

Alfred Deakin

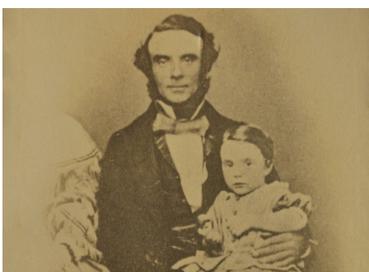
(1856–1919)

Australia's 2nd Prime Minister



Terms of office

24 September 1903 to 27 April 1904 • 5 July 1905 to 13 November 1908 • 2 June 1909 to 29 April 1910



Glimpses of childhood

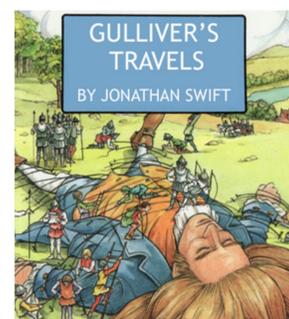
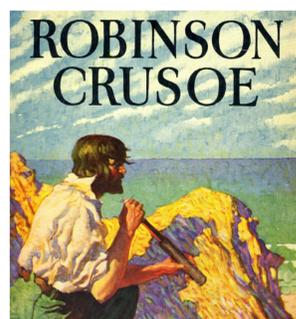
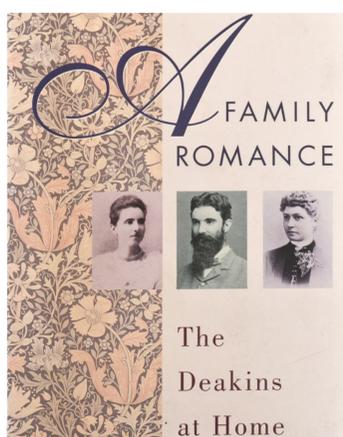
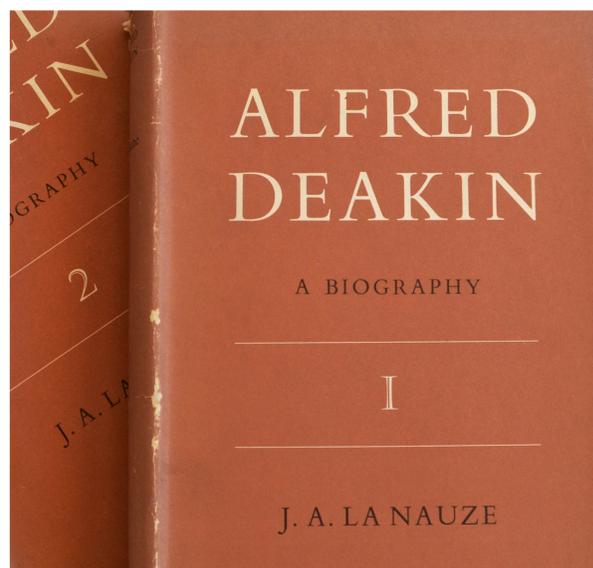
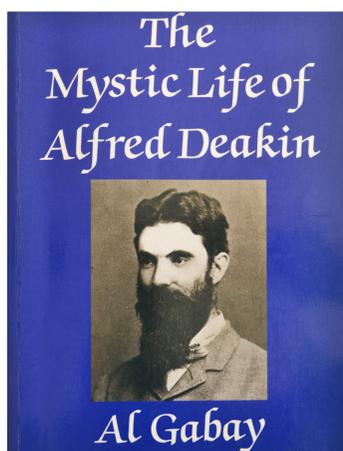
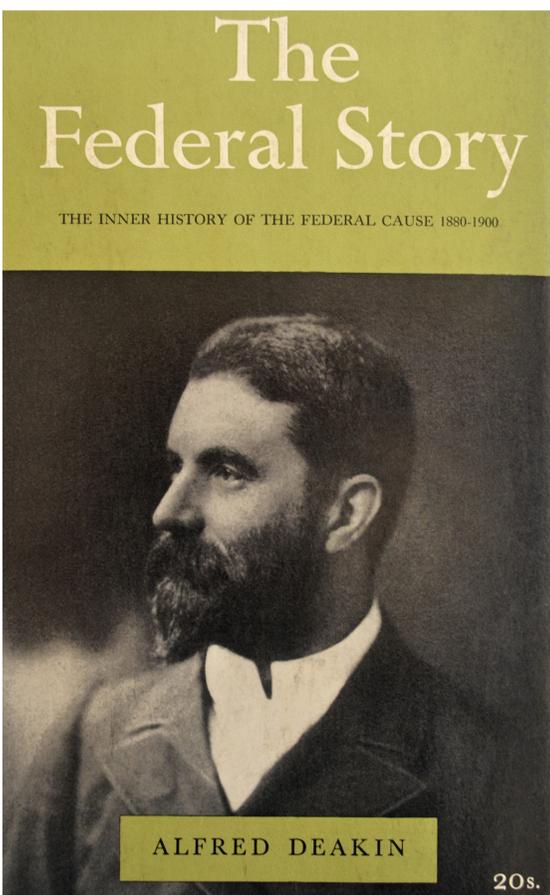
Fortune favoured Alfred Deakin from the start. Born in Melbourne in 1856 to solid, reliable middle-class parents who had emigrated from Great Britain in 1849, he grew up in a Victorian colony enjoying a golden era. All six Australian colonies basked in the glow of 'the long boom', from the mid-1850s to the later 1880s, a period which produced an impressive number of political, social and cultural firsts.

