

**BISHOP
JOHN EDWARD MERCER**

Richard P. Davis

**UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA
OCCASIONAL PAPER**

34

**BISHOP JOHN EDWARD MERCER:
A Christian Socialist in Tasmania**

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*To Ian Breward
with best wishes
Richard Davis*

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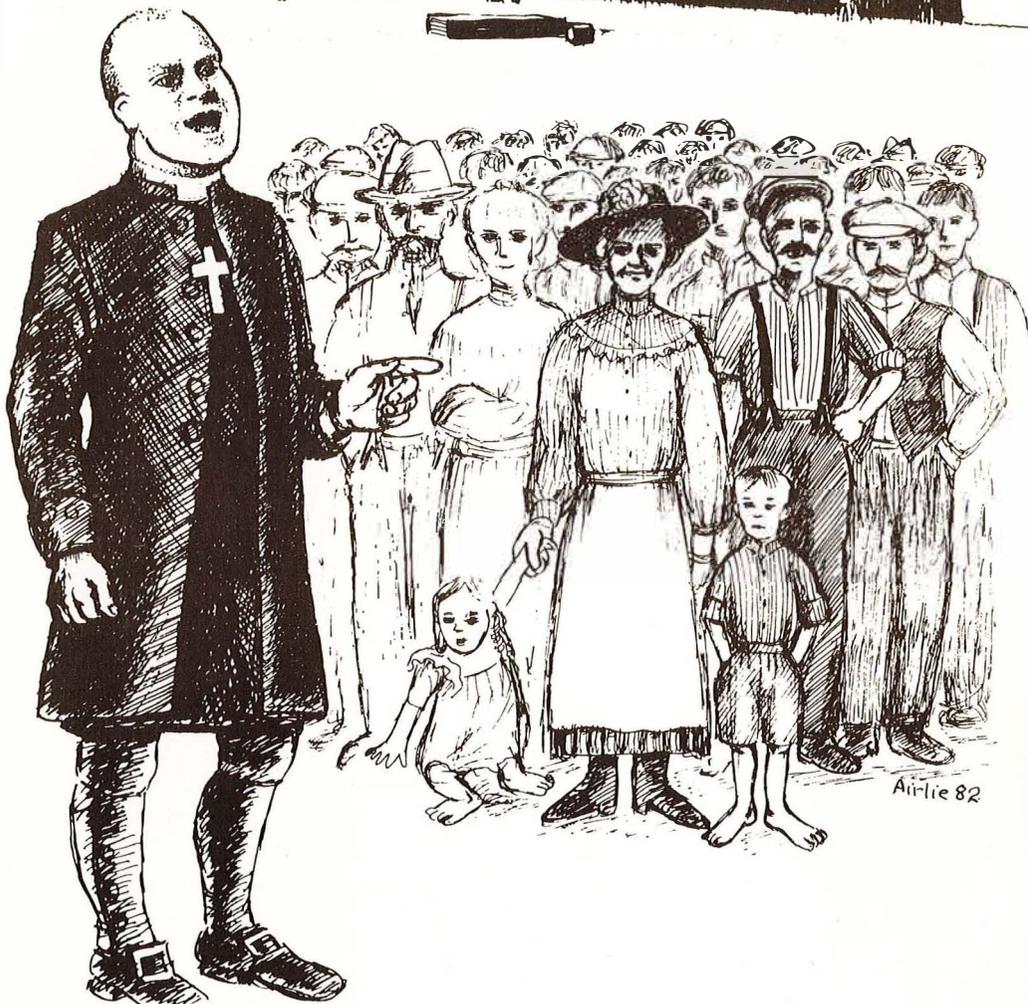
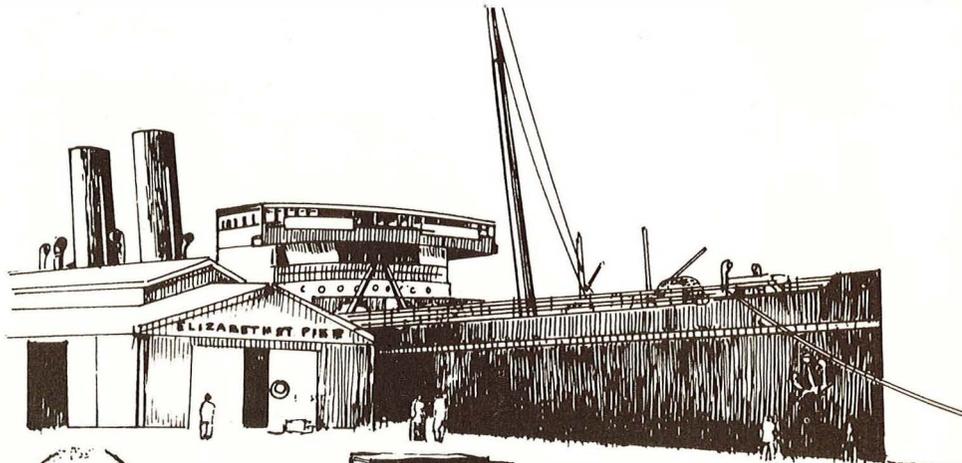
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In memory of the late Herbert Condon,

Warden of Christ College and first St Wilfrid's lecturer.

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ST. WILFRID

Some there are who rail at Sorrow,
Fain would fling her to the void,
Crying, 'Life should all be radiant,
And its joyance unalloyed.'
Ah! The wider Will is wiser.
Sorrow wields a chastening power.
Ever gleams the saintly aureole
Brightest in the darkest hour.

Born in days when heathen kingdoms
Burdened all the land with strife —
Days when faith and fresh devotion
Burned in consecrated life.
Wilfrid early saw his vision —
Arden soul that never swerved —
Sought to win the pagan people
For the Captain Whom he served.

And his purpose made him noble,
Set him with heaven's chivalry.
But that sorrow made him greater
Men and angels could descry.
Great he was in manhood's vigour,
While his minster's height he rears.
Greater when they thither bore him
Rescued from the stormy years.

Great he was in manhood's vigour —
Prelate, helmsman of a State;
Kings could honour him as ally,
Councillors could emulate.
Yet austere withal in secret,
Life itself a deodand;
Faithful to the spirit's prompting,
Riding frequent through the land.

Great! But greater in his exile,
Dauntless still, but humbled too!
Better learnt the Master's lesson,
Souls of men by love to woo.
Love he gained because he gave it —
Deeper joy than place and power!
Ever gleams the saintly aureole
Brightest in the darkest hour.

*From Certain Verses, by
J. Edward Mercer, Bishop of Tasmania*

BISHOP JOHN EDWARD MERCER

John Edward Mercer presided over the Tasmanian Anglican Church in the years 1902-1914, an exceptionally important period in the development of the infant Commonwealth of Australia. In 1902 Tasmania was a backward, depressed State, dominated by a powerful upper class offset by no parliamentary Labor party, few unions, and no trades halls. As state legislation failed to provide for wages boards or other forms of industrial conciliation, working conditions were frequently worse than in the more progressive Australian States. But when Mercer left the State for good in March 1914, great changes had occurred. The first effective Tasmanian Labor government was about to take office; state wages boards had been in operation for several years and were being set up in an increasing number of industries; many new unions, including the powerful Australian Workers Union, had been formed, resuscitated or extended from the mainland; tradeshall councils functioned in Hobart and Launceston. Tasmania, once a sleepy hollow and a byword for backwardness, was on the move, at last in step with the rest of Australia.¹

What part did Dr Mercer, who meteor-like flashed briefly across the Tasmanian and Australian mainland scene, play in this development? Was the bracketing of Mercer with Billy Hughes as the most significant influences on Australian² development in the early years of the century but the strained hyperbole of an inventive obituarist? The answers to such unlikely questions may reveal interesting features of Tasmanian politics and society in the first decade of this century. Bishops, by nature of their office, are, with exceptions like Mannix or Gore, more often noteworthy for their administrative tact and discretion, than their bold speculation on social and economic questions. Mercer's predecessor, Bishop Montgomery, though perhaps not so flamboyantly reactionary as his famous son, who once

declared that all British Labour voters deserved incarceration in lunatic asylums, had found it necessary in the 1890s to discipline the radical agitator, the Rev. Archibald Turnbull; he thus appeared to reinforce the identification between Tasmania's majority church and its reactionary upper class laity.³

Dr Montgomery's experiences may well have led to his recommendation of a successor with different priorities. At that time, Tasmanian Anglican bishops, unlike their counterparts in a number of Australian dioceses, were still chosen by the Archbishop of Canterbury in association with other English prelates. Recommendations from various lay, ecclesiastic, and political sources secured the appointment to Tasmania of Edward Mercer, then the rector of the Manchester slum parish of Gorton. He was forty-five at the time.

