

Chapter 12

A transnational imagination: Alfred Deakin's reading lists

Mark Hearn

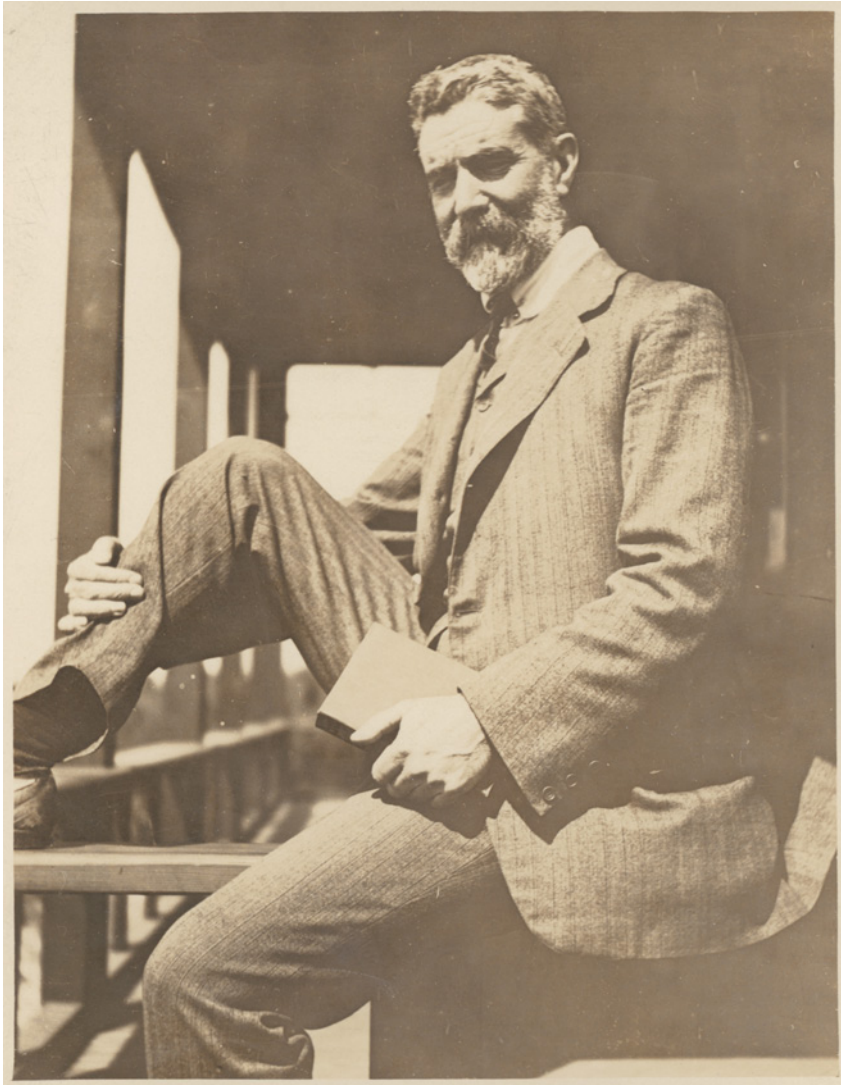
Between 1906 and 1914, Alfred Deakin (1856–1919) kept an annual record of his reading. In those nine years, in either the front or back pages of his rough diary (and sometimes in both front and back), he documented a total of 864 books—on average, 96 books a year, at a rate of nearly two a week.¹ While he read these books, Deakin served variously as Prime Minister of Australia and opposition leader, finally retiring from politics in 1913. The period 1906–09 was perhaps the busiest and certainly among the most politically productive of his career. As Prime Minister of a Liberal protectionist government, Deakin entrenched his vision of the post-Federation Australian settlement through the New Protection Program, fulfilling the ideal of limited government intervention in the lives of the people, within a federal system that itself upheld the principle of limited governance—a system Deakin had helped shape as a leading federal convention delegate in the 1890s.²

Deakin's papers include inventories of some of the 1500 books crammed into his Melbourne home at the time of his death in 1919 at the age of sixty-three, revealing the extraordinary variety of his interests in philosophy, spiritualism, literature (particularly French), biography, history, health, essays and literary criticism, poetry and agriculture.³ This chapter focuses on those works recorded in his rough pocket diaries to explore some sense of Deakin self-consciously recording his reading at a specific period, and how this reading might reflect a public life at a critical moment of influence and transition towards its conclusion. Deakin's reading and his extensive papers allow us to follow the spiritual and existential crisis that approaching retirement and failing health summoned in him in the period 1910–13.

