

## IMMIGRANTS' CHILD

ALFRED DEAKIN REMEMBERED himself as an unhappy child, a timid, lonely little boy made miserable by intensities of emotion he could barely contain, happy only when reading and occasionally at play. Others saw a different child, engaging and curious, an early talker and precocious reader, a restless, charming little chatterbox. The adult Deakin puzzled about the detachment he often felt from his busy, happy and successful everyday self: 'Living at the heart of things, a most untiring agent in the executive and legislative life of politics, with pulse oftener at fever pitch than those of the most compulsive gambler or speculator, I feel and have always felt "aloof".'<sup>1</sup> Occasionally he felt moments of overwhelming despair, more often just a sense of calm detachment. As with the child, others saw a different man, charming, responsive and quick-witted, a gifted orator and an effective politician. Both are true, and the challenge is to understand how they are related.

Deakin was born on Sunday, 3 August 1856, the only son of William and Sarah Deakin, who named him after the poet laureate, Alfred,

Lord Tennyson. They were good parents, and they loved him dearly, indulging his whims, nurturing the gift for language on which he would base his political career, and giving him the best education Melbourne could offer. But something in his early years laid down a residue of pain and a detachment he lost only towards the end, when his mind was failing, a small stone of unhappiness that ground away inside him, carving out the space for his richly lived inner life. The parents are the child's first world. To understand Deakin's childhood and its resonances in his later life we need to know his parents as well as we are able.

The major sources are the idealised portraits written long after childhood by Deakin and his sister, Catherine, Katie to the family.<sup>2</sup> She was six years his senior. Although recalled by the adult siblings, these are portraits from childhood, when the parents constitute the indissoluble unity that creates the world and their children cannot imagine it any other way. To Deakin, 'Neither ever seemed to have thought of the...possibility of there being any other partner in the world or person who could replace or displace their mutual attachment... They were complementary to each other in disposition and talent while they matched excellently in physique.' With the family, friends and places of their parents' youth on the other side of the world, how would the children know? There were no aunts or family friends in the colony to gossip about disappointed romances, no grandparents to recount stories of their parents' childhoods, few ways of understanding what had made their parents who they were.

Alfred and Catherine also agreed that, apart from providing a loving and supportive home, their parents had little overt influence on the direction of their lives and interests. Many children of immigrants no doubt feel that they made their own way in the new land. But children do not bring themselves up, and the Deakin home was close. Nor did Alfred or Catherine ever ponder what emigration meant for their parents or wonder about their states of mind in their early years in the colony.

Deakin's fullest portrait of his parents was written in 1908 on the day his mother died. Her eighty-five-year-old self fell away, and he remembered the comely young woman of his childhood, the feel of her body and his own adoring gaze: 'I was conscious of her beauty

even when still a very young child feeling the gracefulness of her figure, admirably proportioned, supple and strong though slight—the delicate tone of her complexion, pale but easily flushed—her clear grey eyes always calm and calming, clear and still.’ Both her children saw Sarah’s life as centred on her home and family. To Deakin, she was ‘wife and mother first and last, all her womanhood expressed in those relations—There was no life for her outside them, and no thought of hers that did not begin and end in them.’

The family’s link to the outside world was William. Deakin’s portrait of his father is of a passionate, sociable, excitable man: ‘Sensitive in the extreme, ambitious, variable, imitative, talkative, fond of praise and approval, rapid in adapting himself to strangers and fond of meeting them...emotional, affectionate, expressive, versatile, impressionable and reckless’. He was ‘susceptible to the beauties of nature, of men and women, of music and literature...often witty, a capital mimic, an admirable reader aloud, a vivacious story teller with natural taste, verve and effectiveness’. Much of this could also be said of the adult Deakin.

