
Alfred Deakin was a political prodigy who entered the Victorian Parliament in 1879, aged just twenty-two, and who left politics thirty-four years later in 1913. His career spanned three decades and bridged the colonial and federal eras. Not only was he devoted to the federal cause and one of its leading architects, he played a vital role in determining the political character of the new Australian nation and its institutions. When he died in 1919 he was hailed by the King as 'one of Australia's greatest statesmen' (p. 3). Deakin was, according to his latest biographer, John Rickard, 'a presiding figure who, in a period of transition, helped give expression to the cultural aspirations of an educated, younger generation' (p. 1).

But, as Rickard so amply demonstrates in A Family Romance, Alfred Deakin was also someone other than 'a statesman'. He was a son, brother, husband and father. He was, like most people in the past, as now, a member of that complex web of relationships we call 'a family'. What Rickard does in A Family Romance is give these relationships priority. In a neat reversal of the usual pattern for a biography, Deakin's public career provides the background to life within the home. The private sphere is made prominent and consequently, so is the importance to Alfred of his relationships with the two most significant women in his life, his sister Catherine and his wife Pattie. Growing from a larger, as yet unpublished, study of Alfred Deakin, A Family Romance illuminates our understanding of the inter-relationship between the so-called public and the private spheres, between gender and politics and, significantly, between history and fiction. It is a novel work of history, in both senses of the word.

The plot is simple, but compelling. In the introduction, Rickard indicates how his interest in the Deakin family at home was aroused by 'one or two tantalizing hints' suggested in J. A. La Nauze's 1965 biography of Deakin. Following these leads, Rickard went looking for the family drama and, as he says 'found much more than he had bargained for' (p. 2). Alfred praised publicly the joys and virtues of a warm and tranquil home life, but it appears that as the political heat mounted outside in the public arena, the temperature in Alfred's 'City of Refuge', his home, also rose. Rickard tells an emotional tale of slowly deteriorating family relationships within the Deakin circle. The main characters in this drama are Alfred, his unmarried older sister Catherine, and his wife of thirty-eight years, Pattie, but no-one within the Deakin circle remains untouched.

To tell too much might spoil the suspense, although mentioning that when Alfred died in 1919 he left a widow and sister, who were once good friends, but were now no longer on speaking terms, won't give away too much. Rickard is determined to give each main character equal billing. 'It is my intention to give each in turn the chance to speak' (p. 18), he insists, so each is duly devoted a biographical chapter, starting with Catherine. The final chapters attempt to place the characters together, at home ('The City of Refuge' and 'Ballara'), and abroad ('Journeys'). 'Endings' is a chapter that attempts to tie the three threads together.
Within each chapter, especially the first three biographical vignettes, Rickard allows each ‘character’ to ‘speak’ through a narrative reconstructed from their own writings. He follows this with his own interpretation, a device that generally works well, although the narrative seems a bit uncertain at times due to lack of sources, a problem Rickard fully acknowledges as he interprets. Consequently, the sections of the book that focus on Alfred, because he was so prolific, are the strongest, although the chapters on Catherine and Pattie are probably the most intriguing and imaginative. Although each chapter is fully sourced at the end of the book, no footnotes are used. This adds to the impression that we could be reading a work of fiction, somewhat unsettling but all the more poignant for its basis in fact. Rickard is liberal with his interpretation of evidence, but at no time is he dishonest. The question marks left hanging are some of the book’s greatest attractions.

Its main attraction, though, lies in the author’s utterly unapologetic rationale for writing it. After listing an impressive number of wider historical insights that the Deakin family’s unique story might provide, such as an understanding of the expectations immigrant parents had for their children in the colonial environment, the concerns of the Victorian bourgeois family in Australia and the complexity of the relationships within it (the link between Catherine and Alfred seems surprisingly intense to the modern eye), or the appeal of spiritualism at a time when orthodox religious dogma was under attack (Pattie and Alfred met because of their joint interest in spiritualism), Rickard gets to what he describes as ‘the point’. ‘Catherine, Alfred and Pattie exist as characters in their own right: they are not pawns of historical argument,’ he says. ‘It is the plot of their family romance which lures me on and my interest needs no other justification’ (p. 3).

At a time when the purpose of historical research is questioned, even at the highest level of federal government, and when many of the nation’s schools appear to be showing a singular lack of commitment to the teaching of history, Rickard’s work reminds us that, historically speaking, nothing is more instructive than a good story well told. The question remains, is it history? Should historians explore what Rickard describes as ‘the imaginative territory’ of ‘human relationships, emotions and motivations’ (p. 3)? Or is A Family Romance a good story, but one better told by the novelist? This is the challenge that Rickard sets himself and leaves the reader with. I think it is a challenge well met. That the book raises as many questions as it answers is not a criticism, but indicative of its worth.

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It is telling that those who recognise the name of artist Colin Colahan do so in connection with the famous Mollie Dean murder case of 1930. Running a poor