

At the Margins: Working-Class Women's Traditions in the Poetry and Poetics of Mary Fortune and Louisa Lawson

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The poetic practices of Mary Fortune (1833-1911) and later Louisa Lawson (1848-1920) exemplify the complex political functions of women's working-class poetics in colonial Australia throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Colonial Australian women's poetry has been relatively under-examined, apart from some studies such as Michael Ackland's *That Shining Band: A Study of Colonial Verse Tradition* (1994), and a chapter by Elizabeth Webby in Debra Adelaide's *A Bright and Fiery Troop* (1988), "Born to Blush Unseen: Some Nineteenth Century Women Poets." This marginality is even more marked with regard to women's poetry which engages with working-class writing traditions. Referring to working-class poetry in the British context, Florence Boos notes that "It is revealing that only meagre selections of Chartist poetry appear in the anthologies we have, though Chartist writings comprised the most widely known forms of working-class verse" ("Class and Victorian Poetics" 3). This essay argues that the poetry of Mary Fortune and Louisa Lawson include important examples of colonial women's poetry being engaged with "songs of labour" and, more broadly, a tradition of working-class women's writing. Their work spans the second half of the nineteenth century, reflecting a shift from early Chartist influences to more distinctively Australian expressions of radicalism later in the century. These poets' links with working-class traditions are both formal and thematic, building on oral traditions, and a communal poetics of the people. Fortune's "Song of the Gold Diggers" (1855) and Lawson's "They Are Taking the Old Piano" (1906) can be read as advancing radical egalitarian understandings of labour and gender.

Both poems, despite apparent differences in style, were imbricated in a gendered poetics of the domestic and sentimental. Fortune's ballad, "Song of the Gold Diggers," the first poem she published in Australia, is a striking example of radical verse, while Lawson's "They Are Taking the Old Piano" may be read as "sentimental" rather than overtly radical. However, its highly affective style and encouragement of sympathy for the poor works to develop a political critique along class lines. Boos points out that much "working-class women's poetry has been brushed aside as apolitical and sentimental versification" ("Class and Victorian Poetics" 4), with Eliza Cook's "The Old Arm-Chair" as an example of a popular poem which became a sentimental favourite. However, connections between the radical and the "sentimental" are significant to both Lawson and Fortune's poetry, particularly in terms of the ways they relate to gender and colonial poetry of the "new world."

The politics of gender and labour operating in both Fortune and Lawson's poems situates these poems within the broader history of a working-class women's tradition. While, as indicated above, little has been written about working-class poetics in colonial Australian women's poetry, the connections with traditions outside of Australia including Britain suggest "preferences for ballads and songs over more 'formal' genres such as blank verse and the dramatic monologue" (Boos, *Not So Lowly* 21). The first poem published by Mary Fortune after her arrival on the Victorian goldfields was a ballad, "Song of the Gold Diggers." It appeared in the *Mount Alexander Mail* in December of 1855, and a week later was reprinted by the *Bendigo Advertiser*, under the signature "M. H. F." Fortune's choice of

pseudonym crucially concealed her gender as well as her identity, leaving her free to write outside the constraints of conventionally feminine poetics.

“Song of the Gold Diggers” celebrates the hopes of equality and political freedom for emigrants to Australia in the mid-nineteenth century. Set against the social flux of the goldfields, Fortune’s poem has rightly been considered by Clare Wright to be an important example of radical goldfields poetry by women, like that of the less well-known Ellen Young (308). However, the poem’s representations of labour and its appeal for the importance of the rights and equality of the diggers in the “new world” connect directly to the Chartist poetic tradition in which the dignity of manual labour was a recurrent theme. Ernest Jones’s “A Chartist Chorus” (1846), first published in the *Northern Star*, is an example of one such Chartist ballad celebrating the freedom of the working class: “And now we’ll be—as bold and free, / As we’ve been tame and slavish” (169). Fortune’s “Song of the Gold Diggers” begins:

Hurrah for the free new land!
 And hurrah for the diggers bold!
 And hurrah for the strong unfettered right
 To search in the hills for gold!
 Turn up the sods, my strong free mates,
 And dig with a fearless hand:
 For there’s not a castled lordling here,
 In all this glorious land.

