

**Robert Withycombe, *Montgomery of Tasmania: Henry and Maud Montgomery in Australasia* (Brunswick East: Acorn, 2009)**

**Book Launch: Chapter House, St Andrew's Cathedral,**

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A colleague and I bumped into a PhD student at Macquarie University last week. 'What are you working on?' my colleague asked the student. She replied, 'the appointment of twenty bishops in the early church.' He rolled his eyes. 'How boring,' he obviously thought. I licked my lips. 'How tantalising,' I thought, with memories of the machinations which went into the election synod at which Harry Goodhew was elected Archbishop of Sydney in 1993: my version of that event, I understand, cannot be released until fifty years after my death! Perhaps nothing pinpoints the character of Anglicanism like Episcopal appointments. Who is involved in the appointment? What is the expectation of those who do the appointing? What is their understanding of the role of a bishop? How are gifts lined up with needs? How does a candidate decide whether or not to accept?

There is an especially interesting specimen of the genre in Robert Withycombe's *Montgomery of Tasmania*. Montgomery, we learn from Robert's book, in 1901, on what was to become D-Day, was offered the position of Secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel after making full demonstration of (a) his belief in the missionary role of the bishop, (b) his missionary practice as a bishop, and (c) his discontent with the retiring Secretary who was not retiring quickly enough for Montgomery. The frustrated Bishop of Tasmania had found that the SPG was to the CMS what ice is to fire. But when he received the offer he had no Episcopal colleague to talk to, and no-one in Tasmania had either offered him the job or expected him to leave. He would have to explain himself. He was not sure that it was a job for a bishop and he was not tempted by the offered salary. But, long before this he had rejected the right of private judgment in the matter of his life's calling in favour of the declared will of the senior bishops in England, and so felt he had to accept their decision. At least one of them, Randall Davidson, knew him well, and suggested that in such a role he would be to the Archbishop of Canterbury what the Undersecretary of State was to the Colonial Secretary. This would allow him to become, even more than he had been in Tasmania, the militant, missionary Bishop of Greater Britain.

Well, a good book sends sparks shooting in every direction. Who was this SPG secretary, I wondered, for whose removal Montgomery had petitioned in 1897? He had become SPG assistant secretary in 1864, and his leadership of SPG in the official history is assessed as 'masterful'.<sup>1</sup> In 1872, still assistant secretary, he had published an extensive survey of

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<sup>1</sup> H. P. Thompson, *Into All Lands : The History of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts 1701-1950*, 1951, 227

missions throughout the world, entitled *Under His Banner: Papers on the Missionary Work of Modern Times*.<sup>2</sup> He tells us that the name of Australia's first chaplain was 'almost unknown even to Churchmen at this distance of time'<sup>3</sup> and then proceeds to prove the point by calling him Robert Johnson. For this great crime I would gladly have added my name to Montgomery's petition for his removal!

### **The Book's scope**

This less than serious introduction allows me to say a number of serious things about this excellent book which we are launching today. First, it does shoot out sparks, but Robert does not follow them if they fall outside his purview. This is a very disciplined, highly focussed work. It is not a full biography of Henry Hutchinson Montgomery. It does not follow him once he departed these shores to take up his role as SPG Secretary. It does uncover the logic which drove his advisers to offer him and himself to accept the position of Secretary, but we are not shown how the Bishop performed in that logical role. Robert is content to point to another study which does that job. Similarly, there are many very interesting photographs in the book, but, commendably, there is no photograph of Montgomery's portrait in the USPG headquarters, where he stands camouflaged by the regalia of a Prelate of the Order of St Michael and St George: the intrepid explorer, the Episcopal swagman of his Tasmanian days has evaporated. No, Robert's is a study of Montgomery and of his wife Maud in their twelve years in Tasmania. Neither does it get sidetracked on any of his great contemporaries, such as Archbishops Frederic Temple and Randall Davidson, although the book is greatly enriched by its drawing on Montgomery's correspondence with Davidson, with whom the emotional bishop wore his heart on his sleeve. Nor does Robert follow the careers of the great men who followed him such as his son, the field marshal, although Robert hints more than once that the militant bishop is the type of whom Monty is the archetype.