The son of an Anglican parson, Mercer was born in Bradford and educated at Rossall School and Lincoln College, Oxford. Through his public school's Mission in Newton Heath, Manchester, Mercer gained six years' experience as curate in an industrial city before being transferred to even more exacting parishes.⁴ Physically tall and handsome, Edward Mercer possessed a mellifluous voice, an amicable manner, and an excellent temper which enabled him to accept personal criticism without demonstrating annoyance. He was, moreover, exceptionally well read and able to converse fluently on virtually any topic — theology, philosophy, literature, science, history, or politics. These qualities made Mercer an extremely formidable platform speaker. Indeed, his command over the facts, his sparkling delivery, his use of the homely allusion or relevant anecdote, and above all his humour, often exercised an almost hypnotic effect⁵ on the people who invariably flocked to his sermons, lectures and public addresses. He often appears to have received rousing receptions from audiences who must have found many of his actual opinions unpalatable. Not without reason did the Hobart *Mercury*, a constant critic of the bishop, sum up Mercer in the words of the Renaissance genius, Alberti, 'I am a man, and nothing human is foreign to me.'⁶ In Tasmania Mercer lectured, walked the bush, published prose and poetry,⁷ and even found time to paint.

Despite such outstanding qualifications, Mercer subsequently claimed that he had been 'astonished' when invited to become a bishop. He had never trimmed his sails to catch a passing breeze and had always said exactly what he believed.⁸ In Gorton parish he had taken a keen interest in the conditions of the poor and was a vice-chairman of the Manchester Christian Social Union. This organisation

was far from radical, and has been criticised for the discrepancy between its social criticism and its practical policies. Most members disliked the Independent Labour Party.⁹ Although Mercer had been at Oxford with leading lights of the CSU like Charles Gore and Scott Holland, it was parish work at St Michael's, Angel Meadow, and Gorton, not an apathetic Oxford, that led him initially to social reform. The CSU's powerful denunciation of abuses and ambiguity over their rectification was a marked feature of Mercer's radical utterances in Tasmania. It was his practical experience of poverty and degradation, rather than the depth of his social analysis, which proved so explosive in Tasmania.

'Controversy' was the key to Mercer's Tasmanian experience. It began almost before he had disembarked on Tasmanian soil from the RMS Paparoa on 1 September 1902. The Launceston *Examiner* welcomed him with a leader applauding Mercer's lack of sectarian spirit, but sourly affirming that an Australian bishop, more in touch with local conditions, would have been preferable, especially as local appointments encouraged Anglican clergy by providing promotion opportunities.¹⁰ Even Mercer's qualities were unable to dissipate such arguments, successfully repeated in the Tasmanian synod of 1913 which provided for the local election of his successor.¹¹ On arrival, Mercer also had to contend with the wide publicity given to incautious comments made at his consecration in St Paul's Cathedral, London, by a Prebendary Bevan that sixty years earlier it had been said that there was no God in Van Diemen's Land, nor ever would be. This insult was linked by some to abuse of Mercer's predecessor, Bishop Montgomery, 'the greatest failure as a bishop that has ever been sent to Australia', who was alleged to have instructed Bevan. In his very first utterances, Mercer was forced to explain away Bevan and parry attacks on Montgomery.¹² Had he been a silent bishop, Mercer would have incurred criticism for his English origin.

From his earliest days in Tasmania, Mercer demonstrated his intention not to remain mute. Though personal correspondence is unavailable, it is possible to reconstruct a type of battle plan by which Mercer intended to bring the Anglican Church and Tasmania itself into the twentieth century. His interests can be roughly grouped under five headings. First, and most important for this paper, is social reform. Here Mercer, the CSU man was determined to prevent — by church sympathy for worker aspirations — the new Labor movement from identifying with atheism, and simultaneously to demonstrate that the Anglican upper classes could not rely on the church as a

buttress for the status quo. This was very dangerous ground for a bishop who could easily alienate powerful supporters without convincing sceptical working class representatives of his sincerity. The bishop's second task was to introduce Tasmanians to a new theology assimilating recent evolutionist science. Here again the intrepid bishop risked a virulent reaction from this conservative flock. The new theology can be regarded as the corollary of the bishop's social reform policy, in that socialism was often associated with rationalism. Thirdly, Mercer campaigned for moral reform with special emphasis on temperance and gambling abolition. Although individual moral development was part and parcel of the bishop's social gospel, liquor and gambling interests were powerful enemies against whom Mercer could not count on much support from working class leaders. A fourth major interest was the development of education at all levels, lay and Anglican. Mercer praised the Labor movement for not joining the demand for the abolition of the infant University of Tasmania. Yet in his support for religious teaching in state schools, Mercer was not always in accord with local Catholics, led by Archbishop Patrick Delany who shared some of his Anglican counterpart's social ideals. Fifth and last, Mercer endeavoured to encourage wider perspectives in imperial and world affairs, especially in the years before the First World War. The danger here was the possibility of antagonising developing Australian national sentiment.

To disseminate his message, Mercer adopted the highest profile. Public lectures, occasional sermons, special church services, and the publication of books and pamphlets (pouring forth in a steady stream during Mercer's Tasmanian years)¹³ made the bishop's name resound throughout Australia, and provoked critical correspondence and editorials in the local press. At the same time, Mercer took a special interest in the formation and encouragement of local citizen groups. He was naturally associated with the Tasmanian Temperance Alliance. He developed the Citizens Reform League as a non-party organisation lobbying politicians to encourage useful projects. However, when the League recommended candidates to the electors, Mercer found himself subjected to some criticism by his admirers in the young Labor party.¹⁴ On a more academic level, Mercer supported the Social Science Circle. Towards the end of his episcopate, he joined the Overseas Club with its potential value for encouraging imperial defence and wider responsibilities.¹⁵ Defence requirements sometimes appeared opposed to the aims of the local peace society in which,

although it once criticised him, Mercer was also involved.¹⁶ The bishop demonstrated his ecumenism by founding the Ethical Society for representatives of all Christian churches and the Jewish synagogue.¹⁷

Mercer did not neglect the institutions of his church as a means for the advancement of his message. He revived Christ College and associated it with Hutchins School.¹⁸ St Wilfrid's College for clergy was established at this time. Mercer encouraged Anglican secondary schools, but was less successful in the face of competition from the Boy Scouts (promoted in Hobart in 1912 by Baden Powell himself) and the army cadet movement, in establishing church lads brigades. The bishop also pressed ahead with more orthodox activities such as the creation of new parishes and the building of new churches for Tasmania's growing Anglican population.¹⁹

Behind all Mercer's activities lay his belief in the need for social reform. He lost no time after his arrival in demonstrating where he stood in practice, if not in theory. At his welcome in Launceston, he rejected suggestions that he stick to theology by announcing that his prior duty was to find out about Tasmania.²⁰ The social conditions of Tasmania were clearly uppermost in his mind. In fact, Mercer could not have arrived in Tasmania at a more crucial time. In February 1903, Tom Mann, the English socialist leader, visited Tasmania as a prelude to the state election campaign of March which resulted in a pledged Labor party of four in the House of Assembly. Mercer followed Mann with an address on 'Capital and Labor' to a packed St John's Church, Launceston.

In this early address Mercer was fully in the tradition of the CSU which he recommended to his audience. The bishop partly agreed and partly disagreed with Mann, whose lecture he regretted missing. Mercer insisted on a moral rather than an economic viewpoint, rejecting socialism as a panacea. Not only was it likely to establish a tyranny of its own, but the bishop was sure that rich and poor would always exist. Patronisingly, he suggested that workers would prefer to serve a master from a higher station than one who has risen from their ranks. None of this was calculated to please radicals in the congregation, but Mercer came down to earth with practical examples of the evils of capitalism which he attributed to a spirit of selfishness. His fifteen years among the English working classes had opened his eyes to the problems of poverty and starvation. His brief reconnoitre of Tasmania had shown him 'many sad scenes' in what should be a workers' paradise.²¹ Already Mercer was indicating that he would not be a conventional bishop.