The sheer scale of economic activity encouraged broader community enterprise, particularly during the 1870s and '80s. There was a cultural blossoming, an awakening, more visible in 'Marvellous Melbourne' than anywhere else. Books at affordable prices became available to the general population and the young Deakin, a tireless reader, cashed in on this cultural and intellectual bonanza. The excitement and energy of the era undoubtedly helped to shape ambition and aspiration in Deakin as he grew up.

His childhood, however, did have its difficulties and he would not forget them. Deakin resented being sent to the all-girls' school of his sister Catherine in Kyneton, from age four to eight, and he was bullied when he attended Melbourne Boys' Church of England Grammar School, from 1864 to 1871. Catherine later suggested that her brother 'made friends easily', but that memory fails to tally with his recollections. Resentful that, in Kyneton, the 'absence of boy companions helped to keep me girlish', Deakin evidently adopted some female behavioural patterns that were exposed in the robust atmosphere of a private boys' school, where he was given names such as 'Miss Deakin', 'Polly' and 'Pretty Polly'.

Looking back, Deakin reviewed his school life as a period of 'wasted opportunities'. Yet it was during this period that he embarked (perhaps unknowingly) on a rebellious journey where, as biographer Walter Murdoch puts it, he 'went his own way ... unsubdued, and almost untouched, by the world of external realities'. His love of literature opened up a whole new vista of possibilities and he doted on books that provided exotic locations, tales of adventure and heroic characters.

Deakin became a self-coached fast reader, 'unusually swift' according to another biographer, John La Nauze, a talent complemented by a genuine gift for recall—of sources, citations, contexts and poetry. In his teens, he could recite whole sections of verse and prose of those writers he most admired. Applied to politics in the remarkable life about to unfold, a razor-sharp memory would prove invaluable.



Sources

Montagu Scott, *Portrait of Alfred Deakin as a boy, 1864*, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-144487743 • Alfred L. Shepherd, *Portrait of William Deakin with Catherine Sarah Deakin seated on his knee*, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-151818378
Liverpool Photographic Studio, *Portrait of Alfred Deakin, as a young boy, 1860-1870*, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-228183507 • Catherine Deakin with harp, National Library of Australia • Alfred L. Shepherd, *Deakin family portrait*, National Library of Australia