

# Alfred Deakin

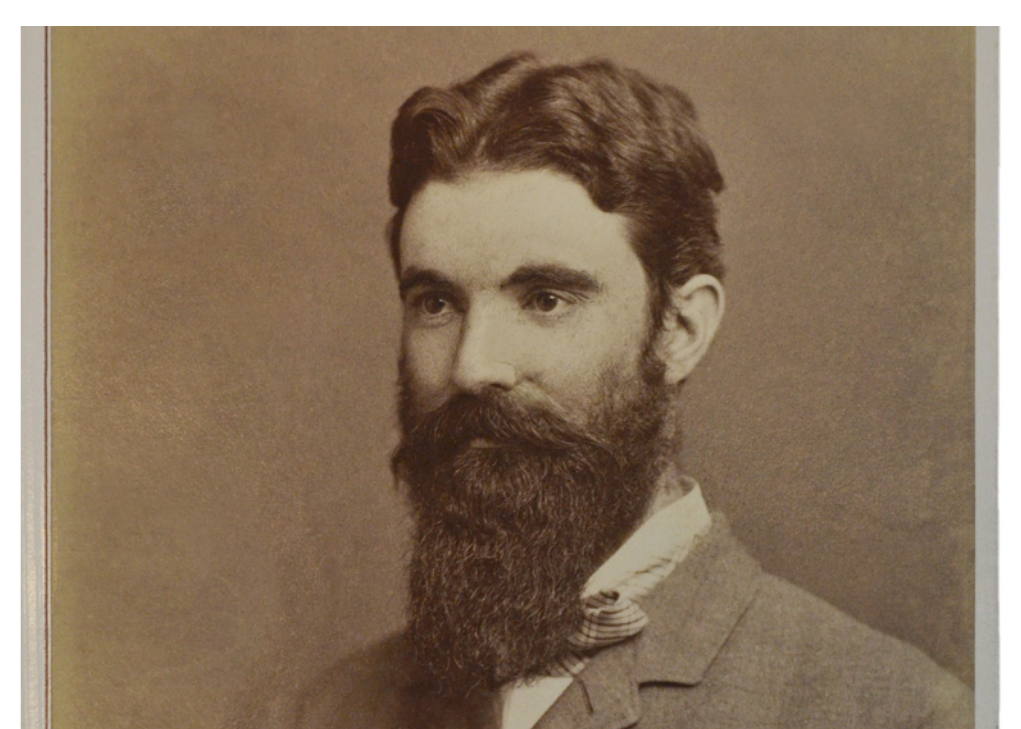
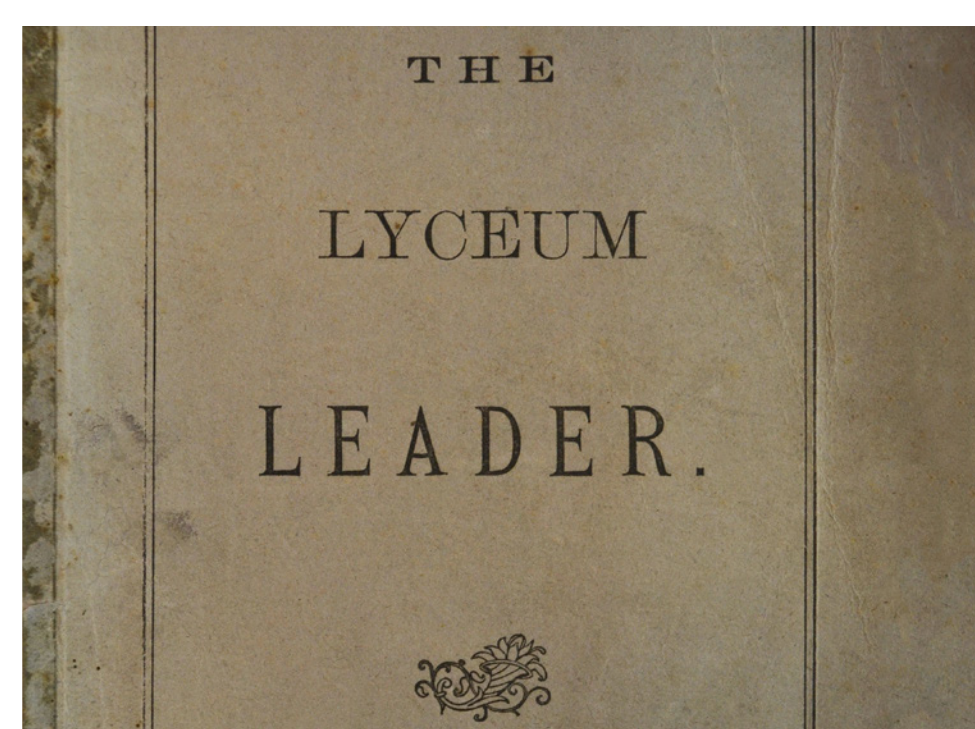
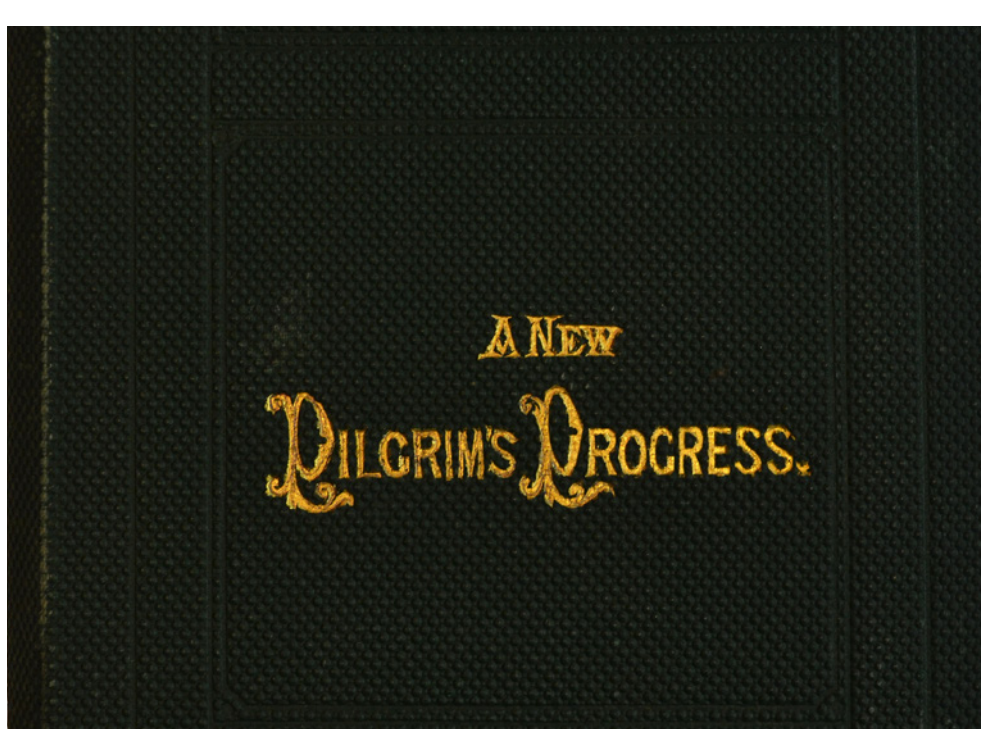
(1856–1919)

