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REPORT

DIGITISE *THE DAWN*

Campaigning for Louisa Lawson's Journal for Australian Women to be Digitised and Made Available Online

Donna Benjamin

'There has hitherto been no trumpet through which the concentrated voices of womankind could publish their grievances and their opinions.' So wrote Louisa Lawson in the first edition of her Journal for Australian Women, *The Dawn*, in 1888.

Trove is a web-based search service focused on Australia and Australians that aims to supplement the results provided by other search engines. One of its most exciting features is access to Australia's digitised newspapers, and crowd-sourced corrections to the digital text generated by automated optical character recognition software. Trove was designed 'to provide a single point of access to the resources of the deep web and facilitate access to a significantly greater range of resources from major sources, including selected digitised material freely available online', yet to date it does not include some of the more important Australian historical documents, such as *The Dawn*.

The Dawn is regarded by some to be Australia's first feminist journal. It was not the only publication of its kind, but it was the longest lived, and is a rich primary record of the times. The view of Australian life recorded in *The Dawn* conveyed a different story to that told in the pages of the *Bulletin*. These two early Australian publications presented very different pictures of the Australian character—one of the solo bushman, the other a domestic homefront. The *Bulletin* argued for the way of the single man, and *The Dawn* spoke of the home, and family, and advocated a role for women as a civilising influence on the rough and ready frontier of colonial Australia (Bloodworth 1998; Lake 1986; Lake 1996).

New South Wales State archives have an affidavit stating that Louisa Lawson was 'Proprietress, Publisher and Printer' of the *Dawn* newspaper (Newspaper affidavits for *The Dawn* 1901). She was a tireless campaigner for women's right to vote, to work and to receive fair pay for that work. She exclusively employed women to produce the publication. By October 1889, 10 women were employed as typesetters, printers, binders, and unskilled workers. At one time Lawson's press was blackbanned for employing non-unionised labour, namely women (Lawson 1889b). At the time, however, women were not admitted to the New South Wales Typographical Association (Hagan 1965; Stevens 1998).

In the late 1800s many women were employed as journalists for Australian newspapers and journals, but their writing was found largely in the social pages. A small number of women ran their own magazines for a female readership, employing female writers. *The Dawn* was arguably the most famous of these and centred on Lawson's own editorial on subjects of concern to women, including, for many years, the campaign for female suffrage in Australia (Lemmon 2008).

The Dawn contained stories on many feminist issues, including divorce, the age of consent and the evils of corsetry (Lawson 1889a). As well as operating as an important vehicle for the communication of feminist politics the paper also contained short stories, fashion notes, sewing patterns and reports on women's activities around the country and overseas, and in 1896, the subtitle was changed from 'Journal for Australian Women' to 'A Journal for the Household', reflecting the fact it was also being widely read by men.

Louisa was born in Guntawang, NSW on 17 February 1848. Singled out amongst her peers as having the potential to teach and lead, J.W. Allpass suggested she should act as a pupil-teacher at Mudgee National School. Instead, she married Norwegian Peter Larsen, and brought five children into the world, one of whom, Henry Lawson is well known to most Australians. Her great granddaughter, Dr Elizabeth Lawson, has also carried the family propensity for wordsmithing.

Louisa Lawson was the driving force behind *The Dawn's* success. So much so that when her drive diminished after being injured in a tram accident, there was no one else to take up the reins and continue to run the publication. The publication printed its last edition in 1905, a mere three years after Australian women obtained the right to vote.

The idea to mount a campaign to digitise *The Dawn* formed when doing background research for a conference presentation for the Haecksen mini-conference held in conjunction with Australia's largest free and open source software conference, linux.conf.au in Brisbane in January 2011. I wanted to uncover early examples of women working in Information and Communications technologies to bust some of the prevailing myths in our industry that women are rare mythical creatures.

I was already aware of *The Dawn*, and turned to the Trove's online collection of digitised newspapers, only to be disappointed to discover it had not yet been digitised. The National Library indicated it was not on the immediate schedule for digitisation, however they said that 'from July 2011 we are seeking to digitise additional titles funded by other libraries and institutions'. This prompted me to ask how much money would be required. And that's how it all began.

From that point on, I asked friends and colleagues what they thought of the idea. Without exception everyone agreed it would be worth the effort to gather funds for the library to prioritise the digitisation of *The Dawn* so that all might benefit. So I set up a website, and called for donations via PayPal. The organiser of the Haecksen mini-conference, Lana Brindley, also passed the hat around to collect cash donations—which kickstarted the fund. On International Women's Day we exceeded our target of \$7,500.00, and the National Library has indicated it will put *The Dawn* on the list of titles to be digitised and added to the Trove project online.

The *Dawn* banner proclaimed: 'A day, an hour of virtuous liberty is worth a whole eternity in bondage.' As an important Australian newspaper, it educated, informed and engaged women and men from across the social and political spectrum (Lee 2008).

The Trove is already a very rich resource. It will be made all the richer when resources such as *The Dawn* are added to the collection.

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