The new prelate's next opportunity arose with the first annual convention in Hobart of the Workers Political League, or Labor Party. Mercer organised a special service at St David's Cathedral and preached on 'The Eight Hour Day', one of the planks of the new Labor platform. The federal Labor leader, John Christian Watson, who true to his name espoused a moderate Christian socialism, attended, as did some of the conference delegates remaining in Hobart. The *Labor Clipper*, edited by Walter Woods with whom Mercer established a working relationship, pleased with the bishop's gesture, claimed that he had secured the largest male congregation in the cathedral for many years. 'It was not so much what the Bishop said — for he spoke only as the Labor Party has spoken for years — but the fact that the Bishop said it.'²² Mercer, in fact, had to justify the discussion of such topics from the pulpit, and already some of his clergy were believed to be looking askance at his efforts. Again, the chief interest lay in the bishop's practical experience in England; he promised a closer study of the colonies. When he talked of men murdered by overwork and insisted that factory toil, as something unnatural, be made as short as possible, he struck a sympathetic chord in his working-class audience. His ridicule of the complacent suggestion that workers would be unable to occupy additional leisure was timely.²³

The bishop now moved full steam ahead in his already promising efforts to gain the confidence of the workers without compromising his position as a non-party religious authority. In late 1903 and early 1904, the bishop made a comprehensive tour of the West Coast parishes. In the mining communities of places such as Queenstown, Gormanston, Waratah, and Zeehan, trade unionism through the Amalgamated Miners Association was developing strongly, and three of the first four Labor seats in the recent election had been won, not without hints of employer reprisal, in these electorates. Mercer therefore gave two lectures, 'Social Equality' and 'Competition', in the main centres. In the days before radio and television, the bishop's polished oratory represented entertainment of a high order, while the message related directly to the topic of the hour. Hundreds accordingly packed into his lectures, some miners apparently travelling for miles through rough country for the privilege of shaking his hand.²⁴ The bishop, moreover, was honoured at Queenstown by being elected a life member of the local branch of the AMA whose president chaired his lecture at the town hall.²⁵ Though such honours are now unremarkable even to conservative politicians, Mercer's acceptance in 1903 and his lectures

for working-class audiences appear to have created a furore in the ranks of the well-heeled citizens of Tasmania. The drawing-rooms buzzed with disapproval. Mercer, however, continued undaunted. At a general diocesan meeting in the Hobart Town Hall, he referred to the hostile innuendo against him, and affirmed that the reception of AMA membership was in fact one of the proudest moments of his life. He hoped that the Anglicans who disapproved were a minority, but said he would acquiesce if a majority wished to send him away.²⁶

Mercer felt himself confronted by a suffocating colonial middle class society, and would have sympathised with Vera Brittain's castigation of Buxton, a comfortable watering place only a few miles from the slums of Gorton. According to Brittain, Buxton represented 'the sum-total of all false values', typified by 'a mean censorious spirit'.

Artificial classifications, rigid lines of demarkation that bear no relation whatsoever to intrinsic merit, seem to belong to its very essence, while contempt for intelligence, suspicion and fear of independent thought, appear to be necessary passports to provincial popularity.²⁷

Unlike Brittain, who discreetly published her views many years after she had left Buxton for good, Mercer, according to the delighted *Clipper*, a 'born fighter', expressed his feelings without undue discretion. Condemning Hobart 'society' for its months of concentration on balls, parties, dances, 'at homes', and bridge sessions, the bishop showed himself to be a prickly guest. He asked one 'society devotee' if she had done one sensible thing during the season, and not unnaturally failed to elicit a reply. Longing for a phonograph — a modern cassette recorder would have served his need — Mercer sat behind a typical couple at a function. 'They talked the most empty, absurd, and excruciating inanity it is possible to conceive as emanating from human beings.'²⁸ From the pulpit the bishop lectured the affluent on their false assumption that the social problem could be relieved by a few charity puddings for the poor.²⁹

Such utterances clearly evoked upper class fury. Someone in Launceston apparently told Mercer to his face that he was 'a bad, dangerous fellow'.³⁰ Here was the Anglican bishop, who, after the governor, traditionally represented the aspirations of polite society in the State, revelling in his association with the representatives of unwashed copper miners while treating with contempt the classes who had provided the backbone of the Anglican church in Tasmania. The bitterness of extant letters to the press on Mercer in the next few years was probably but the tip of an iceberg of hostility and resentment. As

the *Clipper*, itself commended by Mercer³¹ despite its occasional criticism of his social theory, pointed out, the bishop's days in the State were clearly numbered after his attack on local society.³² It detected a whispering campaign against Mrs Mercer, and denounced the 'flavour of Old Vandemonia about this style of fighting'. The bishop's wife, who died tragically in 1907 leaving two daughters, shared her husband's social conscience and appears to have been more concerned with the problems of impoverished pensioners³³ than with elaborate entertainment for the gentry at Bishops court. With a teetotal bishop, it is safe to conclude that vintage wines did not flow too freely at episcopal receptions. On their arrival in 1902, the Mercers exhibited a happy picture of family life at an afternoon tea given to a representative and comprehensive assembly.³⁴ On his departure in 1914, the then widowed Mercer sadly regretted the stories circulating about what happened in his home, often put about by people who had never been there. He claimed that he loved social life, but had little time to devote to it.³⁵

It was perhaps inevitable that upper class critics should attempt to demonstrate that the bishop was a hypocrite in his sympathy for the poor. In 1911 Frederick Burbury, second cousin of the subsequent governor, complained in the *Mercury* that Mercer, who was always preaching socialism and attacking capitalism, should live in a palace on an income of £1,500, a sum requiring the wool of 6,000 sheep on 15,000 acres. Burbury was forced to apologise when Archdeacon Whittington demonstrated that the bishop's income was in fact £800 p.a. and that Bishops court, far from being a palace, was smaller than many country rectories in England.³⁶ Nevertheless, such an example of what a sympathiser depicted as the 'really cruel remarks'³⁷ passed on the bishop in the local press must have hurt.

Hurt or not, the bishop's incredible pace of controversial activity was not halted by adverse criticism. He may have reflected that bourgeois abuse was well-calculated to rivet his essentially moderate and even conservative message on the workers. A good example is a speech in the House of Assembly in November 1903 by Labor representative George Burns who declared that, unlike the socialist, he had no desire to cripple the capitalist but simply wanted a fair arbitration system.³⁸ This was precisely Mercer's position. Critics on the right, however, systematically misrepresented the bishop, refusing to consider his repeated assertions that he was not a party man, that he rejected the economics of socialism, that he looked to co-operation not class war, and that a purely socialist government might lead to

tyranny. These critics insisted on the contrary that he was fomenting class war, that his deprecation of socialism was insincere, and that he misrepresented Christianity by claiming that the best socialist ideas were not unchristian.³⁹

Mercer was also criticised for comments he did not make. For example, although he had never uttered a word in public on the subject, Mercer complained that Tasmanian landowners attributed the Commonwealth Labor government's land tax to his agency.⁴⁰ A typical example of the unrelenting attitude against Mercer was a comment made by Charles T. Watson, who suggested in the *Mercury* that Mercer should depart for the socialist settlement in Paraguay with his friends, Tasmanian Labor leader John Earle and federal Labor prime minister John Fisher, and there learn some honest work with a spade. People, said Watson, know Mercer as an entertaining speaker, 'but when he gets on to the subject of socialism they pay no heed to his wild and whirling words'.⁴¹

The reality of Mercer's tactics were demonstrated when the Hobart Workers Political League branch asked him to deliver an address in 1905. Mercer said publicly that he would accept any invitation to talk on a subject of which he had knowledge, but found that only one section seemed to want him.⁴² The address to the WPL covered the bishop's pet subject of gambling. He was thus propagating his own views rather than endorsing Labor. In fact, he met considerable opposition when he declared that gambling should be abolished, not nationalised. Fair lotteries only strengthened the gambling spirit and Tattersall's lottery, so useful to state funds when prohibited elsewhere, encouraged an increasing number of bookmakers in Tasmania. 'Let them not give the imprimatur of the State to vice.' Several WPL members supported Mercer, but influential figures like W.A. Woods, MHA and editor of the *Clipper*, and 'Big Jim' Long, MHA, were opposed.⁴³ In Bendigo the following year, Mercer raised a hornet's nest by asserting that a Tattersall's representative once offered an MP £300 for his vote. When called upon by Tattersall's manager, who accused him of unmanliness, to substantiate his accusation, Mercer relegated the incident to some years before.⁴⁴ The local Labor forces were distinctly neutral over this attack on a vested interest.

