Introduction

The ninety-eighth Primate of All England, William Temple, died in 1944, and the following year Winston Churchill named Geoffrey Fisher as his successor in the Chair of St. Augustine of Canterbury. The prime minister's choice proved controversial, however, because another man, Bishop George Bell of Chichester, looked to many the wiser appointment. What was indisputable was the severity of the challenges that the new archbishop would face. The Second World War would soon be over, and then the mammoth project of rebuilding would commence in earnest. For both the church and the nation, this effort of reconstruction would be spiritual as well as material.

Out of the Ruins

Few if any historians could evoke the postwar mood or depict the moral and physical ruins of civilization as effectively as the English novelist Rose Macaulay in her 1950 novel, *The World My Wilderness*, set in the years just following World War II.[1] In this book the author expresses in a clear and moving way her fears about the future of British society. This novel, she said, "is about the ruins of the City [the business center of London], and the general wreckage of the world that they seem to stand for. And about a rather lost and strayed and derelict girl who made them her spiritual home."[2]

Although only seventeen (and the daughter of a King's Counsel), this central figure, Barbary, is already barbarous: wild, intractable, given to acts of defiance and petty theft. "'Civilised . . .' Barbary seemed to examine civilisation, balancing it gravely, perhaps wistfully, against something else, and to reject it, as if it were mentioned too late" (33). The child of a broken home, during the war she had lived in the South of France with her beautiful, intelligent, idle, pleasure-loving mother, whose notion of parental love did not entail a heavy investment in adult supervision.

1. Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness;* hereinafter cited within the text.
2. Macaulay, *Letters to a Friend, 1950–1952*, 27.

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As a member of a band of boys and girls assisting the Maquis during the Occupation, Barbary was brutally and far too rapidly transformed from a child of innocence into a child of experience. After the war, living in London, she remains somewhat of an anarchist, preferring to live amid "the ruined waste lands . . . the broken walls and foundations . . . the roofless, gaping churches, the stone flights of stairs climbing high into emptiness" (61). These places, she feels, are where she belongs: at "the waste margins of civilisation . . . , where other outcasts lurked, and questions were not asked" (110).

In this novel, Rose Macaulay is shining the light of her torch on the spiritual wreckage of postwar Britain—on the desolate areas of both cities and souls that leaders such as Geoffrey Fisher would have to search out and tend to. In a violent and treacherous world, one that bears a growing resemblance to a moral wasteland, Macaulay is asking: How many Barbarys might we be producing? How many children may be growing up too fast, lacking adequate care and security, and hence rootless, sullen, suspicious, and defiant? This novel is full of compassion toward all of its characters, but especially toward Barbary, who, as one literary scholar wrote in summarizing the author's attitude toward her creation, "is thoroughly lost, thoroughly pathetic, and very much worth saving."[3]

Toward the end of *The World My Wilderness*, Macaulay appears to raise a final question: Does the church have a role to play in this work of rebuilding? While Barbary's only religious belief is "in hell" (174), her half-brother Richie—who fought in the war, endured three years in a German POW camp, escaped, and now desires only the beauty and refinement of "aristocratic culture" (150)—is drawn to the church. But the lure appears to be largely aesthetic and nostalgic: "In this pursuit he was impelled sometimes beyond his reasoning self, to grasp at the rich . . . panoplies, the swinging censors, of churches from whose creeds and uses he was alien, because at least they embodied some continuance, some tradition" (150).

In the last pages of the novel, however, Richie literally takes steps toward the church, possibly reflecting a deeper quest for order and meaning in his life and in the lives of others. Fully conscious of the barbarian threat ("the primeval chaos and old night"), he murmurs to himself T. S. Eliot's words from *The Wasteland*: "We are in rats' alleys, where the dead men lost their bones" (253). Then, "[s]huddering a little, he took the track across the wilderness and towards St. Paul's [Cathedral]. Behind him, the questionable chaos of broken courts and inns lay sprawled under

3. Webster, *After the Trauma,* 27.

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the October mist, and the shells of churches gaped like lost myths, and the jungle pressed in on them, seeking to cover them up" (253–54).