Discipline is everywhere evident in this book. If history is to do its job of informing the present generation about the achievements of past generations, and before it can be used as data from the past for the benefit of the present, it must be focussed on context and on the issues which concerned its subject, it must reveal the perspective of those about whom it is written, and it must be grounded in relevant primary sources. This book gets an A+ for all of those. It is very good history, indeed. Let us look briefly at the questions which are asked in this book, at its major themes, and at its content.

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<sup>2</sup> London, SPCK, 1872.

<sup>3</sup> P.232.

## Questions addressed by the Book

Many, perhaps most, of the questions asked are of perennial interest to the Anglican Church:

- What is the appropriate role of a bishop of the Church of England?
- How should the role of Primate be understood in what is today the ACA?
- How appropriate is a panAnglican vision for the Church in its attempts to proclaim the gospel to people of every nation? How good an analogy of the Kingdom of God is the British Empire?
- How advantageous is engagement in foreign missions to the home church? Is it invariably a reflex advantage augmenting the size of the cake (25, 59) or does it deplete the resources?

I take it that each of these questions cannot be properly answered with *a priori* theology. It must be a theology tested by historical experience. Montgomery's Episcopal career illuminates them all. If you are interested in any of these questions, here is as good a place as any to start looking for answers. Robert says that Montgomery had to learn how to be a bishop by his experience in the job (p.2). He would have been off to a flying start if he had been able to read this book at the outset.

## The Book's Themes

What are the themes of the book? Robert seeks to explain Montgomery's understanding of his own role as bishop in terms of the need to shape the Church of England in Australia into a missionary church. This necessitated his own acting as a missionary, albeit a missionary bishop. It also required recognition by the leaders of the Australian church, especially the bishops in general and the Primate in particular, that they must be aware of their national responsibility for mission. In this the Church should engage with passion and sacrifice. Montgomery's paradigm of Colonial Anglican episcopacy was a missionary one, and his answer to the party strife which pitted diocese against diocese was to get all – High, Low, and Liberal – to engage in mission.

True, he was a man of his times, a fine exemplar of the 'muscular Christianity' then in vogue, and he was far more convinced of the glories of the British Empire than we are, and he did ask for commitment to an 'imperial' Christianity (pp.60, 265). Yet Robert does not fall into the trap of arguing that Montgomery put imperial motives for missionary work on a level with the great commission. His 'missionary advocacy was never captive to any British imperial dream', Robert insists (p.268). For him, the British Empire inculcated a sense of responsibility which was an ancillary argument for mission (p.5). It was an analogy of the Kingdom of God which was inclusive of peoples from every nation. This insight, alone, will mean that we have here a valuable addition to the literature on the concept of the missionary bishop.

## **The Book's contents**

Perhaps an unusual feature of the book is that it is not arranged chronologically as are most biographies. It is arranged thematically. This signifies that Robert thinks of this work as more than biography. It is a study of twelve years in the history of Tasmania from the perspective of the work of its bishop. So, following a chapter on the formation of the militant, missionary bishop, we are given fifteen chapters on different aspects of his Episcopal ministry, and then we have the fine, final chapters on his appointment to the SPG and an assessment of his legacy.

Each of these fifteen thematic chapters could stand on its own as a major focussed study of the issue under discussion. I suspect that some historians will use the book in that way, consulting chapters related to their area of research. But, for all that, the book has an impressive unity. The fifteen chapters are really sub-themes of the major theme of the militant, missionary bishop, forever shaping his diocese and the Australian church into an instrument for great-hearted missionary service.

