

REVIEW ARTICLE

By DUNCAN MACCALLUM

Alfred Deakin, a Biography, J. A. La Nauze, Melbourne University Press, 1965, 2 Vols., 695 pp. including appendix, bibliography, references and index, \$13.00.

This book has been long and eagerly awaited, both because of the need for a fuller and more systematic treatment of its subject and also because of the quality of mind and scholarship of its author. An incidental result of its now having appeared is that the Deakin papers have been handed over to the Australian National Library, where presumably they will be available to historians who wish to consider what light they may throw on some of the great issues of the early Commonwealth period, those of defence and social policies for instance, in greater detail than has been appropriate in this book.

To many present-day Australians at least, who do not know of many notable politicians who are mystics and introverts interested in poetry, wide readers, and, with all, successful politically, Deakin is a bewildering man. He was successful in the sense that he reached the highest political office in the land and participated in, and actively influenced, at the very least, even if he was not always responsible for, much important legislation which we associate with the early days of the Commonwealth. Politically he has been credited with a considerable capacity for what some would call delicate negotiation, those less friendly to him subtle intrigue. At the same time he appears to us as a man who wrote very warmly in his adult life of his partner in marriage, and yet he could on his 48th birthday record his extreme loneliness: ". . . there has been no one upon whom I could lean or have leant for years in public affairs or even in private. All have failed me or I have had to withdraw from them" (p. 313). The subject of this study, as a matter of pleasure, could correspond with the artist Tom Roberts and with men of letters. Present-day experience suggests that the view of an Australian public man in London may not be as significant in political terms as local observations of his behaviour. But if Sir Charles Dilke thought of him as "the man of greatest promise in all Australia; . . . a great administrator, a man of extraordinary eloquence and charm", so also have we evidence of the general respect in which Deakin was held and with which he was treated by his political friends and opponents alike. And this evidence is reinforced by his personal relations with most politicians, except perhaps for Reid who, as a quite antithetical personality, may perhaps be treated as a special case.

No one who has had the benefit of studying under the author or working with him, as the reviewer has been so fortunate as to have done, will be surprised at the thorough, careful and sensitive way he has portrayed Deakin's characteristics. The

book is written with enviable lucidity and restraint. It is not of course a book for the uninitiated, and perhaps a chronological appendix or *curriculum vitae*, not just appendices of the ministries of which Deakin was a member, would have helped the reader to bear in mind the calendar order of events in Deakin's life which, quite appropriately, does not determine the treatment in the book itself. The author, whose published work has hitherto dealt with minutiae within a fairly small horizon, has here shown a capacity to encompass the subject in a vast landscape and has apparently avoided the pitfalls of many biographers in over-focusing on the subject. Though the writing is light, it yet can be pungent at times. Professor La Nauze's historical colleagues will not be surprised at, and may even agree with the justice of his comment: "Deakin's is an embarrassing case for the academic historian: a politician who was his superior in lecturing, in breadth of reading and as a writer" (p. 644). More congenial, assuming it to be the case, is the author's comment on Deakin's invitations to Walter Murdoch, then a lecturer in English in the University of Melbourne, to lunch at Parliament House when some interesting visitor was being entertained, "a kind of invitation not frequently extended in later years by Prime Ministers to mere lecturers, however intelligent" (p. 232).

The author follows his reference to Deakin's superiority over the academic historian by observing that perhaps this is a clue to one of the puzzles of Deakin's career: "In scholarship it is impossible to think too precisely upon the events; the rule does not apply in politics." The author refers to what he thought to be Deakin's pride in his self-sufficiency: no one would pluck the heart out of his mystery but "there would have been no interest in preserving it if none had known that there was indeed a mystery" (p. 360).

Professor La Nauze has presumably been led to examine Deakin's life as the result of curiosity in this sort of thing and in the phenomenon of an intellectual in action, as that of a man with not only a mental capacity of quality but, perhaps even more important, an attitude of mind which seem to mark him out from many of today's Australian politicians, and in so far as we know enough about them, from some of those of his day.

The question, however, is whether the reader of this book can resolve the mystery, and a failure to do so may, of course, be due not to the author but to the reader's deficiency in imagination or to his excessive demands for certainty as to human character and behaviour. Yet it may be that the author has been too careful not to impose his explicit judgements on us or has too often left us to read between the lines; for instance, the matter of Deakin's alleged desertion of Reid, that of the promises Deakin is said to have given to Senator Miles Staniforth Smith as to the position of Lieutenant-Governor of Papua and the subsequent appointment of Hubert Murray, and the matter of John Forrest's misunderstanding of Deakin's commitment to support his election to the leadership when Deakin retired. These matters are all discussed carefully, but is the author too chary of trying to formulate a total assessment of Deakin in the light of these facts? They may perhaps be explained by Deakin's being unable, in his protective insulating skin as Affable Alf, to say "No". This

may be politics and a normal characteristic of the dilemma of compromise, but does it present a puzzle in view of Deakin's stature and his consciousness of moral problems? Does it amount to a lack of integrity in someone such as Deakin who continued to record his interest in a private life whilst staying in office?

