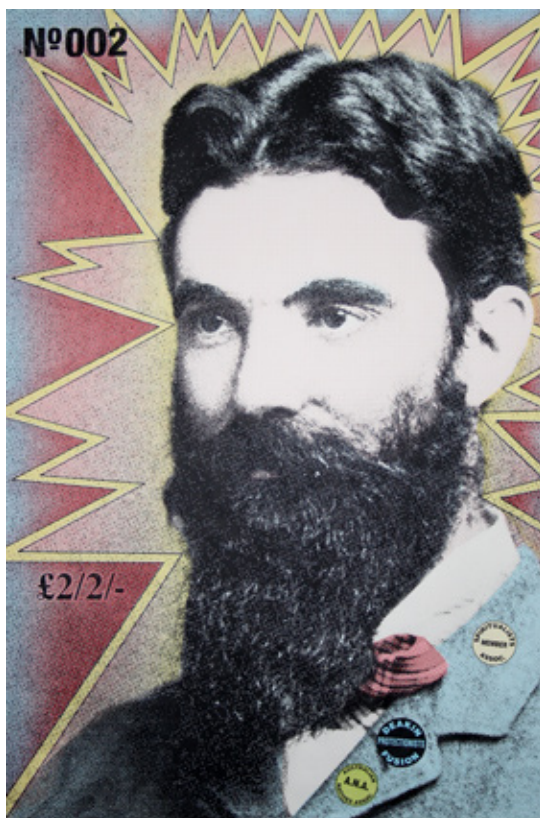


Alfred Deakin

(1856–1919)

Australia's second Prime Minister

The Lives, The Legacy



David Headon

Australian Parliamentary Library

Department of Parliamentary Services

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1. Front cover: *No 002 Deakin* by Alison Alder.
56. Back cover: *Canberra Times* cartoon by Geoff Pryor on the day of Federation's Centenary, 1 January 2001. A reunited and 'remembered' Barton and Deakin enjoy the nation's celebratory fireworks.



Australian
National
University



Foreword

On 1 January 1901, the Australian colonies united in ‘one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth’.ⁱ Reflecting popular sentiment, *The Sydney Morning Herald* declared: ‘seldom indeed in the world’s history have a people entered into full possession of their heritage under circumstances so auspicious and with an outlook so full of dazzling promise’.ⁱⁱ

But while the nation was created in law, the task of creating a true federal union had only just begun. As Alfred Deakin observed in his anonymous column in the (London) *Morning Post*:

Sudden as the birth will be and richly endowed as is the new-born with the amplest charter of self-government that even Great Britain has ever conceded to her offshoots, much time and toil will be required before we can hope to actually enter and enjoy our inheritance. Not even an Act of the Imperial Parliament can remove by its fiat the antagonisms of thought, aim, and situation existing among the scattered four millions of independent Australian Britons who are taking their destinies into their own hands on a far greater scale than they have been hitherto accustomed to essay ... The Commonwealth Constitution will begin to take effect on the 1st of January, but everything which could make the union it establishes more than a mere piece of political carpentry will remain to be accomplished afterwards.ⁱⁱⁱ

To the 111 members of the new Commonwealth Parliament, not least its first prime ministers, would fall the challenge of ‘putting into actual operation the intricate provisions of the Constitution’ and of building the new nation.^{iv}

This monograph is part of a multi-year project focusing on Australia’s first eight prime ministers, who led their governments from the benches of a parliament house borrowed from Victoria. All but one (Bruce) brought to the role experience as parliamentarians in the colonial parliaments. Even so, they and their parliamentary colleagues must have felt it a herculean task to create the legislative, financial and administrative institutions and frameworks of the new Commonwealth government from scratch.

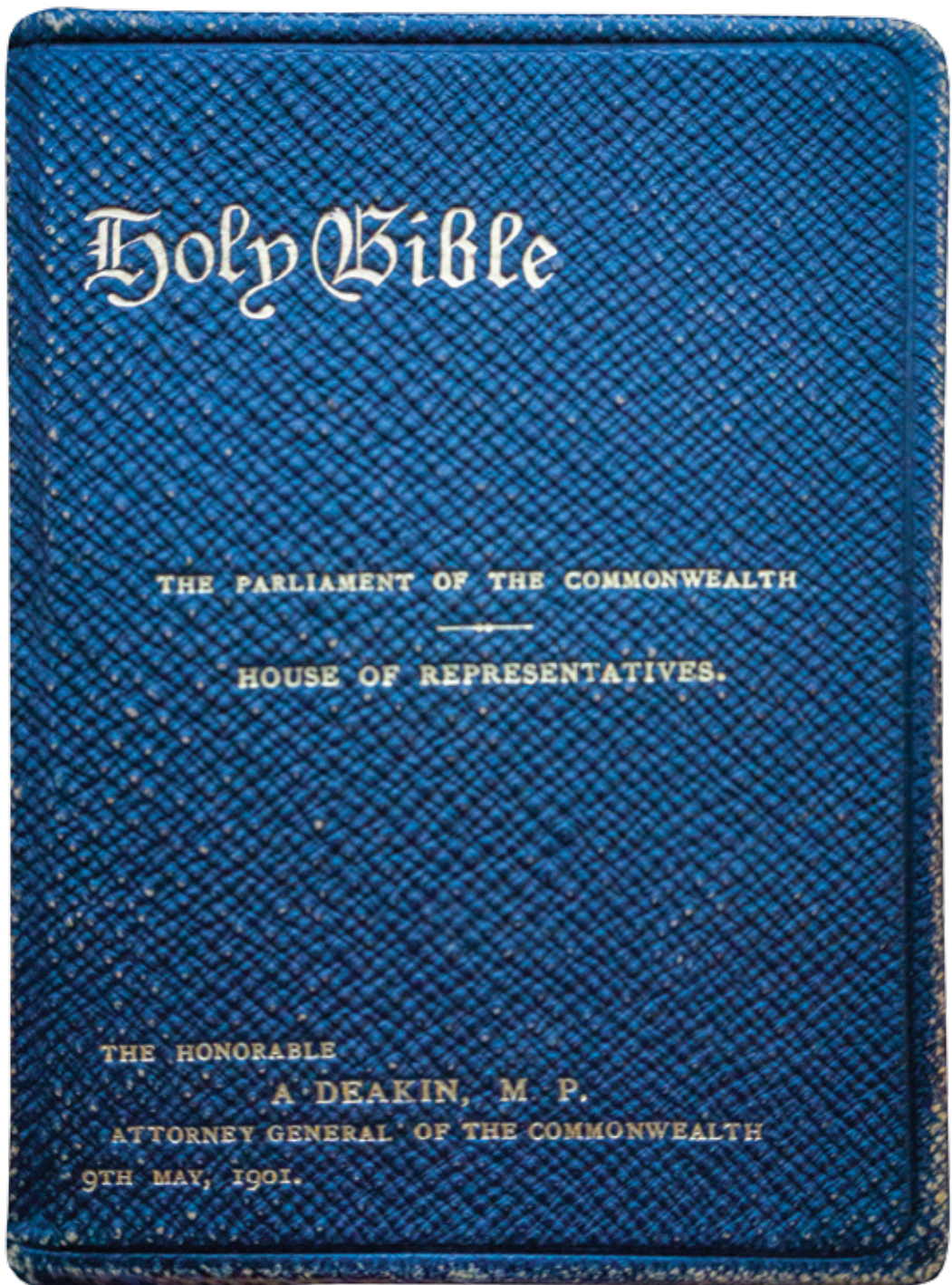
The first eight: Australia’s early prime ministers project, undertaken in partnership with the National Archives of Australia, the National Museum of Australia, the Australian Studies Institute at the Australian National University, and the Parliament of Victoria, seeks to enliven interest in this formative period of the nation’s history, focusing on the private, public and political lives of its political leaders, and something of the essence of the world they inhabited and which shaped them.

Alfred Deakin, although not Australia's first prime minister, seems a good place to start. Deakin was attorney-general in Edmund Barton's first Cabinet, and prime minister three times during the nation's first decade, twice with the support of the Labor Party and once as leader of the Fusion government.

Urbane and intellectual, charming and courteous to men from all parties, he was enormously well-read—in philosophy, theology, comparative religion and literature. In the words of another biographer, Judith Brett, 'he was middle class, well-educated, and supremely self-confident, like the city and the colony in which he grew to manhood'.^v

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dianne Heriot". The script is cursive and elegant, with a prominent initial 'D'.

Dianne Heriot
Parliamentary Librarian



2. Alfred Deakin's Bible. Given his admiration for the Deakin legacy, it is appropriate that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull swore his Oath of Office on this Bible on 12 July 2016.

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The Deakin challenge



3. *The Argus* newspaper photograph of Deakin on the steps of the Victorian (then, the Commonwealth) Parliament, on his retirement in 1913.

In the Epilogue to Volume 5 of his monumental *A History of Australia*, Manning Clark ensures that the two central figures of the volume—Henry Lawson and Alfred Deakin—are accorded a fitting, final comment. Lawson, Clark writes, had become a mixture of ‘irony, melancholy and drunken drowsiness’, his disintegration into alcoholism readily summarised. The far more complex Deakin, Clark has walking ‘deeper into the night’, and he concludes in characteristic prose:

On 7 October 1919 [Deakin] died. He was buried in St Kilda cemetery, near the graves of other men who had believed in Australia as a ‘new Britannia in another world’ ... no words could do justice to the mighty spirit encased in his native earth, nor to the tragic grandeur of what had happened to the most distinguished son of the Australian–Britons.¹

What *had* happened to Deakin, Australia’s second prime minister, during his lifetime in politics and far beyond confirms his claim to being not only this country’s most compelling leader, but also its most religiously-minded and best-read. Of Australia’s 29 prime ministers to date, he is undoubtedly the most enigmatic. Prime Minister no less than three times between 1903 and 1910, he is full of contradictions. So the interested historian who goes in search of the real Deakin, the man entire, the public man and the far more perplexing man behind the mask, is faced with the task of reconciling an array of apparent opposites.



4. Deakin’s funeral service at St Kilda Cemetery, Melbourne, in October 1919.

How do we satisfactorily account for a man who was, for many Australians of the Federation era, the poster-boy of the aspirational ‘native-born’ but also the most articulate spokesperson for Australian Britons; an individual supremely confident and persuasive at the lectern, who in his voluminous diaries constantly recorded his frustration at what he regarded as his manifold failings; a man persuaded to embark on what would become the most distinguished political career of his generation who, for much of its 30-odd years (1880–1913), longed to be a creative writer, a litterateur of talent and acclaim; a man who appeared in later life to be a banner representative of Protestant success, who in his youth attended numerous seances, briefly considered himself to be a medium, embraced theosophy for a time and who, throughout his life, felt that he personally had been chosen by God to fulfil a purposeful, even sacred mission, which included federating the Australian colonies.

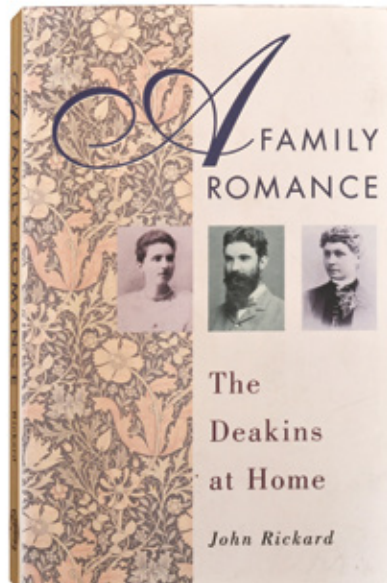
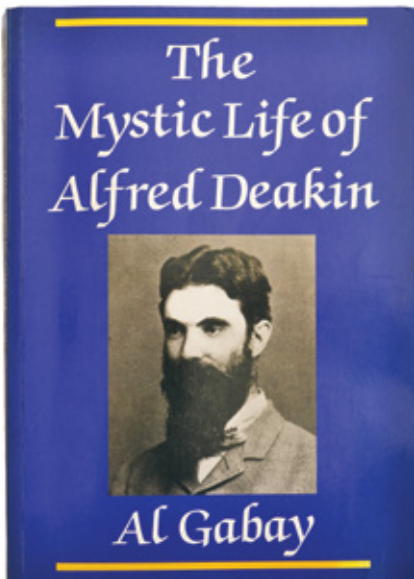
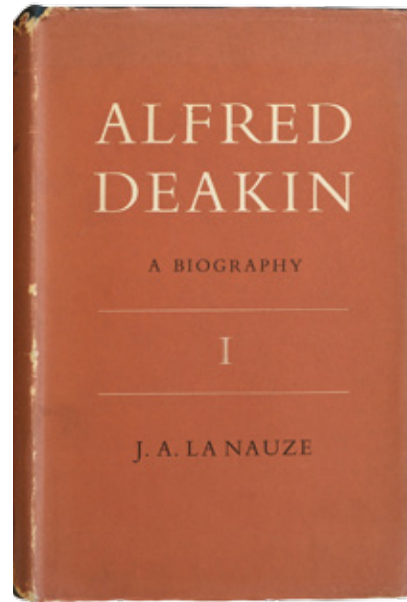
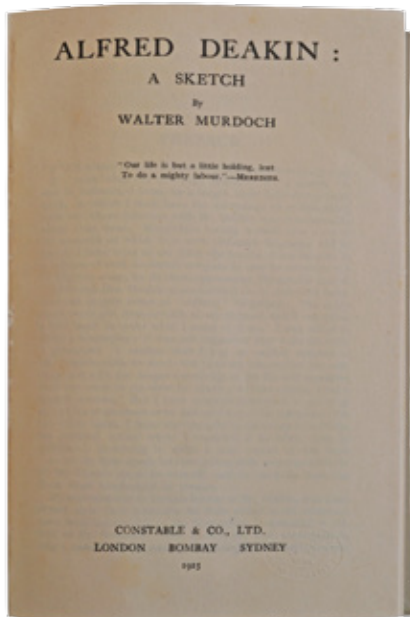
Deakin believed in direct communication with the dead and, during his several political decades of public service, he quite literally heard ‘voices’ and acted upon them. He never lost his fascination with the possibilities of spiritism.

For almost his entire political life, Deakin prided himself on his astute decision-making and robust liberal stance, yet in his third prime ministership, 1909–10, he led a ‘Fusion’ government with a disparate group of political conservatives, a course of action which was as ill-judged as it was shamelessly pragmatic. This dubious alliance, with a group Deakin had earlier labelled ‘the wreckage of half a dozen parties’, ‘the wreckage of all the parties that have failed’, damaged his reputation in his twilight years.²

Alfred Deakin is impossible to summarise neatly, a fact reinforced by the diverse scholarship on him, especially the range of ‘story-tellers’ of the last 50 years. The task to understand Deakin’s multiple dimensions, public and private, is so daunting that virtually all those who have tried have opted to focus on one, or a manageable number, of the many parts of his life and character in order to arrive at defensible conclusions.

This is abundantly clear in the four most significant accounts of Deakin’s life: Walter Murdoch’s 300-page biography, described by the writer as ‘a Sketch’ (1923); J A La Nauze’s two-volume biography, widely acknowledged as the classic study, published in 1965; Al Gabay’s absorbing journey into the vicissitudes of what he calls in his title, *The Mystic Life of Alfred Deakin*, published in 1992; and John Rickard’s *A Family Romance* (1996), part-biography, part-family ‘detective’ story.³ The stark differences in approach of these four writers underscore the extent of the Deakin challenge.

Story and story-tellers



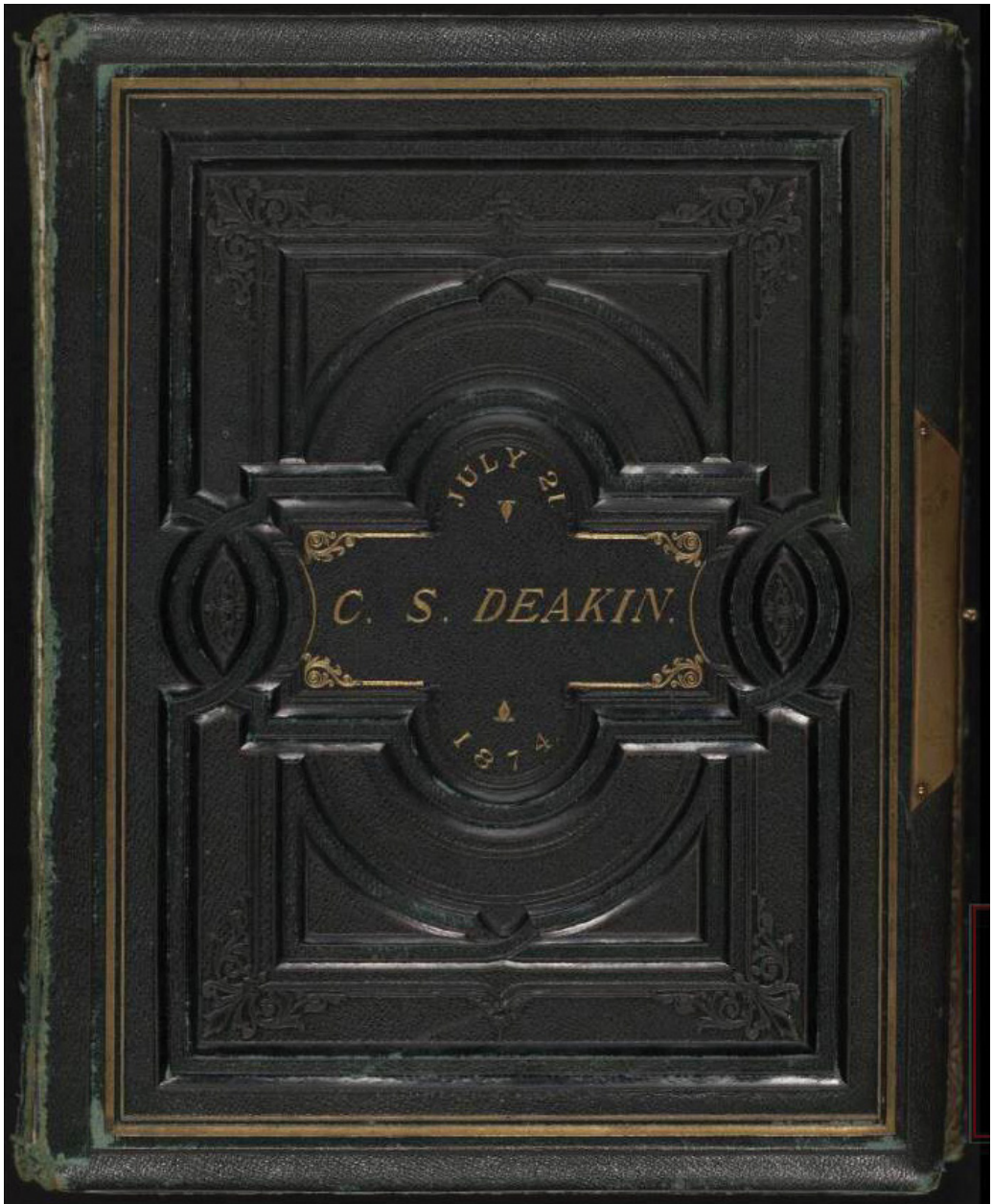
5. Until recently, the four major biographical studies of Alfred Deakin. In August 2017, Emeritus Professor Judith Brett published a new biography entitled *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin*, a 'masterly' study according to one reviewer.

