

THE LITERARY STATESMAN

ALFRED DEAKIN AND HIS PAPERS



ABOVE

Liverpool Photographic Studio,
Melbourne

Portrait of Alfred Deakin as a young boy, between 1860 and 1870
sepia-toned photograph on carte-de-visite mount; 10.1 x 6.3 cm
Papers of Alfred Deakin, 1804–1973
Manuscript Collection
nla.ms-ms1540-19-613-s7-a1

BELOW

Tosca, Brisbane

Portrait of Edmund Barton with [Alfred] Deakin c.1900
b&w photograph; 14.7 x 20.3 cm
Papers of Sir Edmund Barton,
1827–1940
Manuscripts Collection
nla.ms-ms51-12-1268

IN 1900, ALFRED DEAKIN RECALLED THAT, as a boy, he had aspired to be the writer of ‘poetic plays on the Shakespearean model’. He came to realise, sadly, that neither his youthful poetry nor his prose was worth preserving. He later contemplated writing essays or sermons on literary, social and religious issues, which he would deliver from an unsectarian pulpit, but again his literary efforts proved disappointing. ‘So it was at length I became a politician’.

Deakin was a politician for 34 years (1879–1913). Having trained as a barrister and worked briefly as a journalist, he was first elected to the Legislative Assembly of Victoria at the age of 23. Within three years, he was a Cabinet minister and, in 1886, while still in his twenties, he became Chief Secretary. Throughout the 1890s, he sat on the parliamentary back benches but, as the great orator within the Federation movement, he remained in the forefront of public life. His long fight for the Federal cause was successful and in 1900 he journeyed to London to persuade the British Government to accept the Australian Constitution. Deakin was the first Commonwealth Attorney-General and, in 1903, he succeeded Edmund Barton as Australia’s second prime minister. Between 1903 and 1910, he headed three ministries and was the architect of many of the long-lasting

institutions and policies of twentieth-century Australia: the High Court, the industrial arbitration system, the restrictive immigration policy, the protective tariff system, self-reliance in naval defence, and the Australian administration of Papua New Guinea.

Deakin wrote of the British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, that ‘he always had another side to his nature, an inner life removed from the crowd but partially expressed in his books’. He could have been writing about himself. Despite his dismissive comments about his youthful ambitions, he was always an ardent student, omnivorous reader and compulsive writer. While he did not write novels like Disraeli or histories like Winston Churchill, Deakin matched them as a literary statesman. For 34 years, he led a dual life, as a politician and administrator during the day and as a reader and writer during the night.

Towards the end of his life, Deakin wrote that ‘the intoxication of public success’ could not compare with ‘the transports I receive from books’. He had ‘lived more, & more intensely, in & through books’. As a schoolboy, he spent much of his time reading and daydreaming. By the time he was 20, he had read translations of Miguel de Cervantes, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich von Schiller, as well as numerous classical texts. Many of his diaries contain reading lists that average about 100 titles a year. In 1887, he noted that the total was only ‘75 or 80 volumes but a busy year’. Many of his colleagues consumed crime stories and other pot-boilers on long train journeys, but Deakin seldom indulged in light reading, even when holidaying at his beach house at Point Lonsdale. Although a lawyer by profession, he seldom read legal treatises. Instead, he focused on religion, philosophy, poetry, novels, literary criticism, Greek and Latin classics, biographies and, to a lesser extent, history and politics.

The breadth of Deakin’s reading is astonishing. He would toil through heavy works on mysticism, Indian religions and German philosophy and then turn to the latest novels, stories or plays of George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, Bernard Shaw, Mark Twain,



GRAEME POWELL DESCRIBES
ALFRED DEAKIN'S DUAL LIFE—
POLITICIAN BY DAY, PROLIFIC
READER AND WRITER BY NIGHT

Henry James, Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad and Arnold Bennett. He sometimes read books by Australian authors, including Charles Bean, Jeannie Gunn and Walter Murdoch. Deakin had a good knowledge of French and among the many French writers in his reading lists were Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Honoré de Balzac, George Sand, Guy de Maupassant and Alphonse Daudet. On the voyages to and from England in 1887, he practised his French by reading 32 books by French novelists and philosophers. Similarly, when he sailed to England in 1900, he read a French translation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