At the WPL meeting on gambling in 1905 Jim Long, asserting that all life was a gamble, advised the bishop to concentrate on something more important, like sweating. In no way disconcerted, Mercer accepted the challenge in 1906 when he addressed the WPL, not in the

safe seclusion of a hall but in the full glare of publicity on the Elizabeth Street Pier, where the Labor Party organised regular Sunday afternoon meetings. The occasion amply demonstrates how a moderate, although highly principled and conscientious man, could find himself under attack from both sides of the political spectrum. The meeting itself, well advertised by the *Clipper*, which promised seats for ladies, was a huge success, attracting an estimated 'magnificent crowd' of 1,100 people. To many members of the upper class, the bishop's appearance in such circumstances must have seemed the ultimate provocation. Mercer was attacked in the *Mercury* prior to the occasion for acting against the best interests of Anglicanism. In reply, the bishop cited the decision of the 1888 Lambeth Conference which had denounced social inequalities. It was because he loved Anglicanism, the bishop told the gathering on the wharf, that he was present. Those who had followed his previous utterances would have perceived the truth of the statement. Nevertheless, local Anglicans, perhaps fortified by the blunt disagreement with Mercer on socialism expressed by the Australian primate at a CSU in Sydney in 1905, were not easily convinced. According to the *Clipper*, 'all sorts of unkind and unchristian things' were being said by members of his own and other churches.⁴⁵ The Launceston *Examiner* quoted an informant, described as a moderate churchman influential among the laity, who commented on discussion on the propriety of Mercer's action by saying that although the bishop was entitled to his political views, he should not as head of the church side with a particular party.⁴⁶

Once again, the point was missed. Identifying with the Labor party was precisely what Mercer was not doing. The Labor controversy raised by his speech should have dispelled such doubts. On their side of the political divide, Labor spokesmen were often as critical of the bishop as their opponents on the right. At the wharf, Mercer, with his usual outspokenness, made few concessions to the principles of his hosts. He used the occasion in fact to continue the debate over gambling that had begun at his earlier WPL address. Labor supporters happily accepted the bishop's insistence that the tendency of modern commercialism 'was to squeeze employees as a lemon is squeezed, then throw the human rind in the dustbin'. Sweaters who could not afford to pay more indicated an unchristian social system; those who could needed the 'application of something hot and strong'. Labor leaders found no fault with the bishop's rejection of the charity panacea, the need to clear the monopolists out of parliament, and the advantages of

workers' cottages at a moderate rental. Eyes were raised, however, when Mercer reverted to the theme of gambling and drink, again insisting that they should not be nationalised. He disclaimed a desire to deprive the worker of his glass of ale, attributing heavy drinking partly to low wages. The workers must nevertheless have wondered how hard their teetotal bishop would fight to preserve their glass of grog.

Labor criticism on this issue was immediate. At the wharf John Earle, the party leader, defended gambling as Long had done previously. Gambling, said Earle, was so ingrained in human nature that it could only be phased out gradually when people came to realise its uselessness. In the meantime, gambling could pay for old age pensions and other social services. Replying, the bishop courteously offered to deal with Earle's arguments point by point when another occasion could be arranged. But Earle was not alone in his views. Immediately after the wharf meeting, a *Clipper* correspondent described the bishop as a 'perplexed philosopher'. His peculiar mix of economics, theology and social science was 'a wild and whirling fizz-up full of sound and effervescence signifying nothing but benevolent flatulence'. A number of alleged inconsistencies in Mercer's position as a church administrator and social reformer were detailed. His opposition to gambling, for example, ignored the fact that church finances were based largely on gambling in land, stocks and shares; his temperance took no account of the fact that 200 English clergy derived their stipends from the profits of the liquor trade.⁴⁷

The week after the bishop's celebrated appearance on Elizabeth Street Pier, W.A. Woods took him to task in a similar fashion, complaining of 'a sort of duality about the estimable Bishop'. The philanthropist dovetailed badly with the 'manacled prelate of an Anglican fashionable Church'. Woods was not prepared to forget the past contempt of the church for the weak, and suggested that a changed environment could best begin by more clergy visiting the wharf. As for the bishop's complaint about the nationalisation of vices, Woods considered the argument hackneyed and 'rather cheap' in that the government already did it in many ways.⁴⁸ Altogether it was an exceptionally sour response from the party which the bishop appeared to be sacrificing so much to support. Mercer, who did not stand on his dignity, was probably reasonably satisfied with the controversy which indicated that his views were gaining widespread publicity. Although hard argumentative blows were given in his debate with the Tasmanian Labor party, personal relations between Mercer and its leaders appear

to have been close. On the gambling and liquor issues, the subsequent history of the Labor party in Tasmania amply demonstrates the dangers of too close an association with these interests, complaints and scandals continuing almost until the present day. Mercer was not successful in his temperance and anti-gambling advocacy, but many might argue that events have proved him correct.

Mercer continued to address Labor meetings after his visit to the wharf in 1906. In the last year of his incumbency, we find him writing to Woods: 'I shall be away most of the time for the rest of this year, winding up my final visitation to the Diocese. If you are not too disgusted at such a revelation of incapacity, you might let me have notice of any important meeting you may like to hold, and I will do my best to attend'.⁴⁹ The bishop could hardly have been more co-operative, and gives the impression that he was in fact a member of the Labor party. However, Mercer's remarks to Woods can still be explained according to his general principle of speaking whenever asked.

In 1910 the bishop had worked with Woods on an issue which raised considerable controversy and may have influenced state history. In that year, despite the establishment of a federal arbitration court and the Harvester Judgment which laid down the principle of a fair basic wage for all Australians, Tasmania still had no wages board or arbitration court. Efforts to legislate for wages boards had hitherto been blocked by a reactionary Legislative Council. Pressure was again mounting as the House of Assembly debated a new bill in 1910. A few days before the bill reached the Legislative Council, Walter Alan Woods rose in the House of Assembly to provide details of the sweating of dressmaker apprentices in Hobart. These unhappy girls, he demonstrated, sometimes earned as little as 2/6d a week in their first year, increasing to a miserable 6/- in their fourth. Unpaid overtime was exacted until 9 or 10 pm up to four nights a week. Saturday afternoon was worked and only half an hour permitted for lunch and, on overtime nights, for tea. The workroom was too hot in summer and too cold in winter, when the girls had to supply their own firewood. To cap this scandalous picture of exploitation in a high-class Hobart drapery, Woods revealed that the girls were forced to take three weeks' annual holidays without pay.

Such facts might have been dismissed as the partisan pleading of a Labor MP had not Woods given them on the authority of 'an eminent dignitary of the Anglican church' whose identity was obvious to all.

Mercer, moreover, was quoted as declaring that 'this is little less than slow murder, and money-making on the flesh and blood of British girlhood'. Furthermore, the bishop shocked the complacency of those who believed that colonial workers were infinitely better off than their counterparts in the Old Country by giving Woods comparative statistics of conditions in Manchester. There, girls' wages in their first three years rose from 10/- to 15/- per week, despite the fact that the cost of living was lower in England. An hour was allowed for lunch; the workrooms were properly aired and hot water was provided for tea, while cheap meals were available in a nearby dining room.⁵⁰

The Labor *Daily Post*, which had replaced Woods's *Clipper*, made full use of the bishop's statistics, derived from a Tasmanian royal commission of 1907 whose findings had proved so damaging that they were suppressed by the government. It demonstrated that the Legislative Council's action in rejecting factory legislation and wages boards was a direct contribution towards 'race suicide' by prematurely destroying the bodies of future mothers or driving them onto the streets to eke out their pittance.⁵¹

Supporters of the government were naturally incensed. In the subsequent debate, virtually all Labor members spoke and emphatically endorsed the bishop, often with examples from their own experience, Woods's brother-in-law, Ben Watkins, citing his own sister's work as a dressmaker. The Premier, Sir Elliott Lewis, not long before praised for his efforts as an Anglican layman, on the contrary reprimanded his bishop for getting hold of a 'cock and bull story'.⁵² Even the Anglican *Church News*, not always happy with Mercer's social crusades, considered the Premier unnecessarily offensive.⁵³ Labor members ridiculed the assertions of government supporters who claimed that they had personally visited representative draperies and found no evidence of sweating. Generally, the Assembly conservatives tried to avoid the charge of attacking the bishop directly, but the Premier insisted that Mercer name the employers involved.