By his own admission, Walter Murdoch was compromised when writing his 'Sketch', published just four years after the death of its subject. Murdoch's Preface contains several noteworthy disclaimers. He hoped to follow the volume with a 'larger, more fully documented work', recognising 'the moderate compass' of the 'Sketch', and he confessed to being not only an 'ardent admirer' of Deakin, but also 'a biased witness'.⁴ Conscious of the impact of his 15-year friendship with Deakin on the requirements of authorial objectivity, he informs the reader that he will endeavour to 'let the facts speak for themselves'. On a number of key points of judgement, consciously or unconsciously, he does not.

Murdoch openly states that two of his main sources of information were Deakin's sister, Catherine, or 'Katie', and his son-in-law, the husband of his oldest daughter Ivy, Herbert Brookes—himself a successful businessman and activist in his father-in-law's Liberal Party. What Murdoch does not tell us is that he passed on draft chapters of the manuscript to both Catherine and Brookes, and to Deakin's wife, Pattie.⁵ Catherine, we know, asked Murdoch to remove any criticisms of Deakin's political record and to rewrite the account of her brother's last years since she felt that Murdoch had painted 'too gloomy' a picture. Murdoch agreed to 'make the shadows less black'.⁶ We do not know how much else was altered, or excised, to satisfy family sensibilities.

The other point to be made about Murdoch's contribution is that his friendship with Deakin and direct link to the sad reality of the recent past—Deakin's 12-year long decline into dementia—was probably the reason that he focused his attention on Deakin's life and career before 1901. As Deakin's second biographer, J A La Nauze, points out in the Preface to his study some 40 years later, no less than two-thirds of Murdoch's book 'was devoted to Deakin's life before the inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia'.⁷ La Nauze reverses this proportion, though he advances his own set of disclaimers.

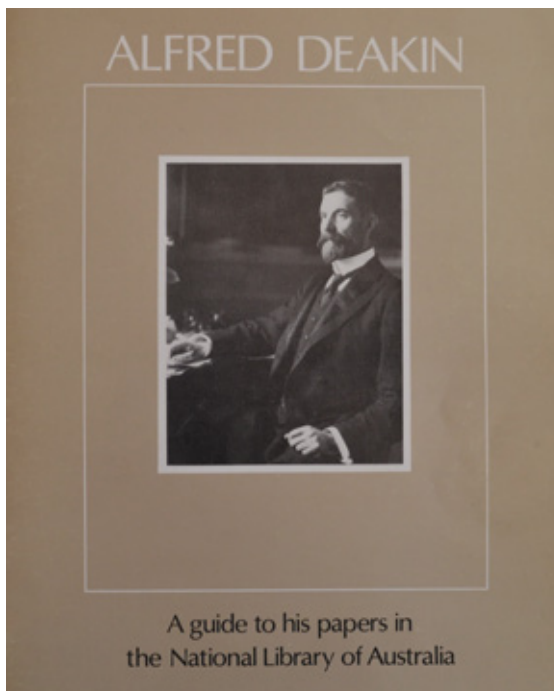
He is conscious, he tells us, that many readers might feel he has 'neglected many matters in which Deakin was concerned in the years 1880–1900', and he admits to an even more significant absence with this sentence: 'It seems right to add that I can claim no competence in the matters discussed in chapter three, and the best I can do is to report them'.⁸ To what is he referring? His chapter three is entitled 'Insights, Prayer and Praise', comprising a slim 25 pages of the biography's 700 pages, in which La Nauze touches rather uncomfortably on Deakin's 'inner life', what we now know to be Deakin's prodigious, mesmerising, ultimately life-shaping inner life. La Nauze, the Oxford-educated Ernest Scott Professor of History at the University of Melbourne, was flummoxed by Deakin's seances, sightings, prayers and praise, and he reverts to the safe terrain of Deakin's political career as soon as he possibly can.



6. Embossed front cover of a photograph album compiled by Deakin's sister Catherine (Katie) in July 1874, when she was in her mid-20s. The album is one part of the extensive visual record of Deakin and his family.

Historian Stuart Macintyre is right in saying that La Nauze's two-volume biography in the mid-1960s was arguably 'the culmination ... of this form of high historical scholarship' in Australia, published during a period when a number of writers responded to 'Australian history as a story of national self-fulfilment'.⁹ Psychological complexity and mystical speculation had no respectable place in this largely heroic narrative. Indeed, in the body of the text of La Nauze's chapter three, he inserts as justification for his attitude an asterisked footnote quoting senior historian Ernest Scott's memorable if waspish dismissal of Deakin's inner life: 'His mind', Scott wrote in a 1923 review, 'was birdlimed for any stray notion to settle and stick upon'.¹⁰

Al Gabay, publishing his *The Mystic Life of Alfred Deakin* nearly 30 years after La Nauze, embraces what he terms Deakin's 'fecund inner life'.¹¹ His work, he suggests, is not intended to be 'a full biography of a master politician'. Rather, it aims to be a 'corrective' to Murdoch and La Nauze, 'for although each author illuminated aspects of this complex man and his political milieu, neither in my view succeeded in integrating Deakin's public exertions to what was unquestionably their motive power: a profound, almost pietistic, private religious faith'.¹² Like no-one before him or since, Gabay methodically trawled through the shoals of Deakin's private writings, all 23 series occupying 12.64 metres of shelf space at the National Library of Australia (NLA), in order to give the mystic aspect of Deakin's life its due recognition.



7. This guide to the Deakin papers was published by the National Library of Australia to facilitate public access to a collection considered to be one of the Library's most significant. (Sir) Robert Menzies formally accepted the papers at a handing-over ceremony on 3 December 1965.

The last paragraph of the Gabay Introduction states the case with clarity:

This book endeavours to look behind the 'affable' exterior to another Alfred Deakin given intimate expression through his private writings: the 'silent student', the seeker for Providential 'signs', the fervent believer in prophecy and inspiration, the would-be poet, preacher and mystic, whose insights and experiences gradually convinced him that his political labours were mandated by the Divine will, and that the fate of his beloved nation was somehow linked to his own capacity for spiritual gnosis and moral improvement.¹³

Gabay's revelatory insights into Deakin's character and preoccupations I suspect prompted the seminar held at the National Library in mid-1993, 'Alfred Deakin: Public Man, Private Spirit', where much new material was presented by, among others, Diane Langmore on Deakin's talented wife and lifelong partner, Pattie, and by John Rickard in a paper he called 'Deakin's Ideal of the Family'.¹⁴ A few years later, Rickard, Professor of Australian Studies at Monash University, published a vastly expanded version of his NLA paper in a book he called *A Family Romance—the Deakins at Home*.¹⁵ While not breaking as much new ground as Gabay, Rickard also felt it necessary to review the contributions made by his major scholarly antecedents on the basis that each one—Murdoch, La Nauze and Gabay—had contributed 'only the sketchiest accounts of the family which surrounded Deakin'.¹⁶ Walter Murdoch, Rickard observes, was compromised by the Deakin family 'looking over his shoulder'; La Nauze's otherwise 'magisterial' contribution suffered because of the scant treatment accorded Deakin's 'inner life', the author (Rickard notes somewhat tartly), 'effectively quarantining it, so that it would not infect the main narrative'; and Gabay, according to Rickard, treated the members of Deakin's family 'as much a part of the external world as were his political colleagues'.¹⁷

Two hints, 'two tantalising hints' in the La Nauze biography, evidently piqued Rickard's interest in Deakin. For there, embedded in the text, was 'a family drama waiting to be recovered'. The last sentences of Rickard's Introduction, written in the mid-1990s with a dash of post-modern flair, promote the point of difference in his approach:

It is the plot of their family romance which lures me on and my interest needs no other justification. The challenge lies in exploring the complexity of human relationships, emotions and motivations. And why should that imaginative territory be regarded as being the sole preserve of the novelist?¹⁸

So there you have it: four biographers stretched over 70 years, virtually a slice history lesson in the development of Australian historiography in the twentieth century, each writer approaching his subject in a different way, feeling that his particular individual entry point into the subject necessitated an opening statement of territorial intent. Several writers have made contributions to Deakin scholarship in recent decades—Manning Clark, Stuart Macintyre, Diane Langmore, Marilyn Lake and Roy Williams, among them—but all (with the exception of Langmore’s fresh take on Pattie Deakin) have essentially enlarged on the known.¹⁹ What is still missing is an account of Deakin’s extraordinary story that integrates the significant elements of the narrative’s well-documented silos.

John La Nauze in his edited volume of Deakin’s letters to the *London Morning Post*, 1900–10, published three years after the biography, commented obliquely:

Some friendly reviewers of my biography of Deakin complained that I had not told them precisely what to think about him. I regard that as a compliment. I do not know what to think about them, much less about a man as complex as Deakin.²⁰



8. This sculpture of Alfred Deakin (in the suburb of Deakin, in Canberra) depicts what sculptor, Martin Moore, regards as the three main stages of Deakin’s life—as journalist, young statesman and barrister; husband and family man; and three-times prime minister. Excerpts from Deakin’s diaries are embossed in the artwork.

In the sections that follow in this account, the many forces influencing the enigmatic Deakin, his actions and reactions, will be discussed. It will be clear what I think about Deakin—his character, inner life, political life, loves, achievements and errors of judgement. Major milestones in his political career are illuminated by a familiarity with what he was recording privately, whether in diary, poem, prose or prayer, or in what he compiled as 'Clues' and 'Impromptus'. We also understand the man more satisfactorily when referencing the emotional upheavals that disrupted the Deakin family home after 1890. Sometimes it goes the other way, when knowledge of the precise dates of big public events in which Deakin played a leading role clarify the content of certain diary entries, or new poems or prayers.

Deakin's life will be discussed decade by decade. The strategy is not an arbitrary one, for it works well in this case: firstly, glimpses into his childhood and after, during the 1850s and 1860s; secondly, what I have called, with Deakin's help, the new pilgrim's progress into the 1870s and 1880s, as Deakin's rich life of the imagination and spirit evolved in wondrous ways in the settled seclusion of his study; thirdly, the reluctant colonial politician's emergence as a dynamic force in Victorian politics and internationally in the 1880s, and the sudden collapse of career momentum at the end of that decade; fourthly, Deakin's steadily more assertive reinvention when he provided leadership, for many, pre-eminent leadership, on the Federation question in the 1890s decade which, together with his nearly three years as attorney-general in Edmund Barton's first Commonwealth Government and five years himself as prime minister to 1910, entitles Deakin to be described as a founder of the Australian nation. His final years, 1910–19, are gathered under the heading 'Between Temple and Tomb', words taken from Deakin's study of the religion, history and architecture of India, words which seem symbolically appropriate when tracing his tragic decline in the Great War decade when he succumbed to what would today almost certainly be diagnosed as Alzheimer's disease.²¹ He bravely fought it until he could fight no more.

Does former Prime Minister Robert Menzies' comment, 50 years ago, that Deakin was the 'greatest Prime Minister this country ever had' retain validity today? Was it a valid assessment then?²²



Glimpses of childhood



9. The schoolboy Deakin, Alfie, aged 9 or 10, during his years at Melbourne Grammar School. While different in character to most of his peers, he did not lack self-belief.

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 what has been termed 'the long boom', from the mid-1850s to the later 1880s, a period which stimulated a number of political, social and cultural firsts. Five of the six colonies ratified some form of constitution by the end of the 1850s and, remarkably, world-leading initiatives such as the secret ballot and the eight-hour working day were trialled in the Australian colonies at this time.

The sheer scale of economic activity encouraged broader community enterprise, particularly during the 1870s and 1880s. 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 cashed in on this cultural and intellectual bonanza. He could read when he was four, and he was aged ten when George Higinbotham (a visionary Victorian statesman thirty years Deakin's senior) conducted a commission into his colony's education system that recommended the adoption of a secular government approach. Deakin was twelve when the last shipload of British convicts docked in an Australian port; fourteen when the Victorian Academy of Arts was founded; sixteen when the Adelaide to Port Darwin overland telegraph line was completed; eighteen when the University of Melbourne became the first Australian university to admit women; and twenty-one when, in Melbourne, an Australian cricket Eleven defeated England in what is generally regarded as the first Test match.

The excitement and restless energy of the era undoubtedly helped to shape ambition and aspiration in Deakin as he grew up, but there were other influences on his early development. Home life was one, regardless of how we interpret the barely disguised hurt of some of Deakin's adult memories. In a talk he delivered for the TE Brown Society in 1910, called 'Books and a Boy', Deakin remembered his childhood in a pastiche of evocative images:

Nothing could be simpler than this presentation of an old-fashioned Australian cottage room with open fireplace, universal in early colonial days. Beside it sits a loving mother, infant on knee, white-gowned and glowing from his hot bath, out of which his sister has just tenderly lifted him, while the father reading by the oil lamp watches the effect of his first gift to the boy. To the uncomprehending the very ordinary picture book before him, its calico stiffened leaves brilliantly emblazoned in violently contrasted colours, may well seem cheap and commonplace, but—to the child—'Not all the wealth of Ormuz or of Ind', not 'All the kingdoms of the world and the glory thereof' could have evoked more entrancing visions.²³

Biographer John Rickard has commented on this depiction as having ‘the idyllic glow of a Nativity’, with Deakin’s mother, Sarah, as the Madonna, sister Katie a maternal companion, father William a nurturing Joseph and the Christ-like, shimmering Alfred front and centre. Two years before the Brown Society talk, in 1908, on the day his mother died, Deakin wrote in a similar vein that as ‘a child, I rejoiced in my mother’s sweetness, patience and loving-kindness’, her ‘perfectly protective embrace’ of ‘the young life entrusted to its folds’.²⁴

I find both of these encapsulations of the deeper past, their carefully crafted intimacy, unconvincing, even artificial. As we see in the vast corpus of Deakin’s prose, as he aged he became more polished in his studied use of literary techniques and devices. This creative sophistication is on display in the Brown Society talk.



10. The Deakin family members pose rather stiffly for a group portrait in 1857—Catherine, mother Sarah, father William and baby Alfred in infant’s dress.

Childhood experiences were undoubtedly regarded by Deakin as significant, but why?

Complicating an answer to this question is La Nauze's acute observation that the 'complex structures' of Deakin's childhood memories were built around 'a single memory'.²⁵ Over the course of his life, Deakin embellished the present and the past as it suited him, whether in a newspaper article, speech, political assessment or family reminiscence. He was adept at rewriting history, or perhaps we might say recording history from his perspective. With Deakin, you must always be wary. When he addressed the Brown Society of mostly friends, family and acquaintances, he was patently in the business of myth-making as memory loss set in. For most of his life, Deakin positioned himself centrally in a grand narrative. In the Brown Society talk we get a portrait of the nation-builder, the founder of a nation, as a young child, with a dash of Abraham Lincoln and his log cabin thrown in. The literary genre of autobiography is full of like-minded accounts of fortunate lives.

We should also interrogate Deakin's idealised images of his father and mother in terms of at least some of the known facts of his childhood. At age four, for several formative years in his emotional development, Deakin was shipped off to a girls' school in Kyneton run by the Misses Thompson, to join his sister Katie. Much later, Katie recalled that the Misses Thompson 'fell in love with the engaging child', but this does not align with one of the mature Alfred's very specific memories when he recalled the Kyneton years coming to an abrupt halt because of an incident of Dickensian proportions.²⁶ The younger Miss Thompson apparently 'dared to box' Deakin's 'noble ears' and when he threatened to tell his father what had happened, he was struck 'again with force enough to send my empty little skull against the corner of a bookshelf'.²⁷

While Katie oddly never spoke about this incident, she certainly looms large in the wider story. Six years older than Deakin, from early childhood she exerted a singular influence on her brother. Their relationship was closer than most brother-sister relationships, more intimate. In a statement that Katie provided to biographer Walter Murdoch shortly after Deakin's death, she said:

My first recollection of my only brother was ... being allowed to peep at him, the nurse and maid ... teasing me, saying, 'Now my lady your nose is put out of joint', which remark I could not at the time understand nor did any personal experience ever enlighten me. I worshipped the baby as I have the man during all our lives.²⁸



11. Deakin aged about 6 or 7, smartly dressed for the camera, and with a characteristic, purposeful gaze even as a boy.

The various schools of twentieth-century psychology would relish a forensic investigation of these remarks, but what is certain is that the lives of brother and sister were inextricably entwined in a filial partnership that developed in important ways well beyond the parents, and possibly beyond Deakin's wife, Pattie. Katie looked after her brother at boarding school; she helped to inform his burgeoning reading list in his teens; she shared his spiritualist passions in the 1870s and after; controversially,

she mentored all three Deakin daughters at one time or another, especially in their musical training; and, according to one of the ‘detective’ stories prosecuted by Rickard in *A Family Romance*, the guilt that Deakin felt after thwarting his sister’s opportunity to marry ‘the great attachment’ of her life would contribute to the household’s emotional turmoil.²⁹



12. Deakin’s sister Catherine, Katie, aged about 12 or 13. The harp was a prop, not an instrument she played, though it did symbolise her lifelong passion for music. Aunt Katie would teach music to all three Deakin daughters—Ivy, Stella and Vera.

After Kyneton, Deakin attended the Melbourne Church of England Grammar School from 1864 to 1871. Katie remembered that her brother ‘made friends easily’, but that too 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 at times suffocating atmosphere of a private boys’ school, where he was given names such as ‘Miss Deakin’, ‘Polly’ and ‘Pretty Polly’.³⁰ Such painful memories at the hands of his peers have a distinct ring of truth about them. Did taunts of this kind prompt Deakin to become a loner who turned inwards to books for solace and adventure? Probably. He once assessed his own character at school as ‘highly nervous, slender, overgrown, sensitive, sympathetic, variable, emotional, apprehensive and dreamy’.³¹ He cried a lot. Consigned by his parents to an institution that was the very model of a muscular Christian, English public school, young Alfred was no seamless fit. He was poor at sport, did not make friends easily, read voraciously and he was by personality utterly different to his classmates.

There were upsides. Deakin was fortunate to have a sympathetic and inspiring teacher at Melbourne Grammar, JH Thompson, about whom he later wrote with affection. He also had a progressive principal, Cambridge-educated Dr JE Bromby, a free-thinker who had already acquired a reputation in Melbourne for his liberal position on many social questions. Bromby was recognised, as well, for the quality of his oratory, a talent that Deakin may have admired and copied for he too developed into a speaker of power and eloquence.

