

# **Our Red Aunt**

**Fiona Jack**

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## **A conversation between Adele Patrick and Fiona Jack**

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**Adele:** Helen Crawford is your father's great-aunt, but tell me how and when you became interested in uncovering more about her life.

**Fiona:** About eight years ago my uncle Jim (my father's brother) started researching our family history, and in particular he took an interest in his great-aunt Helen Crawford. He has fond personal memories of "Auntie Crawford", as he calls her, but he soon realised her life was more interesting than most. As he researched he shared his findings with my parents who shared them with me, knowing I would find it interesting, which I certainly did.

**Adele:** Had you known anything about her when you were growing up?

**Fiona:** My dad loves to tell stories of Scotland and family and one of his favourites used to be the time his family were going to visit Auntie Crawford and her sister Aunt Jean for lunch at their house in Dunoon. He was about 14 at the time and remembers the family's excitement about this big outing. But when the morning came they received a phone call to say that Helen had died, and then not long after that, Aunt Jean also died. He would tell us how his father instead went alone to Dunoon and found the table set for lunch amidst the tragedies of the day. There were gifts for each child by their place at the table and I suppose the momentous events of the day and the special gift from his aunts really crystallised this memory in my dad's mind...hence we heard the story many times! Part of this story would be dad telling us in hushed tones that Helen was "our red aunt, a Communist."

This was all I had ever heard about Helen until my uncle started researching her, and it was really all that my father knew about her too. A couple of years ago we also learned that that Jean actually died first and Helen eight hours later. Dad was quite amazed that he could have had the story wrong for so many years, and that there was a lot more to Auntie Crawford than he ever knew.

**Adele: So how did your research evolve?**

Fiona: When my uncle learned of my interest he sent me lots of files and I started to gather bits and pieces together. I started to understand just how important, fearless and radical she was. I was eager to read her unpublished autobiography that is held in the Marx Memorial Library in London, but despite many attempts I couldn't access it at a distance. There was also a photocopy of the autobiography (and a lot of related ephemera) in the Glasgow Caledonian University library as part of the Willie Gallacher collection but it was inaccessible as it was tied up in a complex legal dispute.<sup>1</sup>

It wasn't until in late 2016 that I was finally able to access a copy. Her unwavering commitment to the struggles of the working classes was so inspiring to me, and I loved her pragmatism and use of language. In an odd way I often felt like I was reading my own words. Nothing about my life's achievements compare even remotely to hers, but there is something about the way she writes that feels so familiar to me. I love the moments where the autobiography almost reads like a manifesto. I have always been interested in didactic speech – it's rebuked in the art world, but I enjoy it, in all its complexity. I think it's a mistake to see it as straightforward and singular. In my mind didacticism can be generous, brave, complex and propositional.

**Adele: Is it this interest in her use of language that brought about the text ribbon works displayed on the floor in the gallery?**

Fiona: Yes. I'm not alone when I say that one of the key parts of my art practice is making work in order to spend time thinking about something – to focus my attention on it for a while, to learn, and to work out formal decisions relating to the ideas that unfold. As I read her writing, small sentences kept

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<sup>1</sup> At the end of 2017 it was moved to the National Library in Edinburgh so hopefully will be accessible again soon.

standing out to me because they seem to be almost prescient today – the way she speaks to women, to workers, to society in general still feels so disconcertingly relevant.

When I reached the end of the autobiography for the first time I was struck by the last sentence - “The world is ours. Let us go in and possess it.” It’s one of those sentences that could mean very different things to different people – it could be a motto for a capitalist, one of those horrid motivational signs in a workplace like amazon.com, or in this case a rallying cry for women and workers. I decided to try and make the phrase into something so I applied it onto some old fabric using my embroidery machine. It seemed to me to be a bit like many things at once - a suffragette ribbon, a tweet, a pageant ribbon, left over from an old banner, or a sports slogan. I liked her words taking on another life, a new form, so I decided to make more. I read back through her writings and speeches and extracted quotes that stood out for me – each time, in various ways, changing the style, materials and processes in response to the language.

**Adele: The autobiography is fascinating and such a lodestone for this exhibition and your bringing the text to light and life opens up the question of it not being published. Is this something you would like to see as further step?**

This wasn’t necessarily my plan at the outset but after reading the autobiography I was amazed that it hadn’t been published already. It’s such a great read, and it seems long overdue to make it available. I suggested to a few people that they should publish it, but no one seemed to be in any hurry to take up the task.