William and Sarah Deakin arrived in the colony of South Australia as newlyweds in 1850. The couple had met in the Welsh market town of Abergavenny near the English border sometime during 1849 and, according to their son, they at once ‘fell in love’. Family lore has it that an old gypsy woman in the west of England told William Deakin that within a few weeks he would meet and fall in love with his future wife and they would travel to the other side of the world and have two children. The gypsy’s assessment was shrewd. In 1849 more than three hundred thousand people a year were leaving Britain and Ireland. Many were just married and the average age of the men was thirty, the same age as William. He had been working since he was fourteen, when his father died, and was visiting Abergavenny as a travelling grocer. His mother was living in Witney in Oxfordshire, and he wrote regularly to family members, but at the time he emigrated he was used to travelling and had no settled home.<sup>3</sup>

Sarah’s life was very different. Twenty-seven and still living at home on a large, prosperous tenant farm, she was the fifth of the ten

children of William and Sarah Bill, all born in the parish of Llanarth in the beautiful border country between Wales and England. The family farm was Long Barn, and when William Bill married Sarah Jones from the neighbouring village of Penrose in 1815, he regarded himself as of sufficient social standing to announce it in the *New Monthly Magazine*, a recently established Tory periodical.<sup>4</sup> When their daughter Sarah was born on Christmas Day, 1822, he was the tenant of Great House on the same estate as Long Barn, where his brother Richard was now the farmer. The brothers occupied the second- and third-most valuable farms in the parish, and took their turns with the other farmers to act as overseers of the poor. William's graceful copperplate hand records the distribution of weekly payments and in-kind support to the poor of the parish. Sarah came from a family of some local standing, literate and with a history of taking responsibility for local affairs. Her cultural and social identifications were English, and her son Alfred never claimed any Welsh heritage.<sup>5</sup>

Sometime after 1833, when the last of their children was baptised and Sarah was around ten, the Bill family moved to the large farm of Great Campston about seven miles to the north of Llanarth, near the village of Grosmont on the Herefordshire border. It was a step up in the world. The farm was substantial, 332 acres, employing a number of servants and labourers, and the family lived in a seventeenth-century manor house. Grosmont was also considerably bigger than Llanarth. Once a Norman garrison town, it had a ruined castle, a large church, a market square and a school. Llanarth, though, remained the village closest to the family's heart. William and Sarah Bill went to some trouble to be buried there and Deakin later chose the name for the house he and his wife Pattie built in Melbourne.<sup>6</sup>

The Bills were still living at Great Campston when the 1851 census was taken. Soon after, William died in the neighbouring parish. He was sixty-two when his daughter Sarah met William Deakin. It is likely his health was failing and Sarah was under pressure to find herself a husband, though a surviving courtship letter from William suggests that he did not gain immediate approval from her friends, who saw him as unequal to her in birth, education and wealth. Professing the

ardour of his affection, he also tells her that 'I cannot compromise one iota of my independence.'<sup>7</sup>

After a short courtship the couple married on 18 October 1849 at St Nicholas', Grosmont. On his marriage certificate William recorded his occupation as grocer and his father's as currier, the leather-industry trade which finishes the hides. By the time of William's death in Melbourne in 1892, his father's occupation had been elevated to civil servant, perhaps to make him a more fitting forebear of one of the colony's leading politicians.<sup>8</sup> There is no record of a honeymoon, or of their living arrangements as man and wife, but when they embarked for Australia on 29 December, Sarah was already pregnant. Friends from Grosmont, James Bevan and his sister, were on the same boat, part of an exodus of young people from the district. Richard Bill, Sarah's brother, followed in 1853.

With seasickness on top of morning sickness, Sarah spent the eighty-six-day voyage mainly below deck while her new husband acted as chambermaid. He wrote to his sister that had he known she would be so ill, he would not have left England. Apart from this, he did not regret the decision as once they arrived in Adelaide he was confident they would soon get ahead, noting the ways men of small capital could make money with investments and property.<sup>9</sup> Still, it was not a great way to start a marriage between two people who scarcely knew each other.