Historians and biographers have observed the depth and range of Deakin's reading, but some significant aspects remain unexplored, including Deakin's reflections on the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who was an inspiration for him at a time of personal crisis.⁴ Deakin's notebook reflections on Bergson's works, in an intense burst of creativity in 1911–12, were perhaps his last embrace of a new source of self-transformation before his final decline. Deakin's engagement with Bergson's ideas dramatically drew together the entangled

intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs that had impelled Deakin's obsessive reading and private writings throughout his life. In temperament and in intellectual and spiritual interests, Deakin powerfully reflected fin de siècle preoccupations with the exploration of new ideas in philosophy, politics and social and moral conventions and alternative belief systems such as theosophy and mystical speculation. In his reading, Deakin drew eagerly on fin de siècle ideas, seeking intellectual stimulation and spiritual comfort.⁵

Figure 12.1: Alfred Deakin with book in hand.



National Library of Australia: nla-pic-an23302838.

Deakin had made a half-hearted attempt in 1903 to record his reading in his diary, but it was only in 1906, at the age of forty-nine, that he began a dedicated process of numbering and listing. The project was that of a middle-aged man, renewing the quest for self-improvement. The lists also reflected the gathering crisis of a man who believed he was slowly losing control of his memory—that vital tool of political skill and self-mastery. For nine years, Deakin dedicated himself to the discipline of reading and recording until, at the end of 1914, he apparently felt compelled to surrender the quest, defeated by the debilitating illness that overwhelmed him in the years before his death.

For much of the period 1906–14, Deakin commented anonymously on Australian politics in a weekly article to the London *Morning Post*, and each day he corresponded with a wide range of friends and politicians.⁶ Every day, he briefly recorded his activities in his diary. He was also a husband and father and, for Deakin, home was a refuge and his diaries reflected how he cultivated a meaningful family life.⁷ Contemporaries in government observed Deakin's capacity for hard work.⁸ They were not aware that in his private notebooks Deakin maintained a demanding routine of hours of intense spiritual and philosophical reflection, often writing into the early hours of the morning. Reading was not a punishment; it reflected Deakin's essentially solitary nature. He found happiness, as he observed in 1910, in the immersion in books, and 'the inner life of speculation...my only true being...this is my "self"...This is my real life, and joy—far more real than the other.'⁹

An almost obsessive sense of self-improvement characterises Deakin's reading. Deakin told his friend and son-in-law, Herbert Brooks, that 'certain books are to be read as discipline whether you like them or not'.¹⁰ That self-disciplinary principle compelled Deakin's reading, his private reflections and his liberal politics, which sought to create self-governing subjects guided by restrained state intervention.¹¹ Self-discipline was reflected in the steady, careful order of the lists, unfailingly numbered and identified by author and title and usually spanning about three pages of each year's diary. The entries reflect Zygmunt Bauman's 'geometry of order', a grid of 'classification, inventory [or] catalogue' to create order and eliminate ambivalence, to identify phenomena and exert control over the world.¹² Few leading Australian figures sought to master such self-control as Deakin strove to achieve, even in an age that produced such determined self-improvers as Deakin's contemporaries (and avid readers) Henry Bournes Higgins, William Jethro Brown and Deakin's friend and intellectual role model Charles Pearson.¹³

Deakin's correspondence with Walter Murdoch represented a rare commentary on his reading shared with a contemporary. Murdoch felt that Deakin was 'too susceptible to the latest idea...the newest theory'. This was a habit that left Deakin receptive to unusual and stimulating points of view—a useful

susceptibility in a period characterised by such a diversity of ideas. In 1906, Deakin confessed to Murdoch that ‘Nietzsche I found very valuable for though to me he acts as “advocatus diaboli” he pricks so many conventional bubbles & sounds the shallows of masquerading “morality” so well that he helps to drive one to deeper foundations & more sincere inspiration’.¹⁴ Unconventional thinking was an inspirational trigger for Deakin, found in the interrogation of the latest idea.