“Song of the Gold Diggers” is written from the masculine perspective of a digger. This is particularly evident in the final stanzas, which read:

Breathe for a moment, one glad breath,
 Throw up the shadeless brow:
 Where is the paid task-master’s eye?
 We never were men till now! —
 Men with a right to toil,
 Men with a right to speak!
 And a strength we will never use, please God,
 To trample down the weak!

Oh! brightly gleams the ore
 In the digger’s cradle rocked;
 But ’tis found in a bank-till free to all
 In a coffer all unlocked.
 Then dig! ’tis for wife and babes,
 We are marring beauties now,
 But the time will come for the waving grain,
 And our sons shall hold the plough!

On the strength of this and a few other early poems, the editor of the *Mount Alexander Mail*, Charles Augustus Saint, offered “M. H. F.” a job as sub-editor and reporter. As Lucy Sussex puts it, Saint made the offer “quite unsuspecting that his contributor was a second Speranza” (“Mary Fortune and Her Poetry” 19) but quickly withdrew it “upon revelation of her gender” (Sussex, *ADB*).

Certainly, Fortune's publication of "Song of the Gold Diggers" (and other political verses) side-stepped the expectations placed on middle-class nineteenth-century women poets, particularly around the acceptable subjects of women's poetry, which was expected to focus on the domestic, especially motherhood, and religious content. "Song of the Gold Diggers," by contrast, joyously celebrates labour as a means to achieve a perceived victory of democratic values in a colonial setting. It is most likely that Fortune was aware of contemporary women poets, given her earlier commission to write for the London *Ladies' Companion* which included contributions by women poets including Mary Howitt and Geraldine Jewsbury (*Dictionary* 340). Margaret Forsyth has, however, pointed to evidence in a study of British case studies of a far greater knowledge of male poets than of both "literary grandmothers" and women contemporaries, adding that:

[I]f working-class women's poetry was constrained by "masculine" forms and structures, the working-class women poets' range of themes was not. Writing from "below" and excluded from literary history by their gender and class, they addressed issues such as industrialisation and sexual and social identity in addition to traditionally "female" themes of love, friendship, and family. (260)

While Fortune's poem reflects the breadth of the working-class women poets' thematic range, it is also clear that she was using a politically radical "new world" male space to challenge ideas of power and social hierarchies.

Fortune's "Song of the Gold Diggers" (1856) is closely connected with the ideals and thematic concerns of Chartist poetry, transposing them to the "new world." In Britain, the significance of poetry, and particularly lyric poetry, to the Chartist movement has been noted by scholars including Florence Boos, Anne Janowitz, and Solveig Robinson. While "Historians have often pointed to the links between British Chartism and the Eureka protest, highlighting the similarities between the People's Charter and the Ballarat Reform League's 'Diggers' Charter'" (Wright 310), the significance of the accompanying poetry in colonial Australia has received comparatively little attention, particularly that written by women. As Wright points out:

The Eureka Stockade has long been portrayed as a hyper-masculine episode in Australian history, because of the myth of the goldfields as an exclusively male domain and the tangible outcome of the Ballarat uprising of 1854—manhood suffrage. (305)

Significantly, Fortune would in the following year "bloom in the Poets Corner," as she herself put it, as an important example of women's engagement with a Chartist poetics in the goldfields press.

Fortune's "Song of the Gold Diggers" was written at Kangaroo Flat where she lived on the goldfields, in the year of her arrival in Australia. A number of Fortune's short stories were also set on the goldfields, as well as her later serial "Twenty-Six Years Ago; Or the Diggings From '55," which ran from 1882-83 in the *Australian Journal*, published in Melbourne. This memoir, as Megan Brown notes, "highlights women's experience living in the goldfields," just as Fortune's fiction had:

Many of her stories articulate a need for a new standard of behaviour for women. Her writing makes it clear that 'old country' prejudices and the standard by which respectability was judged had to change to suit the environment. (106)

In “Twenty-Six Years Ago” Fortune also reflects on the political radicalism of her first poems published in Australia—the ones which had attracted the attention of the editor of the *Mount Alexander Mail*:

Coming almost directly from America (Canada), and being young, you know, perhaps it was natural that in a new land and among scenes in which law was of but little account, I should bloom in the Poets Corner as a thorough Democrat. (338)

As Brown points out, Fortune’s description of herself as “a thorough Democrat” even in a context that “suggests that her political agenda was just the frivolity of youth . . . confirms for the reader that the underlying egalitarian message is intentional” and moreover that “a ‘new land’ where ‘law was of little account’ created an egalitarian environment where one could construct a new writing identity” (Brown 118). Fortune also later reprinted early poems from *The Mount Alexander Mail* in the *Australian Journal*, such as “Climb up the Hill” republished as “Excelsior,” with edits to accommodate a more conservative readership. It does seem likely that the changes reveal her need, as a writer who made her living by her pen, to tailor her work to particular audiences and contexts, rather than necessarily revealing a fundamental shift in her approach.