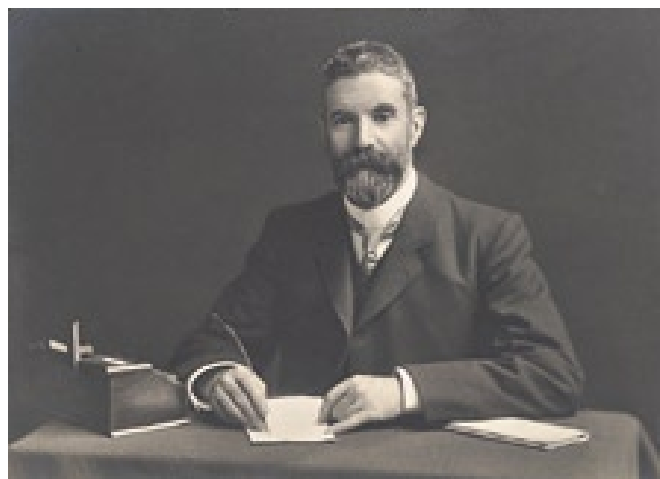
Deakin's love of words and books was well known to friends and colleagues and to the general public who heard his speeches. In contrast, his passion for writing was not widely known beyond his family and closest friends. During his lifetime, only a few books and articles appeared under his name. They included his reports on irrigation in California, India and Ceylon and an account of his tour of the spiritual centres of India in 1890–1891. Most of his writings were either published anonymously or were contained in diaries, notebooks, ledgers and other manuscripts.

Deakin drew on his own experiences for two historical works: an account of the political crisis in Victoria in 1879–1881 and the inner history of the Federal cause. They were not intended for immediate publication but rather to record events behind the scenes, so that future historians would not depend solely on official or published sources. Deakin wrote *The Federal Story* in 1898 and 1900, using the backs of letters, bills, notices of meetings and hotel notepaper. He said relatively little about the great public speeches or the debates in the Federal conventions. He also minimised his own involvement in the Federal cause, although there are scattered references to 'Mr Deakin'. His focus was rather on the personalities, motives and behaviour of his colleagues and opponents and on the negotiations and arguments about Federation that took place in Australia and Britain between 1880 and 1900. Deakin was frank

and at times acerbic, especially when dealing with George Reid, and *The Federal Story* is one of the most readable and influential books by an Australian politician.

George Reid, Edmund Barton, Chris Watson, Andrew Fisher and other leaders of the new Commonwealth figured prominently in 'Federated Australia', a weekly column in the London newspaper, the *Morning Post*. It often discussed, sympathetically but not uncritically, the political position, policies and speeches of 'Mr Deakin'. The author, who ostensibly lived in Sydney, was Deakin himself, although his identity was known to only a small number of people. From 1901 to 1914, regardless of whether he was in government or opposition, he found time to write his lengthy *Morning Post* articles, mainly on political affairs but also touching on agriculture, mining, droughts, bushfires, immigration and industrial disputes. No other overseas newspaper has ever provided such regular, detailed and well-informed coverage of Australia. At various times, Deakin wrote for other newspapers and journals, especially *The Age* in Melbourne and the *National Review* in London.

Even before he began writing about politics and politicians, Deakin was filling notebooks with his ideas on fundamental religious, metaphysical and moral questions. As an adolescent, he abandoned orthodox Christianity and became deeply involved in the spiritualist movement in Victoria. For a time he thought he might be a medium and claimed that his allegory *A New Pilgrim's Progress* (1877) had been dictated to him by John Bunyan. A few years later, he immersed himself in the writings of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg and one of his most substantial manuscripts was entitled 'The Gospel according to Swedenborg'. In later years, he took an interest in theosophy and assiduously read sacred texts of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. He also wrestled with the idealist philosophies of Plato, Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel. Deakin drew on these eclectic sources in his devotional poetry,



ABOVE, FROM TOP
Unknown photographer
*Portrait of Alfred Deakin
Seated at His Desk* c.1905
gelatin silver photograph
13.5 x 19.1 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23309662

Alfred Deakin (1856–1919)
'Federated Australia' column
in the *London Morning Post*,
13 October 1905
Papers of Alfred Deakin,
1804–1973
Manuscripts Collection
nla.ms-ms1540-7-146