Ann Curthoys argues that a transnational history ‘places heavier emphasis on the notion of diaspora...the formation of a diaspora of people who maintain a sense of identity...across national boundaries’.¹⁵ As an idea that might be applied to Deakin, a transnational interpretation could be developed in terms of Deakin’s cultural affinity with Britain or in relation to French literature and philosophy, which were certainly evident in his reading. Deakin’s reading lists, however, reveal not so much a transnational pattern of familiarity as an imagined diaspora of difference, an outsider’s search for moral reassurance and spiritual comfort, a search that seemed to grow more difficult with advancing years and despite ever-accumulating knowledge. Deakin looked on the world through Australian eyes and, in the fin de siècle, Deakin’s reading reflected the search of a people looking to secure their place in the world. Deakin’s ability to link the ideal of nation building with the desire to construct a secure Australian identity facilitated his emergence as a national leader, although Deakin’s reading also suggests that being an Australian in the fin de siècle was complicated by the possibilities available to the formation of that identity. Deakin’s reading reveals what he could not necessarily reconcile with a nation-building cause: an imagination sensitive to an extraordinary range of insights, whether expressed in the subtle personal forms of fiction or in the more abstract reflections of philosophy. In his search for meaning, Deakin explored deeply the transnational domain of the Western imagination, receptive to a wide range of ideas that might help clarify identity, although in the final decade of his career Deakin’s quest was driven by two impulses: to face the ethical challenges posed by life, and the inescapable reality of personal decline and death.

A fin de siècle imagination

Few better records exist of a hungry, relentlessly curious fin de siècle imagination in Australia than Alfred Deakin’s reading lists, ranging across harsh satire and dreamy mysticism, tough social critiques and gentle literary elegies, and a determined interrogation of the turbulent welter of ideas and tensions circulating across the planet in the decade before World War I. Among Deakin’s favourites was the mordant futurist and social critic H. G. Wells. Deakin read Wells’ works as they were published: his social satires *Tono Bungay*, in 1909, and *The Kingdom [Country] of the Blind*, in 1911; *The War in the Air*, in 1908, Wells’ prophetic fictionalisation of new technology intensifying global conflict; the novel *The*

New Machiavelli, about the moral struggles of a British Liberal MP, in 1910; and *First and Last Things* in 1909, a self-styled 'metaphysical' work that outlined Wells' moral beliefs and in which Deakin perhaps recognised a kindred spirit. It was the work, Wells said, of an 'amateur philosopher', and he described himself as 'an ingenuous enquirer with, I think, some capacity for religious feeling, but neither a prophet nor a saint'.¹⁶

Deakin's immersion in the works of George Bernard Shaw illustrated his intense commitment to a preferred author. Like Wells, Shaw seemed to attract Deakin for his vivid skill in provocatively mixing philosophy, sharp social critique and satire in essays, fiction and, in Shaw's case, drama. Deakin re-read *Man and Superman* in 1912 (it was Deakin's habit to note his return to a work). *Man and Superman* was a long, philosophical comedy that pitted a male desire for creative freedom against a female nurturing instinct. Celebrating the 'life force', Shaw borrowed French philosopher Henri Bergson's *élan vital* to champion 'the man of action'.¹⁷ Deakin recommended the two volumes of Shaw's *Dramatic Opinions and Essays* to Walter Murdoch, and recorded reading them in 1907, 1909 and 1910.¹⁸ Deakin also read *John Bull's Other Island*, Shaw's analysis of the 'Irish Question', and *The Quintessence of Ibsen* in 1907 (and Ibsen's *The Pillar of Society*, an attack on moral hypocrisy and suffocating social conventions, in the same year); *The Sanity of Art* in 1910; *Press Cuttings*, *The Doctor's Dilemma* and Archibald Henderson's biography of Shaw in 1911; and *Misalliance* and *Dark Lady of the Sonnets* in 1914.¹⁹ In 1907 and 1911, Deakin read Joseph Conrad's new novels *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, among the first fiction to probe the psychology and politics of alienation that fed the disturbing modern phenomena of terrorism and espionage. *Under Western Eyes* was Conrad's 'bleak' account of a young Russian student caught up in the aftermath of a terrorist bombing, and of the problematic nature of Western attempts to understand an alien Russian consciousness—at once mystical and cynical.²⁰

For a pillar of Australian society, Deakin was remarkably susceptible to reading works that were subversive of moral and social codes, if not political or class structures. It was a way of distinguishing himself from others, a private awareness of a more acute and sensitive perception, and a way of striving for a more authentic existence, as he observed in his notebook in November 1910:

[R]eading does open doors which remain open all one's life making an essential contrast to those who to judge by appearances live not so much in accordance with themselves as with the 'living pictures' supplied by their associations with & observations of others, by the particular environment in which they live & by the march of events affecting them or around them.

