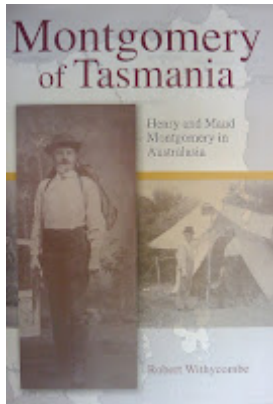


Review: Montgomery of Tasmania



I have just finished an excellent book. Robert Withycombe's biography of Henry Montgomery, father of the famous WWII "Montgomery of Alamein" but here *Montgomery of Tasmania* – the fourth Bishop of Tasmania 1899-1901. The episcopacy of Montgomery has become a talking point for Tasmania's eleventh and current Bishop and I was blessed with a pre-release copy to review.

The book itself is well-written. A decent biography is a history which is not hagiography. It will outline issues and impacts and provide connectedness to the world of the time. Yet it should also be a decent narrative, a character study, an insight that grips and engages. While admitting that as a Tasmanian cleric I have a natural affinity with the subject matter, I conclude that Withycombe has achieved this. A broad audience would find this book not just informative but enjoyable.

And like any good biography, it is not the author I am impacted by, but the subjects – Henry and Maud Montgomery.

I felt a certain yet imprecise resonance with the character of Montgomery throughout. Towards the end I encountered a specific connecting point. It was in the context of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), that great Anglican organisation that had provided the resources for many colonial churches such as Tasmania. SPG was about to experience it's bicentennial in Montgomery's time and we see a telling quote born of a frustration that rests on both affection and respect: "What are you to do... for a Mother who seems to have become dull and heavy?" (Page 252)

Montgomery was a man impassioned by the mission of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Into a pre-WWI world of colonial fervour he contextualised and embodied this gospel meaningfully and zealously. I look back on that era a century ago and I can see the fruit of his and so many other's labours. So many of our buildings and organisations were in foment in that pioneering era. It is cause for great affection and respect.

But just as Montgomery looked at SPG and asked about a "dull and heavy" mother a stultified century on from her heyday, I feel to utter the same sentiments looking at the church of Montgomery. The passion of his era is now "dull and heavy," diluted by generational changes that in the midst of a pain-filled 20th century took the forms but not the heart. And I wonder if Montgomery were here today whether he would look to the Anglican Church of his era and long for it to "burst its grave clothes" (Page 252) and find it's passion and heart once more.

In this book we are given an insight into that passion and heart. To read about a Bishop demonstrating a real and living gospel, holding a roadside confirmation while walking near where I would spend my own childhood ninety years later stirs the soul (Page 88). To glimpse within the eloquence that which expounds "his belief that the Anglican Church's primary vocation was to be a missionary agent" (Page 20) is to touch an eternal heartbeat. Even his frustrations – e.g. at the "archaic home practices" of "the old country with its grooves made by 1,400 years of settled life" (Page 28) and the attitudes of others who "have no ideas beyond those of an Evangelical clergyman in a suburban parish" (Page 104) – have a degree of inspiration. There is something to aspire to in the eulogising words of a *Mercury* editorial on the day before he departed... 'He has met the swagman on the road, and has talked to him, not as the Bishop of Tasmania, kindly condescending to notice an inferior, but as one man speaking to another, with the same earth to live on, and with the same

God above them.'” (Pages 266-267)

And this is before you get to the more personal insights that Withycombe records in chapters focussed on Montgomery’s wife, Maud. Here we see a young wife, matching her husband in strength and passion, persisting through bereavement, and social complexities. We see them as mother and father finding a freedom in Tasmania to learn (some small aspect of) the preciousness of parenting. They live out that foundation of effective missionary zeal – “to go out, and stay out.”

It is these intangibles – passion, a missional understanding of ministry and episcopacy, an entrenched understanding that the church was “never merely to gather and nurture expatriate members of the Church of England” (Page 20) – that can be integrated into a current vibrant, relevant, fruitful vision for the Anglican Church.

It is the tangible legacy that is the difficulty. The rhetoric of the age was imperialism – which no longer applies. The framework was institutionalism – which no longer works. The mode was ritualism and militarism – which no longer has a voice. These things produced buildings and organisations – but does their heart still beat?

It may be interesting to see how some of the quirks of Australian Anglicanism – such as the manner of choosing the holder of primatial office – came about. And it is worthwhile pondering some of the ecclesiastical principles that were debated at a constitutional time. But these are not the fundamental things of growing the kingdom.

Yet the hope remains that the intangibles can be grasped – that it not be, for instance, the existence of a St. David’s Cathedral that remains Montgomery’s legacy, but the focus on a “diocesan mission, unity and identity” (Page 27) which was his vision for one. Whenever we study our forerunners we have cause to grip more tightly to those things that are eternal

and to loosen our grip on those things that so evidently will fade as grass.

That is the case of this excellent book. It is good to find a forerunner so close to home.

Montgomery of Tasmania is published by Acorn Press.

