

Alfred Deakin

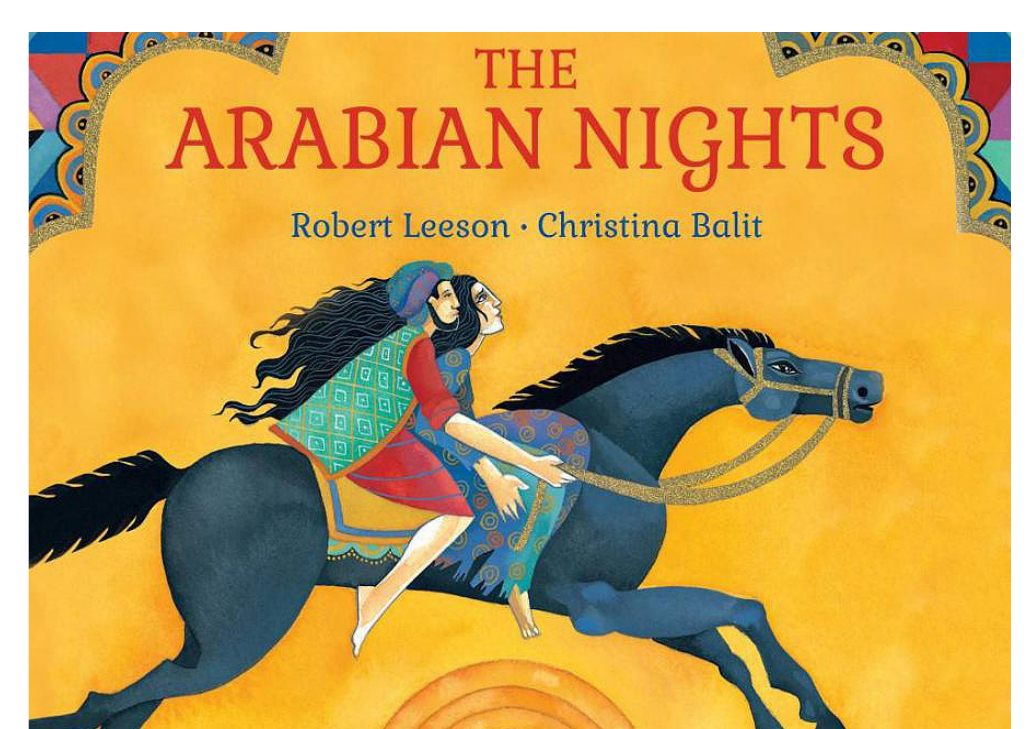
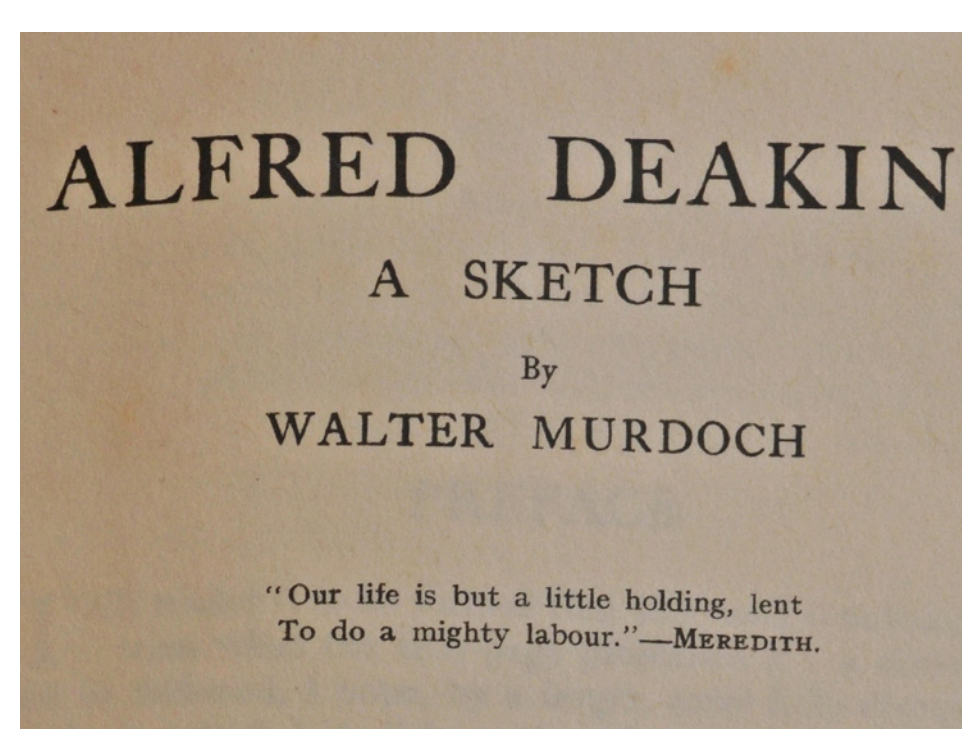
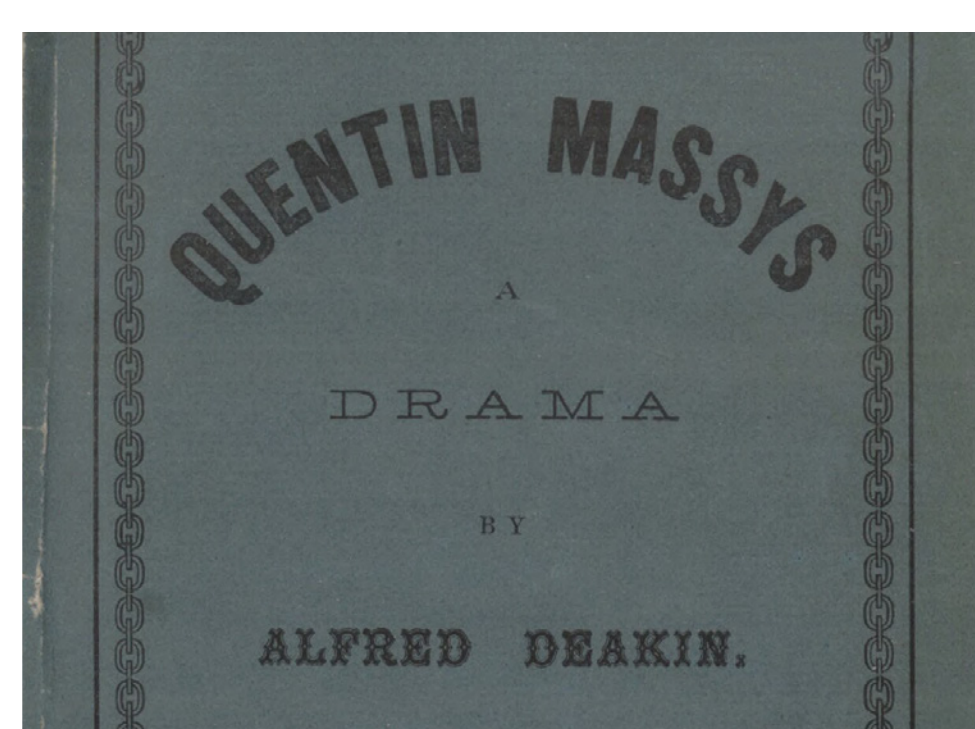
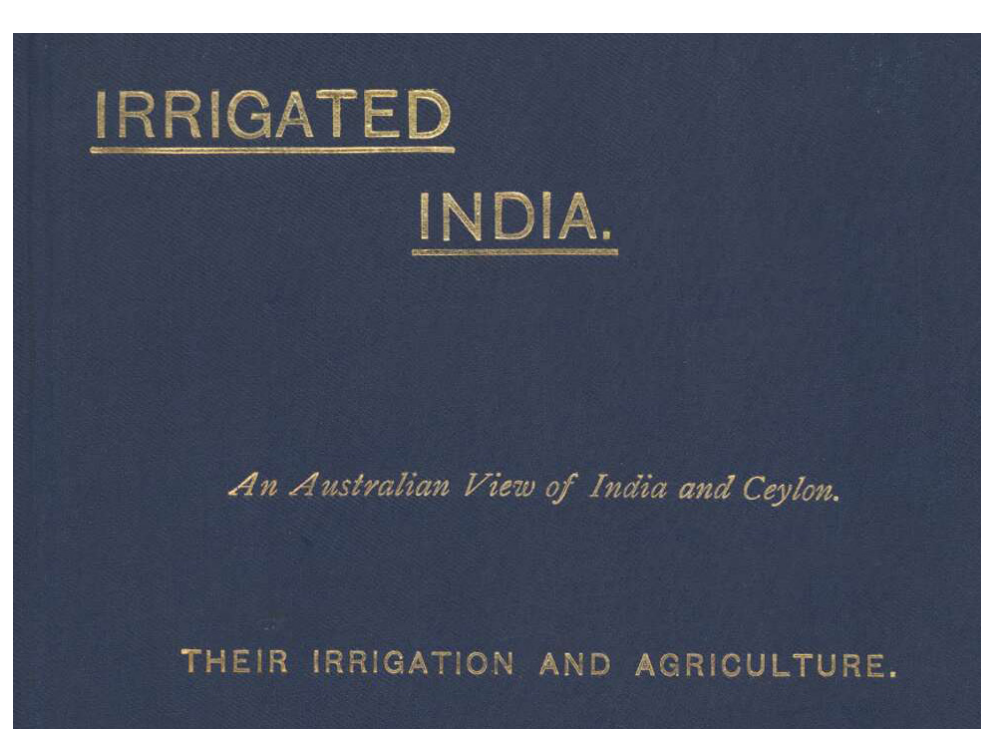
(1856–1919)

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



Alfred Deakin's story and story-tellers