The bishop was now constrained to make a direct statement. He had, he said, originally supplied only the statistics, but had then agreed to allow use of his name in the interests of defenceless members of the community. He was 'absolutely sure of his position', having before him 'positive, specific cases'. On the reasonable ground that it would be dangerous for the girls, Mercer rejected the demand that he reveal his informants, suggesting as an alternative that a representative citizen committee be empowered to take evidence.⁵⁴ Nothing appears to have

come of this proposal, although an employers' deputation waited on the bishop, arguing that individual supervisors were probably at fault. Mercer was supported by other socially concerned clerics, the Rev. Will Vawdon (Methodist) and the Rev. A.W. Sharp (Congregationalist).⁵⁵ The *Daily Post* did everything to keep interest in the issue alive, publishing relevant extracts from the 1907 royal commission.

In early September, the Legislative Council debated the new wages boards bill sent up by the Assembly. This time it passed with a number of amendments, accepted despite Labor disapproval in the Lower House. To W.A. Woods, the cruel strike penalties and the provision for fixing wages at the average paid by reputable employers rendered the bill 'worse than useless'.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the principle was accepted and a system subject to amendment became law. No longer could industrialists in the State of Victoria use the absence of Tasmanian wages boards as an excuse for dumping their goods in the island colony.⁵⁷

The farewell address of the Bass WPL Division credited the industrial legislation of the previous decade as being in 'no small measure' due to Mercer's 'fearless advocacy'.⁵⁸ Was Bishop Mercer really responsible for the result? Certainly, his powerful attack on local sweating must have made it a little more difficult for the Legislative Council to adamantly oppose all wages boards. August 1910 was in a sense the summit of the bishop's achievement in Tasmania. A system of wages boards represented his ideal for worker-employer co-operation. Nor was his interest purely theoretical. In July 1912 he was reported in the *Mercury* as addressing a meeting of Hobart clerks and typists in the mayor's court room in an attempt to persuade them to form an organisation. The attempt was successful and a clerks' wages board eventually established.⁵⁹ Despite the relative lack of publicity given to the occasion, the Anglican bishop's direct efforts at union organisation must surely rank as one of the most significant events in his episcopate.

A few months later, the *Mercury* leaked the fact that Mercer, still a relatively young man of fifty-five, intended to resign his bishopric.⁶⁰ Mercer, while regretting the premature leak, confirmed the rumour in his charge to the Tasmanian Anglican Church in March 1913. He was, he declared, stepping down for personal reasons, not because of lack of support in the diocese.⁶¹ In the absence of relevant personal papers, we can only speculate on the bishop's meaning. By 1912, while he had undoubtedly obtained support in quarters not usually responsive to a

bishop, Mercer had incurred the serious enmity of many influential men. In 1911-12, attacks on the bishop's outspoken comments became both common and bitter in the local press. Even the bishop's lament that Captain Amundsen, conqueror of the South Pole, had not been received in Hobart with sufficient enthusiasm, led to an attack on Mercer's motives and actions. The bishop was constrained to reply in the *Mercury* with a catalogue of his own efforts on Amundsen's behalf. An apology was secured.⁶² Of more moment was Fred Burbury's attack on Mercer's modernist theology, demonstrated by his lecture, 'Have Animals Souls?' and indeed many of his books and lectures on the subject. Burbury was concerned that the bishop's 'evolution' implied a total rejection of the Mosaic account of the creation.⁶³ Earlier, the *Clipper* had claimed with some justification that he was saying things in Cathedral precincts which would have sent him to the stake in years gone by.⁶⁴ On the other hand, Labor rationalists discovered a point where the bishop's excellent science took a sudden leap into mysticism.⁶⁵

As usual, the bishop's social and economic analysis created the most rage. In April 1911, Mercer's lecture to the Hobart WPL branch, 'Is Socialism Anti-Christian', attached a flood of derogatory letters to the *Mercury*, including one from Captain Thomas de Hoghton of Highbury, not only a prominent landowner, but also a retired naval officer and brother of a Lancashire baronet. De Hoghton, moreover, had considerable influence in the Anglican synod. The captain was incensed at the bishop's suggestion that Christians had in the past kept the workers down. 'This is entirely false, and a more unfounded, mischievous statement could not have been made'.⁶⁶ H. Benjafield challenged Mercer to define socialism,⁶⁷ while Fred Burbury, after attacking the bishop's wealth, suggested that his opposition to competition was neither justified by Christ in the New Testament nor exhibited in Mercer's own achievement of episcopal distinction.⁶⁸ Some of the fury was undoubtedly generated by the fact that the Fisher federal Labor government was at the time seeking by referenda to extend Commonwealth powers over a wide area, including control of corporations, monopolies, and labour.

Mercer was constrained to reply to his critics, especially Captain de Hoghton. He claimed that because there had been so many misrepresentations and mis-statements of his position, the issues were almost impossible to unravel. Once again he insisted that the best socialist doctrines were in harmony with Christianity, and that his task was to

end the alliance of socialism, representing half the people, with rationalism. He demanded controversy based on 'unbiased study and social sympathy', regretting de Hoghton's 'mischievous' epithet. On the contrary, the bishop found de Hoghton's views under present conditions 'mischievous'.⁶⁹ Mercer was giving as good as he received, but the strain of meeting such personal criticism must have begun to tell. A supporter suggested that the bishop was 'presumably sufficiently pachydermatous' not to feel the Tasmanian rubs, but this may not have been entirely the case.⁷⁰ In early 1912, Mercer's complaint that women's wages were half those of men and that the cost of living was much higher in Tasmania than in England, was repudiated by an anonymous *Mercury* correspondent as 'grossly rash mis-statements. Unfortunately, this is on a par with other statements made by the same gentleman'.⁷¹ A few weeks before his final departure from Tasmania in March 1914, Dr W.E. Bottrill in the *Daily Post* dismissed a Mercer lecture on co-operation as illogical and his suggestion that property be distributed according to goodness as 'too childish for contempt'. He evoked a carefully-reasoned reply from the bishop.⁷²

Such high profile controversy could not be continued indefinitely. Regardless of the effectiveness of his arguments, his inexhaustible reserve of energy, and his support from many unaccustomed quarters, Mercer probably felt that by 1912 he had done his duty in stirring the somewhat sluggish consciences of the Tasmanian upper classes and demonstrating to the workers that Anglicanism still had some meaning in their lives. It was time for a change of bowling from tearaway speed to subtle spin, preferably in the form of a local Australian bishop. Mercer, moreover, was probably tiring of his existence as a bachelor bishop; he remarried two years after leaving Tasmania. By 1912 his maturing daughters cannot have found life too comfortable with such a controversial father.

Mercer was not prepared to bow out quietly; he reaffirmed his political opinions at the farewell meeting at the Hobart Town Hall. When Captain de Hoghton himself thanked Mercer on behalf of the Anglican laity, his action neatly epitomised the bishop's difficulties in the diocese. Mercer was too honest to ignore this fact and too adroit not to turn it to advantage. 'It was astonishing to him to see friends on the platform that evening speaking so kindly of him when they knew very well that they had said, "What a tremendous lot of damage that bishop of ours has done!"' It demonstrated, said Mercer, the kindness of the human heart and the ability of opponents to respect his sincerity. He admitted the rows that de Hoghton had mentioned, but

claimed that all had been better friends subsequently. There were, he affirmed, no rows in church.⁷³ This was all very plain speaking, which must have made many of the bishop's hearers shift uncomfortably on their Town Hall seats.

In Mercer's final statement of personal principle at the Town Hall he did little, however, to satisfy friends on the left and enemies on the right who had persistently demanded an unambiguous declaration. Mercer again affirmed that 'he was not a Socialist, but he was a Christian Socialist, in trying to look at everything in the light of the life and death of our Lord, and ask what he would have done under the circumstances. (Applause)'. Although this was a noble affirmation, it begged a number of questions. Was Christian Socialism definitely opposed to 'Socialism', or was it merely a variant form? If Christian Socialism was totally different from real 'Socialism', why all the criticism of Mercer? To answer these questions a more detailed analysis of Mercer's position is required.