Deakin reviewed his school life as a period of lost opportunities, but the years were life-defining in ways that he failed to recognise.³² Yes, he matriculated well enough to become a law student at the University of Melbourne; far more importantly, in the Grammar years he embarked on a rebellious personal journey in reaction to his school’s narrow environment, a journey that would liberate him. Murdoch writes that Deakin ‘went his own way, in an idealised world of his own, unsubdued, and almost untouched, by the world of external realities’.³³ Books opened up a whole new world, limited only by the reach of his imagination. He became a self-coached fast reader as well, ‘unusually swift’ according to La Nauze, a talent complemented by a gift for recall—of sources, citations, contexts and poetry, whole chunks of verse and prose of those writers whom he most admired.³⁴ Applied to politics in later life, a razor-sharp memory would prove invaluable.



A new pilgrim's progress



13. Deakin, aged 18–19, in the midst of his years of intense spiritualist enthusiasm.

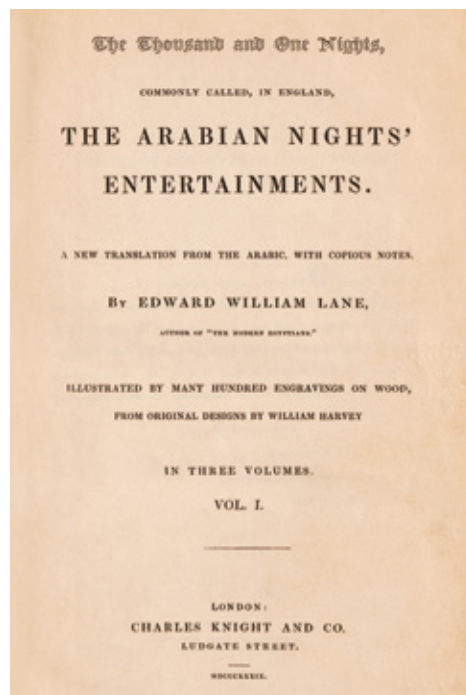
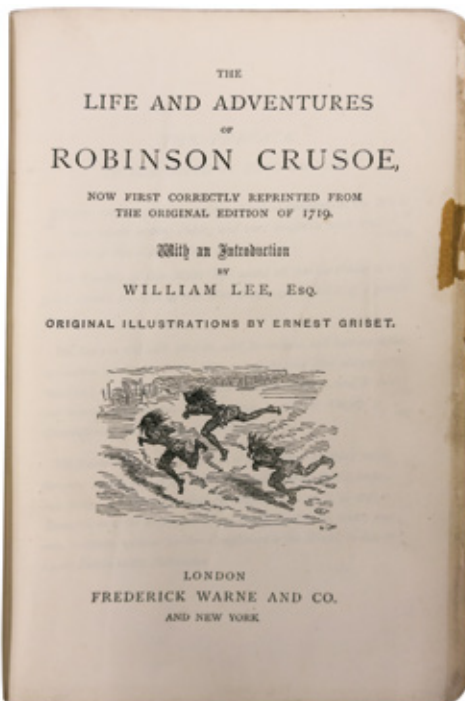
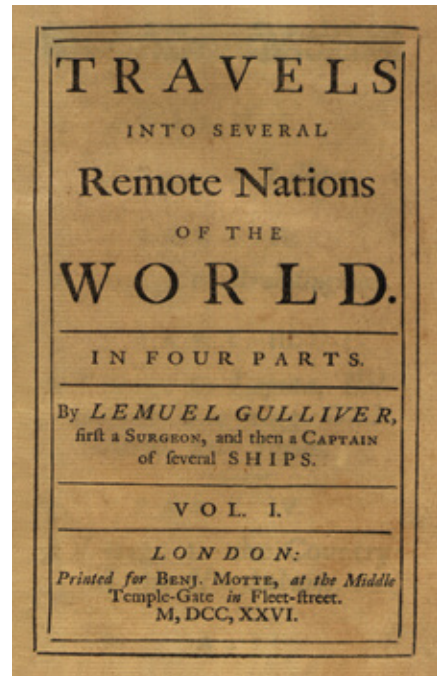
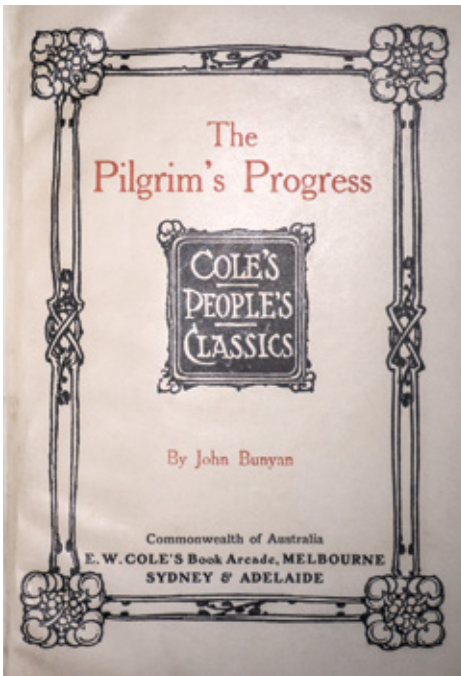
Three books in particular stimulated Deakin's early teenage years, when he regularly took himself off to the public libraries of Melbourne and Prahran with a packed lunch to read for the entire day: John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Jonathan Swift's classic *Gulliver's Travels*. The world of the *Arabian Nights* was not far behind. Add to these stimulants to the boy's imagination the tuition provided by what Murdoch calls his 'real teachers' as he got a little older—Marryat, Fenimore Cooper, Scott, Dickens and Dumas—and you have a reading list, a learning curve that opened exotic new worlds and sparked a spirit of enquiry that lasted.³⁵ In Deakin's own words: 'I spun romance after romance based on my favourite books in which I was the culmination of all heroes and in turn every kind of noble being supplied with the appropriate adventure and surroundings'.³⁶ This is a telling statement because, as will become clear, Deakin conjured some form of heroic myth for himself for the rest of his life.

The first book Deakin ever bought, aged 16 in 1872, the year he started his law studies, was Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*.³⁷ He may well have internalised one of Carlyle's favourite sayings, 'blessed is he who has found his work', and Carlyle's view of history, that only the 'strongest' men in a community have the ability to bring about social reform. The times were ripe for the dissemination of ideas, facts, fads and fancies that might change community thinking, and the young Deakin was ready to play a part in the zeitgeist.

During the 1870s, as he dutifully absorbed dry, legal precedents, Deakin's extra-curricular reading sped through the likes of Plato, Carlyle, Mill, Huxley, Ruskin, Schiller, Dante, Spinoza, the English Romantic poets, Spencer, Emerson and Swedenborg. We know that in 1879, aged 23, the year he first stood for election to the Victorian Parliament, his reading list included, to cite a small sample, Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason*; Masson's *The Life of Milton*; *Les Misérables*; Mill's *The Principles of Political Economy*; Morley's *Rousseau*; Madame Blavatsky's theosophical *Isis Unveiled*; Bosworth Smith's *Mohammed and Mohammedism*; the *Ramayana*; Henry James; Matthew Arnold and Harriet Martineau.³⁸ Clearly, a searching course of self-education was underway.

Murdoch and La Nauze both make reference to what they feel was Deakin's lifelong susceptibility to 'the latest idea, the latest thing he had read, the newest theory'.³⁹ Making this observation in 1921, two years after Deakin's death, Murdoch maintained that getting 'carried away' was 'a weakness' in his distinguished friend. Yet it is not hard to detect in this judgement the posture of a university teacher, overly conscious of applying academic standards. Deakin was never contained by such strictures. He admitted to having 'strayed' into law.

The new pilgrim was set to explore other, less travelled roads.



14. Four classic works of the Western literary tradition which exerted a lasting effect on Deakin. One of the specialties of renowned Melbourne bookseller, E W Cole, was studies of comparative religion.



A rich life of the spirit begins



15. Deakin, about 1878, the beard long in the period shortly before his political career began. The whiskers would soon be trimmed more neatly as public life beckoned.

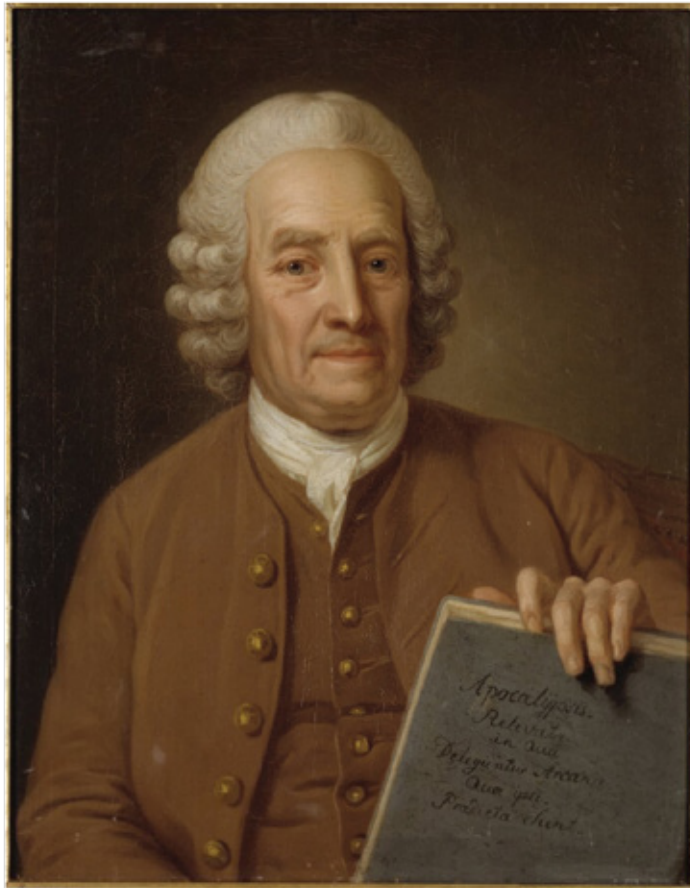
At university, Deakin joined the Debating Club and, later, the Eclectic Association, the busiest meeting place for Melbourne's aspiring intellectuals. There, two older friends, David Mickle and Arthur Patchett Martin, introduced their teenage colleague to the writings of English philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer, and the literature of agnosticism.⁴⁰ Deakin later remarked that he had to 'read hard to catch up to them' but the rewards followed. His recall of those salad days is a delight:

The gates of knowledge, judgement and speculation were swung wide open day and night as the three inveterate talkers wrestled with the latest books or articles in the reviews. Dumas' three musketeers were not more ready and reckless in the fray than we.⁴¹

Mickle's nagging critiques and Martin's droll commentary were offset by Deakin's more open and idealistic, if initially naïve, search for life's answers.

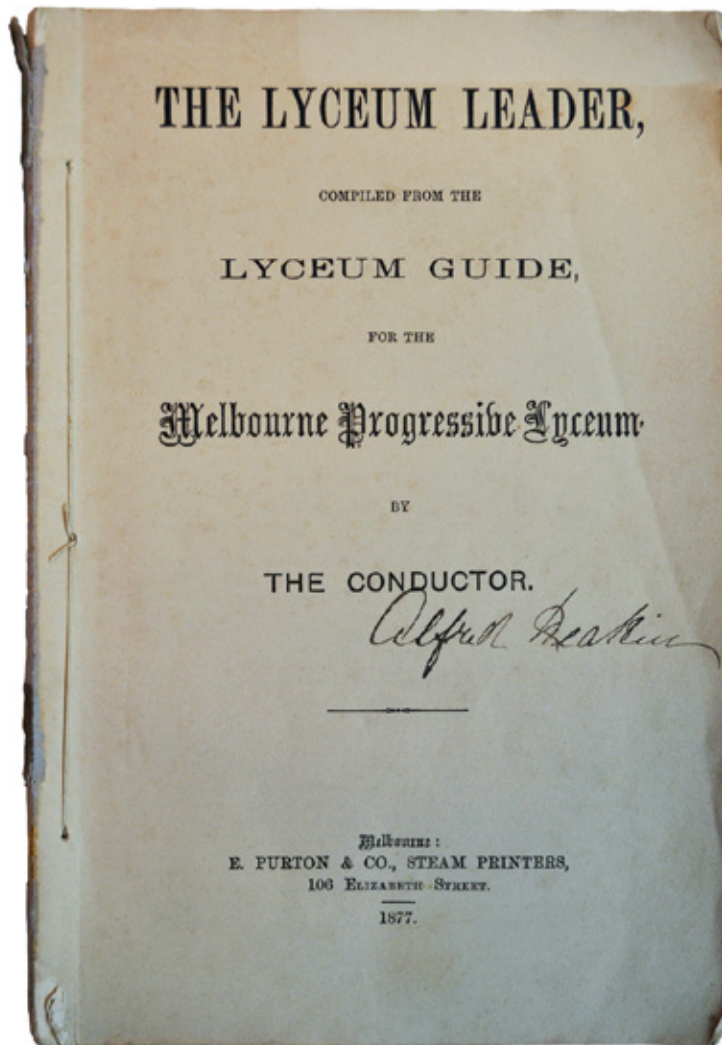
The quest led the impressionable Deakin into spiritualism and, later, Swedenborgianism. In its popular form, spiritualism started in 1848 with the widely reported 'Hydesville rappings' in northern New York State when two girls, 14-year-old Margaret Fox and her 12-year-old sister Katherine, purportedly heard strange knocking sounds in their family home—sounds, they claimed, that were produced by a spirit, Splitfoot. The case was an immediate sensation, reported across the world, and the girls became celebrities. They were brought to New York city in 1850 and gave public exhibitions of their talent for communicating with the dead—séances which attracted some of America's most noted political and cultural figures, including historian George Bancroft and creative writers, William Cullen Bryant, James Fenimore Cooper and Nathaniel Willis. The list of notable converts boasted the likes of poet Walt Whitman, renowned newspaper editor Horace Greeley, ex-slave Sojourner Truth and abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. For many of these enthusiasts, including Whitman, spiritualism connected closely to the writings of Swedish mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg, who shifted from the physical sciences to spiritual matters back in the 1740s in order to prove the existence of the soul and the afterlife through the application of scientific rigour. Whitman declared in the 1860s that Swedenborg was destined to make 'the deepest and broadest mark upon the religions of future ages ... of any man who ever walked the earth'.⁴²

In a Western world still coming to grips with the implications of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859), many people with liberal beliefs began looking for meaning and direction in their lives outside of traditional Christian pathways, including a surprisingly large number of the citizens of 'Marvellous Melbourne'. Still in his teens in the early 1870s, Deakin assumed a leading role in the city's rather fashionable spiritualist movement, attending and initiating séances, hosting and delivering lectures and, where possible, putting spiritual phenomena to the experimental test. He became a member of the newly established Victorian Association of Progressive Spiritualists (VAPS) in 1874 and, in the same year, was invited to join the exclusive seance circle of Dr Motherwell, a leading Melbourne physician.



16. Swedish mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Late in life, Deakin described Swedenborg as ‘one of my most revered and suggestive authors’, but he had to admit that he could not ‘even superficially explain’ why.

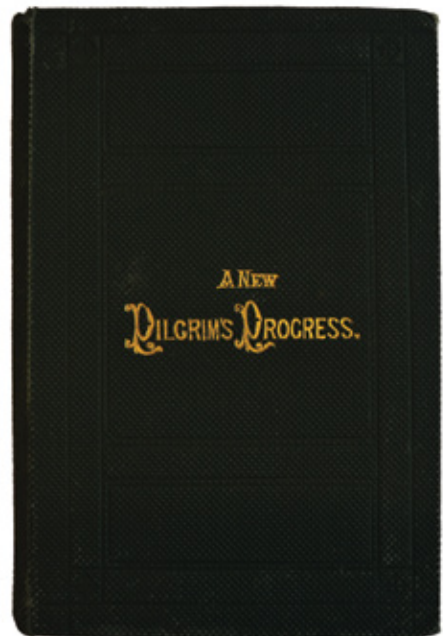
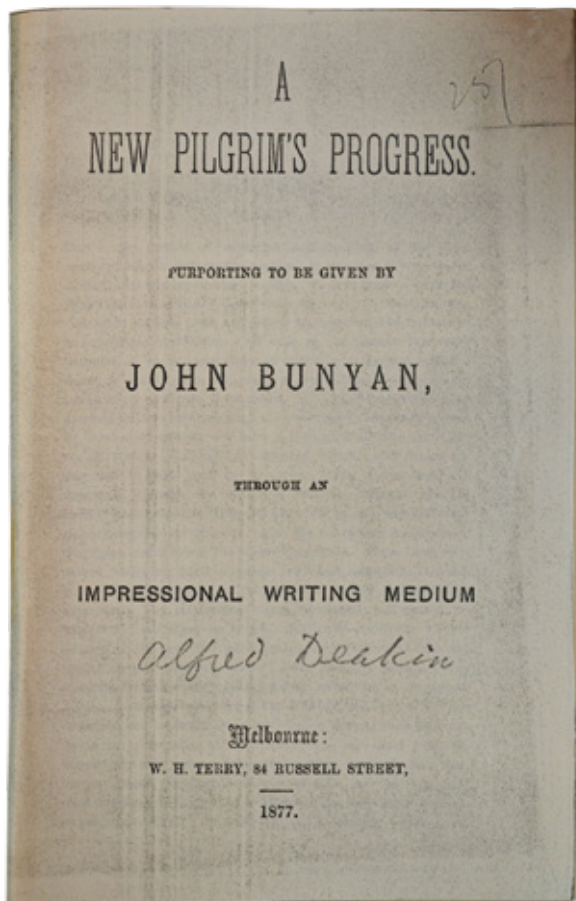
In the years that followed, Deakin became one of the Victorian Association’s most active members, teaching at its spiritualist Sunday school, the Progressive Lyceum, and editing *The Lyceum Leader* in 1877, a collection of spiritually elevated prose and verse chosen by Deakin from the works of Confucius, Marcus Aurelius, Longfellow and the English Romantic poets, the Talmud and the Koran (interspersed with Deakin’s own spiritual homilies and prayers). In a talk he delivered with autobiographical overtones, Deakin outlined the Lyceum’s aims, which would entail “no dogmas, no catechisms, no teachers” tyranny. The children are developed, not crushed by authority’.⁴³ In 1878, the 22-year-old Deakin became the President of the Victorian Association of Progressive Spiritualists. By then, he was vegetarian and a temperance advocate.



17. Deakin's copy of *The Lyceum Leader*, a prose and verse collection of works (that he edited) chosen for their spiritualist messages and aspirations. Deakin's own contributions are scattered throughout.

Deakin's spiritualist experiences in the 1870s had lifelong consequences. Habits formed took hold as he began to balance the breadth of his reading and the intellectual vitality of his discussions with the urge to put his own thoughts on paper. Over the next several decades, as his political life soared, this resulted in an astonishing volume of private writing, the recorded workings of his 'inner' life. There would be times in the future when the irresistible strength of the inner life matched the political machinations of the outside world; on occasion, the demands of the personal and private threatened to subsume politics entirely.