However, as much as Fortune draws on colonial differences to explain her own egalitarian approach, and her freedom to express it in verse, her “Song of the Gold Diggers” is stylistically and thematically typical of Chartist poetry. Defining features of British Chartist poetry include a poetics of the people as a collective, reflected in the use of inclusive language—as in the line “We are toiling for our own”—as well as the expression of a high regard for the dignity of manual labour. Isobel Armstrong points out that “poets who contributed songs to the [Chartist] movement were poets before and after it dissolved as an *organised* movement. Though the unique rhetoric of solidarity is hard to find again, many poets went on publishing protest poems” (*Victorian Poetry* 193). Fortune’s “Song of the Gold Diggers” is simultaneously a protest against the “fatherland” and a celebration of solidarity and freedom among the diggers, presenting “the new free land” as one in which “there’s a mighty strength in our beating hearts / We are toiling for our own!” (11-12). Oppressive working conditions are associated firmly with the “old world” and Fortune urges an unsentimental break with the past in the line, “never a lingering look cast back / To the land where we were slaves” (15-16). In the third stanza, quoted above, the speaker gleefully asks “where is the paid task master’s eye?” and replies that “there’s not a castled lordling here / in all this glorious land.” Fortune’s poem “Climb up the Hill,” first published in the *Mount Alexander Mail* (1855),¹ as well as later poems including “Work with a Will” (1875) and “Boronia” (1907), consistently expressed a high regard for the dignity of manual labour.

In 1875, “Work with a Will” won the guinea prize in the *Australian Journal*. Much like her earlier experience with the *Mount Alexander Mail*, Fortune’s identity (and gender) seems to have been successfully concealed. The editorial specifically noted that “the author of the successful contribution proves to be our old contributor, Waif Wander (W. W.), although quite unknown to the judges at the time of making the award” (“The Competitive Poems” 76). In the original announcement of the winning poem, a month prior in September, it was noted that “the judges, consisting of Mr. Marcus Clarke, Mr. G. Gordon McCrae and the

¹ “Climb up the Hill” was republished as “Excelsior” under the name of Waif Wander, in the *Australian Journal* (1880). For a listing of Mary Fortune’s poetry see the 1997 bibliography by Lucy Sussex and Elizabeth Gibson, *Mary Fortune*, Victorian Fiction Research Guide No. 27 [1997]. http://victorianfictionresearchguides.org/mary-fortune/#identifier_0_2496.

editor of this journal . . . have awarded the prize to the author of a poem entitled ‘Work with a Will’ by ‘Nessuno’” (“The Prize Poem” 57). It is likely that Fortune’s consciousness of gender bias was a factor in her choice to obscure her identity by not using the pen-name “Waif Wander,” by then a very well-known contributor and known to be a woman. “Nessuno” may be read as a particularly playful self-effacement, translating as “nobody” from the Italian. The poem opens with the lines:

I am writing a song for the Boys of the East
 To listen, and learn, and be told
 As a treasure to carry more precious by far
 In the journey of life than its gold.
 Be the work what it may—of the hand or the head,
 The mind or the fallow to till
 With the pencil or plough, with the axe or the pen,
 Do your work in the world with a Will!
 (“The Competitive Poems” 76)

The theme of labour and its dignity is conspicuous in much of her poetry. However, this later poem significantly includes the literary work such as that undertaken by Fortune herself. As Sussex notes, “it is not known what schooling she [Fortune] received, but she was adept at written English, sometimes used an educated Copperplate hand, and sprinkled her works with Gallicisms and Latin tags” (“Shrouded in Mystery” 119).