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':

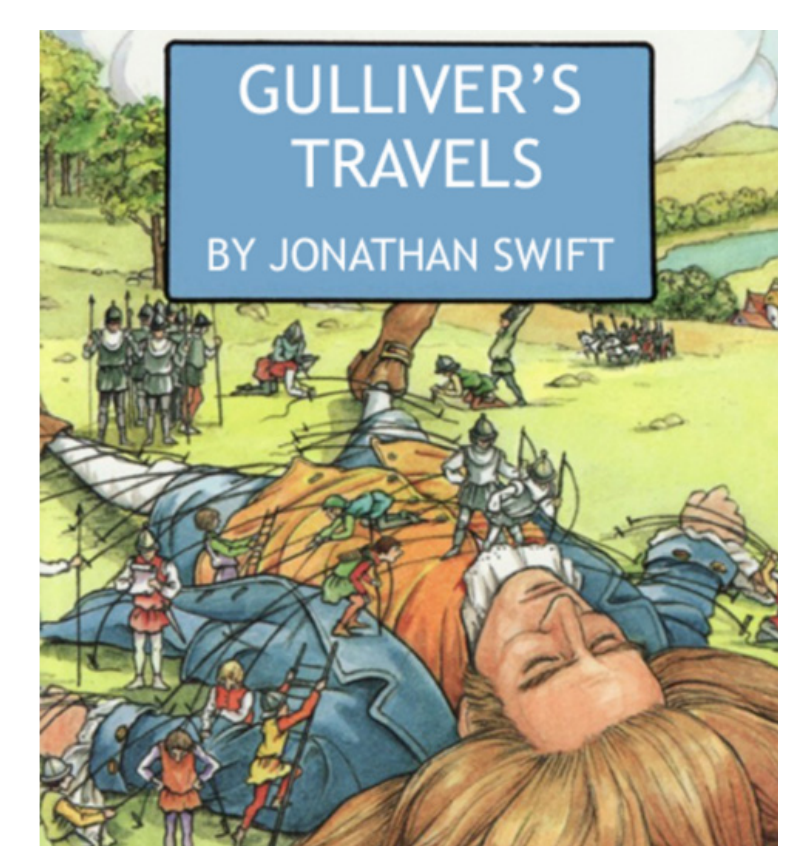
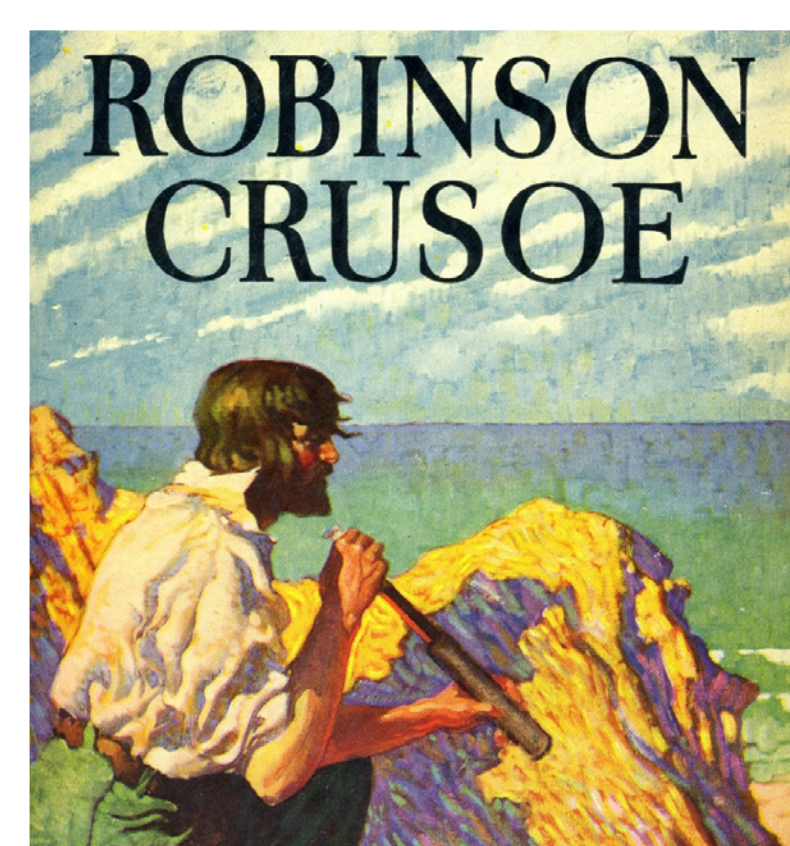
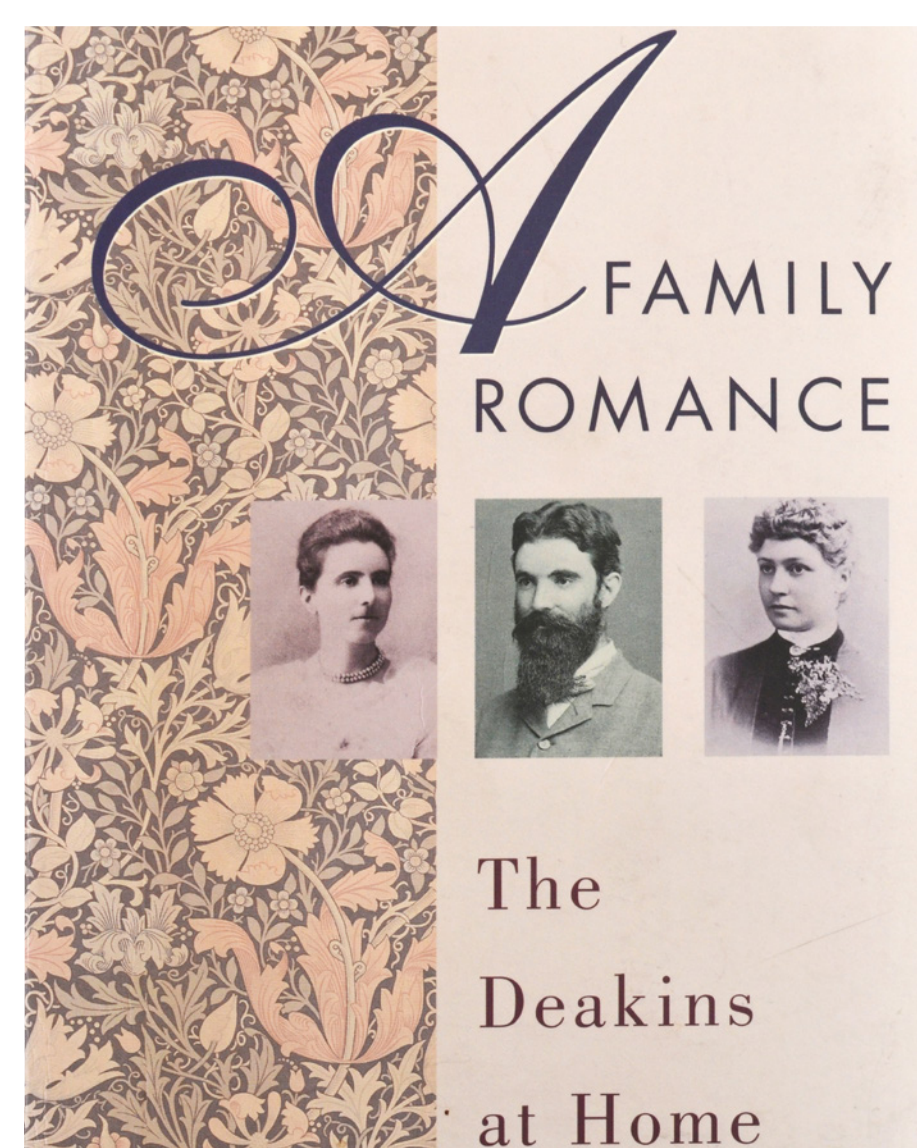
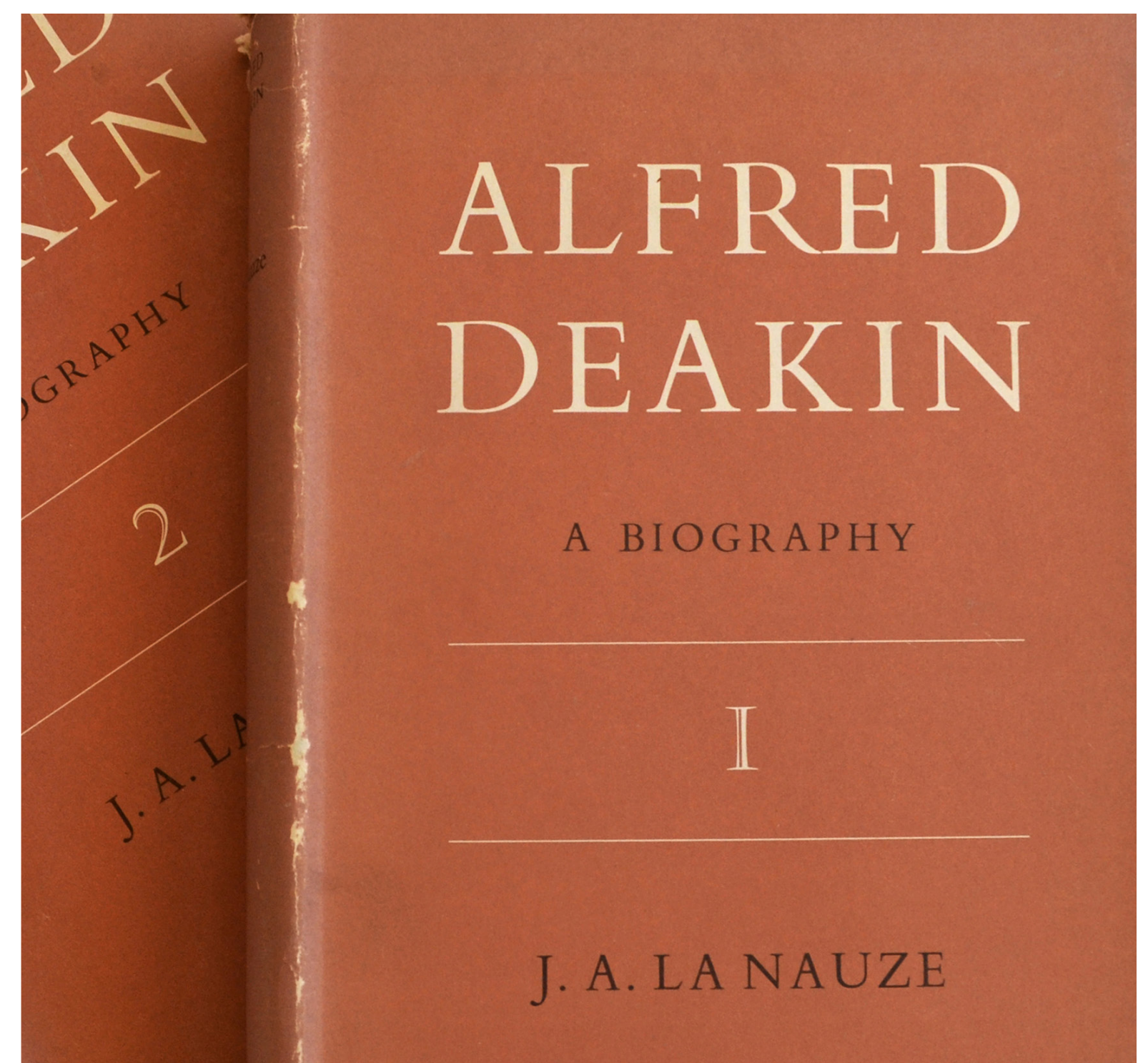
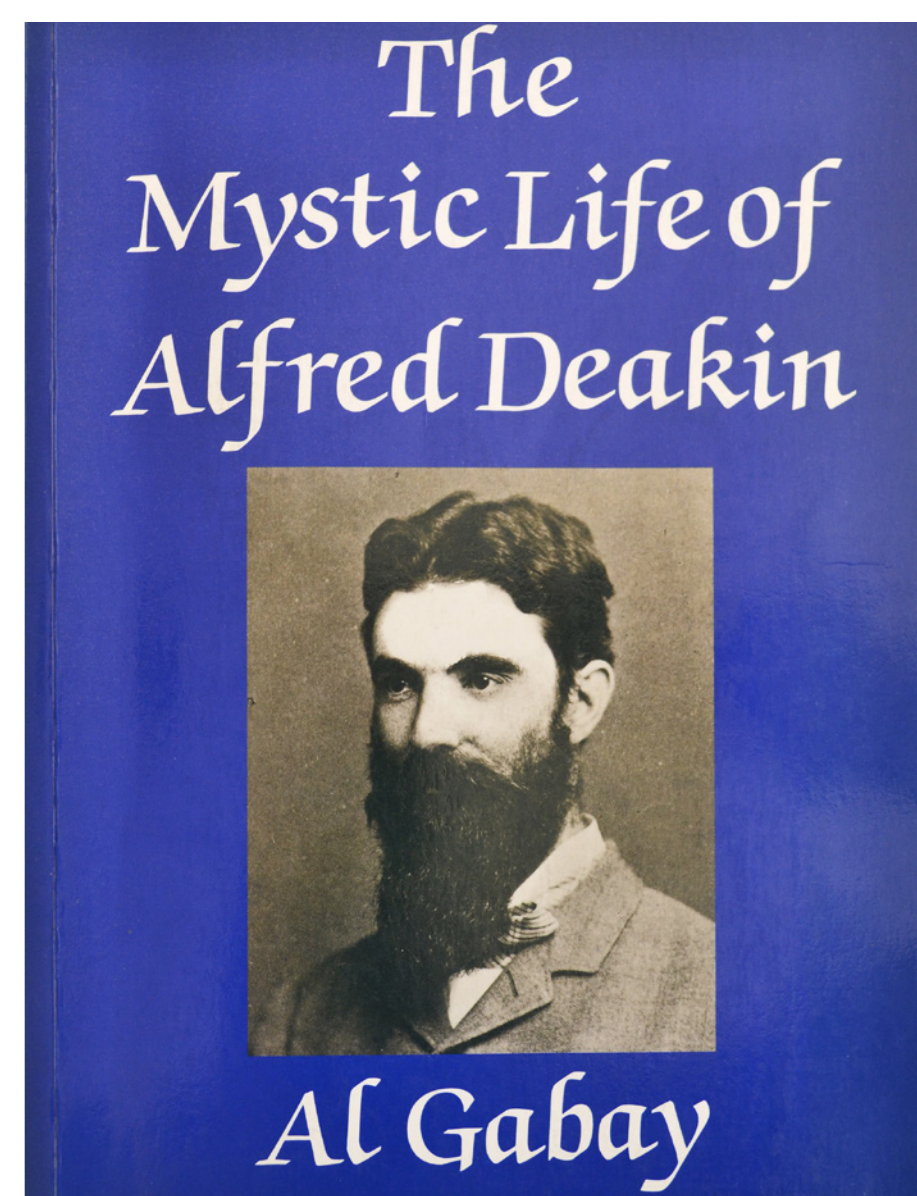