It is difficult to overstate the impact of spiritualism on Deakin. The seances he frequented entrenched a belief in 'out-of-body' experiences and the 'invisible' that he never lost, experiences which, for example, dominate the 30 or so 'fictive' pieces of creative writing that he penned from around 1890.⁴⁴ Deakin even had a youthful flirtation as a 'spiritualistic medium' that produced a curious tome of 260 pages entitled, in full, *A New Pilgrim's Progress, Purporting to be Given by John Bunyan Through an Impressional Writing Medium*.⁴⁵ Dr Motherwell's circle of adherents was thrilled with this homegrown addition to its source documents, and WH Terry, editor of the VAPS journal, *Harbinger of Light*, greeted the work 'as one of the most remarkable contributions to the spiritual literature that we have ever had'. It was evidently produced over 12 months and 49 sittings by a medium who, as Deakin himself once put it, was 'operated on by the subliminal forces in oneself'.⁴⁶



18. Book cover and title page of Deakin's copy of *A New Pilgrim's Progress*. Purportedly channelling the spirit of John Bunyan, Deakin was the 'impressional writing medium', a description which would acutely embarrass him throughout his political career.

In 1877, however, the same year that *A New Pilgrim's Progress* was published, Deakin made the decision to take no further active part in mediumship. He was 21. Later, he acknowledged that the purported 'impressions' recorded 'afforded no evidence whatever of anything more than readiness and fluency of speech on my part'.⁴⁷ There is 'nothing Bunyanesque in the book', he recanted sardonically, 'except the title'.⁴⁸ In the political decades of his life about to commence, the existence in print of *A New Pilgrim's Progress* caused its author/medium no end of embarrassment. For Deakin's critics, it was the gift that kept on giving. They never tired of labelling him a 'seancist', even in obituaries after his death.⁴⁹

John La Nauze, occasionally an exasperated biographer, laments this overt spiritualist phase and Deakin's presidency of the VAPS, suggesting at one point that Deakin might 'have been better occupied at twenty-two in playing cricket'.⁵⁰ The comment is misleading because in 1880, aged 24, Deakin in fact cut all ties with the Spiritualist Association and even during this, his most passionate spiritualist phase, his personal outpourings were far from exclusively spiritualist in nature. His love of literature, especially drama and poetry, was as intense as it was enduring.

While attending seances, inculcating free-thinking values into young Lyceum students such as his future wife Pattie, and dissecting Carlyle, Mill, Emerson, Spencer, or Darwin at the Eclectic Association gatherings, Deakin wrote a number of one-act and three-act plays before 1877—stories replete with Muslim clerics and conquerors, conjurers, concubines and Christian virgins—that combined his passion for drama of all kinds, high- and low-brow, with his yearning for the romance and adventure of a distant, magical past. Law textbooks continued to come a distant second to the alluring world of the 'Arabian Nights'.

Perhaps fortified by the ease with which these short plays rolled out onto the page, in much the same manner as *A New Pilgrim's Progress* presented itself, Deakin felt emboldened to show his most ambitious effort, *Quentin Massys: A Drama*, a five-act play in Shakespearean blank verse set in Antwerp and Italy at the end of the fifteenth century, to a Mr Harwood, a reputable actor/manager based in Melbourne. Harwood, it appears, 'panned it mercilessly', and the crest-fallen writer reacted by torching all but two or three copies of the printed work.⁵¹ This experience of rejection for the proud Deakin was a salutary one. Despite his youthful determination to become a writer/scholar rather than a lawyer, from the mid-1870s onwards he never again showed his personal writings, poetry or prose, to anyone. The only exceptions were the poems he wrote for his wife Pattie every year on her birthday and on their wedding anniversary.

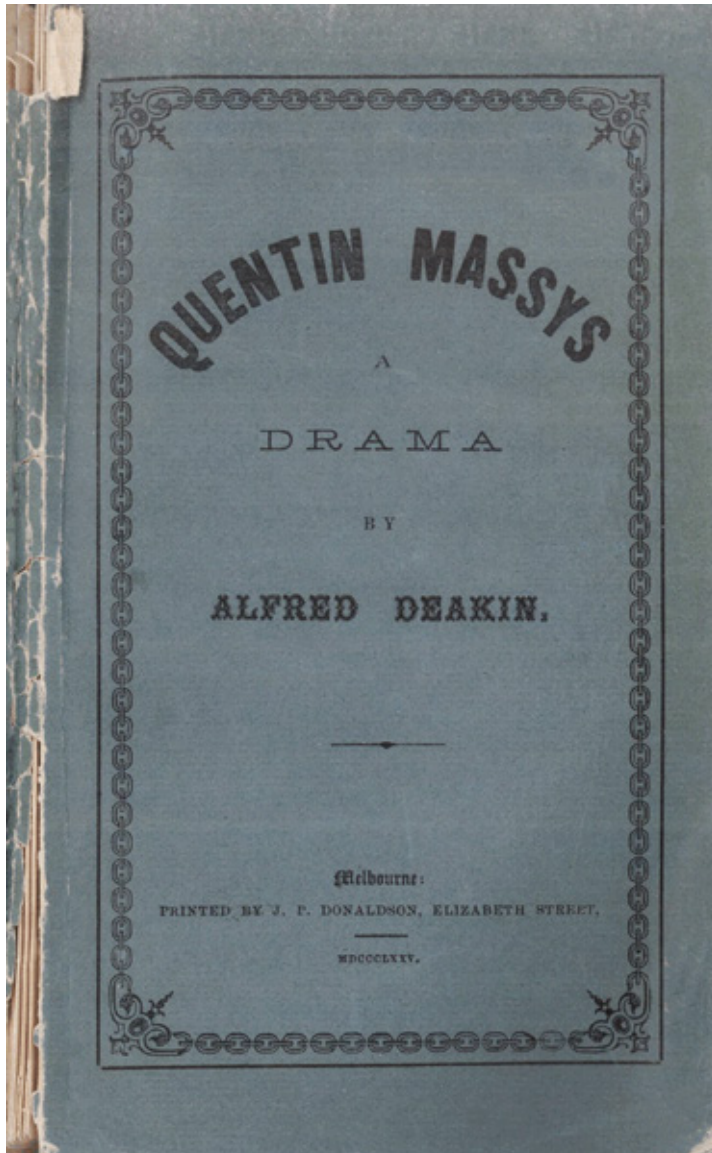


19. Carefully posed family album photograph of teenager Pattie Browne (Deakin), with her mother and three younger siblings. The Browne family had an active role in Melbourne's spiritualist movement, particularly her father, Hugh Junor Browne, a man of wealth and influence.

The decision in no way curtailed his output, though, nor did it modify his literary bent. In 1878, the year he was called to the Bar to begin a modest legal practice attracting little work, Deakin commenced a new literary enterprise, an enormously ambitious treatise that he ‘projected to run to five volumes ... [to] define a new aesthetic and correct the errors in the theories of Ruskin and others’.

The manuscript, entitled ‘Poets and Poetry’, ultimately comprised 1,000 tightly written foolscap pages, an intriguing early entry in the CV of a future Australian prime minister.⁵² Six years on, in 1884, he began work on the first of his six ‘Gospels’, a project dedicated to those whom he considered to be the greatest writers of the past who had woven into their works a divine message for humanity. The dedication and sheer writing time required for these monumental undertakings (let alone keeping track of the endless succession of literary/spiritual curios that took his fancy) is directly relevant to Deakin’s larger story, because it was in the period spanning them that his political career began.

The dreamer was about to reveal a tough, pragmatic side.



20. Cover of Deakin's five-act play in Shakespearean verse, *Quentin Massys*. A well-credentialed reader's damning assessment of the play resulted in Deakin never again showing anyone any part of his vast output of private writing.





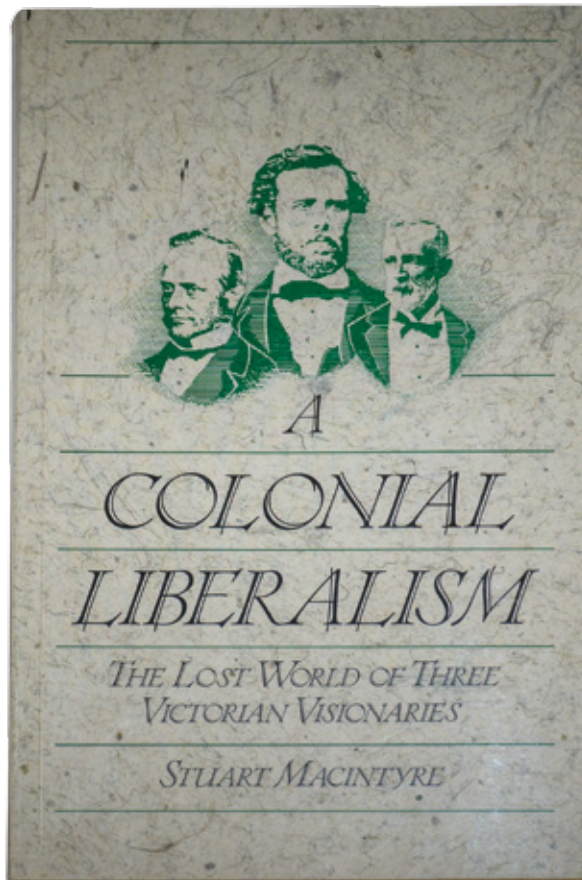
Reluctant lawyer, reluctant politician



21. Studio portrait of Deakin, aged 29, taken on 21 July 1886, at a time when his political career in colonial Victoria was firmly established. Curiously, his chosen outfit and demeanour seem to convey a commitment to matters of the spirit.

In the buzzing world outside Deakin's study, three prominent citizens in Melbourne's political, social and cultural life contributed to the moulding of his liberal views: George Higinbotham, Charles Pearson and David Syme. They are the subjects of Stuart Macintyre's book, *A Colonial Liberalism—the Lost World of Three Victorian Visionaries* (1991), individuals for whom the 'liberal tradition they embodied was more a code of conduct than a precise political program'.⁵³

George Higinbotham, a graduate of Trinity College (Dublin) described by one contemporary as 'the greatest of Australian orators and of Australian Liberals', was attorney-general during the well-documented political crises in Victoria in the turbulent 1860s. Much later, in 1886, he was appointed by Deakin himself as the colony's chief justice. He remained, for Deakin, 'a towering figure', a figure of reverence whose espousal of liberalism left 'an indelible impression' on him and all like-minded, democratically-minded contemporaries.⁵⁴

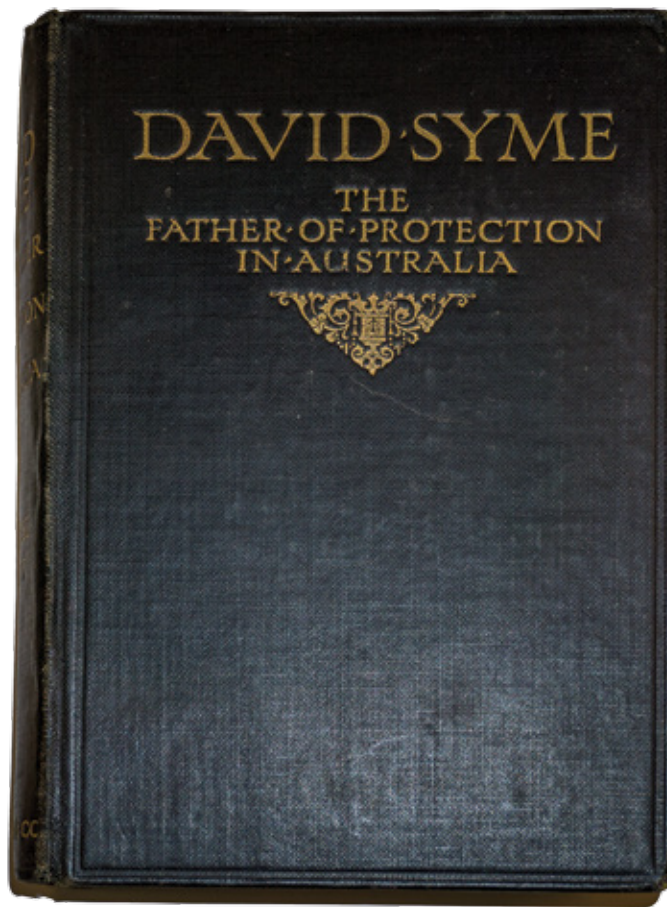


22. The 'Three Victorian Visionaries' assessed by historian Stuart Macintyre in *A Colonial Liberalism* (1991) were George Higinbotham, David Syme and Charles Pearson. Each played an important role in shaping Deakin's political and cultural beliefs.

Deakin met Charles Pearson at the University of Melbourne when the university lecturer regularly chaired debates for the popular debating club and mentored talented undergraduate participants, including Deakin. A former Fellow of Oxford's Oriel College and professor of history at King's College, London, Pearson took his liberal views into the colony's public life in a manner which disconcerted Victoria's conservatives because they seemed so plainly at odds with his privileged English background, his at times condescending demeanour and his conspicuous eyeglass. For Deakin, the free-thinking Pearson spoke and wrote with a model liberal sensibility, unafraid of any opponent. It was polymath Pearson who suggested to Deakin that he learn French to enable him to read that country's great writers in their own language, a facility he duly acquired on a single return voyage to the United States in 1885. On that same trip, Deakin left his wife Pattie (and daughter Ivy) in Los Angeles while he went east on a pilgrimage to the gravesite of one of his favourite writers, the Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, about whom we will hear more shortly. Pearson, it should be noted, embarked on his own visit to meet Emerson in the American's home town of Concord, Massachusetts, and attended a seance as Emerson's guest, a shared experience that might well have been a topic of conversation when Deakin joined Pearson, in 1878, as a journalist on the staff of David Syme's *Age* newspaper.

Deakin met the Scottish-born Syme in May 1878, as a result of their mutual interest in spiritualism, and Syme soon after hired the reluctant lawyer on a trial basis. He made an immediate impression on both the hard-headed proprietor and his journalistic colleagues. Despite repeatedly emphasising how 'laborious' journalism could be, Deakin was good at it, able to churn out leaders, editorials, articles, reviews, colour columns and investigative pieces as the occasion demanded. About the time Syme met Deakin, he became the majority owner of *The Age*, having increased the paper's circulation in the previous two decades to a stage where it was one of the largest in the entire British Empire. Syme wielded clout, able to make and break governments in colonial Victoria and, after 1901, federal governments.⁵⁵ He ruled as a despot. None of his staff ever got close to him, with the exception of Deakin. They hit it off almost immediately, with Deakin becoming 'the spoiled child of the office'.⁵⁶

To the extent that Deakin engaged with any major political issue in the 1870s, he was a free-trader in the same vein as John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer and Richard Cobden. However, as Australian novelist and cultural commentator Vance Palmer memorably phrased it in his collection of essays, *National Portraits* (1940), it was the intractable protectionist David Syme who 'connived at [Deakin's] political education', reshaping the impressionable young employee's political beliefs.⁵⁷ As Deakin later acknowledged, he owed his conversion into a 'convinced Protectionist' of local industry 'to Syme and a series of conversations, walking with him'. He had crossed, he said, 'the fiscal Rubicon'.⁵⁸



23. Cover of Ambrose Pratt's 1908 biography of David Syme (1827–1908), long-term proprietor of the *Age* newspaper, who exerted a powerful influence on Deakin's political career, especially in its formative years. Deakin wrote the biography's Introduction.

This might be the first telling statement of Deakin's willingness throughout his career to be politically pragmatic if and when the circumstances required it. In the decades to follow, his critics would view in an entirely different light this particular serviceable conversion concerning the Australian colonies' most pressing political and economic issue. Radical MLA David Gaunson, for example, dismissed him as nothing more than a 'puppet', 'the poodle dog of a newspaper proprietor'.⁵⁹

Syme was also the catalyst for the start of Deakin's political career in 1879–80. When an opportunity arose in Victoria's West Bourke area, a mostly rural electorate, the *Age* proprietor convinced his precociously talented, if initially reluctant journalist to put himself forward, promoting his ability (Syme's brother would call it 'genius') in the pages of the newspaper.⁶⁰ After two interesting false starts that do not have to concern us here, Deakin was finally elected in July 1880, during the same year that a

clairvoyant predicted he would in time embark on a life-changing journey to London to participate in a 'grand tribunal'. Deakin would never forget what he described as the 'extraordinary information' he received and, in 1887, when he represented Victoria at the Colonial Conference in London, he embraced the experience as unassailable evidence of the veracity of the earlier prediction—and remained a lifelong believer in the entwined relationship between his political and inner lives.⁶¹



24. Pen and ink drawing of the exuberant reception Deakin received in Melbourne after his impressive debut on the international stage at the 1887 Colonial Conference in London.

The weeks spent in London, when Deakin's engaging personality and cogent arguments impressed a number of Britain's most senior politicians, foreshadowed the glittering 'federal story' to come. But in the 1880s, most of his political acumen was developed on the floor of the Victorian Legislative Assembly. A rise to prominence came quickly, perhaps too quickly. Between March 1883 and November 1890 he held office in successive conservative coalition governments, as leader of the Victorian Liberals in 1886 and joint-leader of a Duncan Gillies/Deakin coalition until 1890.

Deakin's subtle skills as a negotiator impressed parliamentary colleagues of all persuasions. He took a keen interest in the government's public works programs, especially those relating to irrigation, and gained a public profile when he chaired a Royal Commission into irrigation, a subject of vital importance in a country prone to drought. This led to him introducing Australia's first irrigation legislation in 1886 after a trip to California as the head of a parliamentary delegation.

In the Introduction to her 1952 play about Deakin, *Tether the Dragon*, Kylie Tennant, best-known for her social realist novels, supplies a snapshot of Deakin in the 1880s:

He might have the reputation of being a mystic and a poet, but his grasp of detail, his capacity for hard work, and the fact that he was a man everyone liked, made him an ideal colleague in the ministry. He found it expedient to grow a curly auburn beard so that his youth might be less noticeable and from this disguise he never again emerged.⁶²

The portrait has merit, with two necessary caveats: first, Tennant does her best to overlook Deakin's initial lack of confidence as a young politician. In later life he recalled that it took him years in politics before he managed to 'assert whatever individuality there was in me'.⁶³ Secondly, not everyone liked Deakin, and this point needs expanding.



25. Early pen and ink drawing of Melbourne's Parliament House. Construction began in 1856 and continued for decades, throughout Victoria's long economic 'boom'. The building epitomised the architectural splendour of 'Marvellous Melbourne'.



