Miss Margaret Kiddie’s depiction of the Presbyterian squatters of Victoria’s Western District in *Men of Yesterday* purports to show, in the Tawney tradition, how easily Calvinist doctrines could be accommodated to capital practice. “These Presbyterians honestly believed themselves God’s chosen and that unshakeable belief was one of the factors making for their success. It was not long before worldly prosperity, the symbol of virtue, became of overmastering importance. Black illustrates how Calvinist doctrines could be accommodated to capitalist practice.” But what was the Calvinism of Victoria in the squatter era when Niel Black, Francis Ormond, J. D. Wyselaskie, and many another of the Western District squatters were encouraging the education of young Calvinist theologians by means of their newly acquired wealth? As Miss Kiddie skilfully depicts the elite of Western District squatterdom, we are frequently introduced to those claiming to be the spiritual sons of John Calvin in their everyday concerns of family and business. But who were the propagators of the Calvinist faith in the colony, and what did they teach? What was the relation between the doctrines propounded by the professors of the Presbyterian Church in Victoria and the practice of the rank and file members of the church, and was there any connection between Presbyterian belief and Western District capitalist practice?

Principal Adam Cairns was the first of a long line of Scottish Free Church theologians who were to be entrusted with the task of handing on the Calvinist theological traditions to the native born preachers who, after 1865, were gradually to become the principal source of Presbyterian ministers in Victoria. Not till the death of Professor D. S. Adam in 1925 did a man trained elsewhere than in the Scottish Free Church training colleges teach Systematic Theology in the Presbyterian Church of Victoria’s Theological Hall. Dr. Cairns, later to become Principal Cairns, was a veteran of the Scottish Disruption of 1843, when a large portion of the Established Church of Scotland broke away from the old state-supported church and set up their own religious institutions under the name of the Free Church of Scotland. Professor A. J. Campbell, who took over the teaching of Systematic Theology from Cairns and carried it through till the building of Ormond College and the appointment of the first two permanent professors in 1883, also suffered the anguish of having to break his ties with the “Auld Kirk” in 1843. The resolute and energetic Dr. Cairns, who was to be the principal spokesman for Presbyterianism in Victoria from 1853 at least up till 1870, with his voice ever ready to be raised on the public platform, from the pulpit, or through the press on such issues as the sailing of Pacific and Orient steamers on the sabbath, or marriage with a deceased wife’s sister, was a gift of the Disruption to Australia. Like many another physically exhausted Scottish theologian he came to Australia in search of health, and having recovered his strength he used it with considerable effect on the Victorian scene. To those of us who find it hard to conceive of a theologian being a force in public affairs, it may be of significance to note that in Dr. Cairns’ Chalmers Church there worshipped regularly such men as Premier McCullock and Mr. James Balfour. These men never found it easy to pay mere lip-service to the doctrines of their church as propounded by the courageous and resolute Dr. Cairns. I intend to discuss mainly the teachings of the Free Church teachers of theology in the colony, among
whom must be included Geelong’s T. M. Fraser as teacher of Christian Apologetic, these being the principal transmitters of the Calvinist tradition between 1859 and 1880, although other elements were represented slightly in the colony. The Free Church men represent the more conservative branch of Calvinism in the colony, and they had most influence in the Victorian Presbyterian Church in the squatter age. I intend to discuss the relationship of some of their main theological tenets to the social teaching which they expressed through the monthly “Christian Review” from 1864 to 1878, and in sermons, pamphlets and addresses on key topics from the early 1850’s, with the object of throwing some light on the long-debated question of a possible connection between Calvinist thought and capitalist practice, and particularly that suggested for Victoria’s squatter era.

Predestination has often been claimed to be a powerful driving force in the minds of Calvinists, their rise to wealth and respectability being supported by a firm belief that God is on their side in the attaining of worldly ends. 2 Certainly one can find evidence to support this in the moralistic snippets resembling the Old Testament’s wisdom literature, which appear in the popular Presbyterian press of the day. However it is always much more difficult to tie such vague popular ideas to the theological doctrine being taught at a given time. The problem of God’s sovereignty and man’s free will was one of the unresolved problems which continued to mystify and worry Presbyterians right through this period, and flared up into violent controversy after the “Strong Case” in the 1880’s. The Westminster Confession, which the Victorian Church resolutely maintained was its main standard of the faith, apart from the Bible which was interpreted according to the Confession’s understanding of inspiration, insisted on the eternal predestination of men by God to their appointed everlasting lot. At the same time other clauses insisted that all men were judged righteously, and that the doomed were condemned for their sins. Some contemporary theologians claimed to reconcile these two propositions without difficulty, others such as Fraser admitted there was a problem, 3 while the somewhat unphilosophical teacher of theology A. J. Campbell probably represented the majority when he said that such abstruse problems had not bothered the Lord Jesus during his worldly mission, so why should they bother his disciples? 4 But it is significant that while A. J. Campbell strove mightily to take the Gospel to all men in the belief that it was for all men, he did find a vague notion of predestination a comforting, if not a driving force, in his religious mission.