Australia's 2nd Prime Minister



## Terms of office

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



## A new pilgrim's progress

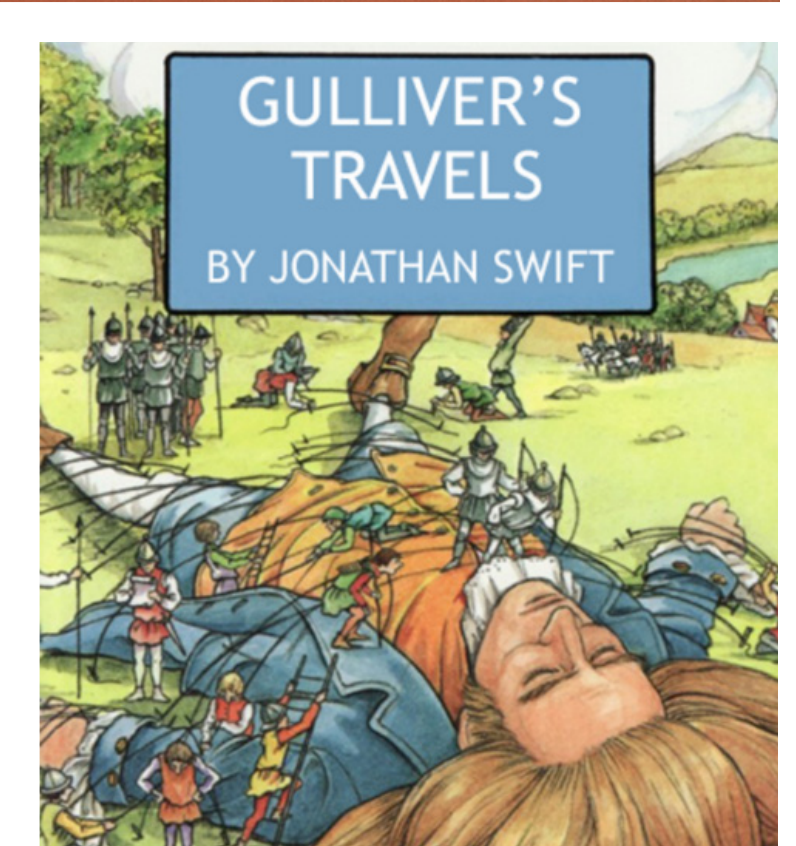