26. Parliament House, Melbourne—host of the Commonwealth Parliament from 1901 to 1927.

In a speech he delivered to the Victorian Parliament on land ownership on 28 November 1882, three years after the publication of Henry George's international bestseller, *Progress and Poverty* (1879), Deakin declared himself a land-reformer, a devotee in a general way of George's argument for a single tax on unused land that (it was asserted) would abolish poverty and ensure social progress with fairness. Deakin stated that land should be 'held in trust for the people as a whole, to be used for the benefit of the whole—not the few'.⁶⁴ Such sentiments reflected his communal beliefs of the previous decade but, during the 1880s, they came under intense pressure when he accepted a position as minister in a conservative Victorian government. Again, his stated position abruptly altered, an ideological shift that infuriated the secretary of the Henry George-inspired Single Tax League in Sydney, AG Huie, who dismissed him as a 'poseur' and, in a derogatory remark destined to recur, 'a spiritualist and a seancist'. Deakin, Huie raged, 'is not and never was a Liberal ... [he] is a Tory, advocating views acceptable only to the British landed aristocracy'.⁶⁵ In an essay written as a retrospect on Deakin's career in 1913, the year he formally retired from politics, radical Labor MP Frank Anstey reacted to Deakin's well-documented equivocation with similar venom: 'This brilliant young man dropped his principles in the charnel house of oblivion ... The advocate of social progress and political liberty became the sworn comrade in arms of the anti-progressive and reactionary forces of the time'.⁶⁶ Deakin, in contrast, characterised his actions when in government during this first decade in the political arena (and, indeed, later in federal politics) as those of an 'ultra-Radical'.



27. Legislative Assembly Chamber of the Victorian Parliament— which acted as the Commonwealth Government’s House of Representatives from 1901 to 1927.

What is certain is that he campaigned for the conservative government of which he was a part with a resolve at odds with his nominal leadership of the Liberals. Even Syme's *Age* found it hard to fathom such opportunism, accusing him of 'treachery', of being 'a traitor to Liberalism'.⁶⁷ Despite this public assault on his character, in the elections of 1886 and 1889 Victorian voters confirmed the Duncan Gillies/Deakin government in power during a decade of plenty as British capital poured in unchecked. The public debt of Victoria grew alarmingly. Land values began to fall in 1889 and, when the housing bubble burst, the consequences for all sections of the community were disastrous and long-lasting.

In the second half of the 1880s decade, in the boom times, Minister of the Crown Deakin 'speculated heavily in the rush to be rich', investing his savings as well as his father's, and losing both.⁶⁸ His father died not long after. Deakin eventually managed to repay all his debts, though he was implicated in corrupt business dealings. As Richard Norris puts it in his *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry: 'The picture of [Deakin] as an innocent intellectual unwittingly caught up in the brutal world of business seems too kind'.⁶⁹ Far too kind. In his years as a minister in the Gillies Government, Deakin was chairman or director of a number of suspect enterprises and, as a lawyer in the early 1890s seeking to recover his financial losses, he defended a few of his former business associates and political colleagues who, the public felt, deserved gaol time.

There was more. On the cusp of the 1890s decade that created a Federation, when the great maritime strike sparked an epic confrontation between the forces of labour and capital, it was Deakin in office as chief secretary who recruited special constables and summoned troops to break the damaging deadlock. History records that those troops, led by the infamous Colonel Tom Price, were alert to their commander's instructions to 'fire low and lay them out'.⁷⁰

Ten years into a political career that seemed certain to culminate in Deakin becoming his colony's premier, his life trajectory had taken a sudden, unexpected turn. A number of his coalition colleagues were not surprised. They had always been uneasy about his fluid political stance and peccadilloes. During the 1880s, with its excess of social gatherings for the acquisitive few, Deakin acquired a reputation as a loner. He was charming, always, but a reluctant mixer and never a drinker. He gained the sobriquet 'Affable Alfred' because of his drawing room graces and yet, as Stuart Macintyre has observed, there was 'an inner reserve that few penetrated'.⁷¹ It was a reticence in boisterous company that might have owed something to the experiences of childhood. The more likely explanation, however, can be found in his unswerving attachment to the endlessly rewarding experiences of his lone spiritual search.

In this first decade in politics, and with so much going on in the Victorian Parliament, somehow Deakin managed a written output in private that defies belief. No-one, neither his wife nor his political associates, had any inkling of the dimensions of an inner life that was being given full expression in the confines of the home study.

The Gospel according to Swedenborg 1.
The East of the Church Fathers -
4. 4. 89.

21. 9. 89.

1. The gospel according to Swedenborg means to put
analogies to those of W & Spence - Incidentally
it implies both the life ^{& mind} of Objective nature &
the independent ~~stagnant~~ & conflicting life of
man controlled by the moral ~~&~~ social law
into an organisation as ^{marked as that of nature} - W's gospel reaches
up from its main postulate to a doctrine
of society similar in kind but of another
kind ^{directly & explicitly} & explicitly repulsive ^{as compared}
These two gospels convey indirectly or by
inference their verdict upon the nature of the
Divine Being & W's points to the immutability
of man in a vague way - We have now
to deal with a gospel which approaches
all these questions from another side - from
the inner side - which teaches directly of
the nature of God, which postulates in the
most plain & emphatic fashion the
immutability of the soul & is as positive in
its declarations as to the conditions of life
in the next world as to those of this world.

28. Two representative examples of the 600 handwritten pages of Deakin's *Gospel According to Swedenborg*. The dense manuscript was completed in nine months, 1889-90, between Parliamentary sitting periods.

The Gospel according to Swedenborg

Vol II. 19. 10. 89 -

Moral Ethical System

XIV.

Swedenborg's revelation is of a spiritual world but it comprises much more than this. It is a revelation of a moral world. ^{moral} ~~Not~~ ^{merely} after death as a ^{compensation} ~~for~~ ^{for an} ~~imperfect~~ ^{imperfectly} ~~natural~~ ^{natural} existence ^{but perfect here & hereafter} ~~of a~~ ^{of a} ~~special kind~~ ^{of a} ~~but~~ ^{discussing} the chief laws of life in this world as ^{as} ~~these~~ ^{as} moral laws & life temporal ^{as well} as life eternal. ~~When~~ ^{When} the expression of a complete & harmonious moral plan. Present & future alike are determined by moral considerations. The only true distinctions in the universe are moral distinctions; the only divisions between being & being, or between state & state are moral; the only progress made or ^{made} is moral, ^{independently} ~~or~~ ^{of} ~~allied~~ ^{to} ~~to~~ ^{morals}. Salvation ~~or~~ ^{or} damnation, Heaven ~~or~~ ^{or} Hell, Joy & Peace ~~or~~ ^{or} Pain & Suffering are ^{all} ~~created~~ ^{created} by moral character solely. Moral law is the axis of life & the key to creation. It is the very heart of Swedenborg's gospel. Coleridge had reason for his declaration that as a moralist Swedenborg was above praise.

How did he do it? Two days before his 24th birthday in August 1880, the month after he took his seat in the Victorian Parliament, Deakin made his first entry in what he called his 'Spiritual Diary Personal and Mundane', where he recorded the prevailing prophecies, spirit identities and seances that he had encountered, with the aim of assessing their veracity. The more recent seances he had attended, which purported to conjure up the spirit figures of individuals such as Sophocles, Dr Johnson, Macauley, and Mill, he rejected as 'Rubbish'.⁷² Of equal significance was that in 1882 he began to record his own 'Clues', as he labelled them. This, ultimately, was a 27-year project detailing, in 12 x 20 cm notebooks, a total of 953 numbered and dated entries ranging in length from a single line to 50-odd pages. There were other special-purpose journals as well, with names such as 'Sparks', 'Materials', 'Insights', 'Impromptus' and 'Personal Equations'; a notebook of devotional poetry called 'The Script'; a carefully compiled list of seminal quotations; and miscellaneous assortments including a cluster with the playful title, 'Praises, Phrases and Crazes'.⁷³

The commencement of a promising political career did nothing to diminish Deakin's spiritual yearnings.

In 1883, he made a note to himself after reading the English poet, educator and essayist Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) and *God and the Bible* (1875) that illuminated his future course. He had begun to clarify, he wrote, 'a religious system of belief and action, of faith and philosophy, which I can not only accept, but act upon'. And act he did the following year with a momentous decision to 'find out God' through what developed into an exhaustive study of certain heroic figures of the past—William Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Swedenborg, Jesus, Mohammed and Socrates—whom he considered had divine insight. Over the next 25 years, half of them spent in the Commonwealth Parliament, Deakin faithfully adhered to the challenge he had set himself. He never contemplated terminating the quest, no matter how many political meetings were inked into the daytime parliamentary diary.⁷⁴

As a first tangible commitment to a more disciplined study of religion and religious meaning, on his 28th birthday in 1884—a crucial year—he started work on his 'Bok of Praer and Prase', considered by biographer Al Gabay to be 'the most intimate surviving expressions of his inner beliefs and aspiration'.⁷⁵ The same year he began the first of his Gospels, the *Gospel According to William Wordsworth*. For biographer Murdoch, the Wordsworth Gospel was 'the most thorough, scholarly and convincing of all [Deakin's] writings', in length exceeded only by the reams of 'Poets and Poetry'.⁷⁶ It is not hard to understand why the English Romantic poet appealed to Deakin as his first subject for intense study. In poems such as *Tintern Abbey* and *Intimations: an Ode on Immortality*, nature provides Wordsworth with a window into the invisible, a region of transcendence and the soul. Wordsworth felt he was 'treading on holy ground', and Deakin agreed.⁷⁷ He wanted to know more.

In the late 1880s, Deakin commenced his *Gospel According to Shakespeare* and, of utmost significance, a *Gospel According to Swedenborg*—a scrupulous, 600-page assessment of the spiritual guidance proffered by the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic. Deakin was electrified by Swedenborg's claim to illumination through sudden revelation in shaping a person's 'inner sight' (together with his recorded experiences of visions, trances and tremblings) and he took this concentration on his acknowledged 'Master' with him into the 1890s as the idea of a Federation steadily gained in popularity. An MP himself in Sweden, Swedenborg promoted the need for society's gifted individuals to choose a path of public service, something that Deakin confirmed as his own life choice during these years. He began routinely capitalising the seminal phrase, the 'Ideal of Duty', which he felt implied a sacred, democratic trust.⁷⁸ The link between his public and private lives was becoming clearer.

Deakin probably found his way into Swedenborg's writings through his reading of the American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom he regarded as 'the most important prose writer of the century ... a friend, an aider of those who would live in the spirit'.⁷⁹ A long-time resident of historic Concord, Massachusetts (like his friend Henry David Thoreau of *Walden* fame), Emerson had published his First and Second Series of essays in 1841 and 1844, including the influential *Self-Reliance*, *The Oversoul* and *The Transcendentalist*, to complement earlier classics such as *Nature*, *The American Scholar* and *Man the Reformer*.⁸⁰ In her Richard Serby Oration in 2006, historian Marilyn Lake quotes the assertion of Emerson biographer, Harvard professor Lawrence Buell, that *Self-Reliance* is 'the best single key to [Emerson's] thought and influence'.⁸¹ She feels that Deakin's use of the essay is further evidence of Buell's claim, but I am not so sure. I suspect Deakin got just as much, if not more, from the esoteric *Nature* (1836), in which Emerson outlines his understanding of 'higher law' and famously alludes to becoming 'a transparent eyeball', as 'the currents of the Universal Being' circulated through him to make him 'part or parcel of God'.⁸² Whole sections of Emerson's even more elusive *The Oversoul* must also have appealed to the maturing Deakin, and the Australian devotee could hardly have missed the personal relevance of the last section of Emerson's *The American Scholar* when he stated:

There is one man of genius ... whose literary value has never been rightly estimated;—I mean Emanuel Swedenborg. The most imaginative of men, yet writing with the precision of a mathematician, he endeavoured to engraft a purely philosophical Ethics on popular Christianity of his time ... he saw and showed the connection between nature and the affections of the soul.⁸³

When Deakin visited the United States for six months in 1885, as the Minister for Public Works and Water Supply, to learn more about irrigation from the Chaffey brothers in California, he made sure he took time off to undertake a pilgrimage to Emerson's gravesite in Concord, on the other side of the continent. Emerson had died only three years earlier. At the historic Sleepy Hollow Cemetery there was a burial mound but still no headstone. Deakin was deeply affected by the experience, writing that 'I shall see it long'.⁸⁴

When able to escape the hurly-burly of politics, either through travel or in the contemplative atmosphere of his study, Deakin had begun moving in rarefied spiritual air.

Another American destined to be influential entered Deakin's sphere at this time: Harvard philosopher Josiah Royce. Responding to a doctor's order that he needed to take a complete rest from his university duties, Royce embarked on a long sea voyage, arriving in Melbourne in early June 1888 with a letter of introduction from an old university friend of Deakin's, Dr Richard Hodgson—by then a psychical researcher at Harvard with an international reputation. Royce's visit happened to coincide with Deakin's commitment to attend an inter-colonial conference in Sydney to discuss the vexed issue of Chinese migration. The two men decided to make the trip north together and, in the eight days available to them prior to the conference, they stayed at the Hydro Majestic Hotel in the Blue Mountains. A lasting friendship was forged there, one forever valued by both men in a correspondence that continued for some 25 years. They were destined never to meet again in person.

After the sojourn, Royce wrote immediately to his newfound friend that he would 'always remember with more gratitude than you may imagine the delightfully cheering little journey that I owe to you ...'.⁸⁵ A week later, Deakin cemented the bond with his own words of thanks, acknowledging the gratifying stimulus that the many conversations with Royce had given to his intellectual and philosophical needs: 'To me your companionship was a source of unalloyed pleasure and profit. Yours is the best-trained and best-informed mind in metaphysics and kindred topics that I have ever had the opportunity of enjoying'.⁸⁶ Three years on, Deakin had clearly created a secure place for the American philosopher in his expanding world of the spirit: 'I shall always count it a special providence that sent you to me when you visited Australia, so that I entertained, or rather was entertained by, a philosophic angel unawares'.⁸⁷

Al Gabay, devoted biographer of Deakin's mystic life, notes that the 'dual influences of Swedenborg and Royce, more than any others, shaped and matured Deakin's moral and metaphysical outlook'.⁸⁸ But at such an important juncture in his life, it does appear to have been the intellectually sophisticated, steadying influence of Royce that took priority, helping the young Australian politician to overcome a nagging pessimism. In a mid-1892 letter, after citing his recent reading of several philosophical works recommended by Royce, Deakin praised his friend's latest book, *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (1892), noting its marked effect on him: 'In my blindfold way, rather by faith than by intellectual insight, I have reached some of the positions you attain by force of thinking'.⁸⁹

Royce, fast becoming what one historian has described as 'the most important figure in modern Anglo-American philosophy', was never an academic removed from the real world.⁹⁰ He took a close interest in contemporary society, publishing on his return home his impressions of Australia in three articles, two in *Scribner's Magazine* (in May and June 1889) and one in the *Atlantic Monthly* (January 1891).⁹¹

Consciously following in the footsteps of writers such as Anthony Trollope, Joseph Conrad, Havelock Ellis and JA Froude in his best-selling work, *Oceana* (1886), Royce trod a well-worn path with commentary on Australian geography, geology, flora and fauna, sport, the distant continent as a 'second New World' and the emergent 'national type'.⁹² He is far more interesting, however, on the detail of Australian politics, and there is no doubt that the essays for his large American readership are shaped almost entirely by the eight days spent with Deakin. He readily acknowledges this in the first *Atlantic Monthly* piece:

Especially did I prize a ramble of several days amongst the dark gorges of the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, in company with a prominent public man ... He discoursed to me of politics and, in my ignorance, I could offer him only metaphysics in return, which he received very kindly. We talked particularly of colonial federation, of the good and evil of the colonial systems of responsible government, and of the future of Australasia.⁹³

The three pieces, in which Royce mentions his Australian confidante by name on several occasions, enable us to gauge with some clarity Deakin's opinions on national politics just prior to his Federation journey. Subjects include his:

- ◆ recognition of the need in Australia for political reform with social responsibility
- ◆ naive belief in the need for elected governments to be given sufficient time in office to implement their policies, thus ensuring (he felt) the best outcomes for the common good
- ◆ 'idealistic socialism'
- ◆ 'immense respect for the social order itself' in the Australian community, with its abundance of 'public spirit', 'social spirit' and 'cheerful conformity'
- ◆ surprising endorsement of an Imperial Federation (the only issue canvassed by Royce where the American expresses a dissenting opinion) as a safeguard against Australia's geographic isolation, and his
- ◆ unshakeable commitment to 'race homogeneity' as the basis of a 'healthy national life'⁹⁴ (a belief, typical of the era, strongly supported by Royce).

The American philosopher's compelling portrait anticipates Deakin's prominent role in the Federation debates about to begin in earnest. However, the astute Royce also discerned a deeper undercurrent in his 'opportunist' friend, whom he described as a lover of life and a lover of metaphysics. But also a lover of 'power'.⁹⁵ It was an observation that would be validated when Deakin entered the federal sphere.





A father of Federation, family man



29. Deakin in his courtroom attire. He practised as a lawyer for a short time, and only when financial circumstances demanded it.

When a no-confidence vote terminated Deakin's coalition government in October 1890 amid allegations of corruption and culpable excess, he had little choice but to reinvent himself. The diaries indicate just how troubled he was by the circumstances of his political fall from grace, his dire financial predicament, spiritual unease and lack of confidence in the community's collective will to achieve meaningful social progress. Historian Stuart Macintyre suggests that Deakin's occupation of the Victorian parliamentary backbench for the duration of the 1890s decade was probably 'an act of penance for his earlier profligacy'.⁹⁶ Deakin preferred to believe that it gave him the opportunity, free of the shackles of ministerial solidarity, to speak his mind on matters of public interest.

His personal situation deteriorated in February 1891 when the relative tranquillity of the home, his 'city of refuge', had to withstand a 'horrid misunderstanding' between the two most important women in his life, wife Pattie and sister Katie.⁹⁷ Conflict had been simmering for years because of Pattie's belief, probably valid, that her spinster sister-in-law had been accorded too large a role in the raising of the Deakin children—of whom, by Christmas Day 1891, there were three daughters, Ivy, Stella and the yuletide baby, Vera. What John Rickard has referred to as an 'emotionally charged web of relationships' developed around Pattie and Katie that would prove 'intensely moving, and, ultimately tragic'.⁹⁸ The tension generated by this household battlefield continued indefinitely and the conflict was never resolved.



30. Deakin's sister, Catherine, in later age. Despite her protestations to the contrary, she was a disruptive presence in the Deakin household. The relationship between Pattie and Catherine soured over the years, affecting all family members.

With his public and domestic lives under pressure, the seemingly imperturbable Deakin not only managed to give substance to the role he would play in the achievement of Australian nationhood, he also distinguished himself almost immediately as one of its leaders. At the first two important Federation meetings—the Australasian Federation Conference in Melbourne in February 1890 and the National Australasian Convention in Sydney in March/April 1891—Deakin made a colossal impression on his intercolonial colleagues for his knowledge of the relevant historical and legal details of the issue, his backroom powers of persuasion and conciliation ('tactful offices', according to Federation historian and peer, Bernhard Wise) and his understanding that without strong advocacy by each colony's leading politicians, Federation stood no chance at all.⁹⁹



31. The talented delegates who attended the Australasian Federation Conference in Melbourne, in February 1890—a historic gathering which revived the Federation debate. Deakin is standing, third from the right.