In an earlier paper, I endeavoured to place Mercer in perspective by postulating models based on the difference between the social views of Plato and Aristotle.⁷⁴ It was suggested that Plato's *Republic* represented an all-out transformation of society to abolish private property among the guardian class and thus ensure devotion to the public good, while Aristotle emphasised the ideal of private property modified by the ideal of individual trusteeship for the benefit of the community. Mercer, who not infrequently quoted Aristotle, was seen as an advocate of the latter philosophy. He understood Socialism in an Aristotelian sense of a moral or religious appeal to the divine spark in imperfect man, not as a system for perfecting secular men by establishing an ideal terrestrial environment. Mercer's Christian Socialism was shown in the earlier paper to have been very typical of moderate English CSU thinking, and hence not very original.

A new look at Mercer confirms the basic Aristotelian framework. Interestingly enough, many of his ideas were close to the 'distributism' of Belloc and Chesterton, which, via the 1931 Encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, produced the original philosophy of the Australian Catholic Social Movement, subsequently Santamaria's National Civic Council.⁷⁵ The essential feature of this social philosophy was that it opposed both laissez-faire capitalism and outright socialism. Instead it sought a middle ground, emphasising, with Aristotle (absorbed into Catholic thought by St Thomas Aquinas) the state as a moral entity. This fact helps to explain why Mercer attracted such fire from the right

without winning the complete endorsement of the left for this ideology.

In Manchester, Mercer worked in the very heartland of laissez-faire capitalism, discovering in the slums of Gorton its seamiest side. From his earliest days in Tasmania, the bishop showed his theoretical and practical abhorrence of 'Manchester' economic man. He attacked the 'wages fund' theory which suggested that government intervention could never raise wages above their natural level.⁷⁶ As a corollary, he also repudiated as being like a man-eating tiger, the existing competitive system, which was used to justify the poverty and misery of the exploited victims of capitalism. He believed, with Aristotle, that remuneration should be in accordance with personal worth.⁷⁷ This 'distributism' raised eyebrows on the left. Mercer was affirming individualistic values: he repeatedly denied that human beings were naturally equal, and demanded only equality of opportunity as opposed to the predominance of hereditary wealth or influence. Again, Mercer accepted the importance of private property for individual use and development, but not monopoly capitalism. Like Aristotle and Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*, he considered that property had duties as well as rights.⁷⁸ Far from advocating class war, the bishop wanted class co-operation and a form of arbitration in which workers and employers would meet on equal terms, the former being represented by effective trade unions which would avoid strike action.⁷⁹ True equality he believed could only be based on the brotherhood of man according to the common fatherhood of God. Insofar as socialism worked towards such a brotherhood, Mercer considered it within the Christian tradition.⁸⁰

But the bishop repudiated 'economic socialism',⁸¹ by which he seems to have meant Marxism, with its emphasis on the inevitability of class war. Despite an occasional identification of Marxism with secularised Christianity, class war was more clearly associated with unbelief. Nevertheless, Mercer on at least one occasion came close to the class war idea, so far removed from Aristotelian 'trusteeship', when he annoyed the *Mercury* by declaring that the artisan outlook differed as much from the capitalist's as the poet's from the merchant's.⁸² Similarly, Mercer almost accepted the ultimate Marxist ideal of from each according to his ability, to each according to his need. Like a true scholar, the bishop was prepared on occasion to follow ideas wherever they led. On social matters, he was able to associate himself with Shaftesbury's lament, 'sinners are with me, saints against me'.⁸³

Moreover, in declaring that he had no fears about the sort of socialism preached in the British Empire,⁸⁴ Mercer showed his grasp of the fact that Australian Labor was fundamentally moderate and had very little, if any, Marxist tinge. Metin's 'socialism without doctrines' probably illustrated, despite some occasional radical talk in the *Clipper*, Mercer's own perception of the Australian Labor scene. Nevertheless, it is significant that the bishop never expressed a desire for a Labor parliamentary majority, but rather sufficient MPs to balance the representatives of the upper classes. How he reconciled this opinion with the existing Westminster two-party system is undisclosed; possibly he looked forward to some system of power sharing among small groups elected by proportional representation.⁸⁵

On one very important issue Mercer's views chimed exactly with the actual philosophy of Australian Labor in the first decade of this century. 'White Australia', or race war not class war, was the foremost plank of Labor policy at this time. The issue was technically an economic problem relating to cheap labour undercutting Australian standards, but a cursory glance at the files of the radical *Clipper* demonstrate the crudest racist thought. Religion was turned against the Melbourne Council of Churches by the assertion that men were equal only as Christians.⁸⁶ Despite the existence of contemporary Australian clergymen who, like the Rev. H. Worrall (Methodist, Melbourne), asserted that racism was unchristian, Mercer was quite definite in his opinions, speaking publicly not only of the low wage dangers of Asian migration, but also of the Chinese as a people lacking the individualism he considered so important in his own race.⁸⁷ In fairness to Mercer, it must be remembered that these views were common in his day, and the advocates of cheap coloured labour were right-wing politically. The bishop did praise the rites and ceremonies of the Chinese religion, probably meaning Confucianism.⁸⁸

Mercer was, however, able to denounce the destruction of the Tasmanian aborigines,⁸⁹ and had very modern-sounding views on another oppressed group, Australian women. He insisted that the latter had been forced to conform to men's ideas of what they should be, but looked to a day when anti-female prejudice was abandoned; a woman, like a man, 'should have free play for the development of all that is in her'.⁹⁰ Mercer also supported trade unions for women, arguing that their absence in Australia explained why women's wages were half those of men.⁹¹ In the light of this broadmindedness, it is a pity that his views on race failed to rise above the level of his own day.

Mercer had not accepted Aristotle's derogatory views on women, but seems to have almost agreed with the Stagirite's justification of slavery as based on the natural differences between races.⁹² The bishop should not have done so as he had lamented that Aristotle's 'magnanimous man' was too selfish to consider the poor, weak, despised and helpless.⁹³

Apart from his narrowed vision on race, Mercer's scholarly willingness to argue every issue to its ultimate conclusion makes it difficult to dismiss him as a moderate social reformer seeking to interpose the CSU between Capital and Labour. On a number of fundamental issues, his liberal theology, argumentative penetration, and practical experience defy classification. Was he a 'perplexed philosopher' or a 'most skilful steersman'⁹⁴? For example, his position as a church dignitary would seem to have encouraged him to inject a certain otherworldliness into his social preaching. Yet Mercer ironically repudiated such tactics. 'My dear brother, it is so hard. I have £10,000 and you ask me for a copper. It will be all right up there; just you wait'. But elsewhere Mercer insisted that without belief in God, the wolf's policy of grab all would be the only rational attitude on earth.⁹⁵ Again, it seems reasonable to assume that Mercer repudiated the all-out 'Platonic' socialism which sought to establish a secular heaven on earth because, like many articulate Catholics, he believed Original Sin to stand in the way of terrestrial perfection of man. Yet Mercer's modern theology rejected the doctrine of Original Sin, traceable in a form to Aristotle, as it repudiated the doctrine of the Atonement as an 'unnatural horror'.⁹⁶ Thus theological considerations hardly prevented Mercer from openly accepting the full socialist ideal, had he wished to do so. Other English CSU men, it is true, rejected otherworldliness and original sin.