Both Fortune and Lawson reflect the influence of a working-class poetics in the ways their poems represent gender and labour in the “new world.” Sussex also emphasises Fortune’s radical rejection of the concept of dependant femininity and compares her with Louisa Lawson:

A greater departure from the image of the Angel on the Hearth . . . could hardly be imagined. It is not too great a claim that she likely influenced Louisa Lawson, an *Australian Journal* reader, who was later to provide similar sentiments in *The Dawn*. (“What the Mischief” xx)

Fortune’s listing of the rights “to toil” and “to speak” at the end of “Song of the Gold Diggers” is particularly pertinent, given the restrictions faced by women poets for whom questions of labour and political voice are entwined. In the lines “Men with a right to toil! / Men with a right to speak!” Fortune is advocating these freedoms and new-world ideals. However, in “Song of the Gold Diggers” she also draws attention to the “wives and babes”: “And a strength we will never use, please God, / To trample down the weak!” As Solveig Robinson says of the contemporary British Chartist poetics of Eliza Cook (1818-89), these “songs of labor express a radical vision of a fundamentally more democratic England, a vision that fuses an idealistic belief in the dignity of manual work with a pragmatic belief in the efficacy of self-improvement through cooperation and education” (229-30). As Robinson also suggests, “through her employment of simple and direct language and regular meters, and through her sympathetic depiction of the pains and the pleasures of working-class life, Cook’s poems share many of the distinguishing features of Chartist poetry” (230). Fortune’s poems certainly express the same values as Cook’s songs of labour, in a colonial context.

Eliza Cook’s Journal, a penny weekly, began in 1849 in Britain, and Cook was to become a highly popular international presence. It has been noted that “the enormous popularity of the journal was marked by its having outsold even Charles Dickens’ *Household Words* and the

fact that much of it was reissued in 1860 as *Jottings from my Journal*" (Armstrong, Bristow, Sharrock, 359). Robinson points out that "her role in radical Unitarian and feminist circles has been given critical attention, especially recently," and Cook's journal, as both a self-published journal and as a space for the publication of her own poetry, may be seen as an important precursor to *The Dawn* (1888-1905), the monthly feminist journal Louisa Lawson both edited and published. As Boos has pointed out:

[W]orking-class women poets flourished about half a generation after their male counterparts . . . between 1850 and 1880, a period in which girls began to benefit from limited basic education and a few journals opened their pages to women. (*Working-Class Women Poets* 41)

Although women certainly published in periodicals prior to this, I want to suggest that this earlier flourishing period of working-class women poets in Britain is significant to Fortune's poetry as well as Lawson's work in *The Dawn* and other periodicals, and to their poetics more broadly. While Fortune's poetry coincides with this proliferation of contemporary mid-century working-class women's voices, Lawson was writing much later at the *fin de siècle* with a more established tradition of working-class women's writing to draw on.

The probable significance of Eliza Cook's achievements as a British woman poet of the working class to the formation of ideas of identity in Lawson's poetry is also clear. Cook, unlike Lawson, is best known as a poet, and, like Lawson, the journal she published included her own poetry as well as articles and household advice. Cook's poetry was popular in America and was also frequently reprinted in Australian newspapers, one example being "The Heart That's True," printed in *The Argus* in 1851. In its digital collection, The National Library of Australia holds the scores for Australian music written by Ellen May Cave to Eliza Cook's "Remembrance," as well as "The Englishman" by Eliza Cook, with music composed by John Blockley, and "The Old Arm-Chair" by Eliza Cook, with music by Henry Russell. Cook's popular presence in Australia makes it likely that Lawson's "The Old Piano," written seventy years later, could be influenced by and evoke memories of "The Old Arm-Chair," which was reprinted in colonial Australian newspapers through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Lawson's "They Are Taking the Old Piano" and Cook's "The Old Arm-Chair" are both poems in which memory is evoked through the emphasis placed on specific physical objects relating to the "domestic sphere" within a tradition of working-class women's poetry.