In a speech that concluded the first day's deliberations in Melbourne, Deakin reacted to the mild reservations voiced by South Australian delegate, Thomas Playford, with a burst of optimism, and a clever mix of reason and emotion. Those colonial citizens lacking the 'generous spirit of kinship', he said, had to be answered with an appeal to the head and heart: 'We must direct much of the loyalty which is now attached to individual colonies to a central idea of the national life of Australia, so that our countrymen shall exhibit their loyalty to the nation, and the nation only ...'. It was Deakin's belief that this 'passion of nationality', while not evident at the beginning of the decade, would continue to:

widen and deepen and strengthen its ties ... [and that] as a wise seaman steers his ship to take advantage as far as possible of wind and tide, so should we shape our course so as to secure for this great movement every possible assistance, whether from the forces of sentiment or motives of self-interest, and thus to be enabled to reach the haven of Federation.¹⁰⁰

The closet creative writer was never far away in Deakin's most enlightened speeches.

Deakin sought to persuade his audience of seasoned colonial politicians—men with the capacity to get things moving at last—to get on board. Yet he realised that the best result in Melbourne was to outline a sensible course of action. So, in the concluding comments of a long address, he flagged a first, manageable step:

All that is possible for this Conference or a Convention to do is to present to the Australasian people a means by which they can, if they so please, transform themselves and their separate segments into a great and united nation. I do not fear the result of an appeal to the people.¹⁰¹

This latter sentiment arguably became the primary motivation for Deakin's public speeches over the next ten years as he (and the New South Wales politician he befriended in Melbourne, Edmund Barton) tirelessly traversed their respective colonies and, when tactically necessary, the continent, promoting Federation's case. In the crucial referenda of the late 1890s the colony of Victoria remained steadfast in its support for nationhood, twice producing the country's largest affirmative vote, a 'magnificent' contribution to the cause according to Barton. In a June 1898 letter thanking Deakin for his friendship, the New South Wales Federation leader gratefully acknowledged his stout Victorian ally as Federation's 'greatest worker'.¹⁰²

As always with Deakin, however, contradictions prevail which defy straightforward conclusions. The 1890s decade was no different. Yes, he appeared in public as a buoyant apostle for nationhood, bubbling with confidence about ultimate success; in private, however, it was a different matter. Writing in mid-1892 to his trusted correspondent, Josiah Royce, and conscious of his financial predicament, he confided that the 'path before me ... offers no preferment but I mean to try its thorns and if nothing comes of it may retire from public life altogether ...'.¹⁰³ A notebook entry in the same year expresses resignation in the face of the crass priorities of fellow colonists:



32. Undoubtedly the two most prominent and energetic advocates of Federation, Edmund Barton and Alfred Deakin. Their common cause resulted in a close and productive friendship.

It is depressing to note how little real love of literature, art, or ideas has been fostered in our seasons of plenty among the well-paid and reasonably leisured artisans and business people generally. Selfishness and shams, cant and materialism rule us, up and down and through and through.¹⁰⁴

This was not the first time, and it would certainly not be the last, that Deakin commented on the parlous state of his community without a hint of irony applied to his own complicit actions and activity in the past. Unsure of the future for himself and his family, disconcerted by recent events at home, he noted in a few letters that he had begun to suffer from insomnia.

As the decade rolled on, and in the face of earlier setbacks, the resilient Deakin dusted himself off to identify fresh new goals. He adapted readily to an understated role inside the Victorian Parliament that was gradually subsumed by a more expansive public role. The Federation debate gave him the chance to apply himself to national questions, and this was the bigger stage he had been looking for. At the historic National Australasian Convention sessions in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne in 1897–98, Deakin exploited his well-established and well-earned status,

making sure that no obstacle diverted the delegates for too long. Once again, he engaged in a number of face-to-face conversations that allayed individual delegates' fears when they arose, ideal training for the minority federal governments he would lead in the new century.¹⁰⁵

On 30 March 1897, a week into the Convention's Adelaide session, when discussion was mired in complex issues—states' rights, money bills, taxes and tariffs—Deakin shrewdly identified the need to re-set the group's compass. The grand purpose of the meeting had to be restated and inter-colonial rivalries transcended:

I trust that ... upon this Convention rests the responsibility of framing a Constitution for all time—that upon this Convention, and upon this Convention alone, rests the whole burden of Federation at the present moment. It is perhaps possible for us to fail altogether in our high aim, and we may easily fall far short of its final achievement; yet it is certain to be long before such another opportunity can present itself ... Is it possible when the Australian people for the first time have emerged as an Australian people, represented in an Australian Assembly to draft an Australian Constitution, that its great promise should disappear unfulfilled? Why should it if we are at once true to ourselves and loyal to each other? ... Awed as I feel by the fact that we are come from, that we speak to, and that we act for a great constituency, awed as I feel in the presence of those who sent us here, I am more awed by the thought of the constituency which is not visible, but which awaits the result of our labours—we are the trustees for posterity for the unborn millions unknown and unnumbered—whose aspirations we may help them to fulfil and whose destinies we may assist to determine.¹⁰⁶

Deakin's dramatic conclusion (recalling the rousing phrases of an earlier 'native-born', the republican Daniel Deniehy in the 1850s) drew such a spontaneous emotional outburst of applause from the public galleries that the President of the Convention, South Australia's Richard Kingston, asked that 'order be maintained in the gallery, however eloquent the provocation'.¹⁰⁷ Deakin had brought the audience into play, zealous representatives of his 'Australian constituency', and their reaction, together with Deakin's flights of oratory, must have proven irresistible to the last few parochial states' righters remaining amongst the delegates.¹⁰⁸

In an address he gave in 1895 entitled 'What is Liberalism?', Deakin began to broaden the scope of his interests and concerns. He insisted on the need for those sharing his liberal philosophy to lobby hard for a 'reconstructive' approach to society's problems. The economic depression had bitten hard across the country. As it eased, Deakin felt the time had come for the revival of those social issues at the forefront of community discussion in the 1880s: there had to be renewed 'resistance to and destruction of class privileges'; individual political rights without reference to creed had to be expanded, and the gap between haves and the have-nots narrowed; and the chronically poor needed to be protected by sympathetic mechanisms of the state. Government's 'paths of progress' had to include all the citizens of a

democracy. True liberals had a duty, an ideal of duty, to leave ‘the world on the whole a better place than they found it’.¹⁰⁹ As Deakin’s social and political vision expanded in the later 1890s, this goal solidified into a fundamental, personal commitment.

Deakin’s cultural education at this time was enriched in new ways. His love of literature, for so many years expressed only within the confines of the home study, found fresh outlets. As his community profile grew, it was only a matter of time until Deakin, a proud member of the ‘native-born’ and a charismatic, progressive politician, caught the eye of Australia’s new brigade of artists, writers and cultural identities such as Tom Roberts (from the time he commenced work on the ‘Big Picture’ of Parliament’s opening ceremony in 1901), Walter Murdoch, and the poets Sydney Jephcott, George Essex Evans and William Gay. A Bendigo resident restricted to hospital for the last four years of his short life, Gay was only 32 when he died of tuberculosis. He and Deakin never met, but they shared a rewarding correspondence. Three months after Gay’s death in December 1897, Deakin travelled to Bendigo, in the heart of his electorate, to deliver Australian Federation history’s most celebrated speech. Fittingly, he gave it at the Australian Natives’ Association banquet on 15 March 1898, a few days before the conclusion of the Convention meeting in Melbourne.



33. Promotional postcard publicising Victoria’s overwhelming ‘yes’ vote in the second referendum in 1899. Despite enduring personal setbacks, some self-inflicted, Deakin was the dominant Federation advocate in his colony.

On such a symbolically charged occasion, with voters in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania heading to the Federation referendum polls in June 1898, Deakin as always entertained and engaged with a dazzling oration. And here is the nub of the matter. By the late 1890s, he understood what real leadership looked and sounded like. In Bendigo, Deakin never once used any notes as he got down to the practical business in hand with a beguiling simplicity: 'I propose to speak to Australians simply as an Australian'.¹¹⁰ He used only two sources that evening, both of them carefully chosen. While the origin of the first allusion was not mentioned by Deakin, it is a fair bet that many in the room identified it—a single, powerful line, halfway through his speech: 'These are the times that try men's souls'.¹¹¹ This was the opening sentence of the great English-born, eighteenth-century polemicist Thomas Paine to his American Revolutionary pamphlet, 'The Crisis', printed on 19 December 1776. Washington's Republican troops were under siege by the more heavily armed, more numerous British forces when Paine produced a series of remarkable 'Crisis' pamphlets, thirteen in all, as rallying cries for the American soldier and civilian alike. Washington would later say that the Revolution could never have been successful without Paine's contribution.

For years, a number of Australian commentators had maintained that an Australian Federation lacked, to its detriment, some sort of revolutionary catalyst, a galvanising spark of war. Deakin, appreciating the relevance of Paine's trenchant words so close to the referendum polling days, used the author of classics such as *Common Sense* (1775), *Rights of Man* (1791–92) and *Age of Reason* (1794) as his own propaganda weapon. He knew exactly what he was doing as he warned an audience of sympathisers, restating one of his Federation themes as he again echoed Paine, that 'if we fail in the hour of crisis, we may never be able to recall our lost national opportunities'.¹¹²

Deakin used his second source to conclude the oration—a stanza of poetry:

Our country's garment
With hands unfilial we have basely rent,
With petty variance our souls are spent,
And ancient kinship under foot is trod:
O let us rise, united, penitent,
And be one people, mighty, serving God!¹¹³

The words are William Gay's, and they comprise the last stanza of his poem, 'Australian Federation', a nationalist hymn for the coming Australian nation. What a worthy choice by the mature Deakin: an aspirational poet personally known to him as a fine example of the talent of the rising generation of Australian writers, and a poet determined to incorporate local themes into his work who was well-known to the audience as one of them. There must have been a few tears shed on the night.



34. Postcard of Deakin with a selection of Australian flora and fauna, and a composite coat of arms. It was probably a promotion of the Australian Natives' Association, with which Deakin was closely connected.

Bernhard Wise, barrister, colonial/state politician and respected Federation historian and analyst, summed up Deakin's contribution to the achievement of nationhood when he observed that it is 'hardly possible to over-estimate the services rendered to the cause of Australian Union by Mr Alfred Deakin'.¹¹⁴ Deakin's energy and dedication in the second half of the 1890s, like Barton's, when they visited town after town, addressed meeting after meeting, was seemingly inexhaustible. Even more extraordinary that he still found time for those pursuits he cherished above all else, in the hours spent at night amidst the calm of his books and satisfying spiritual inclinations. He penned three more Gospels in the 1890s—*Personal Experiences in Spiritism*, *Essay on the Modern Gospels* and *Gospel on Islam*—as his faith in Divine Providence, according to Al Gabay, 'reached its apotheosis'.¹¹⁵

This might help to explain Deakin's recounting of an experience he had in late 1899, just weeks before being invited to London as one of the delegates chosen to oversee the passage of the Commonwealth Bill through the Imperial Parliament. In a letter to his future son-in-law, Herbert Brookes, with whom he was becoming close, he related the circumstances of a mystic voice he had heard, and he explained it in terms of a telephone analogy. While using his 'line' into the world of the spirit—Gabay calls it 'the liminal world between [the] two worlds' of the soul and the here-and-now—Deakin had heard someone repeatedly calling for Brookes, a voice he believed to be that of the young businessman's deceased first wife.¹¹⁶ The experience affected Deakin to his core; indeed, for him it was of lasting importance, offering further proof, if any was needed, of the reality and substance of the inner life, and its potential reach.

Shortly before he departed for London to re-engage with some of Britain's most experienced politicians, Deakin tried to put into words his grasp of the active netherworld located between body and spirit. He felt that, with all senses alert and receptive, a person could connect to this 'abnormal world, not necessarily the true world, any more than this is, but often equally true, and sometimes more true, more profoundly comprehended'.¹¹⁷



35. Deakin appears here to be celebrating the achievement of Federation. He always believed that he was an 'instrument' of God on a mission as 'a trustee for posterity' to establish an Australian nation.



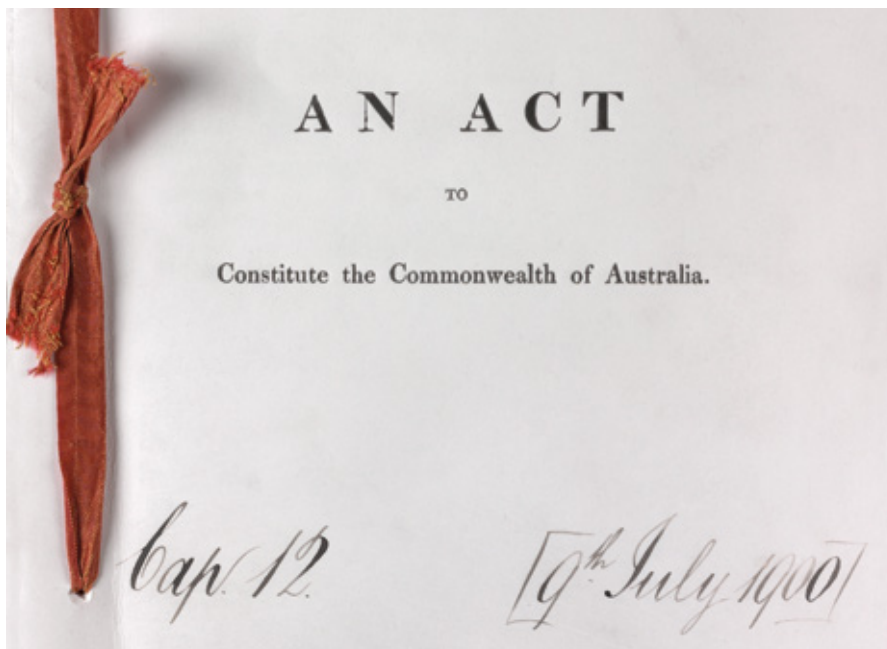
A founder of nation



36. Deakin at his desk in 1905, during his second—and most authoritative—prime ministership.

The five-man Australian delegation chosen to oversee the passage of the draft of a Bill to Constitute the Commonwealth of Australia through the Imperial Parliament gathered in London in March 1900. There was no West Australian representative because that colony had not yet put the draft Bill to a referendum. Deakin and three of his colleagues—Barton, the South Australian Richard Kingston and Tasmania's Philip Fysh—were adamant their brief was to oppose any alterations to the wording of a Bill that had been endorsed by the colonies at a referendum. As expected, the fifth member of the delegation, the Queenslander James Dickson, sided with Whitehall but his decision did nothing to weaken the resolve of the others.

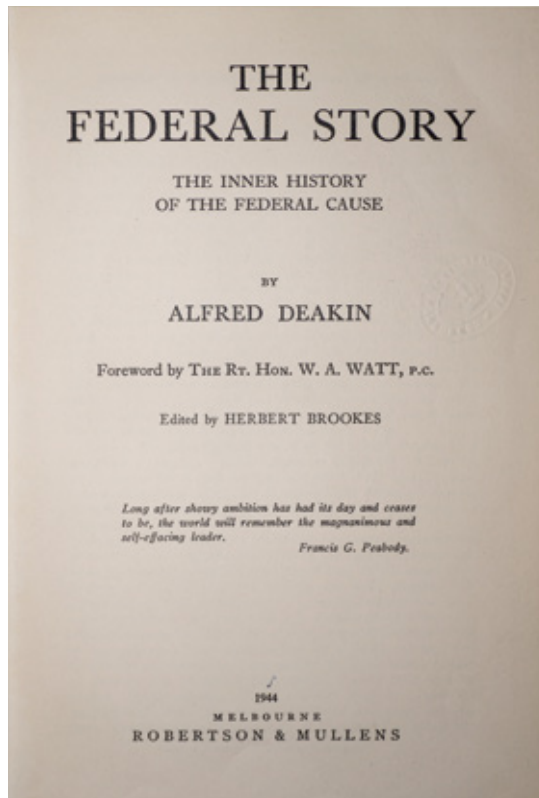
They were prepared for a fight, well aware that the Empire's representative, Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, a dominant figure in English politics, was an adversary of formidable proportions. Chamberlain conceded that the Australian people had produced their Constitution 'without either inviting or desiring any assistance from the outside'; he refused, however, to budge on any matters that affected the British Empire.¹¹⁸ In such circumstances, he felt that the Imperial Parliament had a duty to intervene. Weeks of negotiation followed, during which time the Australian emissaries bolstered their case by taking it to the British public in a busy and popular round of dinners and meetings, with Deakin in high demand. Finally a compromise was reached on the only substantive alteration to the Bill, appeals to the Privy Council (Clause 74)—a modification accepted by the Australians, who regarded the overall result as a win.



37. The British Government's *Act to Constitute the Commonwealth of Australia*. Deakin would later write that Federation's 'actual accomplishment must always appear to have been achieved by a series of miracles'.