As a commercial traveller, William was used to the peripatetic life and the society of strangers. Emigration was not the wrench for him that it was for Sarah, who had lived all her life in a close-knit rural community. She brought with her two small leather-covered notebooks of poems, some written by her, some by friends and family, and some copied from popular poets. One notebook is dated 1844, when she was twenty-two; the other is later and includes a number of poems of farewell from just before their embarkation. Sarah's own poems in her spidery hand are typical of the domestic poetry popular in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, four-line verses about loss, memory, parting, and affection for home and family, with titles such as 'Farewell', 'The Departure', 'Forget Thee No', 'The Forsaken', 'The Lock of Hair' and 'Grief Under Smiles'. One poem seems to suggest a

dead sweetheart. In 1847, when she was visiting Manchester, she wrote 'My Home'. These verses have a particular poignancy for a young woman destined for emigration.

I sit amidst a stranger's Home  
 I join in strangers' mirth  
 And my heart is in my native land  
 And by my father's hearth...

But still my Mother's smile is there  
 And her tone of love to warm  
 And my sweet young sister bright and fair  
 With touches of fairy form.

An affectionate undated poem of William's, 'To My Dearest Sarah', acknowledges how painful it was for Sarah to part from those she loved, and her dread of 'the moment we utter Farewell'.<sup>10</sup>

The couple's first few years were unsettled. Catherine was born in July 1850 in Adelaide and named after William's mother. A year later they joined the rush to Victoria after gold was discovered, and William became one of the legions of unsuccessful diggers in the Central Goldfields. For Sarah these few years must have been extremely difficult, caring for the infant Catherine as they lived in temporary accommodation, enduring the heat and flies of the Australian summer, and attempting to keep themselves clean and respectable in the chaos of the goldfields. As well, mingling with people from all over the world and of all classes and religions would have been confronting for a shy woman who had rarely ventured outside the district in which she was born. Sarah's brother Richard arrived in 1853, and sometime after that he and William set up a coaching business. Bill and Deakin's People's Line of Coaches ran from Melbourne through Kyneton and Gisborne to Bendigo.<sup>11</sup>

By the time their son was born in 1856, the better prospects they had emigrated to find were starting to take shape. They were living in a rented cottage in George Street, in an area soon to be Fitzroy, on the

northern edge of the city of Melbourne. The coaching business had its stables in nearby Gertrude Street. The neighbourhood was filling fast with new immigrants. Their friend from Grosmont, James Bevan, was two doors down, the proprietor of a booming road-contracting business. Richard Bill and his family were in Gore Street. The Deakins were doing well enough to employ a maid and a nurse to help Sarah with the new baby. Soon after, they moved to a larger house at 27 Gore Street, on the corner of Little Victoria Street. It was a good position, on the ridge before the land plunges down to the Collingwood flats, with a view across the bush stretching to the Dandenongs on the eastern horizon.<sup>12</sup>

What was the state of Sarah's heart when her son was born? She was thirty-three and had been in the colonies a little more than six years. Although Catherine was born in the first year of her married life, there had been no more babies until Alfred and he would be their last child. The average married woman had six live births, and large families of ten or more were common. And the beloved home she had left was no more. In the early 1850s, her father and mother moved to the next county, perhaps to live with a married daughter, and both died soon after: her father in 1852, her mother in 1855.<sup>13</sup> To a woman still feeling the pain of emigration, this was a final severance from the home of her childhood and youth.

No letters survive from this period, but Deakin's later memories of Sarah's self-containment and suppression suggest a mother who may have been emotionally unavailable as she grieved her parents' deaths and the loss of home, leaving him, as in the lines he loved from Tennyson's poem *In Memoriam: A. H. H.*,

An infant crying in the night:  
An infant crying for the light:  
And with no language but a cry.<sup>14</sup>

All his life Deakin sought solace in the belief in a divine universe, and yearned to lose himself in a mystically experienced oneness.

Catherine was six when her brother was born, beginning a lifelong devotion: 'I worshipped the baby as I have the man during all our lives.'

She spent her savings to make her first purchase, her own rocking chair to nurse him in.<sup>15</sup> Catherine was a serious child, small and plain, who spent her life in her brother's shadow, seemingly without conscious resentment. In a photo of the family when Alfred is about one, he is sitting snugly on his father's knee while she stands somewhat to the side of her mother, with a hand resting in her lap.