Memory is highly significant to oral and popular poetry, particularly as passed down through song. Even as a child, Schaffer recounts, Louisa Lawson "appears to have exhibited a great talent for poetry and music, writing verse at school and singing to the diggers in the pubs (but also in church!) in a strong soprano voice" (140). The connections of working-class women's poetry to song have been well established. Boos, for example, points out that:

Drawing on deep oral traditions, all the rural working-class women poets I have studied—as well as many of their urban sisters—composed poetic "songs" . . . working-class autobiographers recorded the powerful influence of songs they heard in childhood. ("Not So Lowly Bards" 29)

It is through music as well as periodical print culture that Lawson would most likely have been familiar with Cook's poetry, which was frequently reprinted in Australian newspapers. Robinson suggests that:

Marked by a directness of language and general simplicity of structure, Cook's lyrics appealed to readers of all classes: a biographical notice in the 1883 *Notable Women of Our Own Times* states that her poems were as likely to be quoted and sung "in the backwoods of America, or in the bush of Australia, as in the midst of civilized society at home" [13], and her obituary in the *Times* (September 26, 1889) acknowledges that in her heyday her name was a "household word." (230)

The setting of Cook's poems to music reflects the acceptance of class messages in popular poem-as-song. Elizabeth Webby and Philip Butterss note the importance of ballads in Australian literary history: "An early and perhaps not unbiased view was held by staff at *The Bulletin*, who believed that Australian Literature had its very origin in the ballads which studded the pages of that journal during the 1890s" (Butterss & Webby xvii). Lawson published poetry in *The Bulletin* and various other periodicals as well as in *The Dawn*. Boos further notes "Ballads of history also expressed a preference for truth and truth telling over fiction" ("Not so Lowly Bards" 30); it is this sense of truth-telling which underpins the radicalism of both "The Old Arm-Chair" and "They Are Taking the Old Piano." Cook's popular presence in Australia is an example of the working-class use of the ballad or song form as a radical expression of cultural memory, an important aspect of Lawson's "They Are Taking the Old Piano":

They are taking the old piano,
 They are lifting it from the floor,
 To carry it to the waggon,
 That stands at the old home door.

And mother is mutely watching,
 With tears on her faded cheek,
 I wonder of what she's thinking;
 Her heart is too full to speak.

Perhaps of the day he brought her,
 While out from a roseate arch,
 There rang from the old piano
 Bright strains of the "Bridal March."

Or may be when long years after,
 It wailed "the dead march in Saul"
 As slowly he went forever,
 Enwrapped in a funeral pall.

I know by her pain drawn features,
 How tightly the chords entwine,
 I know that empty corner
 To her is a ruined shrine.

We're selling the old piano,
 We're selling to buy us bread,
 And keep for a while longer,
 The old roof over her head.

(*Collected Poems* 144)

Both Cook and Lawson's poems are specifically concerned with addressing memory and sentiment by embodying them in objects. Boos has pointed out that "perhaps the most distinctive subgenre in the poetry of nineteenth-century working-class women was the 'ballad of memorie,'" which took various forms and often merged personal testimony with collective memory ("Not So Lowly Bards" 29).

"They Are Taking the Old Piano," like "The Old Arm-Chair," moves temporally from the present to the past, and back to the present. This present is contrasted with a time in which "there rang from the old piano / bright strains of the bridal march." Significantly, in valuing both the piano and the old arm-chair sentimentally, these poems are disrupting and problematising a purely monetary approach to the value of these objects. Cook's poem is emotionally charged in its emphasis on both the memory of her mother and the relationship of her mother to the chair:

I learnt how much the heart can bear,
When I saw her die in that old Arm-chair.

'Tis past, 'tis past, but I gaze on it now,
With quivering breath and throbbing brow.
(Armstrong, Bristow, Sharrock, 361, 23-26)

Kathryn Ledbetter's point that "The Old Arm-Chair" "sanctifies motherhood and the material manifestation of memory and place" (4) is as true of Lawson's poem, which contrasts the past vibrancy of the piano's music with the mother's silence, as she stands, "mutely watching / with tears on her faded cheek" amid the memory of the "bright strains" of the piano's music.

Lawson's "They Are Taking the Old Piano" builds thematically from a point at which the sanctity of a past sentimental attachment is recognised. This sanctity of the physical manifestation of memory is articulated by earlier working-class women's poetry, such as Cook's "The Old Arm-Chair," which opens with frank recognition of the devalued position she is taking in writing a sentimental, domestic piece about an old chair. The speaker defiantly asks the reader, ". . . and who shall dare / To chide me for loving that old Arm-chair?" (Armstrong, Bristow, Sharrock, 360, lines 1-2). Cook challenges dismissive approaches to the emotional and political significance of the sentimental object. The speaker recalls:

In Childhood's hour I lingered near
The hallowed seat with listening ear;
And gentle words that mother would give;
To fit me to die, and teach me to live.
She told me shame would never betide,
With truth for my creed and God for my guide.
(361, lines 9-14)