I couldn’t let another 60+ years go by with it sitting there, so I set to work. Luckily I’ve got an enthusiastic and generous mum who agreed to type whole thing out - 400 fuzzy photocopied pages. We tried OCR text recognition programmes, but none of them could render anything vaguely coherent from the blurry manually typed pages. It was quite a project for my mum, but in the end she really loved it.

It’s from this process that the work *Mum, Helen and I* came from. My mum and I were exchanging a lot of emails over the period she was typing out Helen’s text. Gradually she started to develop a tremendous respect for Helen, and started her own research project – regularly sending me photos

and thoughts. When she went so far as to try and edit an error on the Helen Crawford Wikipedia page I started thinking about making a work out of my mum's great emails, and the whole process of transcribing this important text. It introduces some transparency into the process which I like.

Wanting to open this process up even more there is also the companion piece in the exhibition which is a copy of the autobiography that invites anyone to contribute to the editing process. People are invited to proof, annotate, correct or make comment throughout the book, and where possible these contributions will be merged into the final published text.<sup>2</sup>

**Adele: And was the rock work also a direct response to the autobiography?**

Fiona: In chapter 10 she talks about her move towards militancy as a suffragette and describes the time she broke the windows of the Minister for Education – “I took the two stones given me, got a taxi early in the morning to Piccadilly and quietly made my way to Harvard Street. The two stones had messages attached, with a demand for the enfranchisement of women, etc. I felt rather proud of the fact that I broke both windows and that my aim was good.” As impressed as I was at reading this passage I wasn't seeking to re-enact this moment, or to find out what was written on the notes attached to her stones specifically, but rather I wanted to make a connection between the bold actions of her and her suffragette comrades, her almost lifelong commitment to Marxist/communist thinking, and a contemplation of radical action today.

**Adele: Tell me more about the phrase “in the hands of the proletariat” Is it borrowed from somewhere?**

Fiona: I wrote that myself, or so I thought, but then I googled the phrase, as one does, and it turns out Lenin wrote it<sup>3</sup>. I am not sure if I had read it somewhere or whether just thinking about Marxism a lot would generally lead one to writing words such as this, but it was a nice intersection because Helen was very impressed with Lenin and all he stood for. Within Marxism the proletariat is a class of citizens who don't tend to own property and who possess one significant material value – their labour-power, or their ability to work to earn wages. When Marx used this term in the development of

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2 (The autobiography will be published by the Glasgow Women's Library, The Marx Memorial Library and Fiona Jack in 2018)

3 The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution, April 7, 1917 in Pravda No. 26.

his socio-political theory it is precisely in this landlessness that he sees the potential for revolutionary action through their collective power as they are a people unadulterated by land ownership and material wealth.

I am hoping that there are no stones left at the end of the exhibition, that they're all in the hands of the proletariat.

**Adele: Why was it important for you to include ceramics?**

Fiona: On my first trip to Scotland in 2016 I visited the People's History Museum in Manchester, the People's Palace in Glasgow and the Marx Library in London. In all of these places I saw political commemorative ceramics aligned to both radical and mainstream events and views. I hadn't been aware of the depth of this tradition. We don't really have a parallel tradition in New Zealand – just the odd mug here and there commemorating a visit from the Queen or something similarly colonial in theme.

From that same trip it started to become clear to me that the near omission of Helen Crawford's history within my own family was mirrored in her absence within Scottish history. Some of the people I met on that first trip to Scotland figured this was because she was too radical, but others thought that it might be more a result of the Labour Party promoting the legacy of its historical members, and consequently more radical histories like Helen's were overlooked.<sup>4</sup>

Those two realisations led me to think about making ceramics that might commemorate or acknowledge aspects of Helen's life and work. I didn't want to just decide for myself what was worthy or interesting about her life, so I asked people I had met on my research journey to help me make a piece. I asked them what they felt was important to commemorate about her life, and why. They were also invited to help me make decisions about form, function, imagery and language, but everyone chose to leave that part to me – Glasgow to New Zealand is a long way to try and make a pot with two people!

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4 Whilst Helen was in the ILP for a time, she later came to be very vocal about her rejection of the party.

**Adele:** As part of the show you're making a banner for the GWL. This is such a generous act and it typifies your approach of making work with care and consideration for specific contexts with particular groups of people. How did this particular idea come about?

Fiona: For the past few years I have been making banners for groups I admire as a way of supporting their kaupapa – their practice, principles, work. In the GWL I see an institution that is so humble and welcoming at the same time as being visionary, critical and influential. The banner isn't directly related to Helen's history of course, but it offers a practical and useful outcome from the exhibition for the library and its community and that is important to me.