After the meeting, the group's three leading advocates—Deakin, Barton and Kingston—found themselves alone in the attorney-general's office. What happened next is part of Federation folklore. We are fortunate to have a firsthand account, despite the third-person used in the description: 'When the door closed upon them and left them alone, they seized each other's hands and danced hand in hand in a ring around the centre of the room to express their jubilation'.¹¹⁹

The account is Deakin's own, included by him in a large bundle of unrevised articles which, in his words, '[though] strictly truthful and fair so far as I can make them ... are very personal and unflinching in their candour'.¹²⁰ He called the collection 'The Inner History of the Federal Cause, 1880–1900'. It finally found its way into print in 1944 as *The Federal Story*, edited by Deakin's son-in-law, Herbert Brookes, with assistance from his wife, Deakin's daughter Ivy. The volume has been republished twice: firstly in 1963 under the editorship of John La Nauze (who produced a new text, restoring previously omitted words and phrases); and secondly in 1995, entitled '*And Be One People*'—*Alfred Deakin's Federal Story*, with an introduction by Stuart Macintyre.¹²¹



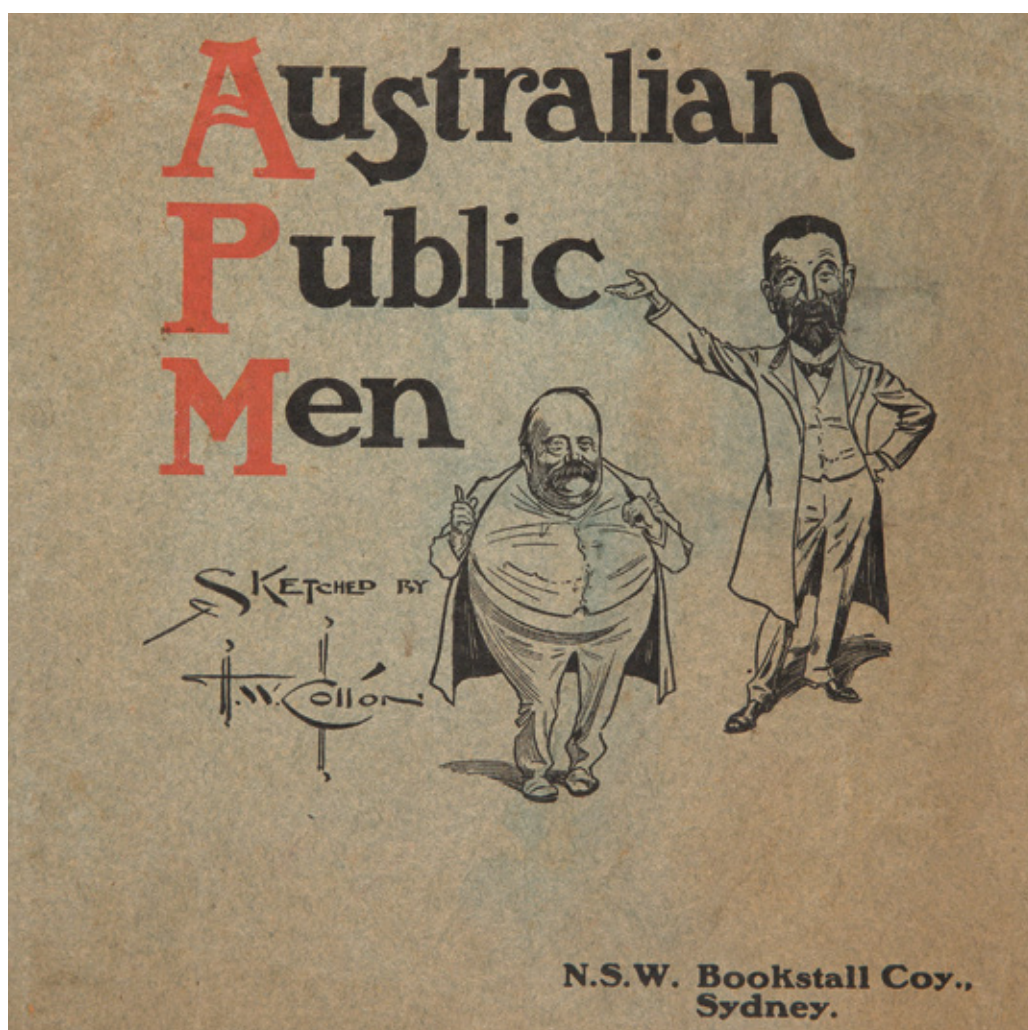
38. Deakin's insider account of the Federation era, *The Federal Story*, first published in 1944, some 25 years after his death. Despite its subjectivity—an 'inevitable bias', as Deakin candidly admitted—it has remained an influential work for generations of Australian historians.

Both later editions, separated by some 30 years, acknowledge *The Federal Story* as Federation's most popular account on the basis of its lively style, plentiful gossip, incisive commentary on England and Empire, accessible narrative and abundance of character assessments of many of the era's leading Federation and Empire figures. It is, unmistakably, an insider's history. Deakin does not try to hide this fact, suggesting in his 'Author's Note' up front that a 'reader must allow for the inevitable bias of any actor in such events'.¹²² The warning has validity, as Macintyre neatly summarises: 'This federal story is a partial one that favours its author's federal enthusiasms and scarcely acknowledges the concerns of the anti-federalists. It is intensely personal in its likes and dislikes'.¹²³ A proud Victorian, a proud Australian and a resolute Federationist, Deakin retained some of his colony's antipathy towards its northern neighbour, the Mother Colony of New South Wales, to go along with his unbending sense of personal decorum and sense of style—and it shows.

Deakin had become a tough politician, a believer in the end justifying the means. High-profile Victorians (such as Henry Bournes Higgins and Isaac Isaacs) who expressed reservations about the wording of the draft Bill felt the wrath of his pen, while one New South Wales politician in particular, George Reid, a highly successful premier of New South Wales and later, Australia's fourth prime minister, was pilloried. As the 1897–98 Convention meetings progressed, Deakin's intolerance of Reid grew. Willing to concede Reid's 'marvellous' political instincts and 'amazing platform powers', Deakin could not abide the man, and he drew a portrait so offensively personal that it was fortunate the manuscript took four decades to be published:

Even caricature has been unable to travesty his extraordinary appearance, his immense, unwieldy, jelly-like stomach, always threatening to break his waist-band, his little legs apparently bowed under its weight to the verge of their endurance, his thick neck rising behind his ears rounding to his many-folded chin. His protuberant blue eyes were expressionless until roused or half hidden in cunning, [and] a blond complexion and infantile breadth of baldness gave him an air of insolent juvenility.¹²⁴

Engaging as Deakin's observations always are, and valuable as they often are, they can also be unfair, mischievous and inaccurate. Some historical perspective is needed here. On the one hand, we must keep in mind that Deakin's observations were never read in his lifetime. They remained in manuscript on the shelves of the home study. On the other hand, these same observations, once published, shaped a number of the foundation myths of Federation a generation later, when *The Federal Story* found a responsive audience of scholars, general readers and students of Australian history. As a result, reputations were newly won and lost. Reid's image suffered for decades in the absence of an authoritative biography, which he did not get until 1989. It is only in the last 25 years that his vital contribution to the politics and social wellbeing of his colony and nation has been reassessed to receive something like its proper due.



39. It is appropriate that the NSW Bookstall Company chose to feature George Reid and Alfred Deakin on the cover of their popular collection of H W Cotton's political caricatures. Their prickly relationship was one of Federation's most engaging narratives.

Historians today are faced with a few more discomfiting facts about Deakin the Federationist. In England in 1900, he was approached by the proprietor of the London *Morning Post*, Lord Glenesk, and the editor, Nicol Dunn, to become the Tory Unionist newspaper's 'special' or 'Sydney' correspondent, tasked with producing a weekly letter on Australian politics and society. He accepted in November 1900, a few weeks before the inauguration of the Commonwealth, on a very respectable salary of £500. The first contribution from the *Post's* 'special correspondent' in Australia went to print on 3 January 1901 and the articles appeared at approximately weekly intervals for about a decade (thus published throughout all three of Deakin's prime ministerships, 1903–10), and then more sporadically until the end of 1914.



40. The swearing in of Australia's first Governor-General, Lord Hopetoun, in Sydney's Centennial Park, 1 January 1901.

Walter Murdoch, Deakin's first biographer and friend, attempted to diffuse this glaring conflict of interest with a question phrased to disarm critics: how did Deakin stay 'so detached, so impartial'?¹²⁵ He didn't, though he could certainly have used his covert position to greater personal advantage. But even if Deakin had remained completely impartial, the principle remains the same. He acknowledged himself, halfway through the 14-year commitment, that the *Morning Post* connection was 'hazardous in the extreme'.¹²⁶ Yet he continued to accept the salary (which he probably needed with a growing family) and be entertained by the ruse. Only a few people ever knew the truth. La Nauze, in his 300-page edition of selections from the *Post* articles, *Federated Australia* (1968), wrestles in the Introduction with the prickly issue of Deakin's motives for the *Post* job. He concludes that latter-day historians like himself, when confronted by Deakin's decision, must conclude that it constituted 'an improper activity for a man holding responsible office for much of the time ...'.¹²⁷ The only issue in doubt was the degree of wrong.

The Australian public was never privy to Deakin's phantom journalism when he was in office. They were aware, however, of his capacity for pragmatism. In the early years of the Commonwealth Deakin figured prominently, culpably, in the untimely end in mid-1904 of the four-month prime ministership of Labor's Chris Watson, ending the Party's first stint in office, and again in 1905 when he engineered a controversial halt to the 11-month prime ministership of the free-trader and antagonist, George Reid. These *coups de grace* barely dented the goodwill he had accumulated as a result of his contribution to the attainment of nationhood. If Deakin was correct in the deft last sentence of *The Federal Story* that Federation's 'actual accomplishment must always appear to have been secured by a series of miracles', then he had played his inspired part.¹²⁸ He always believed that he had been sanctified by mystic invisible forces. For the majority of the next decade, Australian voters did too. Their confidence proved well-founded.

The new Commonwealth's first government, under Edmund Barton, bore all the marks of Alfred Deakin's handiwork. When the first governor-general, Lord Hopetoun, clumsily chose New South Wales Premier, William Lyne, to be Australia's first prime minister, this infamous 'Hopetoun Blunder' was flatly rejected by (among others) the influential Deakin, and rectified immediately. Barton, Hopetoun's second choice, the rightful choice, delivered his first policy speech in January 1901. It contained so many of Deakin's ideas that some observers thought he had actually written it. Deakin accepted the portfolio of attorney-general in the new ministry, introducing over the next three years a series of long, complex statutes that set such 'a high standard in legal draftsmanship', according to recent High Court Chief Justice, Anthony Mason, that their 'present form basically remains as it was when they were first enacted'.¹²⁹ This was no small achievement from a reluctant lawyer of the 1870s who struggled to attract work, and who always wanted to be a dramatist or poet anyway.

It was only a matter of time until Deakin succeeded Barton and on 24 September 1903 he became Australia's second prime minister. During the next seven years, and on the three separate occasions that he occupied the country's highest office (a total of about five of the seven years), only once briefly did he enjoy a parliamentary majority. His refined skills as a negotiator were constantly tested—one valid measure of the overwhelming number of his achievements in office—especially during his highly productive second prime ministership, from July 1905 to November 1908 when, with the Labor Party's support, he was able to give full rein to his most enlightened liberal sentiments.



41. Opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne, 9 May 1901. Historian John Hirst rightly suggests that Charles Nuttall's superb etching 'gives a better idea of the public presence than Tom Roberts' famous painting', the 'Big Picture'. That's Deakin in the middle of the front row, left of stage, next to Barton.



George

Edmund Barton
William John Syme
M. J. Fisher
C. H. Kingdon
R. S. Johnston
James G. Drake

42. In the hectic days surrounding the opening of the Commonwealth Parliament, Deakin still managed to get all members of Edmund Barton's first federal Cabinet to sign his Bible, along with the Duke of Cornwall and York (later King George V).

Accepted for
THE *May 9th*
HOLY BIBLE, *1901*

CONTAINING THE
OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS:

TRANSLATED OUT OF THE ORIGINAL TONGUES: AND WITH THE FORMER
TRANSLATIONS DILIGENTLY COMPARED AND REVISED,
BY HIS MAJESTY'S SPECIAL COMMAND.

Whitcomb

APPOINTED TO BE READ IN CHURCHES.

Joseph



OXFORD:
PRINTED AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS.
LONDON: HENRY FROWDE,
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS WAREHOUSE, AMEN CORNER.
NEW YORK: 91 & 93, FIFTH AVENUE.

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Cum Privilegio.

In his 1923 biography of Deakin, Walter Murdoch comments that during the middle years of Federation's first decade Deakin was at 'his happiest, his freest, his most masterful'.¹³⁰ It is hard to disagree on the basis of a record that boasted, among other achievements:

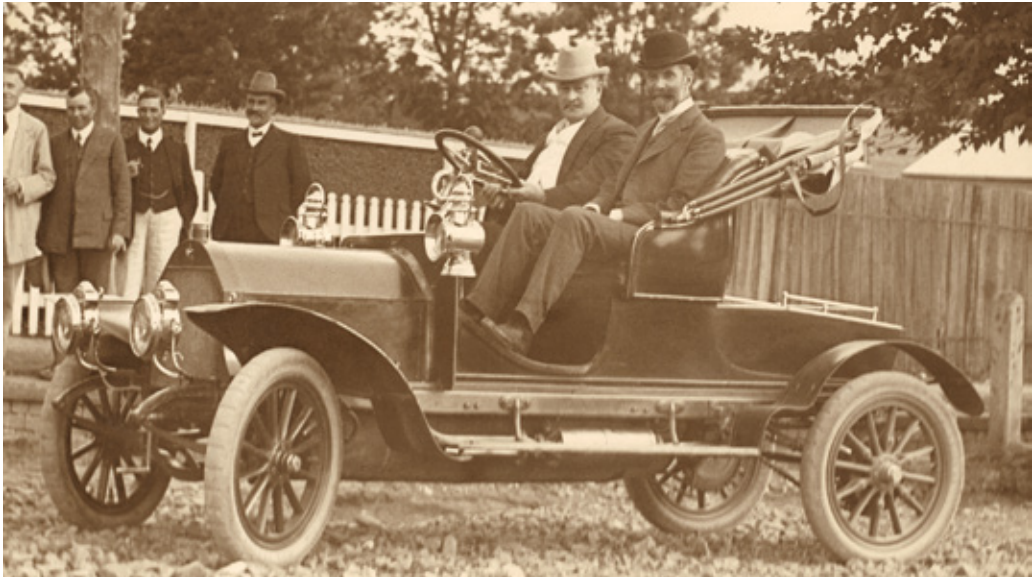
- ◆ the establishment of old-age pensions
- ◆ a protectionist tariff
- ◆ introduction of the then almost universally endorsed *Immigration Restriction Act*
- ◆ a High Court
- ◆ a Court of Conciliation and Arbitration
- ◆ New Protection measures that linked economic progress to wage fairness
- ◆ a robust trade agreement with Great Britain
- ◆ the famed Harvester award, entrenching the concept of 'fair and reasonable' and
- ◆ the introduction of more effective measures to control the proliferation of trusts and monopolies.

Policies were mapped out that put Australian defence more securely into Australian hands, the transcontinental railway was surveyed, a national capital chosen, the Commonwealth Literary Fund initiated and budget provision made for the gathering of Australian meteorology information, wireless telegraphy, copyright and the accumulation of national statistical data.

Deakin led his second government with skill and dedication, ably assisted by individuals he chose for their complementary talents. These included nation-building Littleton Ernest Groom, gruff explorer-cum-politician John Forrest, Isaac Isaacs (destined for the High Court) and former anti-Federationist William Lyne. Treading a precarious line between a resurgent Labor Party and George Reid's anti-socialism, the team worked with a united purpose. It was a government that got things done as the respected Groom informed Parliament in November 1908 when he stated that, over the term of Deakin's second government, Australia 'gained a more prominent position among the Dominions of the Empire, and through the Empire a higher place in the esteem of other nations'.¹³¹ Few by then disputed the claim.

The extent and quality of the infant Commonwealth's initiatives under Deakin attracted global attention in one particular area of endeavour. Social scientists from Europe and America travelled to Australia to observe first-hand the 'social laboratory' of the world, where a raft of progressive welfare legislation was being introduced.

Arguably, the foundations erected in the first decade of nationhood remain in place a hundred years later. In his book, *The End of Certainty* (1993), Paul Kelly refers to Deakin's achievement as the 'Australian Settlement', a lasting pact between government and the people.¹³² Deakin cleverly interpreted and applied to government policy the budding personality of the nation.



43. During his long political career, Deakin either walked or cycled to work. When national business took him elsewhere, he evidently made use of new technology.

In 1907, at the pinnacle of his authority as leader, Deakin attended the Imperial Conference in London, accompanied by his wife Pattie. He lobbied hard if unsuccessfully for an Imperial Federation to solidify a British Empire where self-governing dominions would have a say on issues of defence, foreign policy and economic co-operation. Consistent with the position he first proposed in London in 1887, Deakin asserted that Australia's geographic isolation made a global Empire network essential to the stable future of Australia and to the other dominions scattered around the world. He was firmly rebuffed by English officials, by his dominion colleagues, by sections of the Australian media including the *Age* (which chided him for harping on a favourite project) and by many of his Australian constituents.¹³³



44. Alfred and Pattie in London for the Imperial Conference, 1907. During this trip, Deakin experienced memory loss for the first time. It got worse.

Despite this unswerving advocacy of close Imperial ties, there is no evidence of Deakin succumbing to cultural cringe on his journeys to England, to the place many Australians continued to call 'home'. He knew the difference between loyalty and subservience. Like Pattie, he was a stringent critic of the weaknesses of England and Empire, as his diaries and letters indicate. The seven chapters of *The Federal Story* devoted to his visit to the northern hemisphere in 1900 illustrate the point. Deakin was appalled by the 'snobbishness' of English society and bemused by the leader of England's Liberals, Lord Rosebery, whom he depicted as a man of 'nervous instability', 'poses perpetual' and 'vanity colossal'. But his unflattering array of individual portraits is nothing compared to his Swiftian assessment of the city of London itself:

It was a Vanity Fair in fact and truth ... [where there] shone the superficial veneer of a society with superficial aims and tastes ... Crush, rush and push vulgarised the great assemblages. Incessant excitement, intrigue, chatter and change forbade serious, continuous and undistracted thinking and working. Vast in size, wealth, appetite, profusion, energy and variety of life, London was apoplectic, stertorous, unwieldy, unhealthy, philistine and gross, greatly in need of a strict regimen and severe reform if it was to continue to be the centre of an Empire and the seat of its intellectual, spiritual and political government as its power, position and resources entitled it to be.¹³⁴

Pattie felt much the same way. She could not get home quick enough to escape the 'much diamonded wives'.¹³⁵



45. When in London in 1907, the Deakins were in constant demand, both as speakers (Pattie for the first time in her life) and honoured guests. They kept virtually all their invitations.

Decades after Deakin's death, when Kylie Tennant produced an overview of his career as prime minister, she maintained that it reached a 'peak' at the 1907 Imperial Conference when he 'crammed into six weeks so much work that it would have killed a cart horse'.¹³⁶ The assessment is wrong, but not on the score of Deakin's workload, which was extreme. There was another reason, and it would change his life entirely. For we now know that, during the Conference, he noticed for the first time some signs of memory loss. As usual he told no-one of his distress, though he had in fact begun to experience symptoms of dementia, probably Alzheimer's disease. The onset would be relentless and cruel.

In 1904–05, the Deakins had bought six acres of land at isolated Point Lonsdale on the coast outside Melbourne where they built a cottage they named Ballara, the Aboriginal word for the Ballarat region (Deakin's electorate), said to mean 'resting place'.¹³⁷ The seaside retreat was set to become Deakin's place of rest for the remainder of his life, a place where, away from public scrutiny, he could read, relax, walk, swim, write and simply enjoy the company of family. Unfortunately, just when Ballara had started to provide balm for the ailing spirit, the London trip happened. Back in Australia, it was impossible for Deakin to ignore the worrying lapses in memory, and their increasing frequency. In a relatively short amount of time, his parliamentary appearances began to suffer and he started to doubt talents that had always been taken for granted. His relaxed demeanour within the family changed; his political judgement and gut instincts, so reliable in the past, began to falter.



46. Alfred and Pattie on the verandah of their Port Lonsdale retreat, Ballara, built in 1907–8.

During the six months that the (first) Andrew Fisher Labor Government held office, from late 1908 to June 1909, Deakin made the fateful decision to sever his party's loose alliance with Labor that had proven so constructive for the country, and unwisely aligned himself with the parliament's conservatives—forces implacably committed to anti-socialism. In his own words, Deakin made a pact with 'every enemy I have had since Federation'.¹³⁸ He felt that he could harness their more extreme opinions while staying true to his 'radical' liberalism. Voters thought otherwise. The Fusion experiment, which had Deakin in government for ten months (ironically, with a first-time majority in both Houses) ended disastrously. When the nation went to the polls in April 1910, and with Deakin confident of being returned, Fusion was annihilated.