Likewise, despite the anti-capitalistic threats so uncompromisingly presented in the evangelical Calvinist religious teachings, it seems probable that some vague and distorted conception of God’s predestination supported some laymen in their more worldly missions. 6 They saw the hand of God working in natural phenomena all around them, and believed that their loyalty to him ensured that, as God’s people, his frequent works of providence would ultimately work in their material favour. However the idea was too vague, and lacking foundation in their religious faith, to be a major factor in a relationship between religion and capitalist spirit. Although the oft repeated and vivid warnings of Cairns, Fraser, and Campbell about the terrible dangers of worldly gain were not easily assimilated into the pioneer squatter or merchant mind, the theologians claimed that the Western District squatters were much more ready to support the works and missions of the church than were their equally wealthy merchant co-religionists in the towns. Men like Niel Black and Francis Ormond along with a host of other squatters were prepared to give liberally towards Christian ventures when the church called for money, and their generosity was used as a moral lever against their town counterparts. 7 It is hardly fair to imply that even Niel Black’s religion was wholly of this world. 8 Doubtless he saw himself as God’s steward with
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a responsibility to use some of his worldly wealth in forwarding the Christian mission. For Dr. Adam Cairns taught that whereas to make money for its own sake was folly and destruction, to make money to be used in the service of Christ for the salvation of sinners was a wonderful thing. It is not hard to believe that Mammon and Christ were each making their claim on the hearts of these men, as of Christians anywhere, and in the hard struggle for prosperity and respectability in colonial Victoria Mammon was often in a superior position. But the drive to accumulate wealth and forward one’s position in life need hardly be related to a religious doctrine which teaches that this is the surest way to damnation. Surely, as Max Weber well knew, these impulses are characteristic of human nature, though the necessary self-discipline and resolution of mind required for the attainment of these desires may not be. The Calvinist teachers in Victoria did stress that the building of character came first in the Christian life, laying particular stress on the tougher human qualities, and in fact the old Scottish religious education in the home does appear to have created many resolute men. Principal Cairns believed that many of these Scottish Christians were becoming servants of Mammon in this new land, when removed from their traditional religious environment, and Miss Kiddie’s remarks on the Western District squatters support this; but is it in fact true that the religious ideas of these Calvinists made them more amenable than others to indulgence in the ruthless capitalistic exploitation of others? This involved a drastic lapse from the lofty evangelical ideals of charity to all men for the sake of their welfare in this life and the next. Certainly capitalist attitudes to the acquisition of wealth are in direct opposition to anything that was being taught by the colony’s Presbyterian teachers, although of course the resolution and self-control produced by a Scots Presbyterian upbringing could become invaluable tools in the service offered to Mammon by backsliders. Such doctrines as that of predestination could be perverted in response to man’s selfish impulses, but then so could almost any other species of doctrine.

This was an age when the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the scriptures still remained supreme. The work of the German biblical critics was to have no impact in Victoria till long after the age of the squatters was past. The whole Bible was assimilated eagerly by the Presbyterian thinkers of the day, and since in point of bulk the Old Testament was considerably larger than the New Testament and its thought seemed more related to a pioneer pastoral people struggling in a harsh environment, it took a much larger place in the general teaching of the churches than it does today. The simple acceptance of Genesis as historical fact, when one contributor to the Christian Review could even argue that it was Adam himself who wrote the first part of Genesis, and the acceptance of the Mosaic commandments as the foundation-stone of Christian morality, having issued direct from the mouth of God on Sinai, were fundamental to the prevailing church teaching. Thus the “desecration of the Sabbath” and the Old Testament laws regarding the degrees of relationship within which marriage was valid, were seen not as merely peripheral moral issues, but as central issues of the faith upon which the whole doctrine of biblical inspiration and thus the whole Protestant faith, depended for their very existence. Sabbath-breaking was not merely moral wickedness: it was downright heresy. Obviously at this point the practice of the Western District squatters, so notorious for Sabbath-breaking, was in direct opposition to the most fundamental tenets of their theologians. Along with this Old Testament emphasis on the law of God, went the ancient Hebrew conception of God as the righteous one, whose most prominent attribute was the exercise of a stern justice towards sinful man. An image of God the Father, as somehow akin to the humourless gentleman who dispensed a stern justice at the
Old Bailey, dominated the Presbyterian thought of the day. The atonement of Christ for sinful man was very much a legal transaction. Since a righteous God could never forgo this judgement, justice being so central to his nature, it was necessary that Christ should pay the inevitable penalty in order to balance the scales of justice and thus restore men into God's fellowship. This attitude seems to involve a fusion of Hebrew and Roman approaches to the concept of justice. The theological disputes of the day, and particularly the growing number of attacks on the Westminster Confession faith and Old Testament inspiration, tended to cause a powerful reactionary emphasis on God as the stern judge of all mankind at the expense of other biblical emphases. This in turn did nothing to discourage the harsher aspects of the religion which was practised in the various corners of the colony. For example the ruthless logical Church History teacher A. R. B. McCay wrote in the Christian Review of 1870: "Universalism tells us it is a monstrous idea to entertain of God, that he will make children suffer for the sins of their parents, or for the sin of Adam. They do suffer, nevertheless — and why? . . . The God of the Bible is not the motiveless, or capricious, or weakly indulgent Father of Universalism. He inflicts no suffering but for sin."