What the church received with the appointment of Geoffrey Fisher to the see of Canterbury was, at the very least, a man of strength, discipline, and tenacity—indeed, a former headmaster—who would not readily submit to either primeval or ecclesiastical chaos. Everything that he did was connected to the service of one overriding goal: building up the church, and thereby enlarging the clearing in the wilderness.

A Pivotal Archiepiscopate

Overshadowed both by his famous predecessor, the philosopher and ecumenist William Temple, and by his widely loved successor, the theologian and spiritual guide Michael Ramsey, Geoffrey Francis Fisher (1887–1972), ninety-ninth archbishop of Canterbury, has largely been ignored by professional historians. But in fact his was a pivotal archiepiscopate, one that cries out for fresh examination. The problems and initiatives of his tenure anticipated the major events in Anglican church history and theology in the decades that followed.

Fisher's period in office began and ended with the bridge-building work of ecumenism. Preaching at Cambridge in 1946, he urged the Church of England and the Free Churches to work toward establishing "full communion": sharing the sacraments with one another but stopping short of complete union. And in 1960, at the end of his tenure in office, Fisher embarked on a tour that included stops in Jerusalem, Istanbul, and Rome. His meeting with Pope John XXIII marked the first time that an archbishop of Canterbury had visited the Holy See since Archbishop Thomas Arundel undertook the journey in 1397.

Fisher was also the key person in building up the modern Anglican Communion. In the 1950s his trips to West Africa, Central Africa, and East Africa were major parts of his successful effort to establish new provinces within the Communion. Indeed, his work anticipated the transformation of the British Empire from a far-flung imperial domain into a commonwealth of equal states. His frequent visits to Canada and the United States, coupled with his efforts to include the American bishops and others in the deliberations of the Lambeth Conference, helped to make the Anglican Communion an experienced reality for many Anglicans and Episcopalians outside Britain.

Of particular interest, too, is the relationship between the Church of England and the nation. The senior prelate whom millions of people

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around the world watched as he conducted the coronation ceremony for Queen Elizabeth II in June 1953, Fisher has been referred to as the last great Establishment archbishop of Canterbury. After him, British society and the churches were forced to change, responding to increased immigration, religious pluralism, and secularization. Worthy of attention are such subjects as Fisher's intervention in the Suez Crisis, his involvement in debates on the use of atomic weapons, and his understanding of the role of the Church of England within the larger society. It is important to discern the positive as well as the negative aspects of establishment. A key to Fisher might well be his strong sense of the pervasive responsibility of the Established Church within English society. This commitment influenced not only his responses (sometimes supportive, often critical) to government initiatives but also his understanding of the place of the Church of England in relation to the other churches.

Fisher's time in London, first as bishop of London (1939–45) and then as archbishop of Canterbury, was a period of war, devastation, and rebuilding in the capital city and the nation. How well did Fisher prepare the Church of England for what followed? What were the strengths and weaknesses of his approach to the task of fortifying the church—and the Anglican Communion—for the future? What were his personal strengths and weaknesses as a leader for this crucial time in the history of Christian institutions?

This Fisher-shaped time of both reconstruction and fresh initiatives was a bridge period for the church. One aspect of his work that should attract our attention is not only what an archbishop of Canterbury can do during such a time but also what he chooses not to do. The Cambridge theologian Donald MacKinnon was one of those who regretted that George Bell, bishop of Chichester, did not succeed Temple at Canterbury in 1944–45. Certainly Fisher lacked Bell's adventurous spirit, but it is interesting to see what an administrator of Fisher's ability is able to accomplish. Part of that work undoubtedly has to do with working hard to bring about conditions within which other men and women, who possess different gifts, can flourish.

This biography is intended to be a thought-provoking examination of an important figure in a transitional era. At the same time, this book will offer a balanced portrait: Fisher's tendency as archbishop to play the rule-oriented headmaster, his emphasis on administration rather than on theology and spirituality, and his lack of personal charisma undercut his long-term impact. A fresh review of Fisher's virtues and deficiencies as an ecclesiastical statesman is needed.