The fifteen chapters themselves can be divided into three. Six of the fifteen chapters are on the bishop's own missionary enthusiasms and practices. They include his advocacy of the missionary cause, his support for the New Guinea Mission, the ABM Jubilee of 1900, and his ministry to indigenous people and west coast miners. Of broad evangelical stock, the son of a Vice-President of CMS, Montgomery was loyal to the ABM and SPG, but constantly sought to infuse them with vitality of the CMS kind. At a time of intense strife between church parties, his commitment to mission was devoted to promoting the unity of the church (pp.32, 58, 63). Of course, the ideal of the missionary bishop, was not an evangelical one. Evangelicals preferred bishops to follow their missionaries than to lead them. Bishops were to be consolidators rather than pioneers. But CMS much preferred a missionary-minded bishop to one who had little interest in missions, and, in his Tasmanian days, Montgomery found CMS officials fell over themselves in supporting his missionary enthusiasms in contrast to those of other societies.

But the problem with CMS, the Bishop felt, was that it preferred to see missions conducted by voluntary societies rather than bishops (p.50). Montgomery parted company with CMS's longstanding reservation about bishops: had bishops not already proved their missionary potential? Was he not following in the train of Selwyn of New Zealand, Hordern of Canada, and the Episcopal missionary martyrs – Charles Mackenzie and Coleridge Patteson (p.18). Montgomery even shared the High Church belief that, at his consecration, a bishop received a special gift of the Spirit to engage in mission (p.38).

Montgomery was not confined to conventional thinking about specialisation, that there were foreign missions and colonial missions and

the purpose of the latter was to 'gather and nurture expatriate members' of one's own denomination. Montgomery's Church of England was to obey its Lord and reach out to all peoples (pp.20, 60). Occasionally, Montgomery romanticised his own missionary labours among, for example, the Aboriginal people of the Furneaux Island Group (p.84). But Robert never lets him get away with this. It is certainly not a debunking biography, but it is a deromanticising one, and in his assessment of Montgomery's work among Aboriginal Tasmanians, he endorses James Boyce's sad conclusion that, through his adoption of Social Darwinism, Montgomery had an 'unintendedly negative' impact (p.87).

Then there are seven chapters on the Australian church and the understanding of that national church which results from the bishop's missionary passion. These include chapters on the primacy and Anglican identity, and on strengthening diocesan unity through commitment to mission. Chapter 8 on the primacy is a white-knuckle ride as Robert chronicles the increasing disenchantment, apparently unanimous among Australia's bishops, with their Primate. Montgomery ached for a Primate who was a leader and a statesman; Sydney's Archbishop and Primate was content to be chairman of a federation of dioceses which insisted on their own sovereignty.

Robert is not pleased with Montgomery's impatience and disloyalty, but neither is the weakness in the centralised leadership of the ACA an unambiguous gain. Robert records the apparently unending manifestations of Montgomery's instinctive and habitual centralism. What a dreamer he was to imagine the possibility of such things in democratic Australia, where we are all on the same level, doing absolutely nothing with equal apathy. The issue has the character of ecclesiastical and cultural tragedy which afflicts us to this day. In his mercy, Robert relieves the tension a little by recounting frustrated Montgomery's antics as vicarious Primate as he attempted, by his own example, to shame Archbishop Smith to action.

There is a lot of reliable analysis in these seven chapters on the nature of Anglicanism, which is probably a bigger issue today than it was a century ago. Some of these issues are as perplexing for us as they were difficult for those who endured them, and Robert's careful analysis work will become a major, trusted guide to these issues.

The final two of the fifteen chapters are among the most astonishing in the book – they are devoted especially to Maud, the bishop's wife. Maud, by dint of her financial knowledge and organisational skill, made a disproportionate contribution to the funding of the diocese in the economic downturn of the 1890s. She actually recruited the children of Tasmania in fundraising for the completion of St David's Cathedral in Hobart. All this while, she looked after nine children of her own, burying her eldest child, and bearing three of them in Tasmania. We learn that she genuinely enjoyed being with children and preferred looking after her own babies

than have a nurse do it as was the Victorian fashion. The excessive strictness of which her own sons later complained – the ungrateful wretches – might have been the discipline essential to survival rather than any hardness of heart.