Miss Kiddle makes the good point of how closely these lonely settlers of Scots farming origins related God to the vast expanses of nature with which they were forced to hold constant communion. Providence was very close to them as they struggled to make progress in a harsh physical environment. The scourges of drought and fire and plague were unquestioningly accepted as the reproval of a just God. This attitude to unusual natural phenomena, whether their effects were exceptionally beneficial or exceptionally detrimental, had a sound basis in the thinking of the theological instructors of the day. In international affairs, the Protestant armies of Prussia in the 1870's were seen as the scourge of God against a dissolute France whose Romish past and atheistic present were being terribly reproved. Indeed Yahweh of old was still acting in the elements to the terror of the ungodly in exactly the same way that he had done thousands of years before when the Jews entered the Promised Land. A drought or a plague caused the church to go down on its knees and repent the wickedness of its ways, that the hand of God might relent from its purposes of judgement. When Governor Hotham was cut off in the prime of life on the last day of the year 1855, Dr. Cairns urged his Melbourne audience to feel the hand of God upon them and desist from political faction. But it must also be emphasised that this providential hand had no sympathy for capitalists. Dr. Cairns, who occasionally almost paralleled Marx in his denunciation of capitalist exploitation of man by man in the Golden Age of British industry, saw the Crimean war as forced on the reluctant British by the hand of God, partly as a judgement on their use of his material gifts for their capitalist advancement rather than for missionary and philanthropic ends. Miss Kiddle says that the teaching of the fathers of the Scots squatters encouraged them to make fortunes here and go home to spend them, with the Lord's blessing. That conservative old Scotsman Adam Cairns would have made life difficult for people with such beliefs, and he had no hesitation in blasting such self-centred and undedicated men from the public platform. "It is not in nature to submit patiently and for any length of time to such a system of robbery. And if our prosperous friends are ignorant of their obligations, they must be taught them. They must be taught that, as life has its work, so property has its duties." My reading of the social teaching of earlier nineteenth century Scottish theologians, especially such men as Thomas Chalmers, indicates that this is no isolated instance of the condemnation of self-seeking in material things. Cairns, Campbell, and Fraser could all wax eloquent on the
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Evils of the pursuit of wealth. To Cairns, "Wealth desired for itself, or simply for the importance it may give us, is the veritable upas tree, beneath whose pestiferous shade, all life dies and death alone lives." 24

Where asceticism and hard work were concerned there can be little doubt that the thinking of the typical Calvinist theologian, that of the Presbyterian Church in general, and that of capitalist entrepreneurs were at one. Cairns wrote a special article in the Christian Review eulogising these qualities, and Campbell was equally an admirer of toil. In teaching his flock, Cairns held up for admiration the tough ascetic quality of the Protestant Prussian armies, so like the armies of Joshua of old in contrast to their softer heathen adversaries. Man should indeed earn his bread in the sweat of his brow and that was a noble thing, although of course he must not carry this over onto the Sabbath at any cost, and this in the eyes of the devout was where the capitalist in a man prevailed. What point was there in labour which damned one for eternity? Asceticism and hard work were seen as qualities which were conducive to purity of heart and the extension of God's kingdom, and they were encouraged by theologians whose one object was the salvation of sinners. In a backslider, or in one who did not fully understand his faith, these things could themselves become the destroyers of men, so that the fruits of a Presbyterian upbringing could easily aid a man in activities completely contrary to the precepts of the faith. In the traditional Christian legend even Satan is a fallen angel.