Deakin had been "whirled into politics" through the avenues of law and journalism, influenced by Professor Pearson whom he respected intellectually; by George Higginbotham, that journalist, barrister and democrat whom Deakin regarded with reverent admiration; and by David Syme. They were all on the liberal side in the disturbed politics of the day in Victoria with the political struggle taking the lines of economic interest. And shortly after his entry into the politics of the Colony, Deakin made what, in a way, was a characteristic gesture, and properly resigned as a result of electoral dispute. But this may have been quixotic, and the political effect was to lose his party the seat although he later regained it.

Professor La Nauze does discuss Deakin's analysis of the political situation from time to time but we are not given a very close picture of what one imagines would be the day-to-day problems of political administration and compromise, and Deakin emerges as, from a political point of view, a rather unpolitical politician in day-to-day life. And yet objectively he seems to have been successful, whatever his precise contribution was. Is this to be explained by his ability, by his un-backslapping charm and by his energy interrupted by ill health, and, almost certainly, in its concentrated expenditure causing some ill health? The author's delicacy of his art, the presentation without too much clutter of evidence, may account for our not being told what precisely was wrong physically with Deakin and whether there was a "split personality" amounting to a medical phenomenon which had physical effects. While the reviewer appreciates Professor La Nauze's reluctance to indulge in a facile attempt to label Deakin's problems and to dot the i's and cross the t's with false conviction, the author could perhaps be more generous in making available his own impressions and the route of thought by which he reached them. Professor La Nauze's sensitive use of Deakin's diary shows us, more vividly than a scientific description would have been likely to do, the decline of Deakin's mental powers and his awareness of this. It also reminds us awefully of the extent to which the functioning of even so fine a mind as Deakin's depends on the frail human body. But on the other hand the author is quite capable of elaborating more explicitly without destroying the art of his presentation, which is both graceful and witty, and in his hands the formulations and classifications of medical and psychological knowledge, the results of sociological studies of the intellectual in politics, could have been conveyed more fully to the reader without any indelicacy or without elephantine grandiosity.

Another case of Deakin's conduct is that at the 1887 "Imperial" conference which discussed the New Hebrides, when Professor La Nauze takes up the point as to what was the independent support for Deakin's version in *The Federal Story*. Professor La Nauze has drawn attention to a textual omission in the 1944 edition of *The Federal Story* which modifies the effect of Deakin's claim, but it is not clear why

Deakin should write as he did and leave the account uncorrected. Was it the behaviour of an early Dr. Evatt wishing to strut a little bit on the intra-empire stage, and perhaps wishing to capitalize on, as well as to express, Australian fears, on religious and strategic grounds, of the French interest in the New Hebrides? The author both suggests that a participant in an affair of some moment tends "if not consciously to exaggerate his own role, at least to minimize that of others" and also observes in a detached way that "there is no real reason to believe that his [Deakin's] speech changed the course of events".

Perhaps the reader, not wanting to be cynical, is still left with the feeling that Deakin is too good to be true, or rather what one accepts from lesser men one is reluctant to accept in Deakin. Yet from the other aspect one wishes to know how in an active political life he avoided more political vices. Recently there has been too much reference to fatal flaws as if we had not known for centuries of Greek tragedy and of Achilles' heel, but the absence of more material on Deakin's day-to-day political life and work does not help to elucidate the enigma of his successful stay in politics relatively untarnished by tactical requirements and being made even more vulnerable than he may have been because of his private perplexities.

In political categories, Deakin is classified as a liberal idealist who supposed himself a radical but one who "while he sympathized with many Labour aims disliked its discipline, its ruthless indifference to the fate of sympathizers outside its ranks" (p. 373). Deakin's comment on the Labour Party in 1904, and he of course referred to the Federal sphere, is of topical interest: "Either the Labour section must recast its programme and revise its methods or be condemned to remain permanently in Opposition" (p. 373). He said: "Socialism in the sense of using the power of the State to control the abuses of private enterprise was a different matter" and his own view was sceptical about its larger implications, but empirical, as his legislative proposals show. He believed in the destruction of privilege but, less negatively, that there should be positive protection for the members of society "for whom an abstract of equality of opportunity did not in fact secure equal opportunities of living" (pp. 105-7). This explains his support for such measures as those relating to minimum wages and to old age pensions provided in part by the State.

