

Launch of *Montgomery of Tasmania*
By Professor Tom Frame

There has always been a ready market for biographies. As the author of *The Life and Death of Harold Holt* I am glad that this is so. It has certainly been no less so in the field of Australian religious history. Some are, of course, written in the old-fashioned 'lives of the saints' genre. Such works are meant to be inspirational; inaccuracies are tolerated because they are first and foremost devotional tracts. In effect, they present a person who has been touched by the grace of God who lived a life of sublime service to God, whose words and deeds were exemplary and worthy of imitation by those seeking after holiness.

Within the Anglican world, biographies tend to be written of three main categories of people: activists, mystics and bishops. The first two groups — and they include clergy and laity, men and women — attract interest because these people have been influential in changing the world and transforming individual lives. The latter group, the bishops, have been the subject of relatively few biographies given the very large number of mainly men who have exercised Episcopal ministry. There are some bishops who will be the subject of more than one biography because they occupy a significant office nationally or internationally or because they lived at a crucial moment in Christian history. But there is no adequate test that I could discern from the three dozen Episcopal biographies on my shelf that disclosed why some bishops are of interest to biographers and some plainly are not.

You might be lulled into thinking that Henry Montgomery, the Bishop of Tasmania from 1889 to 1901, was worthy of a biography because one of his sons became Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, one of the most celebrated British soldiers of the twentieth century. But you would be wrong in thinking this. Henry Hutchinson Montgomery lived a full and active life that deserves to be remembered for what it revealed of God's grace in an individual's life, what it conveyed about the life of a missionary bishop in colonial Australia, and what it reflected of Anglican attitudes to religious and everyday life. Allow me to say a few words about the subject, the author and the book.

I recall reading some words about Henry Montgomery about seven years ago when exploring religious attitudes to the campaign that led ultimately to Federation in 1901. I was previously aware of Henry Montgomery because of his son Bernard and what he has written about his time in Tasmania. But what I knew of Henry would not have filled a page. On first inspection he appeared to be yet another well-connected Victorian clergyman who might not have become a bishop in England but who was thought adequate for Episcopal service in the colonies. Montgomery broke from the pack, however, in rendering highly esteemed service on returning to London as the first Episcopal Secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG). This is the work for which he is probably most widely known. However, it is clear from the material gathered together by Robert Withycombe that his Tasmanian episcopate was a highly significant one – that deserves close and detailed attention for what it discloses of the colonial church and its mindset, attitudes to church leadership and the episcopate, the context and conduct of mission, and the many ways in which women played a substantial role in ecclesiastical and civil life in and through the partnerships they formed with their professional husbands. Maud Montgomery has an influence on almost every aspect of Henry's ministry and what he achieved and aspired to achieve cannot be understood without reference to her.

The Bishop who emerges from these pages is a remarkable man. He is a preacher and teacher who took every opportunity to proclaim the faith of Christ Crucified and all the benefits of Christian living. He is an activist with an excess of energy that appeared to make him restless at times as his interests ranged over almost every aspect of Church and community life. He is a missionary whose zeal for the Lord allows him to endure all kinds of hardship and personal deprivation in order to fulfil what he considers his sacred duty. He is a man of almost constant activity and yet he finds time to write long, detailed and thoughtful letters of complex and potentially controversial matters. He is a man who cared for people and worried incessantly about their welfare but could administer discipline with unwavering resolve, especially if any hint of disloyalty were apparent. Montgomery appeared just as much at home with miners and farmers as he did in the company of dignitaries and intellectuals.

In terms of churchmanship, he was shaped in the Evangelical tradition but he encouraged a broad Anglicanism that looked for enrichment from the various strands of theological outlook then present in the Church, giving thanks that the Tasmanian clergy were 'singularly free from party bias'.

He is nothing short of a most remarkable man for whom respect and esteem are difficult to withhold. What I most appreciate about Henry is his expansive vision for the Church and its outreach. He thinks big thoughts and focuses his gaze on what might be rather than on what is now. There is nothing petty or parochial in his grasp of the coming Kingdom of God. While the colonial Church had its share of diocesan autocrats preoccupied with position and prestige, Henry is a generous ecclesiastical statesman with all the resonances accompanying such a description. He appears to have come to terms personally and vocationally with being a missionary bishop better than anyone else of late Victorian period. I would even venture to say that his explanation of, and emphasis on, mission would repay the examination of many contemporary bishops for whom the word mission is a mantra or a slogan rather than an approach to living and an attitude to leadership.

Let me turn my remarks to the author. There are few Church historians as immersed in the source materials and the standing debates that feature in the evolution of Anglicanism than Robert Withycombe. For more than four decades his name has figured in collections of essays, journals, conferences and curriculum. His knowledge of all things Anglican is truly remarkable, from the Reformation to recent events. I have always found him to be the bearer of accurate information and the custodian of insightful interpretation. In this book, Robert has brought all of his skills as a historian to bear on a very rich and diverse body of material. He will, I am sure, explain why and when he started out on this project, but I want to pay tribute to the way in which he has integrated correspondence, speeches, reports and contemporary commentary into a fast-moving and enthralling narrative. As you turn each page you continue to wonder what Montgomery will do next. In essence, Robert has taken some very good primary and secondary source material and allowed readers to see its richness for themselves. Some historians can murder their material; Robert has allowed his to shine.

Robert Withycombe is a wise guide, taking us on a journey through some complicated issues that have required wide background meaning to bring their essential elements into the foreground.

We are told what we need to know about each matter as it arises in the story. We are not overwhelmed with information in the hope that we might get a sense of the point being made through the sheer volume of words heaped up in a pile. There is a judicious mixture of description, commentary, interpretation and conclusion – and no slight of hand. Robert has no interest in vindicating any particular theological position or claiming divine sanction for any specific approach to being Anglican – or indeed, Christian for that matter. There were several points where I might have brought a different emphasis to bear or come to different conclusions about people and places. But Robert’s style is not insistent. He does not imply that his view leaves no room for reasonable alternatives. I appreciate that about the tone of the text, and I am sure you will, too. This book confirms that Robert is one of the most accomplished Anglican historians in the country and we are grateful for his continuing presence at St Mark’s.

And finally, the book itself. *Montgomery of Tasmania* is beautifully produced on quality paper in hard-back format. It is simply a delight to have and to hold. It is well illustrated with pictures throughout the text and the lay-out and design is generous to the eye. The index is comprehensive and just what the reader needs to make the text available as a resource for use in future projects. Acorn Press has done a truly marvellous job and deserves to be proud of this achievement. So, warmest congratulations to Robert and Acorn Press on a job well done.

All that remains for me to do ... is to declare the book launched with the fervent hope that you will enjoy reading it as much as I did.

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