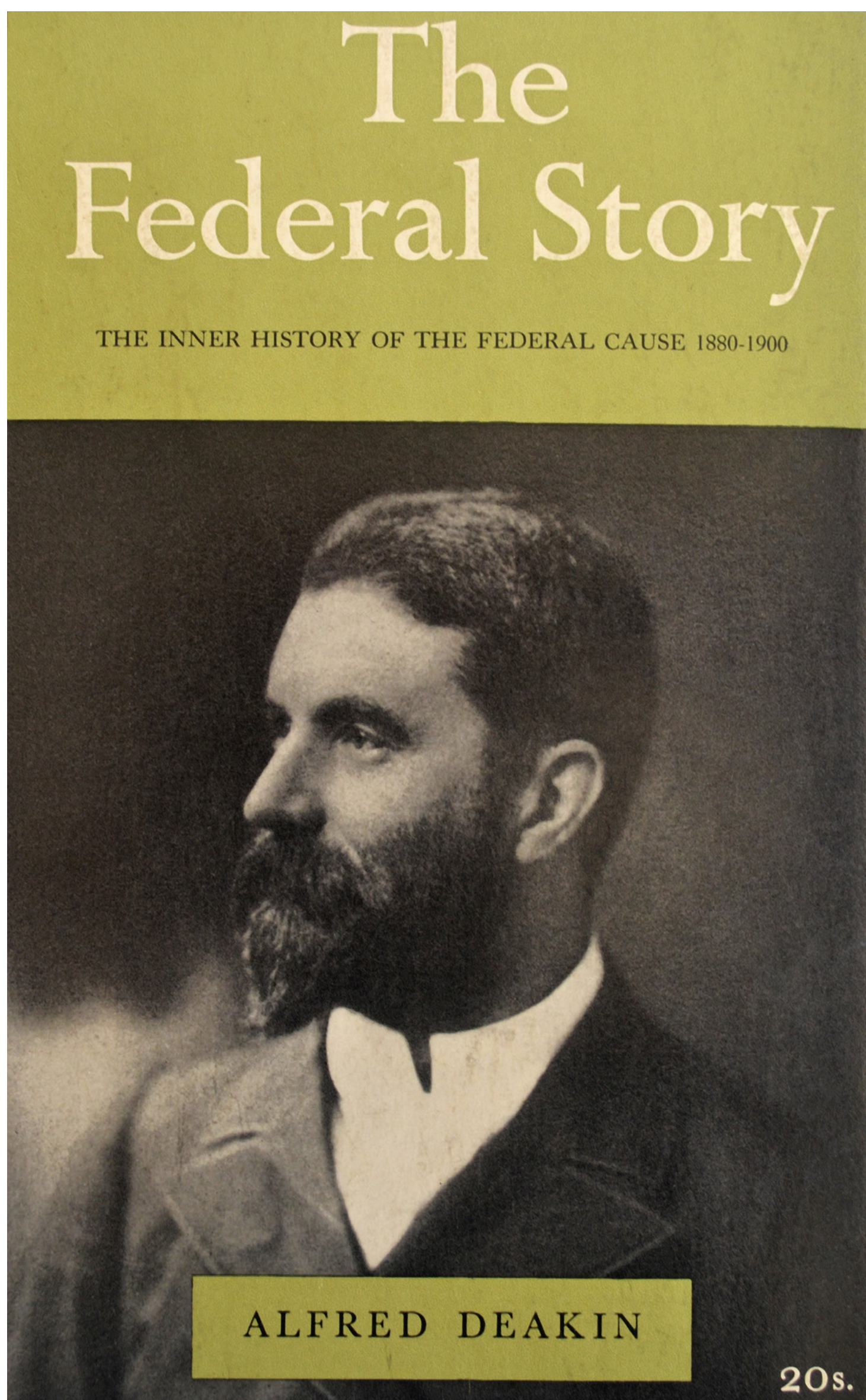
On 7 October 1919 [Deakin] died. He was buried in St Kilda cemetery ... no words could do justice to the mighty spirit encased in his native earth, nor to the tragic grandeur of what had happened to the most distinguished son of Australian Britons.

What had happened to Alfred 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 that 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.

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 brimming with confidence at the lectern, who in his voluminous diaries constantly recorded his frustration at what he regarded as his many failings; a man persuaded to begin the most commanding political career of his generation who, for much of its 30-odd years (1880–1913), longed to be a successful creative writer; a man who appeared during his life in politics to be a banner representative of Protestant success, who in his youth attended numerous séances, considered himself a medium and 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 active political decades of public service, he quite literally heard 'voices' and acted upon them.

Alfred Deakin is impossible to summarise neatly, a judgement confirmed by the stark differences in approach of his four most significant biographers: Walter Murdoch (in 1923), J A La Nauze (1965), Al Gabay (1992) and John Rickard (1996).



Sources

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