

4. Alfred Deakin and the Melbourne Spiritualists

Probably the most unacknowledged vegetarian in Australia's history - yet, ironically, her most famous vegetarian - was three-time Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin.

Deakin adopted vegetarianism as a teenager in the 1870s both as part of his spirituality and also as a means to stop the suffering of fellow animals. His vegetarianism was ostensibly motivated primarily by his involvement in the Victorian Association of Progressive Spiritualists (VAPS), founded by William Henry Terry (1836-1913).

In 1872, Terry founded the Progressive Spiritualist Lyceum, where the young could learn about spiritualism, and at which Alfred Deakin would later serve in the role of conductor. Leading the Sunday services, Deakin would ask, "How do we prove our appreciation [of God]?" to which the congregation - including his future wife the fellow medium, Pattie Browne - would reply, "By protecting, tending and ministering to all helpless living things."

Deakin was very much involved in the spiritualist movement in Melbourne and was for a time a leading medium and a later president of the VAPS. Deakin's novel, *A New Pilgrim's Progress* (1877), was written when he was only 20 years old. Published pseudonymously, he claimed that it was written with the spiritual guidance of the long-dead John Bunyan (author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*), although he later admitted his own authorship. Contained within the work are many aspects of Deakin's philosophy (rather than Bunyan's) including reference to vegetarianism. In the novel the hero, Restless, becomes a vegetarian, taking up what he called a "pure diet" as part of his spiritual journey.

Whatever his views on animal welfare, Deakin seemingly publicly gave up vegetarianism around 1878-79 at the same time that he withdrew from the spiritualist movement. It is assumed that he did this in an effort to appear less of a 'crank' both to his electorate and to his political colleagues as it coincided with the beginning of his political career. The necessity of this move was made apparent by newspaper critics who denounced him and his novel of "outraging religion, morality and public decency" during his (albeit successful) campaign to become a member of the

Victorian Legislative Assembly. ¹

Deakin, however, did not actually cease to believe in the spirit world and continued to study and write on the subject in private. He maintained a great interest in another vegetarian mystic, Swedenborg, and was impressed enough to become for a short time a Theosophist after a private meeting with the eminent vegetarian, Annie Besant, in 1894. In public, he attended the vegetarian-friendly Australian Church of the Rev. Charles Strong and was a close supporter of the Salvation Army as he had also become a great admirer of its vegetarian leader, William Booth. Deakin also kept up what was then known as a ‘Spartan diet’ (which may have been a euphemism for ‘vegetarian’) and continued to use herbal remedies such as “the juice of a boiled wildflower of a particularly nasty flavour” that he also gave to his daughters.²

We know that Deakin always remained moved by the plight of animals. This led him to actively support animal welfare causes and to be a leading patron of non-controversial animal welfare organisations such as the Victorian Society for the Protection of Animals. Indeed, the first piece of legislation that he drafted and had passed through the Victorian Parliament was *The Protection of Animals Bill* of 1881, which was ratified with the aid of Sir Henry Wrixon in the Legislative Council.

Deakin’s early spiritualist mentor, William Henry Terry, was born in London in 1813 and arrived in Melbourne in 1853. Terry, who was immersed in spiritualism and free thought ideas, gave up the family drapery business to set up shop as a spiritualist bookseller. In his bookshop, he also conducted private séances, acting as a medium and psychic healer and sold herbal and homoeopathic remedies. In 1869, Terry founded the Victorian Association of Progressive Spiritualists to provide a forum in which he and like-minded people of ‘advanced’ outlook could meet and discuss spiritualism and other progressive ideas.

¹ Gabay, AI, *Messages from Beyond : Spiritualism and Spiritualists in Melbourne's Golden Age 1870-1890*, p. 132

² See, *My Grandfather's Legacy*, a speech given by Judith Harley, Melbourne Town Hall, Thursday, May 10, 2001. Broadcast and transcript by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation



William Henry Terry (1836 - 1913), by unknown photographer, courtesy of National Library of Australia.
nla.ms-ms1540-19-613-s45-a1.

In September 1870, Terry launched *The Harbinger of Light*, which he advertised as “a new monthly journal devoted to zoistic science, free thought, spiritualism and the harmonial philosophy.” *The Harbinger* discussed many of Terry’s concerns, attitudes and ideas - not the least of which were vegetarianism and animal welfare. Terry published many of his own articles in support of vegetarianism and also reprinted those by sympathetic journalists from Australian newspapers, including Tom Touchstone (the pseudonym used by the poet and journalist, Thomas Bury) from the *Ballarat Courier*. He also reprinted articles he found in American temperance and spiritualist journals such as the *Banner of Light*, which confirmed the prudence of the diet.

Terry’s vegetarianism was less concerned with his health and spirituality than with the health and well-being of other animals. The plight of animals in vivisection - as well as general cruelty - also received much sympathetic editorial coverage. *The Harbinger* ran numerous advertisements for vegetarian products such as the popular ‘Egyptian lentils’ supplied by Terry’s Theosophist contacts in India. Of all Australian publications, *The Harbinger* was the most important in the promotion of vegetarianism. Apart from the later journal *Progress* (1889-1890), it was practically

the only Australian publication of the time to sympathetically mention the Vegetarian Society and its activities.

Terry also published novels and other works on spiritualism. Not to be outdone by Deakin's accessing of the spirit of Bunyan, Terry upped the ante by invoking Shakespeare for his new dramatic version of *All's Well That Ends Well*.

Although Terry was a peace-loving man, his wife was not and his beliefs were not shared by her. After several instances of violence on her part they were legally separated, Terry gaining custody of their children. As if in confirmation of his beliefs, he sadly noted that, her violent episodes "took place after she had had pork and porter."³

Interestingly Terry's marital misfortune was only one of a quite a few incidences of vegetarian men being divorced by their spouses, much to the amusement of the newspapers⁴

Terry's promotion of spiritualism also brought out other vegetarians to Australia. In November 1880 George Spriggs (1850-1912), who had caused a sensation in Britain with his ability to cause materialisations during his séances, came out to Melbourne with his companion, the journalist A. J. Smart. Spriggs and Smart were both members of the Circle of Light a spiritualist group formed in Cardiff, Wales which had strict regulations on clothing, bathing and vegetarianism. Spriggs and Smart became closely involved with many vegetarian society members such as Fanny E. Samuel and to the Browne family after Spriggs reportedly communed with two drowned brothers of Pattie Deakin (nee Browne). Spriggs became a popular 'Psychopathic healer' or spirit healer in Melbourne and served as president of the Thermopylae Club in Melbourne – a club presumably named in sympathy with the (sometime vegetarian) Spartans.

³ Gabay, AI, Messages from Beyond : Spiritualism and Spiritualists in Melbourne's Golden Age 1870-1890, p.33

⁴ Some examples over the years being: The wife did not like it, Maitland Mercury, 10 Mar. 1883, supp. P. 2; Sparklets, Canberra Times, 24 Sept. 1926, p. 8.,