The daughter of the eminent Dean Farrar, who is the inspiration for one of Susan Howatch's popular Starbridge novels on the Church of England,<sup>4</sup> Maud, in her contribution to the Church and the relief of needy women in Tasmania in the 1890s is deserving of admiration. The more so as she was so young – she was five weeks short of her 25<sup>th</sup> birthday when she and Henry first arrived in Hobart (23 October 1889). Her need for all the help she could get would have included the need for spiritual help. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that when the singularly successful George Grubb mission reached Hobart (February/March 1892), among those who received 'the blessing' of the 'life more abundant' was the Bishop's wife. So claims the wondering chronicler of the Mission, E. C. Millard, who records that she was only 26.<sup>5</sup> In fact, I calculate she was 27, but that little error is not enough to throw doubt on Millard's account. Her older husband may not have felt the same need, and later that year reported to his pal, Davidson, that 'We are having all sorts of electric shocks – Grubb and Co. have come and gone' (p.167).

Robert does not mention this spiritual experience of Maud, but in his restrained, well-evidenced way, he does accord her the admiration she deserves. In fact, in her honour he surrenders some of the discipline which he never surrenders when writing on the bishop. Though content not to follow the Bishop after his departure from Tasmania, he cannot refrain from following her. We learn that she did not find a role beside her husband, as they both wanted, in his work for the SPG akin to the work she did for him and his diocese in Tasmania. Instead her great contribution was to the Mother's Union, to which she had not devoted a lot of time in Tasmania. We'll forgive Robert this lapse – It's OK for a clergyman to fall a little in love with another woman just so long as she is born in the nineteenth century and preferably dies before he is born. Maud died in 1942. Robert cannot have been very conscious of her at that stage of his life. The lapse has resulted in two very satisfying chapters which will make their contribution to the historical understanding of the still-unresolved issue of the role of women in the Anglican Church.

### **The Bishop's Personality**

From the study of all these matters emerges gradually, but surely, a complete picture of the bishop himself. Our understanding of him keeps becoming richer with the consideration of each new dimension of his work.

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<sup>4</sup> This claim should be checked!

<sup>5</sup> E.C. Millard, *The Same Lord: An Account of the Mission Tour of the Rev. George C. Grubb in Australia Tasmania and New Zealand from Apr.3rd, 1891 to July 7th, 1892*, (London: E. Marlborough and Co., 1893) 275.

The final piece of the puzzle of his personality is put in place in the very last chapter, where we are informed of his self-revelation that he preferred being on his own to seeking out 'the M.P. on the train' with whom to improve the time (p.276), and that he did not consider himself much of a speaker in spite of all the addresses he gave. He preferred the fringes to the centre (p.67), the bush to the city, lonely leadership to being one of the boys. He was self-aware about his giftedness, and he fitted most of the practice and much of the theory of being a bishop to his gifts. He was perhaps not unusual in that. But he was an unusual bishop (p.64) because he was unusually gifted. His personality was vital, but uncommon. Most of his Episcopal colleagues did not possess vital personalities nor his taste for enthusiasm, and they drove him to distraction with their apparent want of energy and warmth in the service of their Master.

## **Conclusion**

What is it about Tasmania which produces such quality history? John West's *History of Tasmania* is, in the opinion of many, still the best history written in Australia, and the monumental biography of West himself by Patricia Ratcliff,<sup>6</sup> will be read appreciatively for a thousand years. Similarly, this meticulously-researched, comprehensively-thorough, highly reflective study of Montgomery's Tasmanian episcopate will never be superseded, the more so as it is so beautifully-produced. Acorn is to be commended for the quality of the publication. It is not only handsome, but we have been given real footnotes and an index. What more could one want this side of eternity? Congratulations to Robert for this very fine example of the historian's craft and to Acorn for this pleasing manifestation of the bookmaker's craft.

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<sup>6</sup> Patricia Fitzgerald Ratcliff, *The Usefulness of John West: Dissent and Difference in the Australian Colonies* (Launceston: The Albernian Press, 2003).