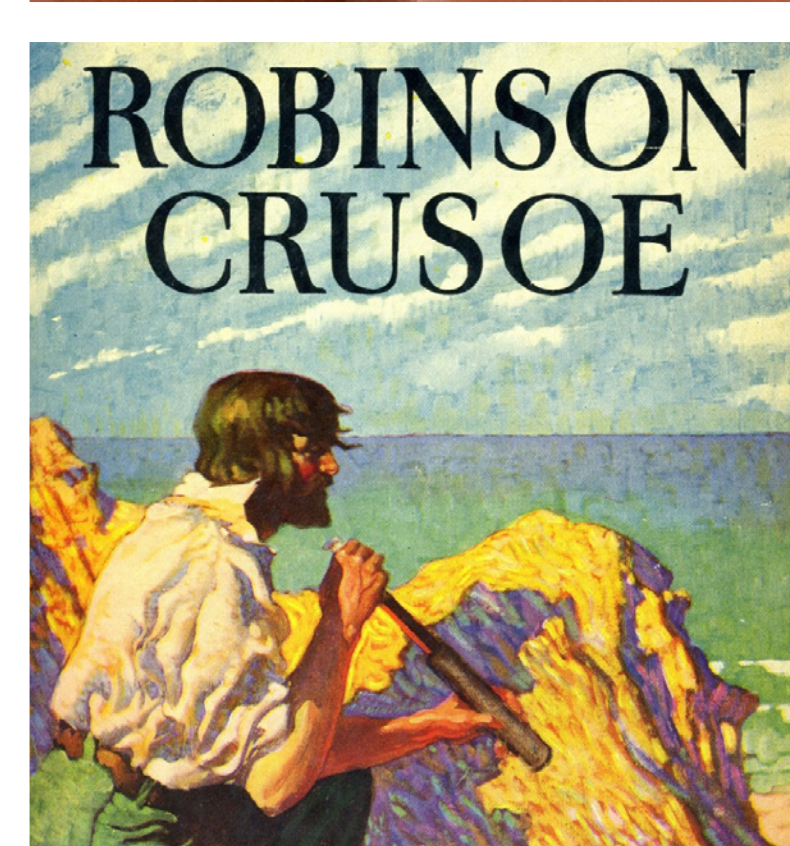
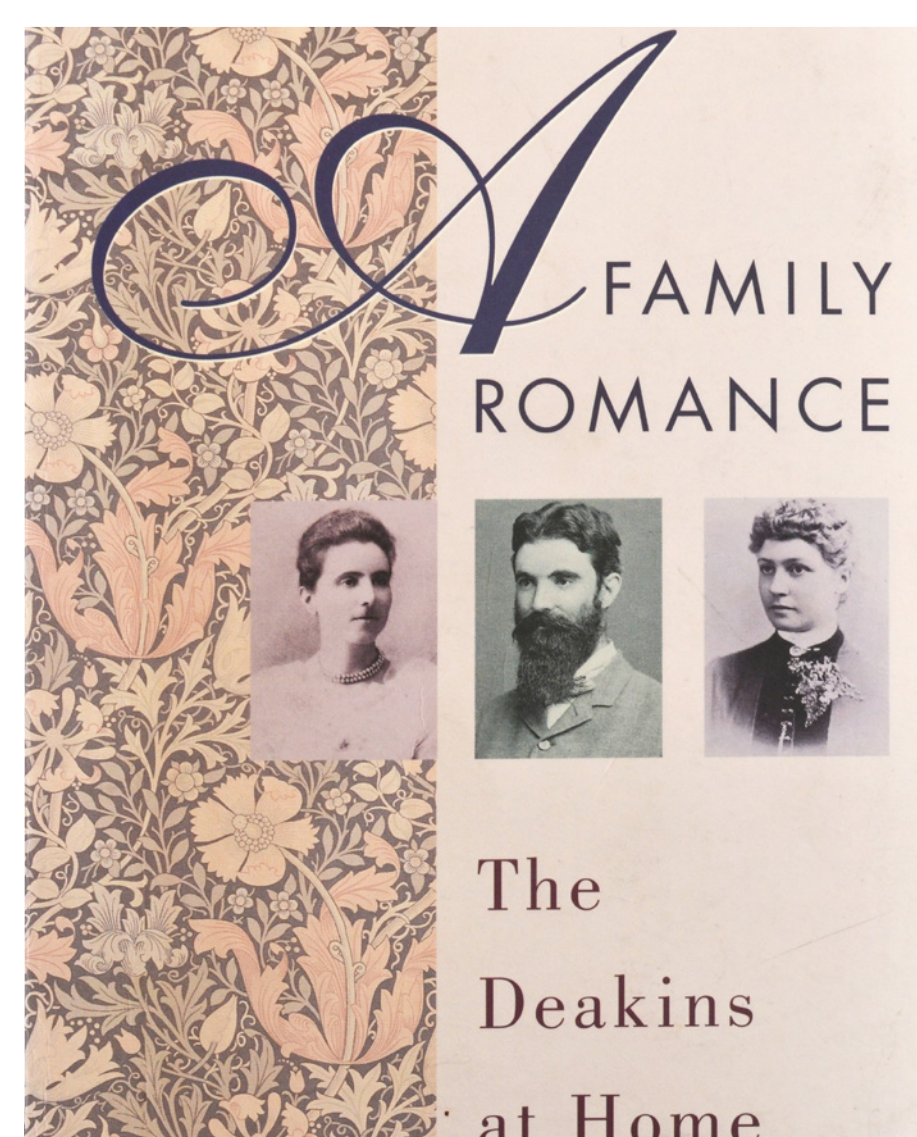
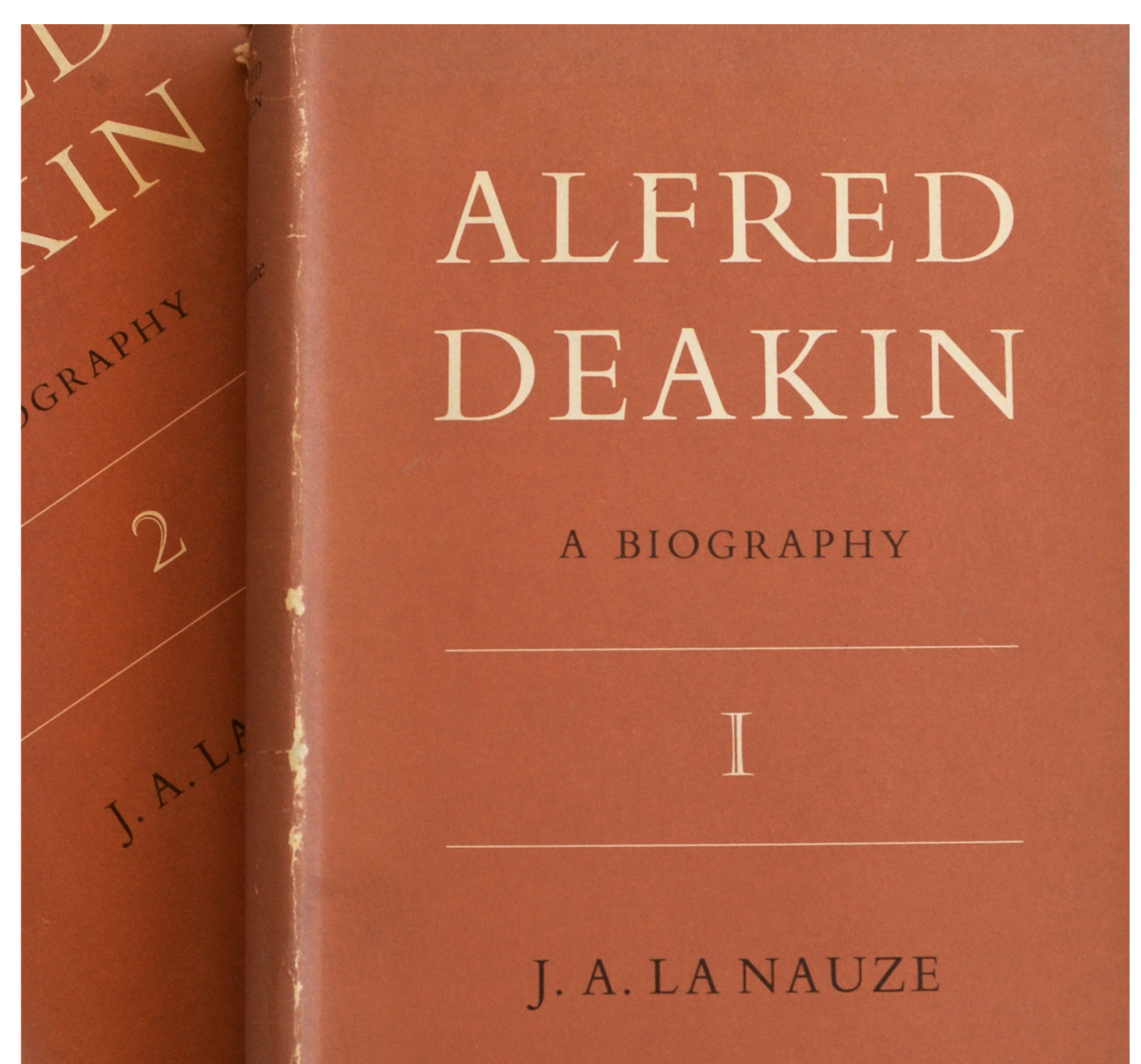
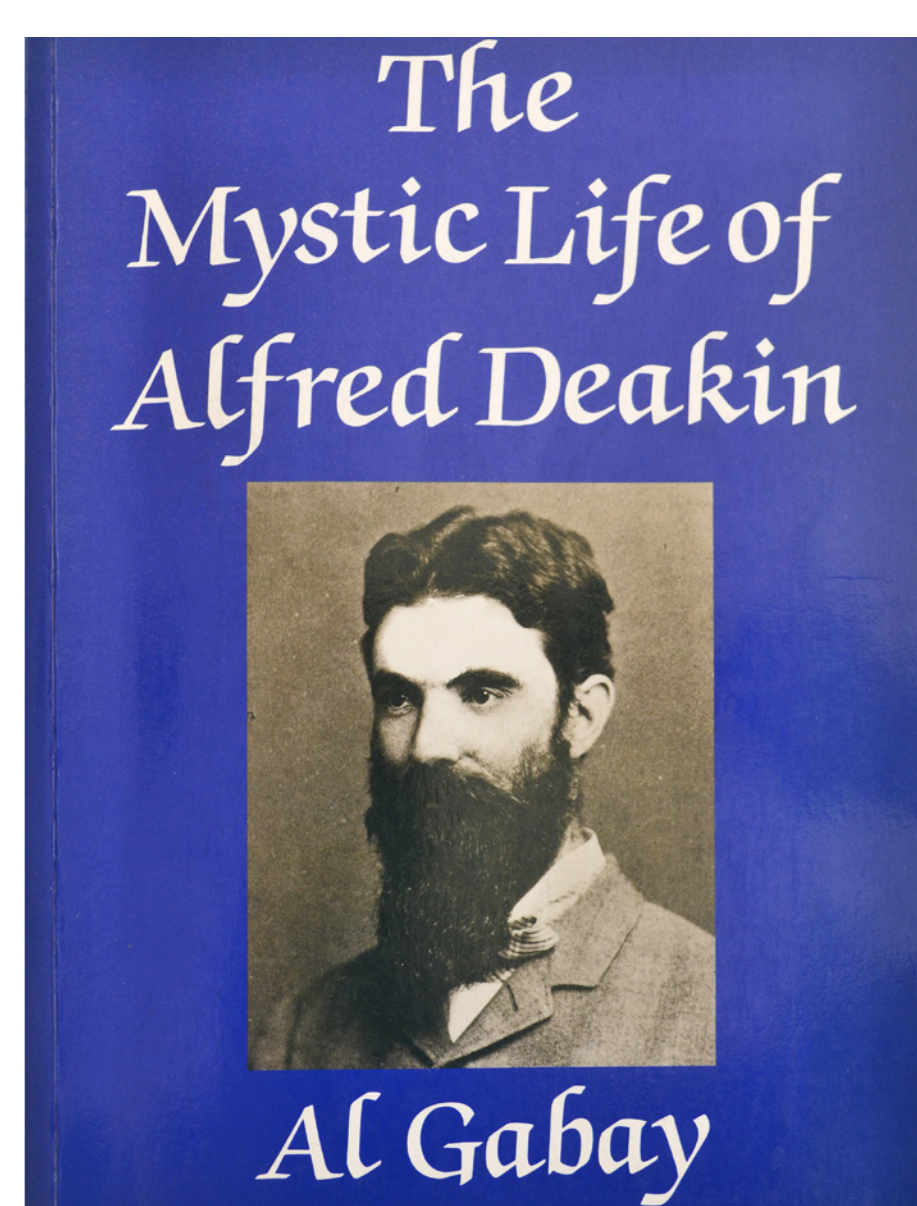
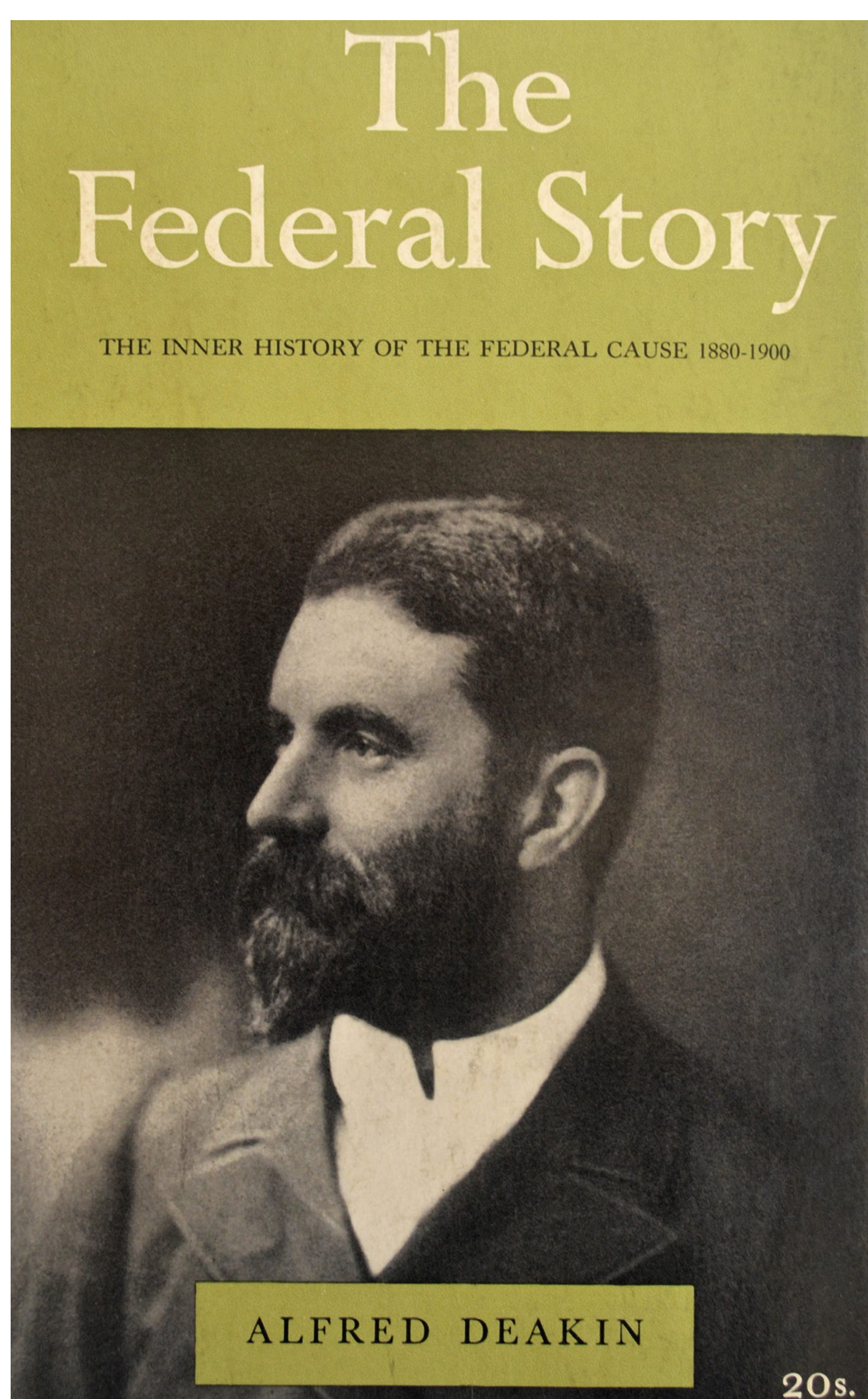
Three books in particular stimulated Deakin's early reading, when he regularly took himself off to the public libraries of Melbourne and Prahran to spend the day: John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Jonathan Swift's classic *Gulliver's Travels*. The world of the *Arabian Nights* was not far behind. Add to these stimulants to the boy's imagination the tuition provided by what biographer 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 revealed new worlds and sparked a spirit of enquiry that lasted.

