

THE DAWN CLUB



Lawson was a writer of men, specifically bushmen. The city was a place to be avoided for its wives and its wowsers: those who tamed men and denied their pleasures. Yet up close, Lawson's stories and poems are more nuanced than the simple Bulletin stereotype. Lawson's predilection for authentic representation tapped into an emerging, distinctively modern Australian womanhood. Lawson's early admiration is embodied in stories like 'The Drover's Wife' (1892) – depicting a tough and reflective woman who seems to be embedded in the very land itself, and whose resourcefulness was in synch with the progressive ferment of the times.

The women pegged on tea-towels around the museum were shadowy yet potent forces in Henry Lawson's chaotic personal life, from his formative years in Gulgong to his heady Bulletin days and then slow, crumbling decline into alcoholism and early death.

Fiona MacDonald rinses conventional literary wisdom to restore a female perspective that is usually overlooked. Her tea-towel portraits, screen-printed in the cheerful and determined suffragette colours of green and purple on white span the museum space like decorative bunting, or crisp lines of laundry hung to dry. They evoke the domestic realm, but each woman depicted exasperatedly tells us that she is not simply one of Lawson's women, but a person in own her own right.

Dr Catriona Moore
University of Sydney

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'The Dawn Club' began with a deep dive into the archive of the Henry Lawson Centre in Gulgong. The archive exists to record the life and work of iconic Australian writer Henry Lawson and consists of photos, artworks, first edition books, manuscripts which reveal much about Henry Lawson's concerns - justice for workers, the republic, the plight of the poor, and the emancipation of women. It is the last which is of particular interest for this project – as the 'Dawn Club' is about the women in Henry's life.

After immersion in the archive, I surfaced with sympathy for the women who were closest to Lawson - his mother, lovers, wife, daughter, colleagues and carers. The fragmentary traces of their lives in the archives record the practicalities of women's lives and their daily personal fight for rights and freedoms that underpins the grand arc of the history of emancipation. Domestic realities often set against the freedom and time to write.

'The Dawn Club' is a series of portraits based on archival images of eight of the women who were the closest to Henry Lawson. The portraits cut as paper stencils, screen printed onto fabric and hung from lines strung between the interior walls of the Henry Lawson Centre evokes their domestic realm while each subject in turn denies her connection to Lawson to assert her separate existence.

Fiona MacDonald, November 2021.

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The Dawn Club is an exhibition and museum intervention by Kandos based artist Fiona MacDonald.

In partnership with the Henry Lawson Centre Gulgong and with funding through the NSW Government, Orana Arts initiated the HARd (Heritage Artist Residency) project. It sought to connect artists with regional museums in order to include community voices that might be underrepresented or missing from the museum displays.

HARd is an outcome of Orana Art's VAMP. The Volunteers. Artists. Museums. Program (VAMP) is an Orana Arts initiative that connects regional, volunteer-run museums in NSW with artists and creative makers. It seeks to reimagine and reinterpret the way the stories of the regions and its people are told. Artist Josh Yasserie will undertake a HARd residency at the Mudgee Museum in 2022.

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