthly periodical written by women for women, Australian Town and Country Journal, 2 June 1888, p 14](#)
- [has started a club and reading room for women in Sydney, Australian Town and Country Journal, 2 November 1889, p 35, column 3](#)
- [is elected to the committee of the Sydney School of Arts; it is the first time a woman has held the position, Table Talk \(Melbourne\), 17 March 1893, p 2, column 2](#)
- [is elected vice-president of the Women's Progressive Society \(England\), Dawn \(Sydney\), 1 April 1893, p 14](#)
- [designs a mailbag fastener, Evening News \(Sydney\), 10 October 1896, p 4](#)
- [interview, Morning Bulletin \(Rockhampton, Qld\), 27 October 1896, p 6](#)
- [a rich quartz leader has been discovered in Sapling Gully, left to Louisa by her husband, Dawn \(Sydney\), 1 January 1898, p 12, column 1](#)
- [has been confined to bed for the last two months after falling from a tram, Dawn \(Sydney\), 1 April 1900, p 31, column 1](#)
- [successfully sues the Railways Commissioners for 450 pds for the accident, Sydney Morning Herald, 29 June 1900, p 4, column 5](#)
- [item about the accident and subsequent court case, Dawn \(Sydney\), 1 August 1900, p 20](#)
- [sues Edward Murray for infringing her patent rights in a buckle, Australian Star \(Sydney\), 13 February 1902, p 7](#)
- [the court finds in Louisa's favour, Australian Star \(Sydney\), 14 February 1902, p 7](#)
- [is selling her farm, Eurunderee, Mudgee Guardian \(NSW\), 18 June 1903, p 11](#)
- [is to cease publishing the Dawn, Tocsin \(Melbourne\), 21 September 1905, p 4](#)
- [photo, Sun \(Sydney\), 8 December 1918, p 19](#)
- [profile, Sydney Mail, 2 November 1927, p 30](#)
- [profile, Windsor and Richmond Gazette \(NSW\), 4 December 1931, p 6](#)
- [a memorial seat in her honour is to be erected in the Domain, Morning Bulletin \(Rockhampton, Qld\), 23 August 1941, p 3](#)
- [Louisa Lawson House is a health and therapy centre for women, run by women in Arncliffe, Sydney, Tharunka \(Kensington, NSW\), 1 September 1986, p 7](#)

### Related Entries in NCB Sites

- [Lawson, Louisa](#) 
- [Lawson, Henry \(son\)](#) 
- [Windeyer, Mary Elizabeth \(friend\)](#)  

[view family tree](#)

- [Todd, Ellen Joy \(friend\)](#) 
- [Holden, Frances Gillam \(colleague\)](#) 
- [Scott, Rose \(colleague\)](#) 
- [Montefiore, Dorothy Frances \(colleague\)](#) 
- [Windeyer, Margaret \(colleague\)](#)  
- [Roth, Adam \(neighbour\)](#) 
- [Rouse, Edwin \(related entry\)](#) 

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