ABOVE
A few of Deakin's many diaries
Papers of Alfred Deakin,
1804–1973
Manuscripts Collection
MS 1540

BELOW
Damian McDonald
Sue McKnight of
Deakin University signs
a memorandum of
understanding with the
Library for partial digitisation
of the Deakin papers,
watched by Professor Sally
Walker, Vice-Chancellor of
Deakin University, and the
Library's Director-General, Jan
Fullerton, in March 2003

plays, essays, stories, prayers, spiritual diaries and manuscripts. Totalling thousands of pages, and written over a period of almost 40 years, they reveal his strong belief in the possibility of transcendence, enlightenment and divine inspiration.

Other private writings included diaries, generally with brief entries, and what he called 'clues', consisting of personal reflections, memoranda, speculations and aphorisms. He also compiled literary notebooks, containing extracts from the works of leading novelists, essayists, historians and philosophers.

Deakin suffered from insomnia and his private writings, *Morning Post* articles and letters were mostly written between 4 am and 7 am. The letters, like all his other writings, were written by hand and Deakin seldom kept copies or drafts. Fortunately, many have survived among the papers of his correspondents. It was an age of letter writing, when the telephone was still in its infancy but, even by the standard of the time, Deakin was a prolific letter writer. He retained much of his incoming correspondence and it is extensive and varied. Apart from family letters, the letters from politicians, governors and public servants in Australia, Britain, New Zealand and Canada form the largest category. In some cases, the correspondence extended over many years: Edmund Barton, John Forrest

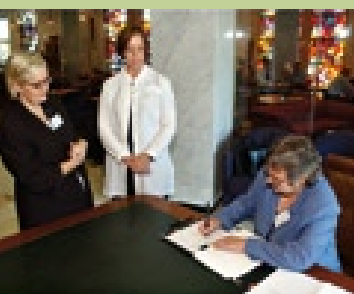
and Bernhard Wise each wrote well over 100 letters to Deakin. Other correspondents included editors, journalists, judges, lawyers, businessmen, academics, writers, musicians, clergymen and soldiers. There are letters, for instance, from the painter Tom Roberts, the writer Rudyard Kipling, the traveller and novelist Beatrice Grimshaw and the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer.

The manuscripts, diaries, notebooks, correspondence, cutting books and political papers that Deakin accumulated throughout his life were kept at Llanarth, his home at South Yarra. After his death in 1919, they remained there for many years, mostly stored in tin trunks and boxes. Harold White from the National Library of Australia visited the house in 1945 and immediately recognised the importance of the papers:

Rarely has a public man, preoccupied with the daily burdens of office, left material so adequate for the study of the political life of his time or of his own personality—in the present case so many-sided.

White waited patiently and finally in 1966 the papers were donated to the Library by Ivy Brookes, Deakin's eldest daughter. The collection was soon being studied by historians and for 40 years it has been among the most heavily used in the Library. White's statement in 1945 remains true today: no other collection of papers in Australia documents so fully the political, intellectual and spiritual life of an outstanding public figure.

GRAEME POWELL was for many years Manuscript Librarian at the National Library



In 2001, the Library, with strong financial support from Deakin University Library, began digitising the Deakin papers, concentrating on those series within the archive that were of wide scholarly interest. Most of the 'public' papers have now been digitised, including the papers on Federal and Victorian politics, irrigation, Federation and journalism. Among the more private papers, the long series of diaries and two family photograph albums have also been digitised.

The digitisation of personal archives presents challenges for both the Library and researchers. Manuscript material is in perpetual copyright and, with a large collection containing extensive correspondence, there may be thousands of rights

holders. The Library has to show that it has made a reasonable effort to locate rights holders before it can publish manuscripts on the Internet. It also has to provide detailed descriptions of the digitised papers and format them to an international standard.

While researchers make heavy use of digitised pictures, maps and music, they are more ambivalent about large written archives. With a collection like the Deakin papers, readers may struggle with illegible handwriting, so most researchers find it easier to use the original collection rather than copies. Nevertheless, remote Library users can now study many of the papers online and thereby gain a better understanding of Alfred Deakin and his times.