The energies of 'most' people were dissipated in the 'struggle to adapt themselves' to the daily circumstances of earning a living, their opinions 'mostly those of

the street & newspapers casually picked up & imperfectly understood'. In contrast, 'even as a lad solitary, introspective, shrinking, timid & fascinated by literature more or less instinctive, made me while a lively boy a dreamer & a reader beyond all cure'.²¹

Charles Pearson encouraged Deakin to read French literature in the 1880s, and it was a task the young member of the Victorian Parliament embraced with intense dedication: more than 230 French titles were listed in Deakin's household inventory, and it was not complete.²² Dreaming in another language opened up a whole new and private realm: Deakin read novels by Honoré de Balzac, Maurice Maeterlinck, Emile Zola and Alexandre Dumas, and Guy de Maupassant's stories; he read the Goncourt brothers' journal and works by Jean Baptiste Racine, Moliere and Anatole France. The literary critics Sainte Beuve and Emile Faguet were favourites. Deakin read several works by Romain Rolland, including *Les Amies* and Rolland's biography of *Michelangelo*. In 1911, he read *L'Aube*, a volume of the 10-part novel *Jean Christophe* that won Rolland the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915.²³ Deakin seems to have read most, if not all, of the instalments. Rolland was inclined to a mystical idealism and wrote his novel as an expression of French–German rapprochement. *Jean Christophe* is the epic story of a German musical genius, based partly on the life of Beethoven. Rolland portrayed his protagonist as a heroic figure and a fighter for social justice. In the end, when Jean Christophe dies, his soul mystically rejoins 'the River of Life'.²⁴ In Murdoch, Deakin found a sympathetic correspondent for the exotic pleasures of French literature and criticism: 'What demons at exposition these Frenchmen are!' Deakin enthused in a 1907 letter. 'I shall always be grateful to you for putting me on to Faguet and the *Revue* [*Latine*]. There is always something luminous in it.'²⁵ In private, Deakin was willing to explore perspectives that he felt must be denied an impressionable public: as Victorian Chief Secretary in the late 1880s, he sought to ban translations of Zola's work.²⁶

The imagined diaspora of difference that Deakin searched for inspiration had an unworldly and spiritual quality, and it was these elements perhaps that drew him to Edith Wharton's stories. Deakin read *The Hermit and Wild Woman* in 1909.²⁷ A somewhat overheated fin de siècle religious parable, the story describes, in a medieval setting, the encounter between a mystical Catholic hermit and a wild woman he meets as he struggles alone with nature, having abandoned his community. 'His longing was to live hidden from life' and escape the tormenting moral choices that confronted him: 'There seemed to be so many pitfalls to avoid—so many things were wicked which one might have supposed to be harmless. How could a child of his age tell?' In order to be 'perfectly good', he had to flee from his fellow men. The wild woman became his 'penitent', while remaining essentially untamed, declining to reconcile herself with traditional faith or to 'confess her fault and receive the Sacrament with him', although they

finally find release in a transcendental death. *The Hermit and Wild Woman* reflects, as Carol Singley suggests, Wharton's intense spiritual longing and a sense of 'spiritual homelessness'. An American who sought imaginative and spiritual inspiration in Europe, Wharton struggled with a crisis of belief stirred by the clash of traditional and alternative faiths and scientific rationality at the turn of the century.²⁸ Deakin's spiritual notebooks also reflect this crisis, and although he seemed to embrace the world energetically, there was also a withheld identity, a part of Deakin that imagined that only by fleeing the world could he find how to be perfectly good.