**Adele:** How did the design process develop?

Fiona: In 2017 we held a workshop at the GWL to gather input from the community, volunteers and staff. This was a productive and fun workshop, and I came away with so much to think about. There was a great suggestion that we ask people to donate fabric for the banner, so we did this, and what we received was extraordinary. It has made the process of making the banner a different and interesting experience for me, and is a process I am sure to repeat in future. I ended up using only the fabrics donated, and no additional fabrics of my own. They were not a group of colours or textures I would normally reach for, but I enjoyed the challenge of trying to make this work.

I also enjoyed the connecting threads that the donations added to the piece. For example, one woman called Kate donated a small piece of turquoise wool with a note attached saying that she had found herself living alone again at the age of 67 and had re-upholstered her favourite armchair in this fabric. I decided to embroider the word EMPOWERMENT which is one of the GWL core values onto this fabric. The relationship between the word and fabric won't mean anything to a passer-by, but it will mean something to her, and to me, and that's enough for me.

**Adele:** Relationships seem to be a theme in many of these works, and in your practice generally.

Fiona: Yes very much so. That's why I'm hopeless if a gallery or curator comes to me and says "we'd like to commission a new project from you,

but you'll need to tell us a year ahead exactly what will be in it". It's just not possible for me to do that as all my projects evolve through learning, research and relationship building – all of which generate unpredictable tangents. Of course at various points I make decisions, formulate methods, start making things, and so on – it's not all wildly unravelling all the time right up until the night of the opening – but it has to be an open and fluid process to respect the time and will of all of those involved.

Another important part of the way I work is best explained by a Māori whakataukī (proverb): Ka mura, Ka muri. This loosely translates to “walking backwards into the future”. All my projects have one foot in the present and one in the past so I have always felt connected to this whakataukī and to Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) for valuing the past in all aspects of daily life.

**Adele: You have lived most of your life in New Zealand and it has clearly influenced the way you work – have you had much of a connection to Scotland prior to this exhibition?**

Fiona: I had never been to Glasgow until 2016. I immediately loved it and feel uncannily at home there. My dad lived in Glasgow until he was 38 when he migrated to New Zealand (via South Africa) with my New Zealand-born mum. He has a strong Glaswegian accent to this day, and has talked about Scotland my whole life – particularly the Jack family bakeries, family, school friends and golf! We hear a lot about all of those things, but particularly the bakeries. This is a key part of my dad's identity and his sense of connection back to Scotland I think. I wear one of my grandpa's baker's union medals on a chain around my neck most days so dad's nostalgia must live on in me a little bit too I suppose.

**Adele: Can you tell us about the significance of the “Jack's rolls” served at the opening and other events throughout the exhibition?**

Fiona: “Jack's rolls” in particular have taken on a kind of mythical aura in my family. They represent the heart of my dad's nostalgia and pride in his history I think. They were only one of the very many things that Jack's bakeries made, but they were their most popular product, and clearly my dad's favourite.

But beyond this the bakeries were a big part of Helen's life too. She wrote: "During a strike of the operative bakers in Glasgow, my father started a soup kitchen, which was run by my mother and grandmother. Even as a master baker my father's sympathies were with the workers." Her parents' values and trade union involvement clearly had an impact on Helen and the development of her views.

I wondered if we could try and make Jack's rolls as a way of connecting these threads again. I was given some of the family recipe books some years ago so I dug those out. I am not sure, but I think one of them might even be in Helen's father's writing. There are also some in the Mitchell Library which were donated by my uncle Jim Jack a few years ago. He is the last master baker from the Jack family, and he now lives in Ayr. I asked him to help me interpret the bread recipe in the books as there were no instructions and elusive details about quantity and ingredients. His memory for all the detail was incredible and I noted down everything, hoping to be able to pass it all on to a baker who might be willing to try and make the bread.

In a beautiful twist of fate we came across the High Rise Bakers – a part of the Glasgow Social Enterprise Network who work with refugees and community to bake bread together and sell it locally. They operate in the Gorbals area, only a stone's throw from where Jack's bakeries was for a time, and near where Helen and family lived when she was a child. Catriona from the High Rise Bakers project is interested in Scottish history so she was enthusiastic about taking on this challenge to bake Jack's rolls for the exhibition. I feel pretty sure that Auntie Crawford would be impressed that refugees and youth were coming together as part of a community enrichment programme to bake Jack's rolls for an exhibition about her!

Adele Patrick is the Lifelong Learning and Creative Development Manager of the Glasgow Women's Library  
Fiona Jack is an artist and Senior Lecturer at The Elam School of Fine Arts at The University of Auckland.

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