

Richard Handley. *That Mad Louisa: The True Story of Louisa Lawson, An Outstanding Character in Australian History*. Melbourne: JoJo Publishing, 2011.

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That Mad Louisa, a recent biography of Louisa Lawson by Richard Handley, is a harrowing account of an exceptional woman's struggle to certify her sanity, creativity, and intellect against the overwhelming patriarchal authority of nineteenth-century Australian society. Louise Lawson, an accomplished poet, activist, editor, and inventor, was the mother of Henry Lawson, and founder of *The Dawn*, one of Australia's first women's periodicals (196). Handley has published his new biography of Mrs. Lawson in hopes of dispelling some of the rumours and negative accusations surrounding her life and to "establish her place as 'one of the grand figures of Australian history' and 'a pioneer of the women's movement' (iii).

As his title suggests, Handley's biography will focus primarily on the issue of Mrs. Lawson's sanity and will attempt to defend and rationalise her bouts of depression, paranoia, and antagonism toward family and friends, paying specific attention to accusations made by her famous son and contemporary critics. "Much has been written about Henry's relationship with his mother," Handley writes at one point, "most of it critical" (202). Handley hopes to vindicate Mrs. Lawson's reputation and dispel much of the criticism. He writes his account of Louisa Lawson's life as a creative non-fiction narrative, often bouncing back and forth between first and third person. He frequently attempts to enter the mind of Mrs. Lawson and tell the story of her life through her eyes—riding across the bush country as a young girl, weathering poverty and childrearing as a young woman, and navigating the streets of Sydney as an independent woman. This creative approach to telling Mrs. Lawson's life story is drawn from parts of her unfinished autobiography, poetry, and publications in *The Dawn*, but also from the manuscripts and biographies of friends, acquaintances, and critics. Handley accounts for his method in the introduction to his sources:

The characters were, for the most part, real people and the narrative developed was in accord with available information about actual events, incidents and the individuals involved. All the important facts and details reported or recorded about Louisa, her family, friends and associates have been included as far as space would allow with the aim of providing a reliable, faithful though somewhat embellished account of her life and her contribution to the development of the land she loved. (311)

As Handley indicates, many of his sources are primary and are creatively used to draw characters from their historical counterparts. While such a method might make the use of his material risky for scholars and researchers, his approach does offer an engaging and compelling account of Louisa Lawson's life, which will likely give the work greater popular appeal.

His biography begins with Louisa Lawson undergoing a psychological evaluation as a sixty-four year old woman and being subsequently committed to an insane asylum in Gladesville. Despite appeals by friends and family, Mrs. Lawson was unable to leave the facility without approval of the facility's superintendent, who withheld her release for the remainder of her life. Mrs. Lawson's diagnosis and subsequent committal to the asylum are used as a framing mechanism for the biography's central narrative. In the following chapter, Mrs. Lawson will be transported back to her childhood in Mudgee, where she lived the life of a free spirited farm-girl, exploring the bush and riding her horse across the countryside.

While Mrs. Lawson's childhood offered moments of great freedom and intellectual pursuit at the Mudgee District Model School, her life in Mudgee was still fraught with hardship and loss. Her father was constantly in a state of recovering from bad business ventures and her little sister Lily would die before reaching adulthood. These events would reveal to Mrs. Lawson the bitterness, inequality, and uncertainty of the world. During this time in her life, Mrs. Lawson discovered her love of writing and affections for the boy next door (Willie), but these early affections would also become another lesson in loss. Willie will be sent away to school and Mrs. Lawson's opportunity for further education will be squandered by her controlling mother and the financial difficulties of her father, but Mrs. Lawson possessed an enduring spirit and was always able to overcome these setbacks. As Handley notes in Mrs. Lawson's resistance to Willie's advances, "[i]t must be remembered that Louisa was a very strong-willed girl" (105).

Handley's sympathetic account of Mrs. Lawson's childhood demonstrates his respect for her character and legacy, but it is also one of the weakest parts of his scholarship. He rarely identifies sources for his descriptions in these earlier chapters and is frequently more concerned with building an engaging narrative over a faithful reconstruction of Mrs. Lawson's life. He often employs detailed descriptions and dialogue of how he imagines Mrs. Lawson interactions with other characters must have gone. Here is a brief example of a scene where he seems to take liberties with Mrs. Lawson's life and imagines what a moment in her young life must have been like:

He [Willie] lay down and pulled her [Louisa] down towards him and kissed her again. It was soon apparent to Louisa that Willie was no different to other boys. As they lay there together, feeling each other's excitement, Louisa's body tingled and her mind seemed to have lost all sense of what was real. She started to panic, her mind and body pulling in different directions (105).

While the scene is passionate and vivid, the audience is never told where Handley gathered the source material for this scene; in fact, Handley does not report how he knows this date or the gift received during the date actually took place. There is no mention of any of this information being taken from one of Louisa's poems or autobiography. This leaves the audience to assume that such scenes are fictional, drawn from how Handley imagines Louisa's first date must have been like. This narrative method is employed throughout this chapter and much of the earlier parts of the book.

While Handley has already admitted to embellishing on certain parts of Louisa Lawson's life, it is still necessary to consider how helpful this fictional approach is to his goal of vindicating Mrs. Lawson's legacy. If he has to fictionalise the historical figure in order to exonerate her, it is doubtful that many of her critics will take such claims seriously. They will see such sympathetic prose and embellished interactions as nothing more than a devoted admirer's idolisation of her life, which would be most unfortunate considering how much valid research Handley employs throughout other segments of his book.

Handley's strongest chapters are some of his later chapters, where he discusses Mrs. Lawson's life in the burgeoning city of Sydney. These chapters tell a heroic account of Mrs. Lawson's struggle to survive in the big city while simultaneously trying to end the oppression of women in Australia. These final chapters' sources are more clearly identified and rarely rely strictly on an 'embellished account of her life' (311). Drawing from such sources as letters, *The Dawn*, poems, and Mrs. Lawson's autobiography, the final chapters feel a more solid piece of scholarship. Handley's reporting on Mrs. Lawson's strategy of inventing a new mail-bag fastener for the Post Office as a means of demonstrating a woman's inventive powers is an awesome account of Louisa Lawson's ingenuity and spunk. Handley's narrative of Louisa Lawson's life seems to reach its climax when the women of Australia are finally given the right to vote and hail Mrs. Lawson as "the mother of womanhood suffrage in New South Wales" (278).

While certain segments of Handley's biography of Louisa Lawson might present difficulties for vindicating her legacy, the book is overall a strong read and passionate account of Louisa Lawson's life and accomplishments, giving the reader and critic cause to reflect on the life of an exceptional woman. *That Mad Louisa* would be well suited for students and the inquiring public alike. From her free spirited life in Mudgee to her revolutionary impact on the development of women's rights in Sydney, Louisa Lawson's life is certainly a compelling story that would provoke reflection and thoughtfulness in the mind of any reader. Richard Handley does an excellent job of capturing the spunk that fed the furnace of Mrs. Lawson's creative prowess and resilient spirit. *That Mad Louisa* is undoubtedly a worthy read and an inspiring story of a remarkable woman.

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