Deakin's restless search for goodness and spiritual comfort had, since early adulthood in the 1870s, drawn him to an interest in spiritualism and alternative religions.²⁹ In 1903, he read Charles Leadbeater's *The Other Side of Death*, a study of the afterlife by the leading theoretician of theosophy: 'Scientifically Examined by Clairvoyant Observation and Carefully Described.' Deakin was drawn to occult and theosophical writings that blended speculations on a transcendent afterlife with the apparent credibility of quasi-scientific language—and Leadbeater was skilled in concocting that blend.³⁰ In 1911, Deakin read *Some Mystical Adventures*, a 'revelation' of the mystical adventures of the theosophist G. R. S. Mead. Chapters included: 'The elasticity of a permanent body', 'Guesses at what to expect', 'Mystic reality', 'The deathless race' and 'Some elementary speculations'.³¹ In his spiritual notebook, Deakin expressed his disappointment with a first reading, finding it 'superficial'; but having, as he conceded, 'read it at a gallop', he returned to *Some Mystical Adventures* in 1912 and found that 'I had missed most of its meaning...it is the most practically helpful of all the philosophies of mysticism & has determined me to continue my perusals'.³²

Deakin was preoccupied with reconciling a morality of life and public duty with his search for spiritual meaning. Idealist philosophy, the belief that reality reflected the workings of the mind, seemed to offer the potential for such an integration, particularly as many of idealism's leading adherents such as Sir Henry Jones, the professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University, encouraged a strong sense of moral and civic duty, including support for New Liberalism's program of state intervention in the causes of social and educational reform.³³ In 1910, Deakin re-read Jones's *Idealism* (having read it only the previous year), a classic statement on the subject.³⁴ Deakin heard Jones speak on 'The individual and the State' during the philosopher's Australian lecture tour in 1908, and met with him, although Deakin was unimpressed with his fellow Melburnians' response: he told Murdoch that he was 'disgusted to hear of local apathy considering the rarity of men like Jones'.³⁵ Deakin was also attracted to the work of German philosopher Rudolf Eucken, the 1908 Nobel Laureate and another of idealism's leading exponents in the period. In *Christianity*

and the *New Idealism*, which Deakin read twice in 1912, Eucken argued that as 'modern civilization...fills us with insatiable ambition', it is necessary that 'an independent Spiritual Life should dominate the storm and stress of the conflict, test the world's work, and so separate the pure ore of truth from its alloy of human error'.³⁶ Such was the project that Deakin had undertaken in his notebooks. Just how seriously he took his quest for spiritual and philosophical understanding is illustrated by a virtually self-constructed course of study he undertook on Eucken in 1912, as he continued to grapple with his decision to quit politics and 'turn in' towards himself, and his restless inquiry into the soul of the 'dimly lit' self.³⁷ Deakin read five of Eucken's works and re-read two of them in that same year, while also reading about 85 other books (and serving as Leader of the Opposition): *Life's Basis and Life's Ideal* (also twice), *The Problem of Human Life, Meaning and Value of Life*, *The Truth of Religion and Christianity and the New Idealism*.³⁸

Deakin re-read William James' highly influential *Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1912, having first read the American philosopher and psychologist's Gifford Lectures on their publication in 1903. He also read James' *Pragmatism* in 1907 and re-read *Memories and Studies* in 1912.³⁹ Deakin was a natural student of James, who brought a sensitive perception to the linkage of religion, psychology and mysticism, stressing the importance of personal mystical experience over religious institutions or doctrines, and an acceptance of a pluralist conception of existence and the pragmatic and relative nature of truth.⁴⁰ In March 1912, Deakin described James in his notebook as one of the leaders, along with Eucken and Bergson, of 'a new exodus towards sundry "promised lands" of the mind and the soul', breaking away from 'philosophic dogmas and assumptions'. James was a model of intellectual action, 'the dashing cavalry leader...cutting off the forces of the orthodoxies of metaphysics...His contributions to psychology are invaluable—a fascinating man.' Like Bergson, James was 'engaged in the same fight for freedom, conducting it with the same freshness & an "elan vital"'.⁴¹ Bergson's vitalism made a profound impact in the period, not least, as Michael Roe has argued, in Australia.⁴² As a man of political if not philosophical action, Deakin perhaps identified with the vital spirit exhibited by James and Bergson, as much as with the content of their ideas.