The outgoing prime minister was, for the short period in office and long afterwards, subjected relentlessly to the vitriol of critics who felt that Fusion was nothing more than a brazen attempt to regain power at all costs. William Lyne, formerly anti-Federation, the recipient of Lord Hopetoun's blunder, and a capable minister in Deakin's outstanding second government, commented that he might have called Deakin a 'Judas', and his tactics deplorable, except that would not have been fair 'to Judas, for whom there is this to be said, that he did not gag the man who he betrayed, nor did he fail to hang himself afterwards'.¹³⁹ Labor's strongman, William Morris Hughes, with whom Deakin had a combative relationship, produced his own brutal assessment, one that Deakin's opponents enjoyed: 'What a career it has been. In his hands at various times have rested the banners of every party. He has proclaimed them all; he has held them all; he has betrayed them all'.¹⁴⁰

For the dominant political figure in the first decade of the Commonwealth, a true founder of nation, this was an ignominious end to his years as prime minister.



47. Renowned cartoonist Claude Marquet's caricature of Deakin's ill-fated Fusion government in 1910.



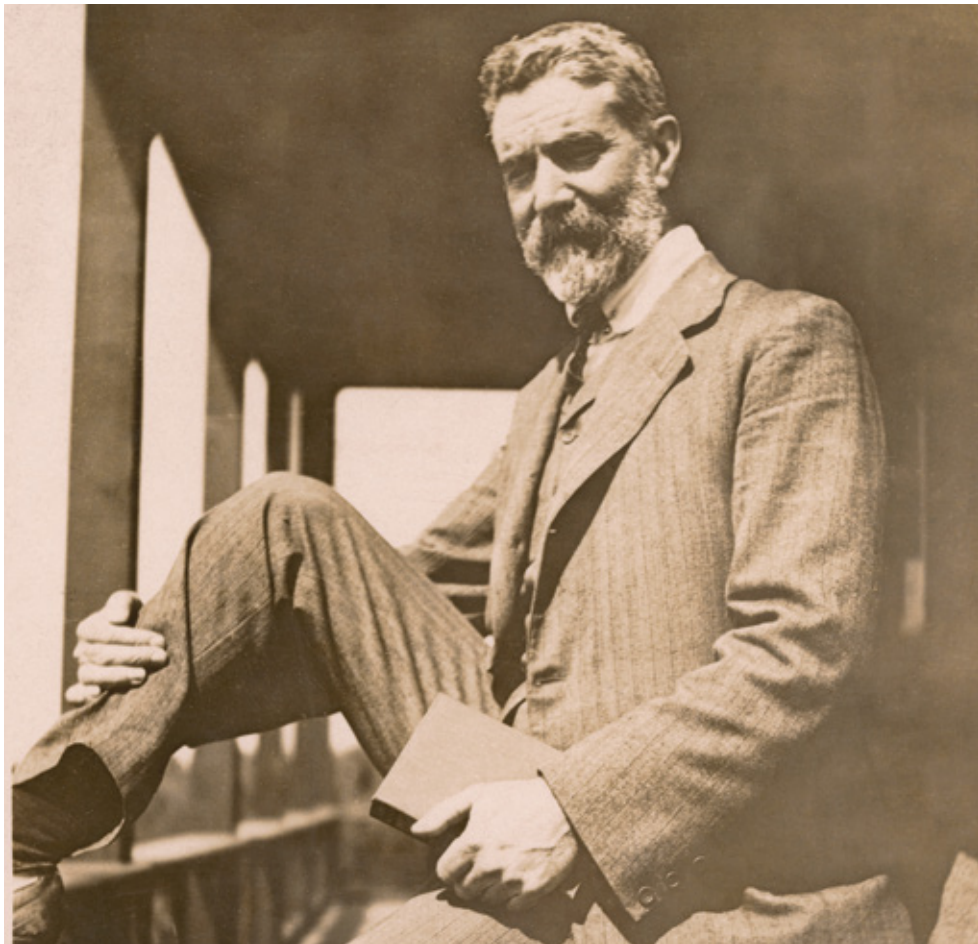
Between temple and tomb



48. A fit Deakin in swimsuit at Point Lonsdale beach, in easy walking distance of the family seaside cottage, Ballara. He had the odd nude swim as well. Granddaughter, Judith Harley, maintains that he found 'tea on the beach preferable to political banquets'.

In 1901, the Commonwealth's inaugural year, Attorney-General Alfred Deakin decided to use his legal casebooks for the sole purpose of recording private musings. It was a decision full of symbolic significance. He had finally left the law as a profession to take his seat in the historic first federal parliament, yet he refused to let the enticements of a public life under the gaze of the entire nation intrude on his evolving spiritual education. The casebooks would be put to better use.

Out of prime ministerial office for 15 months in 1904–05, Deakin completed the last of his Gospels, the 250-page *Ten Letters on Stoicism and Idealism*, only to become even more introspective in his quest for spiritual understanding. Compiling relevant 'Personal Equations' and 'Materials' to go with his 'Clues', he followed a lone Bunyanesque trail in search of nothing less than the truth, the soul and the destiny of humankind.¹⁴¹



49. Apart from providing invigorating salt air, Ballara gave Deakin the opportunity to indulge his lifelong passion for reading. He was never without a book, and the family hammock on the deck was well-used.

A clue to the elevated state of mind he aspired to can perhaps be found in a book he had written some ten years earlier, *Temple and Tomb in India* (1893), where he sought to explain the 'delightful thrill' of a recent trip to India. This exotic country:

seem[ed] like the sudden realisation of long-forgotten visions, which maturity has unwillingly and sadly obliterated, but which all ages would recall if they possessed the power. It has the fantastic grace, and the nearness in remoteness, that belongs only to dreams.¹⁴²

The mature Deakin, embedded in national politics, refused to countenance losing contact with his carefully nurtured world of dreams, no matter what the demands and provocations of his day-job.

It was always going to be an unattainable aim. Conflict between his separate lives inevitably surfaced. In 1904, for example, he wrote: 'Whether I give strength or have influence upon others I do not know but none of them reach me now except momentarily and by sympathy ... I act alone, live alone and think alone ...'.¹⁴³ It would be wrong to take this exasperated statement literally; rather, Deakin was reacting to the weight of totally different demands being made upon him. Insomnia, chronic indigestion and simmering tensions at home exacerbated the problem. From 1907, the onset of first-stage dementia made matters that much worse. In October 1909, four months into the last prime ministership, he admitted to himself that 'mentally much has gone from me'.¹⁴⁴ The following year, 1910, produced another turning point. As he readied himself for the general election set down for 13 April, and surely harbouring doubts about the wisdom of recent political decision-making, a debilitated Deakin once again looked for solace in his trusted notebook. One aching personal entry, an impromptu retrospective, exposed his fragile state of mind:

Preparing the notes for Policy speech ... encouraged and saddened by the thought that it is my last Parliament and perhaps my last Policy speech. Not that I regret the active life of affairs; and still less do I regret the active life of debate and discussion, in the House and out of it, with all the tactics, contrivings, plots and counterplots and personal relations involved. To escape these will be a relief, especially if I live long enough after to permit concentration, self-examination, and a breathing-space of freedom for considering the inner man, the soul life and its obligations, before I pass behind the veil ... No! I am saddened, not with these prospects, but with the sense of opportunities missed, neglected, or ignored—with the 'might-have-been' of a marvellously fortunate and favoured man—saddened because I can achieve so little more and have accomplished so little in the past—also because everything in Australia (and in the world) is so obviously imperfect, inchoate, confused, stained, and wickedly filled with false antagonisms, blunders, coarseness and incapacity, that the promised land of humanity still lies far, far out of sight.¹⁴⁵

Deakin's singular contribution to the national project is here lost in sad introspection lacking both historical accuracy and perspective. Deakin's world view was in a state of disintegration, a grim harbinger of the mental collapse to come.

In the midst of his last months in office, Deakin heard another profound voice—a 'monition' he called it—extolling him to 'finish your job & turn in'.¹⁴⁶ As he had in the past, he acted on the mystic instruction, struggling on as opposition leader until January 1913 when he mercifully retired. How bad did things get? In July 1912, responding to another gruelling House of Representatives session, the most gifted parliamentary performer of his generation wrote 'I cannot keep the thread of the argument consistently—cannot pick my words even approximately—forget where I am in some sentences, and hence risk leaving them unfinished, or inconsistently mixed with another sentence on another line'.¹⁴⁷ He experienced what he termed his 'first decisive breakdown' in September 1912 and was, he confessed in his journal, 'a wreck'. And still he tried to hide his plight from those closest to him: 'I conceal it as far as possible, even from my dearest, hoping for the turn to come'. There would be no relief, no spiritual intervention, no restorative monition.¹⁴⁸



50. The Australian Pavilion at the Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco, February 1915. Despite acute memory loss, Deakin was appointed by Prime Minister Andrew Fisher to oversee the Australian exhibition. Masking the symptoms, somehow he managed the task.

In the final twilight years, when the former prime minister was kept active by those around him, swimming, sweeping floors and on occasion joining his wife and daughter at Great War fundraiser stalls, Pattie decided to go in search of a treatment for her husband's condition. They travelled overseas to do so, consulting experts in Britain and America. To no avail. In 1916, Deakin dismissed his last journal entries with their 'tangle of words, words, words' as nothing but 'babble'.¹⁴⁹ The pathetic final entry in the notebook was penned in April 1917.



THE FUNERAL OF THE HONOURABLE ALFRED DEAKIN
leaving Federal Parliament House
28th Oct. 1919

51. Draped in a Union Jack flag, Deakin's coffin is about to be transported to St Kilda cemetery.

Australia's greatest prime minister?



52. Historic Memorials Committee portrait of Alfred Deakin, 1914, by Frederick McCubbin (1855–1917).

The difficulty when comparing the relative merits of Australia's 29 prime ministers is that the chronological span of the office now stretches to almost 120 years. Comparisons across such a length of time are necessarily problematic. The first seven prime ministers were all members of the historic first Commonwealth Parliament in 1901. Their Australian nation, with a population of only a few million, was in its infancy compared to 21st century Australia. Times change, populations grow, cultural values evolve, sometimes discernibly in a generation, and communities of different eras are subjected to vastly different pressures, both local and global, moral and military.

In the small number of comparative assessments we have of Australia's prime ministers, Alfred Deakin is always placed in the top few, largely based on the achievements of his second prime ministership from 1905 to 1908. His first biographer, Walter Murdoch, assessed his national contribution in terms that Deakin scholars today continue to endorse: 'Australia would be a name of different meaning today if he had not lived ... he stamped his own ideals on the mind of his country'.¹⁵⁰ Twenty years later, novelist Vance Palmer, possibly Australia's most respected cultural commentator in the 1940s, put his finger on Deakin's community impact when recalling that, even in the dark shadows of the last years, he was 'a figure regarded with affection and even reverence. Deakin, it was felt, was the ideal Australian statesman'.¹⁵¹



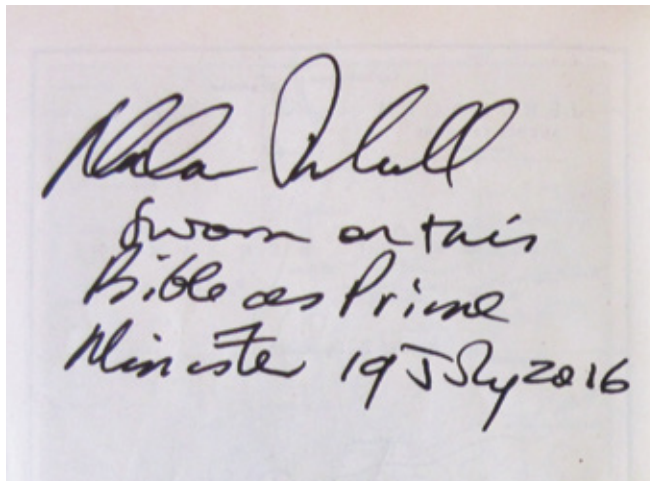
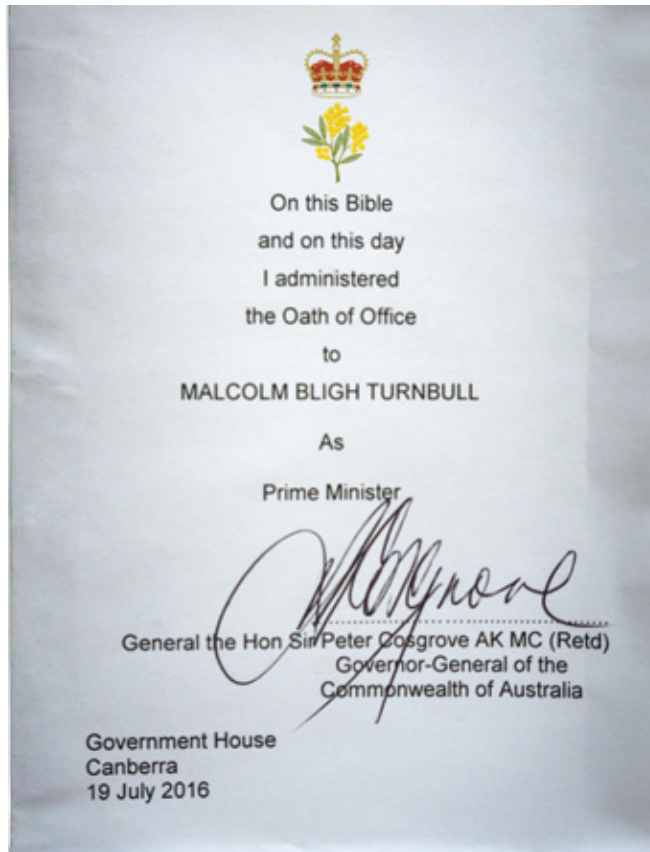
53. *Vanity Fair* caricature of an aged Deakin in formal attire, pointing wistfully into the distance.

During his three visits to England on political business—in 1887, 1900 and 1907—Deakin confidently strode the international stage, an articulate and charismatic representative of the new Commonwealth in the south. He persistently advocated the value of an Imperial Federation and yet, when offered Imperial honours, he steadfastly refused, a number of times, feeling that acceptance might compromise his assertion of an Australian point of view at the British Empire bargaining table.

Nothing is straightforward with Deakin. Inconvenient truths remain. From his earliest political days he displayed a pragmatism that infuriated opponents and unsettled allies; he developed a liking for power that ultimately skewed his judgement to the extent that he aligned himself in his last prime ministership with conservative politicians whom he had always opposed; he wrote anonymously an influential column for a British newspaper for the first 14 years of Federation, a conflict of interest of which he seemed oblivious; and when the middle ground of Australian politics, his brand of Liberalism, began to evaporate as the Labor Party grew in popularity, he was unable to respond with a revitalised statement of the ideals and policies that had established his reputation. By then, as we know, his memory loss was entrenched. It would not be long before it was crippling.

Taking into account the sum of valid criticisms of Deakin's career, however, there is no doubt that these are dwarfed by the scale of his achievements in public life and the adventurous, unquenchable ambition of his inner life. He established the middle ground in Australian politics that remains today the most fertile space for those in the Federal Parliament intent on longevity. Robert Menzies, our longest-serving prime minister, studied the Deakin lessons closely and, in his second prime ministership, showed himself to be a fast learner.

Deakin had something more to offer, an intangible and very human quality to his personality that retains its appeal today. When his political career was at its most hectic, and after each day of parliamentary jousting, he would quietly take his leave from the stately Victorian Parliament building and either walk or cycle home. After dinner with the family, he took himself off to his study, there to immerse himself in the great writers, thinkers and spiritual leaders of the past. If he is not Australia's greatest prime minister, he is certainly its most compelling.



54. Two of several signatures added to Alfred Deakin's heritage Bible in recent years. The volume spans generations, political eras and 29 Australian prime ministers.



55. At several entry points to most of Canberra's suburbs named after former prime ministers, one finds heritage signs of this kind. Alfred Deakin would no doubt have approved of his locations in the bush capital.

Endnotes

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- 1 CMH Clark, *A history of Australia*, Vol. V ('The people make the laws', 1888–1915), Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1981, p. 427.
- 2 Deakin's statements, made on 20 October 1908, are reproduced in F Anstey, *Thirty years of Deakin*, Labor Call Print, Melbourne, 1913, p. 9.
- 3 JA La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin—a biography*, Melbourne University Press (and Cambridge University Press), London and New York, 1965; W Murdoch, *Alfred Deakin—a sketch*, 1923, repr. Bookman Press, Melbourne, 1999; A Gabay, *The mystic life of Alfred Deakin*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992; J Rickard, *A family romance—the Deakins at home*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South (Victoria), 1996.
- 4 Murdoch, *ibid.*, p. 12.
- 5 See Rickard, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 La Nauze, *op. cit.*, Preface, p. vii.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 A Deakin, '*And be one people*'—*Alfred Deakin's federal story*, introd. S Macintyre, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South (Victoria), 1995, p. xxvii.
- 10 See asterisked footnote in La Nauze, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
- 11 Gabay, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 D Langmore, "My cherished and almost worshipped wife"—the marriage of Alfred and Pattie Deakin'; J Rickard, 'Deakin's ideal of the family', *Voices: the Quarterly Journal of the National Library of Australia*, 4(2), Winter 1994, pp. 69–80, 58–68.
- 15 For full citation, see endnote 3.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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- 39 See, for example, the Introduction by La Nauze and Nurser to *Books and men*, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–10.
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- 61 For a broader context, see the chapter entitled ‘The grand prophecy’, in Gabay, *Mystic life*, op. cit., pp. 56–72.
- 62 K Tennant, *Tether a dragon*, Associated General Publications, Sydney, 1952, p. 19.
- 63 Macintyre, ‘Introduction’, in A Deakin, ‘*And be one people*’, op. cit., p. x.
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- 65 See endnote 49. Huie, a lifetime devotee of Henry George’s single-tax ideas, was outraged by Deakin’s backflip. Chris Cunneen’s entry on Huie in the *ADB* enlarges on his Georgist commitment.
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- 76 See Murdoch, op. cit., p. 136.
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- 81 Lake, op. cit., p. 5.
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- 83 Ibid., p. 103.
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- 85 See Gabay, in *Makers of miracles*, op. cit., p. 89 (and footnote 37, p. 235).
- 86 See Murdoch, op. cit., p. 127. On pp. 126–9, Murdoch reproduces a revealing selection of the diary entries written by Deakin in the last years of his life.
- 87 Ibid., p. 128.
- 88 Gabay, in *Makers of miracles*, op. cit., p. 89.
- 89 See Murdoch, op. cit., p. 128.
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- 110 This historic speech is reproduced as Appendix II, in A Deakin, *The federal story—the inner history of the federal cause 1880–1900*, JA La Nauze, ed., Melbourne University Press, Parkville (Victoria), 1963, pp. 177–9. Deakin's son-in-law, Herbert Brookes, in collaboration with his wife, Ivy, Deakin's daughter, edited a first edition of *The federal story* in 1944.
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