The bishop was in fact willing to tackle with remarkable frankness the fundamental philosophical and theological issues of the existence of evil in the world of an omnipotent God, freewill versus determinism, and the related debate on environment as opposed to individual character. On the existence of evil, Mercer admitted his own difficulties on seeing a fisherman drowned off Normandy. He rejected the idea of God as a tyrannical Calvinist deity, believing His plan for the Universe humane if as yet unrevealed.⁹⁷ Similarly, his seven years in an English slum so bad that he dared not describe it to Tasmanian churchgoers, led the bishop to muse on the relative importance of environment and character. On drink, gambling, and housing his

views were balanced. 'Do slums make the slum population, or do the slum population make the slums?' He concluded that it was six one way and half a dozen the other. Slums, the bishop insisted, must go, but he believed that medical evidence reinforced his experience that certain twisted personalities found slums a congenial home, while in the midst of 'awful surroundings' he had found clean and moral homes. Thus on 'the oldest and gravest of all moral problems', freedom of the will, Mercer rejected 'limp fatalism' in favour of the inspiring conclusion that 'the whole story of civilisation' was 'but one of man's gradual conquest of his environment'. In thus repudiating extreme environmentalists and free will advocates, Mercer approached a form of Platonic socialism which envisaged at least the possibility of a heaven, if not a secular heaven, on earth.⁹⁸

Mercer reached towards this ultimate socialist ideal in a lecture, 'Is Socialism Anti-Christian?' to the Denison WPL branch in April 1911. Appropriately, it aroused the bitter opposition of men like Captain de Hoghton. Although there is some discrepancy between the accounts given in the *Mercury* and the *Labor Daily Post*, the main outlines are clear.⁹⁹ It is significant that the *Mercury* in a leader, 'Socialism and Cooperation', published two days after its report of the lecture, asserted, without mentioning the bishop by name, that all socialist systems from Plato to Robert Owen had proved failures. Plato was criticised for rejecting the orthodox family.¹⁰⁰

Mercer had begun in an orthodox fashion, asserting his non-party status and belief that the Christian Socialism of Bishop Westcott was the real thing. However, he fully accepted the spirit of socialism as opposed to its politics. He went on to claim that in its ideal form socialism was not against property, the family, or individualism. His definition of the socialist demand evoked the applause of the Labor supporters present: 'Let us gradually get all the means of production into the hands of the public for the public good, and let everybody after doing a reasonable amount of work, spend the money he gets as he likes, and let everybody have his or her private property as at the time'. Socialists, he declared, did not want an equal distribution of property, but a division between public and private property.

From this lecture and the foregoing discussion, it is clear that Mercer could move, slowly and fitfully, beyond the extremely paternal social reformism of many CSU men. Although he rejected the Marxist class struggle as a means, the bishop looked ultimately towards a genuinely socialist society, from which monopoly capitalism had been exorcised. True, the bishop still feared the tyranny of the state, but

counterbalanced it with a system of workers' co-operatives or guilds. When challenged on this point by a critic who complained that his advocacy of class co-operation was inconsistent with his desire to abolish capitalism, Mercer replied that co-operation was a temporary palliative only.¹⁰¹ Mercer often agreed not only with the distributists of the Chesterton-Belloc school, but also with English guild socialists such as G.D.H. Cole, regarded as being on the left of the British Labour party. As far as Australian Labor is concerned, it is doubtful whether it has ever aspired beyond the ideals of Bishop Mercer. Despite all the rhetoric on socialisation objectives, the ALP has never aimed at more than the nationalisation of dangerous monopolies, if that. Mercer's 1911 version, regardless of his own disclaimers, appears the more developed socialism of a Christian rather than the moral trusteeship ideal of Aristotelian Christian Socialists. Indeed, unless the critic argued from a consistent Marxism, it is difficult to see how Mercer's socialism could be seriously challenged in the Australian Labor movement. There was certainly some fuzziness about the edges of his ideology, but this was equally true of all Tasmanian Labor leaders, many of whom asserted that they represented the whole community, not a single class.

To sum up, Mercer's Tasmanian experience appears to have marginally increased the radicalism originally stimulated by the fetid slums of Gorton. The really important issue, however, was not the effect of the Tasmanian environment on Mercer, but the bishop's contribution to changing Tasmania. Did he play a significant part in the growth of the local Labor party from virtually nothing to the government of the State in the year of his departure? The answer must be that he did. There was a defeatism among the Tasmanian workers, extinguished, after considerable assistance from the mainland, by the establishment, despite several failures, of a viable Labor party. The presence of a 'socialistic' bishop could not but have been a keen incentive to worker effort. More speculatively, the bishop's early encouragement, especially when supported by his Catholic opposite number, Archbishop Delany, may have helped to provide the basis for an exceptionally moderate social reformism; Mercer's views being as radical as those of the average Labor supporter, there was less incentive to move towards Marxism. As for the upper classes, Mercer appears to have been initially less successful in persuading them that Anglicanism must not turn away from the demand of the poor for a place at the feast of life. His most controversial actions, the service for

the Labor conference, the attack on Hobart society, the AMA membership, the Labor address on the wharf, the exposure of sweated seamstresses, and the readiness to debate with all and sundry, so disgusted and horrified the Anglican establishment as to render impossible Mercer's prolonged continuance of office. However, Mercer's own concluding opinion that the social atmosphere of Hobart was better than on his arrival a decade earlier, deserves to be taken seriously.¹⁰² The Labor *Daily Post's* claim that he 'democratised Tasmania during his stay amongst us', may be hyperbole but contains some truth.¹⁰³

So we may leave Mercer on the deck of RMS Osterley, about to carry him and his daughters back to Europe. One thousand people of all classes, who crowded onto the boat to shake their hero's hand and then from the pier waved hats and handkerchiefs in a last protracted farewell as the Osterley steamed down the Derwent,¹⁰⁴ passed a final judgment on an exceptional man. This was probably the bishop's finest hour.

But Mercer's career was not yet over. The bishop of Chester, Dr F.J. Jaynes, finding his strength failing, persuaded Mercer to take a resident canonry at Chester Cathedral and act as assistant bishop. From his induction in September 1916 until the arrival of a new bishop in the summer of 1919, Mercer appears to have been *de facto* bishop of Chester. In 1919, Mercer was also appointed archdeacon of Macclesfield, although he continued to reside in fashionable Hough Green, a few minutes' walk across the Dee from Chester Castle. The archdeaconry of Macclesfield gave Mercer a seat in Convocation and the Anglican National Assembly where he was active in debate. He remained a popular speaker on social issues and made friends in the British Labour party which, like its Tasmanian equivalent, was on the threshold of power.

Although personally prepared by his 1919 publication, *Why do we Die*,¹⁰⁵ Bishop Mercer's death in 1922 was a shock. As the new bishop of Chester, H.L. Paget, said, 'Surely we never knew anyone so vigorous, so many-sided, so wide and intense in his interests and enthusiasms as he'. Mercer's writings, sermons, lectures, and efficient administration were then in constant demand. He was a figure of true Renaissance proportions who deserves equal commemoration in two hemispheres.¹⁰⁶

Mercer's English career¹⁰⁶

In 1889, Edward Mercer became rector of St Michael's, Angel Meadow, Manchester. Despite its name, the parish was situated in the worst slum of the city. Friedrich Engels described it graphically in his first book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*; half a century later Mercer described it no less graphically in a paper to the Manchester Statistical Society (28/4/97). The future bishop saw it as a place of 'grinding poverty, of the lowest vices, of besotted drinking, of unrestrained licentiousness'. There was a rack renting of houses, 'old, dilapidated, insanitary, and infested with vermin'. The death rate was nearly ten times that of Manchester as a whole. Of the 54 houses on Angel Street, where his church was situated, Mercer assessed that all but eight were used by prostitutes or 'fallen women'. Children grew up so callous that he once found a family playing unconcernedly round their mother's body.

What could be done in such a parish? Mercer gave local children a flagged section of the graveyard, once an ancient plague cemetery, more recently a mass grave for local paupers. The rest of the churchyard became a park for older people. Although the church has gone, and the population replaced by dilapidated factories, the park and the playground with its incongruous cobblestones still remain for recreation, rest or meditation, a few hundred yards from the centre of modern Manchester. Inside the church Mercer had further problems. Church records show that although the population of the parish was then over 7,000, he rarely obtained ten communicants. Mercer therefore experimented with 'lantern' services which could, by use of the visual media of the day, attract 200-300 parishoners. The value of unorthodox preaching was not lost on the rector.

In 1897, Mercer was transferred to St James, Gorton, an industrial development area on the outskirts of Manchester. Unlike Angel Meadow, whose population was being eroded by railway yards and warehouses, Gorton was a growing, although still tough, working-class parish. The energy of Mercer and his wife was equal to the challenge. In sixteen months they established a new parish magazine, a parish council, a low subscription non-denominational social club, a mothers union, the largest Church Lads Brigade in Manchester, a branch of the Church Army, and a lawn tennis and croquet ground. The Mercers proved most efficient in raising money and a new boys school was erected. Edward Mercer used the parish magazine to write

amusing doggerel to celebrate church outings and attack local authorities for bad housing and inefficient by-laws. A successor summed up Mercer's contribution to Gorton in a 1922 obituary notice. His arrival was the 'beginning of a new epoch in the history of this Parish, and his remarkable energy enlivened a wondrous amount of life into everything'. Today St James, Gorton, is still the centre of a vigorous inter-denominational community group. In his farewell sermon, Mercer had emphasised 'the duty of the church to the poor'.