Thus we find the theological doctrines of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria's squatting era, though encouraging industry and thrift, do not directly encourage the sort of cold, calculating world view which Miss Kiddle suggests was prevalent among the leading laymen of the Church in the Western District. True it is that their minds had been moulded in an earlier era and conditioned by a hard physical environment, but the Free Church evangelical theology was the theology which they supported in the colony's training institutions, and nobody has ever criticised Adam Cairns for being a great innovator in theological thinking. He taught the same faith as their fathers had received at home in Scotland. In following up the Weber-Tawney thesis one seems always to be hard-pressed to find any real link between theological doctrine and capitalist ideology. Miss Kiddle chose Niel Black as the representative of Tawneyite Calvinism among the laymen of Victoria, but is he a true representative of the creed in the colony? Certainly he and his squatter associates were great contributors to the church's financial needs, in contrast to the wealthy town merchants; but how much warmer was the missionary-minded evangelical faith of most of the theological teachers and so many rank and file members of the laity. Campbell especially could comment acidly on the wealthy and respectable portion of the church. But there were men like Francis Ormond, who despite a reputation for parsimony in every-day life went out of his way to educate and help those who worked on his property. Today we should give him little credit, but such were not the actions of a true capitalist of that era. Weber defined capitalism as an irrational impulse to acquire profits in the interests of acquiring still greater profits. One could hardly term the money making zeal of men like Ormond irrational. His philanthropic contributions in Melbourne during his lifetime indicate that his motives were far from irrational. 26

However, the church teachings of the era do indicate that the nineteenth century Presbyterian layman in Victoria, ever conscious of God the stern judge surveying his every word and deed and expressing judgment through the elements, could be both a stern judge of the fellow men who worked for him, and a frugal, hard-working person, subject to the accumulation of wealth. Consciousness of the ever-present eye of God produced a sober and earnest type of man, with purpose and resolution. The God of the Presbyterians was also a God of love.
and mercy who commanded love and mercy, as A. J. Campbell was ever reiterating to those who would listen, and this evangelical demand of the faith was not merely a question of saving eternal souls; it was also a warmly humanitarian desire to help men everywhere in their struggles of every-day life. But the harsh environment of colonial Victoria seems to have encouraged the assimilation of that which was harshest in the Calvinist tradition at the expense of the total doctrine. A land of drought and fire and famine, plus marauding aboriginals, encouraged an austere view of Providence in the mind of the lonely pioneer. In addition, the Free Church tradition which predominated in Victoria inspired a deep suspicion of Broad Church theology, which it associated especially with F. D. Maurice and the frequent reiteration of “God is love.” In reaction against such influences many of its leaders over-stressed the traditional Calvinist emphasis on God’s sovereignty and justice, and the severely legal nature of the atonement. The Westminster Confession was appealed to constantly on such points. It was an age when the Old Testament was beginning to be questioned with regard to its plenary inspiration, and Yahweh the judge of ancient Jewish orthodoxy was ever present in the minds of its theological defenders in the colony. Rather than any particular doctrine such as predestination, which I believe has been grossly overplayed in the Weber-Tawney analysis, the influence of the prevailing conception of God the Father in the minds of the faithful would appear to be a major factor in moulding the character and world-view of laymen in the church. The warmly personal God of love of F. D. Maurice and some of the leading Broad Church men seemed to be the heretical brain-child of a false sentimentality, to many of the hardy old Scots and Irish Calvinists of Victoria’s pioneering era. Yahweh, the stern providence of the Old Testament, chastising through drought, disaster and plague, dominated the theological ethos which was contemporary with the Calvinist men of yesterday in our Western District, and herein lies a clue to the relationship between theological thought and every-day human affairs among laymen of the day. Some of the Western District squatters, as other puritans before them, tended to grow in the image of the stern deity which they worshipped, and to lack those more gentle qualities which the current theological doctrine tended to obscure in the total Christian conception of God the Father. A tendency to reflect God’s judgement rather than his love, could easily deteriorate into the judgement and pious exploitation of others for capitalistic ends.