Marilyn Lake has argued that Deakin looked to the United States, and not only to Britain and Europe, for a sense of identity and for intellectual and imaginative stimulation. Describing Deakin as a 'desiring subject', Lake focused on Deakin's relationship with Josiah Royce, the idealist philosopher and close friend of William James, and issues of white manhood and self-respect acquired through power. Deakin's desire was also focused intensely on his spiritual quest, as suggested by his relationship with Royce, who, typically of the thinkers who appealed to Deakin, mixed his philosophy with a strong religious influence.

Deakin was adept at identifying political rationales in his reading, drawing on Royce's *The Philosophy of Loyalty* to welcome the Great White Fleet of the United States Navy on its Australian visit in 1908.⁴³

Deakin selected books to develop the scope of his Liberal politics and the cultural values and anxieties that nurtured those politics. He had read John Robert Seeley's *Expansion of England*, a ringing endorsement of the imperialist mission, and had been troubled by his friend Pearson's *National Life and Character*, and its fearful prophecy of the threat to the white race and its diaspora, swamped by the populous hordes of Asia.⁴⁴ In 1911, Deakin read the British Commander-in-Chief Lord Roberts' *Fallacies and Facts*, which advocated compulsory military training—a cause that Deakin had strongly supported in Australia, and a policy designed in part as a form of racial defence for a nation concerned about its vulnerability in the Asia-Pacific region.⁴⁵ Having lost the prime ministership to Labor's Andrew Fisher in 1910, Deakin took solace in being unable to attend the 1911 Imperial Conference in London by reading Richard Jebb's *Imperial Conference*, a two-volume 'history and study' of this unique imperial institution, and John Findley's *The Imperial Conference of 1911 from Within*.⁴⁶

Lake argued that Deakin exhibited a 'profound ambivalence about the British connection'.⁴⁷ Deakin described himself as 'an independent Australian Briton' and embraced the cause of imperial federation, striving to build closer ties of empire between Britain and the Dominions. It is true that he delighted in challenging British authority, but he also drew willingly on Britain for the pragmatic ties of defence and the appeal of cultural identity; he felt British politicians and Colonial Office public servants insufficiently understood the empire's needs. Attending the Imperial Conference in London in 1907, Deakin took time from his demanding schedule to meet Rudyard Kipling, Wells and the Webbs, representatives of the dynamic current of new ideas emanating from the metropole.⁴⁸ As an avid reader of Kipling, Deakin identified with the imagined diaspora of empire and its ancient heritage. Between 1906 and 1912, he read Kipling's children's book *Puck of Pook's Hill*, which allowed readers to transcend time in imaginary connection with heroic figures who had shaped Britain's history. He also read Kipling's science-fiction adventure *Actions and Reactions*, and re-read *Kim* and the *Second Jungle Book*.⁴⁹

A passionate sense of Australian identity was reflected in Deakin's enthusiasm for Australian literature. As a young man in the 1870s, Deakin had written poetry and verse dramas, often with a setting in Australian nature, but eventually felt he lacked the necessary skill to pursue a literary career; he remained a reader receptive to new work by Australian writers and willing to champion it.⁵⁰ In 1896, Deakin lavished praise on Henry Lawson, whose stories spoke for 'the workman, the tramp, the shearer...the inner Australian beyond civic or imported

influences—the most Australian Australia’. Lawson and the poet Banjo Paterson were ‘racy of the soil’; he also praised Ada Cambridge, Tom Collins (Joseph Furphy) and Miles Franklin in a 1905 address: ‘[W]e have good reason, when in patriotic mood, to be proud of the promise of Australian literature.’⁵¹ That promise is not strongly reflected in Deakin’s reading lists in the period 1906–14, where relatively few Australian titles appear, although this could be due, as John La Nauze suggests, to Deakin’s increasing immersion in philosophical and spiritual speculation.⁵² He read Henry Handel Richardson’s novel *The Getting of Wisdom* in 1911, and E. J. Brady’s *River Rovers* in 1912, which described a trip down the Murray River in an open boat. He read two books by Charles Bean, *On the Wool Track* in 1910 and *The Dreadnought of the Darling* in 1912, the accounts of what a city journalist found when he ventured into the nation’s bush wool sheds and down the Darling River.⁵³ These works reflected a romanticised exploration of Australia, familiarising the Australian experience and the land for an urban readership. Bean’s books cultivated a narrative of bush mateship and Australia’s place within the empire, at once loyal to Britain but distinctive and inclined to a sense of independence, reflecting ‘the quality of sticking...to an old mate’—a careful if ambiguous construction that Deakin would have identified with.⁵⁴