On the matter of imperial connection, Deakin believed in the Empire as a world power and apparently in some combination of metropolitan government with dominion participation and centralist solutions co-existing with virtual autonomy. The author suggests that the British Commonwealth as it emerged after 1919 would not have seemed strange to Deakin. The judgement of history may then be that his vision in this respect was defective in view of the changes after the war of 1939-1945. According to Professor La Nauze Deakin would have rejected the Commonwealth of today, consisting as it does of autonomous states, some without even a recognizable and definable institutional link one with another.

Deakin was very impatient with the Colonial Office: "Colonies under the control of distant, dilatory and blasé officials, often ill-informed and sometimes obtuse" (p. 249). Deakin proposed some form of secretariat as a substitute although he did

not further the versions of imperial federation currently espoused by organizations in Australia. Professor La Nauze penetratingly suggests that Deakin's dilemma was to cut loose from the existing Colonial Office, and yet to create greater links between governments; but to Deakin the governments really meant the white governments as he was fundamentally uninterested in Asia, Africa and India. It is true that he envisaged (p. 280) the sort of contact which now exists between Asian students and Australia, but this did not affect his attitude to the exclusion of Asians. Deakin did not regard himself as having any race antipathy but the author hints that he would have disagreed with H. B. Higgins who put a more honest emphasis on the standard of living (p. 281). Deakin might share with many other citizens of this country an impatience with the social forms of English society but he had a strong, almost a mystical preference for British migration.

He insisted on an Australian navy, not as a substitute for British naval protection but as an adjunct to it, for political and national reasons, resisting Admiralty control of the disposition of a force locally supported. Here the author notices the theme which is found in discussions in regard to the Australian Colonies as early as the late 1850's in the Second Empire. This also raises the issue of colonial control of a force supported by colonial money, a theme which goes back to the First Empire, as well as recurring in the nineteenth century in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. And there is another aspect of this problem about which Deakin, as had some earlier colonial politicians in this country, felt strongly, the desire to participate in the conduct of foreign policy as it affected Australia. This is no new thing then in essentials, and the reviewer is more sympathetic to the Admiralty's position vis-à-vis the creation of the Australian navy. There has been a widespread tendency to exclude some of the informed opinions in New South Wales that differed from Deakin's and those having currency in Victoria. However, it is a matter largely of the relative weight to be given to economy and technical efficiency on the one hand, and national aspirations on the other, and the issues are somewhat similar to those in the establishment of airlines by the new nations today. Much of the answer depends on the time period one is considering, and the author takes a long view of it.

On Deakin's association with "spiritism" as he called it, or spiritualism, the author is generously and perhaps characteristically non-committal, or rather does not seek to commit the readers. The author "frankly . . . is not impressed by it" (p. 64, note,) but "the reader must make what he can" of it.

Probably the matter of Deakin's capacity as administrator is not so significant as his interest in policy and his quality of vision, both in his work on irrigation in Victoria and in his duties as Attorney General and also as Prime Minister in the new and vulnerable Commonwealth. This vision is well caught by the sweep of the author's pen. But one would welcome some closer assessment of his ability to get things done in an administrative sense once the political aspect of the problem was largely settled.

It does not seem to the reviewer, who has tried with varying success to follow Professor La Nauze's exacting standards, that all the answers are provided to the

questions posed by the interesting and complex subject. The subject is, however, fortunate in having a biographer who has so skilfully studied him. This book is most important for our knowledge of Deakin. Its author has garnered the material from many places and has laid it together omitting the trivia, and then has digested it. In the process Professor La Nauze has illuminated the late Colonial and early Commonwealth periods. His remarks, for instance, on Victorian politics seem to the reviewer a masterly summary, as does the discussion of Deakin and the Labour Party in the Commonwealth period. And much detailed information is brought to us on, for example, the group political alliances of this period, about the most important Judiciary Act, and about the New Protection. And many brief vignettes of, and glances at, Deakin's contemporaries adorn the pages of this book.

All students of the period between 1880 and 1910 in Australian history, and indeed some of those interested in British imperial history, will be in Professor La Nauze's debt. And, from the larger view, the substantial quality of this book is a step forward in Australian biography and historiography of the modern period. It is fitting that its author should now occupy the Chair at the Australian National University whose incumbent has within his or her hands the power to encourage and develop the work of other students of the Australian past.