The efforts of Max Weber, R. H. Tawney, and their followers to find associations between particular Calvinist doctrines and the encouragement of capitalist ideology in Western Europe since the Reformation, appear on the whole to have yielded very little fruit. The critics have been quick to point out the weaknesses in building a case on such doctrines as those of the calling, of predestination, or of new attitudes to usury. And yet historians and others still seem to “intuit” some connection between these phenomena of post-Renaissance Western Europe. Despite the evidence for capitalism achieving early victories in Catholic strongholds in the Netherlands and much other circumstantial evidence adverse to the theory, people are impressed by the early capitalist successes of Great Britain and the United States with their strongly Puritan backgrounds; and the vast difference in commercial and industrial attitudes between Ulster and Fire is pondered questioningly. And now the capitalist enterprise of the Scottish Calvinist pastoralists in Victoria during the middle and late Victoran era is added to the phenomena to be explained by the historian. Max Weber never claimed that Calvinist doctrine was a major antecedent to the development of capitalist ideology, but he did wish to ascertain “whether and to what extent religious forces have taken part in the qualitative formation and the quantitative expansion of that spirit over the world.” The capitalist spirit involved much more than
the mere desire to grasp wealth for oneself at the expense of others: "It should be taught in the kindergarten of cultural history that this naive idea of capitalism must be given up once and for all. Unlimited greed for gain is not in the least identical with capitalism, and is still less its spirit. Capitalism may even be identical with the restraint, or at least a rational tempering, of this irrational impulse. But capitalism is identical with the pursuit of profit, and forever renewed profit, by means of continuous, rational, capitalistic enterprise." Our investigation of the nineteenth century Victorian scene has shown us that perseverance, frugality, and hard work were emphasised in the building of individual character in the Scottish Presbyterian homes of the era. Predestination has little to do with the case, because Charles Wesley's flock to whom the doctrine was anathema, shared these very same qualities in late eighteenth century England, and were also, to their shepherd's dismay, subject to the acquisition of wealth and its temptations. But the very frequency with which the great Protestant divines of this age found it necessary to expound so adamantly against the dangers of the "filthy lucre" indicates that their flocks were particularly susceptible to temptations to pursue profits for their own sake. This applies particularly to Victoria in the gold rush era, when Dr. Cairns was most eloquent in his denunciations of wealth for wealth's sake. A man educated in the Calvinist tradition, and taught from his youth to be self-controlled to the point of asceticism and to glory in hard work, with his actions and thoughts under the constant surveillance of an omniscient heavenly judge, tended to develop a strong and resolute character which would make an impact wherever it turned its energies. Some of this energy was turned to the evangelizing of the heathen in the South Seas, and the many contemporaries of Cairns and Campbell who spent their lives preaching in the Victorian outback or on the goldfields embodied these qualities of zeal and determination to have a job well done. But there were others who drifted away from the evangelical ideals of their faith, and were unconsciously caught up in the contest for gaining wealth and respectability in a harsh country where these things were considered very important. Some drifted away from the church completely, others stayed within its fold though to a greater or lesser degree alienated from its ideals of service to all men. Those men who did turn their hands to profit had the advantages of a resolute character and disciplined body and mind to enhance the material advantages of small amounts of capital and freeman status in a country where these things were not the heritage of all, and could be used to advantage quickly on the squatting runs of Australia Felix. The tendency of many Presbyterian theologians of the era to over-emphasize God's judgement, to the detriment of his love for men as taught in the New Covenant, made it more easy for some of these men to rationalize their lapse from the Christian way. They were prone to grow in the image of the God they worshipped, and sitting in judgement on their fellows to become self-righteous and conscious of their own superior worth. When the worldly values of their new environment blurred, or finally replaced the other-worldly evangelical ideals, this self-righteousness could make them particularly unsympathetic to those less fortunate in life. Hence a man of religious upbringing could become a particularly successful and unscrupulous devotee of Mammon, at the same time, in some instances, glorifying his God by gifts to the church of his fathers. This is the only sense in which I can see that the Calvinist world-view, as against any specific doctrines, had a tendency to be easily accommodated to capitalist practice, and I think that one should be very wary in applying dubious generalizations from Tawney's work on the English Puritans, to the Australian colonial scene.
NOTES—
1. Margaret Kiddie, Men of Yesterday, Melbourne, 1961, p. 130.
2. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Christian Review, June 1865, p. 4. Article, "How to Prosper in Business." "Above all things, never despair; God is where he was; 'He helps those who truly trust in Him'."
8. Margaret Kiddie, Men of Yesterday, p. 130.
14. Ibid., July 1867, p. 6. A. Cairns, Part II of "Inaugural Address" to the Theological Hall. Also, Ibid., March 1866, p. 1; August 1866, p. 4.
15. Margaret Kiddie, Men of Yesterday, p. 113.
19. Ibid., April 1871, p. 4; also November 1870, p. 3.
22. Margaret Kiddie, Men of Yesterday, p. 112.
24. Ibid., p. 18.
28. Ibid., also Christian Review, April 1871, p. 4; and November 1876, p. 3.
31. Ibid., p. 17 (Introduction.)