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Geoffrey Fisher's tenure represents a distinctive approach to the office. His was not only a particularly significant archiepiscopate, one in which the central issues of his time and place are reflected. It was also a tenure that emphasized the archbishop as chief executive of a large and complex organization. Fisher personified one major way of inhabiting his role: the archbishop as administrator.

Through his example, then, we can gain some perspective on both the positive and the negative features of this archiepiscopal modus operandi, both in his own day and for succeeding generations. Being a highly competent administrator means more than being an efficient manager. It requires thoughtful strategic planning as well as day-to-day administration. But this style of leadership may result in a loss of personal stature, influence, and memorability if the archbishop's focus is largely on structure rather than on qualities of mind and spirit: if, in other words, the archbishop is not also known—and effective—as an intellectual force, a social prophet, or a wise spiritual teacher. The subject of this biography does suggest an irony: Geoffrey Fisher may well have been a more competent archbishop than either his successor or his predecessor, but somehow they are the ones whom later generations are more likely to remember.

The Plan of This Book

Unlike the two earlier, book-length treatments of Fisher's life and career, this biography is much shorter. Especially compared with Edward Carpenter's massive, 800-page account, the present work more closely resembles a sketch of the life or simply a long introduction. It is more likely to give the reader a sense of the forest than a detailed acquaintance with all the flora and fauna. For that reason, however, this narrative may be more useful to beginning researchers and more accessible to anyone seeking an overview of the principal contours of this archbishop's life-story. Further details may be found not only in Carpenter's *Archbishop Fisher* but also in the specialized journal literature and in the 400 boxes of Fisher Papers in the Lambeth Palace Library, in London.

This book consists of seven brief chapters:

Chapter 1, "Formation: 1887–1932," discusses Fisher's family background, education, early career as a schoolmaster, and his long tenure as headmaster of Repton (where he succeeded William Temple in 1914). This chapter looks at the influence of his family and upbringing, and it focuses on Fisher's years as headmaster, an experience that undoubtedly shaped his approach to episcopal office.

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Chapter 2, "Chester and London: 1932–1945," begins with Fisher's service as bishop of Chester and then takes up his tenure in a key post in the Church of England. In 1939 he became bishop of London, bringing effective oversight to a diocese that had been poorly administered for many years. This chapter offers a look at Fisher's role as the head of a committee for pastoral reorganization necessitated by war damage, at his work as chairman of the Archbishops' War Committee, at his effort to impose some ecclesiastical order in his diocese by issuing regulations on ritual conformity, and at his ecumenical participation with Roman Catholics in the Sword of the Spirit movement.

The heart of this book, chapters 3 through 6, provides an account of Fisher's tenure as the spiritual head of the Anglican Communion. His tenure of office comprised the crucial years from the end of the Second World War to the beginning of the 1960s. For these four chapters taken as a whole, the principle of organization is both topical and topographical, for these chapters are presented in the order of widening concentric circles of archiepiscopal activity: the Church of England, the Anglican Communion, other Christian communions, and the world beyond the church.

Chapter 3, "Archbishop of Canterbury, 1945–1961: The Church of England," begins with the story of Fisher's selection by Prime Minister Winston Churchill to succeed William Temple as archbishop of Canterbury. This chapter examines Fisher's attention to canon-law revision, his response to the controversial case of Bishop Barnes and his book *The Rise of Christianity*, and his establishment of the Church Commissioners.

Chapter 4, "Archbishop of Canterbury, 1945–1961: The Anglican Communion," reviews Fisher's activity on behalf of the worldwide Anglican Communion. The 99th archbishop of Canterbury worked hard to strengthen ties with American Episcopalians, and he successfully led two Lambeth Conferences (1948 and 1958). His efforts to establish autonomous provinces in Africa had particularly important results. This chapter briefly discusses Fisher's appointment of Bishop Stephen F. Bayne as executive officer of the Anglican Communion.