Lawson's "They Are Taking the Old Piano" and Cook's "The Old Arm-Chair" are remarkably similar in their insistence on the sanctity of motherhood, memory and the domestic space. Susan Zlotnick has also noted more broadly "the nostalgic impulse in Chartist literature" in which "nostalgic recollections of a Golden past collide and merge with the domestic ideal" (174), an ideal which was by the mid-nineteenth century embraced by the working class as well as the middle classes as a dominant social discourse. The various iterations of this conceptual separation of the "domestic sphere" from the "public," as Zlotnick suggests,

emphasised a femininity based on the ideal of “the domestic woman whose innocence of mercantile considerations underwrites the moral power she possesses” (129). Magazines and journals from this period plentifully provided detailed articles outlining strict expectations of the domestic ideal, centred around devoutness and dutiful, selfless devotion to the family, home, and domestic tasks.

Lawson’s poem both draws attention to the domestic ideal of dependant Victorian femininity and the interrelated masculinisation of paid work outside of the home, and challenges the “morality” of these gendered understandings of work. Lawson’s poem contrasts a point in time in which a husband’s financial support was available to the mother, with a present in which it is no longer possible due to his death. Furthermore, Zlotnick points out that the dominant discourse around gender and labour “For the working man, resecured the conventional patterns of patriarchal authority threatened by industrialism” (169) and that to “restrain female competition in the workplace, the working-class man adopted a representation of waged work that excluded women” (191). In “They Are Taking the Old Piano” the ramifications of such cultural idealisations of women’s financial dependency and exclusion from paid work are evoked through the emotional emphasis placed on the piano as a specific physical object relating to the “domestic sphere,” its value being both sentimental and economic.

“They Are Taking the Old Piano” also takes its political significance through a preoccupation with the past, through a particularly gender-conscious lens. Rather than simply relating an individual experience, however, Lawson’s poem emphasises class, financial hardship, and gender, reflecting the crucial concept of the bardic community in nineteenth-century working-class poetry. Lawson’s inclusive uses of language, such as “we’re” and “us” likewise extend into a broader community. Judith Rosen has similarly noted the significance of the communal nature of song in the work of Ellen Johnson, another British nineteenth-century working-class woman poet. Through this communal use of memory Lawson encourages empathy with the old woman’s social and financial situation, while reminding readers that these are issues affecting working-class women more broadly. The reiteration of these emotions through the memory of significant popular songs is marked by the piano’s music. Importantly, the piano itself functions as a symbol for culture and working-class hopes:

Pianos have always been voices of culture and civility. Some symbolise the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century ideal of ‘accomplished’ femininity . . . some reflect the focus of middle-class hearth and home; whilst others reveal working-class aspirations. (Lancaster 18)

Lawson’s uses of the symbolic and sentimental moreover signal a communal consciousness of memory, particularly of marriage and death, through the strong attachment of shared music. Acknowledging that her “heart is too full to speak,” it is suggested that the thoughts of the mother may be on the memory of the songs played on the piano, “the bridal march,” or perhaps the funeral, “when long years after, it wailed the dead march in Saul” (144). The loss, not only of her husband, “As slowly he went forever / enwrapped in a funeral pall” (*Collected Poems* 144) but also of the piano itself, and its music, reflect Lawson’s sophisticated and multi-layered uses of political “sentimentality.” These strategies are similarly in evidence in Lawson’s editorial choices in the poet’s page of *The Dawn*.

As various commentators have pointed out, Lawson's all-women operation for *The Dawn* was condemned for the use of non-union labour, although the union would not grant women admission (Hagan 21). In an article on the boycotting of *The Dawn* in 1889, Lawson wrote:

The Dawn office gives whole or partial employment to about ten women, working either on this journal or in the printing business, and the fact that women are earning an honest living in a business hitherto monopolised by men, is the reason why the Typographical Association, and all the affiliated societies it can influence, have resolved to boycott *The Dawn*. (Lawson, *Boycotting* 5)

As a late nineteenth-century working-class woman poet, Lawson was actively involved in increasing employment opportunities for women as writers and within the print media. Considering this context for reading Lawson's poem as a response to a working-class women's tradition, the dissenting memory or, perhaps more accurately, the additional memory made by Lawson's poem is that of the ultimate loss of a cherished sentimental object through poverty, and the knowledge that the loss of the piano has bought only "a while longer" (144) as a last resort for a widowed woman without a wage. The sense of loss expressed in Cook's poem, ending with the lines "But I love it, I love it, and cannot tear / My soul from a mother's old Arm-chair" (361, 31-32) is significantly different from the economic necessity of parting with the piano in Lawson's poem.