William and Sarah wanted a far better education for Catherine than was available at the overcrowded school at St Mark's in George Street, or at the local Dame schools. In 1858, when she was eight, she became a pupil at a newly established Ladies' School in Kyneton. A pretty town about eighty-five kilometres to the north of Melbourne, Kyneton was a staging post on the route between Melbourne and Bendigo, and the Bill and Deakin coaches stopped there regularly. The school, run by the Misses Thompson, was typical of the nineteenth-century ladies' academies which offered middle-class girls both knowledge and polish: a sound education in English, history and geography, with the refined accomplishments of music, French, drawing and dancing. Louisa Thompson, who was head of music, was a skilled teacher and Catherine developed into a fine musician.<sup>16</sup>

After she had been there two years, and when Alfred was only four, Sarah and William made the extraordinary decision to send him to join her. Sarah and William's commitment to the education of their children is one of the most striking features of their parenting. The goldrush immigrants produced Melbourne's first baby boom, but only a minority of these children received more than three years of education. When Alfred joined Catherine he was 'the only male among dozens of girls of all ages'.<sup>17</sup> According to Catherine, it was she who persuaded her parents to let him join her.

Catherine no doubt missed her home and may indeed have pleaded for the company of her darling little brother, but why did William and Sarah agree? Four is a very young age to send a child away from his mother. And the combined cost of two children boarding was ninety guineas a year, the annual income of an unskilled labourer. This was a hefty sum. Deakin later claimed that his father's income was never more than three hundred pounds a year, the bare minimum to qualify

for entry into the middle class.<sup>18</sup> This is likely an understatement by the son honouring the sacrifices his parents made for him, but to send both children to boarding school was still an unusual decision for a family of their relatively modest means.

Catherine recalled that she was sent to Kyneton for the bracing climate, and Deakin agreed that it was partly for their health.<sup>19</sup> Although there is no evidence that either child was sickly, Melbourne in the late 1850s was not a safe place for young children. It had no sewerage system and infectious diseases were rife. Sixteen hundred people died of infectious diseases in the city in 1860, most of them children. In 1857 James Bevan's first born had died of 'congestion of the brain' at seven months; and in 1859 William Deakin was in the room when Richard Bill's nine-month-old son died of 'exhaustion from bilious derangement', a distressing experience he may well have taken as an omen, particularly as he and Sarah were not a fertile couple.<sup>20</sup>

Sarah's own physical or mental health may also have been a reason. With only two children, her household duties were not demanding, particularly as the family had a maid, Alfred had a nurse and Catherine was at boarding school. And, with William an effective breadwinner, she had no need to work to supplement the family's income. Likely there were miscarriages or stillbirths. One of Deakin's fragmentary childhood memories is of burying a doll with a wooden spade; perhaps he had been promised a baby, who died.<sup>21</sup>

Whatever the reasons she and William had for sending their children to boarding school, it was a fateful decision for Alfred, who compensated for his confused loneliness with a vivid fantasy life. Deakin's most extended piece of autobiographical writing on his childhood is an essay called 'Books and a Boy' that he wrote in 1910 for a small circle of family and friends. It is a somewhat contrived piece, in which a quote from St John's Gospel introduces a sentimental family tableau:

'In the beginning was the Word' half encircles a little vignette, lightly tinted according to the vogue of half a century ago... Nothing could be simpler than its presentation of an old-fashioned cottage room with the open fire place, universal in early colonial

days, a loving mother, infant on knee, white-gowned and glowing from his hot bath, out of which his sister had just tenderly lifted him, while the father sitting by the oil lamp watches the effect of his first gift to his boy.<sup>22</sup>

The gift is a stiff-leaved calico picture book with images of lions and elephants and other exotic animals, and the boy is entranced. Mother, father and sister all look at him adoringly, but he is looking elsewhere, into another world to which books are the door.