Just as Deakin might have been inclined to read books that reinforced his political and cultural values, he also read works that challenged them. In 1911, he read Olive Schreiner’s *Woman and Labour*. A South African feminist, novelist and political activist, Schreiner argued that women’s labour, especially domestic labour, was ‘wearisome and unending’, and neither adequately recognised nor recompensed. Schreiner championed equal pay for women, equality in marriage and a belief that ‘sex and the sexual relation between man and woman have distinct aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual functions and ends, apart entirely from physical reproduction’. Sex was a physical union that contained ‘in it latent, other, and even higher forms, of creative energy and life-dispensing power, and that its history on earth has only begun’.⁵⁵ There is little doubt that this transcendent idealism would have appealed to Deakin. It is less clear that Deakin was receptive to Schreiner’s arguments about the value of women’s paid and unpaid labour. A year after Deakin read *Woman and Labour*, the Commonwealth Arbitration Court began the process of discriminating against women in the payment of wages, eventually deciding to pay women only 54 per cent of the male wage. The arbitration system that Deakin had championed in parliament did more than any other legislative instrument to make women second-class citizens of the Commonwealth of Australia.⁵⁶

The more subtle, rarefied ideas that Deakin pondered in his private readings might not have often infiltrated his construction of public policy, although it is possible to detect some influence. In the 1903 debate on the *Conciliation and*

Arbitration Act, which Deakin led as Attorney-General, he provided a typically detailed and elegantly argued presentation of the key elements of the legislation. These benefits were not based merely in the pragmatic nature of the employment relationship or the principle of the intervention of the liberal state to create the 'people's peace', a harmonious civil and liberal society; it was a policy, Deakin told parliament, which apparently also reflected that

[w]e realise now-a-days that society is a living organism in every sense of the term. In all its capacities of adaptation, in its changefulness, and in its varieties of action, it partakes of the nature of the living beings who compose it. They, too, are under the influence of various motives, inspirations and aims, passions, interests, and prejudices, and, although human history may be said to repeat itself, we find that it repeats itself with infinite variety, and never twice in quite the same fashion.⁵⁷

Deakin's remarks reflected Bergson's ideal of organic creativity, of a vital impetus at work in nature and human experience, blossoming in variegated forms, an idea that provided Deakin with a powerful metaphor of transcendence in his spiritual notebooks.

Bergson had achieved international fame by the early 1900s with works such as *Time and Free Will*, published in 1889, and *Creative Evolution*, published in 1907.⁵⁸ From October 1911 to January 1912, Deakin read a range of Bergson's work, just as it became available to the Australian reading public and generated interest in journals such as *Bookfellow* and *Salon*.⁵⁹ Deakin also typically read works that either discussed or were influenced by Bergson. In 1911, Deakin read Bergson's *Matter and Memory* and *Laughter*, A. D. Lindsay's *Philosophy of Bergson* and John McKellar Stewart's *A Critical Exposition of Bergson's Philosophy*. He also read and re-read L. P. Jacks' *Alchemy of Thought*, which attempted to reconcile religion and science and reflected Bergson's influence.⁶⁰ Jacks was the editor of *The Hibbert Journal*, the leading international journal of philosophy and religion. Deakin was drawn particularly to the October 1911 edition, containing Bergson's lecture 'Life and consciousness'. Bergson addressed 'the essential and vital questions': 'What are we? What are we doing here? Whence do we come and whither do we go?' These were questions with which Deakin had struggled throughout his life. Bergson doubted that the evolution of life could be explained solely by 'mechanical forces': 'Obviously there is a vital impulse...something which ever seeks to transcend itself...in a word, to create.' Man might ultimately transcend his own limits: 'Perhaps in man alone,' Bergson speculated, 'consciousness pursues its path beyond this earthly life.'⁶¹ In his notebook reflections on Bergson, Deakin was inspired by this 'master...of thought & style' to conceive of his own creative ideal of transcendence:

Each of us will at last learn that in his or her own spirit lies another world as well as a world redeemer; that the eternal process of the suns is forever

multiplying spheres...Hence from the heart of the Deity there flows into infinity & eternity never ceasing streams of embodied aspirations, souls which in innumerable [sic] and ever new phases, enlarging (as we would phrase it) the bounds of being & ever multiplying the children of the highest who in constantly varying modes & inexhaustible forms express the ever deepening & ever heightening creativeness of the all in each, of the One in all, of the all in all.