Lawson published poetry by many women poets including the American Lucy Leggett, who, like Lawson herself, was at the vanguard of women's increasing role in the production of periodical culture. Leggett was the honorary president of the Detroit Women's Press Club and was one of several women who helped her friend Martha Rayne to open a School of Journalism in Detroit in 1886 (Marzolf 116). The school was dedicated to "helping women enter the field of journalism (at a time when fewer than 3 per cent of full time journalists were women)" (116). Leggett was also corresponding secretary for the WIPU (Women's International Press Union) and it is possible she may have come into contact with Lawson in this way. Leggett's poem "Tired" appeared in *The Dawn* on 1 March 1896 and included an epigraph, "So tired, so tired, my heart and I," taken from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "My Heart and I," in which the speaker mourns her dead lover and laments what Pauline Simonsen calls her "consequent sense of redundancy" (509). Leggett's epigraph links her poem both to the older writer, and to contemporary debates about the place of "redundant" women in society. As Simonsen explains:

Redundant women had, by the year of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death in 1861, become an issue of concern . . . and the debate about "excess" women featured in the periodical press from 1860 to 1880. (509)

Many, including Charles Dickens and W. R. Greg, author of the 1869 pamphlet "Why Are Women Redundant?," proposed emigration to the colonies as a solution. Class was a significant aspect of this proposal, as the majority of the unmarried women were noted to have been from the middle and upper classes, while working-class women were suggested to be more in demand by potential husbands in the colonies (Greg 38).

Like Lawson, Leggett was familiar with both these periodical debates and their reiterations in poetry, and as Simonsen also notes, "The debate became a starting point for many of the feminist movements of the late nineteenth century" (509). Leggett's poem is a call to arms: "What though we're tired my heart and I / It matters not there's more to come / We must live on, we cannot die / Must rise and gird our armour on" (24). Like Lawson's "They Are Taking

the Old Piano,” there is an implication in Leggett’s poem that women’s right to work would be a solution to these problems. Boos points out that much of working-class women’s poetry is in fact referring to well-known poetry or song, with a desire to reinterpret it with what she terms a “corrective truth—a dissenting ‘memorie’” (“Not So Lowly Bards” 34). In pointing to the likelihood of future hardship, rather than a resolution, at the poem’s close, Lawson signals the ongoing problem of how financial struggle for a widowed woman can be resolved in a culture which does not permit, or which restricts the capacities of, a woman to earn her own money.

The issue of women’s employment was of enormous significance to both Fortune and Lawson. A reading of Lawson’s poem considering Cook’s feminist contribution to Chartist poetics, and more broadly, working-class women’s poetic traditions, brings out Lawson’s multi-layered and powerful uses of working-class poetics. In building on working-class traditions through simple language, communal popular songs, and memory as articulated by Cook’s well-known poem, Lawson further politicises her poem through an active memory of these traditions. The similarities of Fortune’s poem to Chartist poetry and songs of labour likewise seems to suggest a class-conscious comparison of the goldfields which was highly attuned to these thematic concerns as existing in a transnational context, given the variety of social and cultural backgrounds, and the social flux noted of the goldfields. A reading of Fortune’s relationship to a working-class women’s poetic tradition should take into account the ways in which old-world concepts of both class and gender may have operated in more fluid and ambiguous ways in the colonial context and specifically in the context of the goldfields. This challenge to acceptable feminine behaviour is strongly reflected in her poetic concern with the theme of labour and radical poetics. In reading Fortune’s early radical poem “Song of the Gold Diggers” more closely in the context of the goldfields press and women’s poetry of the gold rushes, as well as more broadly within the contexts of Chartist and working-class women’s poetry, this poem is shown to be an important example of colonial women’s engagement with radical working-class poetics. Lawson and Fortune’s poems challenge class and gender disparities, and indicate ways in which questions of women’s relationships to labour could be addressed, drawing on working-class women’s traditions as a source of radicalism.

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