Chapter 5, "Archbishop of Canterbury, 1945–1961: Ecumenical Outreach," considers Fisher's vigorous labors on behalf of Christian unity. It describes the ecumenical efforts made during his archiepiscopate, beginning with his Cambridge sermon on reunion. It then discusses Fisher's involvement with the World Council of Churches, which he served as chairman at its inauguration in 1948. This chapter concludes with Fisher's historic trip to Jerusalem, Istanbul, and Rome.

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Chapter 6, "Archbishop of Canterbury, 1945–1961: Church and State," begins with a discussion of ecclesiastical establishment. It then examines Fisher's involvement in debates concerning premium bonds, the Suez Crisis, and nuclear weapons. A look at Fisher's participation in the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II rounds off the chapter.

Chapter 7, "Retirement: 1961–1972," sketches Fisher's activities in retirement as a curate in the village of Trent in Dorset and as an active participant in the debate over Anglican-Methodist reunion. This chapter includes a discussion of leadership and ends with an assessment of Fisher's strengths and weaknesses.

Facing the Future

For most people in the United Kingdom, life at the end of the Fisher era at Lambeth looked very different from the way it did at the inception of his archiepiscopate. Probably to many outside observers the Church of England did not seem to change very much in the traditionalist 1950s, but no one could fail to remark that society as a whole was undergoing a significant transformation. In financial terms alone, the British people by 1961 were significantly better off than they had been in 1946, and they had reason to hope for continued gains. Greater purchasing power brought with it widespread access to labor-saving appliances as well as to automobiles and television sets. It was the beginning of a new, more prosperous era, with fewer restrictions and more freedom in all areas of life. But it was also an age that generated a fresh wave of anxieties about meaning, order, and security.

Published in 1950, Rose Macaulay's *The World My Wilderness* is very much a postwar novel. Published only six years later, her last book, *The Towers of Trebizond*, already anticipates the mood of the 1960s. Despite the seriousness of its leading themes, this later novel has a much jauntier tone than the earlier work, which is unremittingly bleak. And *Trebizond* presents the religious questions even more squarely. Indeed, its main subject is the relation of faith and doubt in this exciting but rather frightening new era, when new possibilities were beginning to open up and old patterns of life were breaking apart. The central character in the novel is a young woman named Laurie, who likens the Church of England to "a great empire on its way out, that holds its subjects by poetic force. . . . [T]hough for ever reeling, the towers [representing the church] do not fall . . . ."[4]

4. Macaulay, *The Towers of Trebizond,* 234. See Hein, "Faith and Doubt in Rose

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Upon leaving office and going into retirement, Geoffrey Fisher did not see the church as being "on its way out." He said, "I leave the Church of England in good heart."[5] But the historian and theologian Adrian Hastings raises an intriguing point when he observes that several women writers of this period—not only Rose Macaulay but also Barbara Pym (in *A Glass of Blessings*), Iris Murdoch (in *The Bell*), and Pamela Hansford Johnson (in *The Humbler Creation*)—were producing novels with a different (and more accurate?) take on contemporary Anglican life and the future of the Church of England.

The 1950s, Hastings writes, were a "rather Anglican decade, and Anglican of a benignly conservative hue." That's the Fisher era, reflected in each of these novels, where "the Church appears on the surface as a relatively prospering institution with a decidedly traditionalist orientation."[6] But in the view of all four of these novelists, "A Church apparently very much in business turns out in each case to be . . . worm-eaten. . . . [T]he impression given is one of a nice, rather ineffectual, socially respectable but bewildered rump not far off its last legs."[7]

Hastings intimates little by way of appraisal of these writers' impressions. At this point in his narrative, his contribution to ecclesiastical history is neither to endorse nor to oppose their views but simply to ferret out and to highlight these fictional accounts, giving his readers the opportunity to consider what truth might be contained therein. Within the limited terms of the present study, we might keep these novels in mind when we evaluate Geoffrey Fisher's record as archbishop of Canterbury.

Acknowledgments

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Macaulay's *The Towers of Trebizond*."

5. Quoted in Hastings, *A History of English Christianity, 1920–2000,* 452.
6. Ibid., 451–52.
7. Ibid., 452.

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