This is why, Deakin explained, he read Bergson, Jacks and James and brought them from the world into his imagination:

[T]hose most important to me since they break the fetters of thought, exhibit the relativity of science & all doctrines orthodox or heterodox that have hitherto tied us & our minds down to the empirical interpretations of the universe that leaves us hopelessly distraught...they help to set us free.⁶²

This awareness of living in a relative universe of transcendent science and faith, offering some hope of consciousness beyond this earthly life, represented a powerful way in which fin de siècle ideas sought to break the fetters of nineteenth-century thought and belief. At the end of his life, as Deakin struggled with personal and professional decline, he embraced the relativity and the freedom that this hope opened in his mind and that led him into the passionate outburst that the very page strained to contain, with the rushing, scored and redrafted text spilling from page to page.

Conclusion

Lake observes that 'a trans-national analytic frame that connects the global to the local also serves to illuminate the subjective self-constitution of key individuals in the story'.⁶³ While drawn from the world, Deakin's reading fed an intensified, inward-looking subjectivity—and fed an awareness that, as he observed in 1904, 'I act alone, live alone and think alone'.⁶⁴ It was this emphatic solitude that stood in such contrast with his rapturous longing that humanity would achieve, as he hoped in 1911, a holistic empathy and unity, in all its various and inexhaustible creativeness 'of the all in each, of the One in all, of the all in all'.

Bauman argues that fin de siècle modernism confronted modernity and its quest for holistic order and knowledge with its own impossibility.⁶⁵ Deakin tried to find in the diaspora of his imagination what he could not find in Australia. His struggles reflect the idea of mastery and certainty represented by liberal modernity and placed as a demand on the nation and on the self. Such a demanding self-discipline, and such a powerful transcendence, was not available in human experience, and in Deakin's case was increasingly undermined by

1911 by ill health and failing memory, the clamouring demands of public duty and an intimidating accumulation of knowledge that defied comprehensive assimilation or analysis.

By October 1911, all the carefully accumulated wisdom that Deakin had stored in his mind and recorded in his reading lists was dissipating even as it seemed to him to open up 'vast regions of liberties, possibilities and promise':

Unhappily my whole memory...of the work of theosophists...and their resurrection of ancient texts and of the various gospels, all of which even the Koran have their mystical implications, has vanished except in results, inchoate indistinguishable as to source, & more or less transmuted by being heaped together in that loose bag which represents my mind. This very inapposite break away from my purpose when commencing to write tells its own story of my meandering fidelity.⁶⁶

This meandering fidelity provided its own compelling story. On 15 October 1911, Deakin tried to recall some lines of poetry:

This morning waking in the peace of a Sunday it took me some time before I could recollect to whom I was indebted for the exquisite and apposite fragment of verse that floated into my consciousness 'The peace that man did not make and cannot mar'—that was all I could recover even when I remembered Arnold's 'In Kensington Gardens' as the source. Such a hopeless wreck is my immediately effective memory.⁶⁷

Alfred Deakin could achieve peace, if only in fragments. Remembering Matthew Arnold, Deakin cast his mind back to a moment of imaginative familiarity, an Australian-born child of the British diaspora who identified with the poet strolling in London's Kensington Gardens. Deakin and Arnold did not really have 'place' in common: they shared, as Arnold concluded the poem, the quest to live and to achieve peace before they died.

Notes

¹ Alfred Deakin Papers, MS1540, Diaries Series 2, 1884–1916, National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA). For Deakin's life, see Norris, R. 1981, 'Deakin, Alfred (1856–1919)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 8*, Melbourne University Press, pp. 248–56.

² Nethercote, J. R. (ed.) 2001, *Liberalism and the Australian Federation*, The Federation Press, Sydney; Roe, Jill (ed.) 1976, *Social Policy in Australia*, Cassell Australia, Sydney.

³ 'List of Deakin's books before distribution', Deakin Papers, MS1540/4/692–721; La Nauze, John 1965, *Alfred Deakin, A Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, p. 259.

⁴ 'List of Deakin's books before distribution'; Gabay, Al 1992, *The Mystic Life of Alfred Deakin*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

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