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- ⁴ *The Times*, London, 29 April 1922.
- ⁵ According to the *Examiner*, Launceston, 30 November 1903, 'a magnetic, almost a fascinating influence held the audience' when Mercer lectured on social equality in Waratah.
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- ⁹ Peter d'A. Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival, 1877-1914: Religion, Class, and Social Conscience in Late Victorian England*, Princeton, 1968, p. 197.
- ¹⁰ *Examiner*, 2 September 1902.
- ¹¹ According to the Rev. Charles Vaughan at the Synod: 'A Bishop coming direct from England with set ideas was under disadvantages, finding it hard to grasp from the outset the Australian spirit, and methods of working the Australian Church'. *Mercury*, 10 April 1913.
- ¹² See *Mercury*, 2 October 1902, for critic claiming that Bishop Montgomery brought the church to 'The bedrock of disorganisation'. On alleged instruction of Prebendary Bevan, 2 September 1902. See also *Examiner*, 29 August, 10 and 12 September 1902.
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- ¹⁵ *Mercury*, 27 June 1913.
- ¹⁶ *Clipper*, 24 July 1909 (criticism) and *Mercury*, 9 February 1912 (Mercer presides).
- ¹⁷ *Mercury*, 27 February 1914.
- ¹⁸ The new Christ College buildings were opened by his successor.
- ¹⁹ See Mercer's 1913 charge to the Anglican synod, reported in *Mercury*, 9 April 1913. In his 10 years as bishop, the number of clergy rose from 73 to 100, 16 new parishes were established, and 34 churches built.
- ²⁰ *Examiner*, 12 September 1902.
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- ⁵⁷ Charles Russen, a Primitive Methodist biscuit maker, said this when supporting the bill in the Legislative Council, *Daily Post*, 3 September 1910.
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- ⁶⁰ *Mercury*, 13 January 1913. In a sub-leader it confirmed the announcement it had made some months earlier.
- ⁶¹ *Mercury*, 9 April 1913.
- ⁶² *Mercury*, 29 June and 1 and 6 July 1912.
- ⁶³ *Mercury*, 12 July 1912.
- ⁶⁴ *Clipper*, 25 July 1908. It demonstrated that the bishop was rejecting the creation, the fall, and the atonement. See his 1908 Lenten addresses at Trinity Hill Church, published in *The Spiritual Evolution of the World and the Race*, Hobart (Citizen Office), 1908, pp. 56, 7, 22 and 36, for Mercer's insistence on unbroken evolution and rejection of original sin and the atonement.
- ⁶⁵ See Duncan Murphy reviewing Mercer's Moorehouse Lectures, *The Soul of Progress* in *Clipper*, 11 April 1908. 'Sometimes he jumps, *per saltum*, to a conclusion'. Mercer's writing was adjudged clear till he become mystic.
- ⁶⁶ *Mercury*, 19 April 1911.
- ⁶⁷ *Mercury*, 11 April 1911.
- ⁶⁸ *Mercury*, 15 April 1911.
- ⁶⁹ *Mercury*, 24 April 1911.
- ⁷⁰ *Mercury*, 21 April 1911.
- ⁷¹ *Mercury*, 10 February, 1912.
- ⁷² *Daily Post*, 31 January and 2 February 1914.
- ⁷³ *Mercury*, 17 February 1914.
- ⁷⁴ R.P. Davis, 'Christian Socialism in Tasmania, 1890-1920', *Journal of Religious History*, Sydney, June 1972, pp. 51-68.
- ⁷⁵ See B.A. Santamaria, *Against the Tide*, Melbourne, 1981, p.16. Santamaria praises Belloc's *Servile State*, but claims that the influence of Belloc and Chesterton on him was indirect.
- ⁷⁶ For abhorrence of economic individualism of Adam Smith and John Bright, see Mercer on 'Modern Competition', reported in *Zeehan and Dundas Herald*, 25 November 1903. He went on to outline distributive justice. For criticism of 'wage fund theory', see 'A few thoughts on Wages' to Hobart WPL branch, reported in *Clipper*, 31 July 1909.

- ⁷⁷ *Daily Post*, 2 February 1914. For tiger see *Zeehan and Dundas Herald*, 25 November 1903.
- ⁷⁸ Paul VI, *Encyclical Letter on the Development of Peoples*, 26 March 1967. ACTS Publications, Melbourne, 1967, pp. 12-13 for priority of common good over property rights. The section criticising Liberal Capitalism (pp. 13-14) was also close to Mercer.
- ⁷⁹ Mercer suggested, 'A few thoughts on Wages' (*Clipper*, 31 July 1909) that 'universal unionism would be the greatest reform', but argued at a Hobart Peace Society meeting (*Mercury*, 9 February 1912) that strikes sometimes required military intervention. It was, he believed, a paradox that socialism, favouring international peace, sometimes caused internal war.
- ⁸⁰ In an address to a SCM conference at Brown's River (*Mercury*, 6 January 1913) argued strongly that this sort of brotherhood would lead to 'goodwill socialism'.
- ⁸¹ See *Clipper*, 23 April 1904, commenting on Mercer's remarks to a general diocesan meeting at the Town Hall.
- ⁸² *Mercury*, 9 May 1912 (leader on Mercer's 1912 charge to synod, *Mercury*, 8 May 1912).
- ⁸³ *C & T*, p. 14.
- ⁸⁴ *C & T*, p. 12.
- ⁸⁵ See, for example, Mercer's lecture on 'Modern Competition', *Zeehan and Dundas Herald*, 25 November 1903. Neither Labor nor capital, he claimed, was fit to rule alone, but required a reasonable representation of each.
- ⁸⁶ The Rev. H. Worrall, was ridiculed as the leading advocate of a 'piebald Australian in these parts'. *Clipper*, 4 February 1905, similarly the erudite Hobart public librarian, A.J. Taylor, was dismissed as 'a piebald Australian', *Clipper*, 19 December 1903. The Labor leader, John Earle, referred to the Chinese and Lascars as 'undesirable humanity', *Zeehan and Dundas Herald*, 14 December 1903. An Indian was described as a 'three-parts nigger', *Clipper*, 20 April 1907 (Barman). Melbourne Council of Churches, *Clipper*, 10 August 1907.
- ⁸⁷ *Zeehan and Dundas Herald*, 25 November 1905; *Clipper*, 31 July 1909, *Mercury*, 3 February 1912.
- ⁸⁸ *Clipper*, 3 July 1909.
- ⁸⁹ *C & T*, p. 5.
- ⁹⁰ *C & T*, pp. 14 and 15.
- ⁹¹ *Mercury*, 3 February 1912.
- ⁹² Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. B. Jowett, Oxford University Press, 1942, p. 34 (Bk 1, 6, 7-9). 'The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior, and the one rules and the other is ruled.' 'The lower sort are by nature slaves.'
- ⁹³ *C & T*, p. 11. Mercer contrasted Aristotle with Christ.
- ⁹⁴ *Clipper*, 13 August 1904 (Steersman).
- ⁹⁵ *Clipper*, 5 January 1907.

- ⁹⁶ *The Spiritual Evolution of the World and the Race*, pp. 22 and 36. See also J.E. Mercer, *The Science of Life and the Larger Hope*, London, 1910, pp. 159-193, for a more detailed treatment.
- ⁹⁷ See Mercer's sermon on the Queensland Cyclone, *Examiner*, 15 June 1903.
- ⁹⁸ *C & T*, pp. 24-5.
- ⁹⁹ *Mercury* and *Daily Post*, 10 April 1911.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Mercury*, 12 April 1911.
- ¹⁰¹ Dr W.E. Bottrill, *Daily Post*, 31 January 1914, and Mercer's reply, 2 February 1914.
- ¹⁰² *Mercury*, 9 March 1914.
- ¹⁰³ *Daily Post*, 14 February 1914.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Mercury*, 16 March 1914.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Why do we Die? An Essay on Thanatology*, London, 1919.
- ¹⁰⁶ For Mercer's English career, the following sources have been used: *Manchester Diocesan Directory*, London (annual); *Register of Services — St Michael's Church, Angel Meadow, 1 Nov. 1888 - 1 Dec. 1895* (M330/2/5/2 Manchester Diocesan Archives, Manchester Public Library); J.E. Mercer, *The Conditions of Life in Angel Meadow*, Manchester, 1897; *Gorton Parish Magazine*, 1891-1903 and 1921-2 (at present in St James's Church, Gorton); *Chester Diocesan Gazette*, 1916-22.