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'. He would create some form of heroic myth for himself for the rest of his life.

As he dutifully progressed through the dry, legal precedents contained in the law studies he began at the University of Melbourne in 1872, Deakin created his own alternative course of extra-curricular reading. He effortlessly moved through the likes of Plato, Carlyle (*Sartor Resartus* was the first book he ever bought for himself), Mill, Huxley, Ruskin, Schiller, Dante, Spinoza, the English Romantic poets, the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Swedish mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg.

We know that in 1879, aged 23, the year he first stood for election to the Victorian parliament, his casual reading included (to cite a small sample) Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Masson's *The Life of Milton*, *Les Miserables*, 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. Clearly, a profound self-education was under way.

At university Deakin joined the debating club, giving his first public voice to a rare talent for oratory. He also enjoyed the ferment of the Eclectic Association, the busiest meeting place for Melbourne's aspiring intellectuals. Two older friends he made there, David Mickle and Arthur Patchett Martin, introduced their teenage colleague to the writings of English philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer and the burgeoning literature of agnosticism. 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 ...'



## Sources

Portrait of A. Deakin by Stewart & Co., 1879-1891, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-228182787 • Alfred Deakin, *A new Pilgrim's progress*, 1877, National Library of Australia  
Portrait of Elizabeth Brovine with her four daughters Pattie, Lillian, Nellie and Alice by Stewart & Co. 1865-1930, nla.obj-228203679