

## OBITUARY

### David Montgomery (1927–2011)\*

On 2 December 2011 David Montgomery died of a brain haemorrhage. Montgomery was among the founders of “new labour history” and was one of the first to try to write history from below, from the perspective of the shopfloor and “ordinary” workers. Since the 1980s he was closely involved in innovations at the *International Review of Social History*; from 1988 to 2001 he was an active member of the Advisory Board.

Montgomery was born in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, on 1 December 1927; his parents were reasonably well off, as his father was continuously employed at an insurance firm. In 1945 he enrolled at Swarthmore College but was drafted into the US Army Corps of Engineers the next year. Stationed briefly at Los Alamos, New Mexico, as a young serviceman, he frequently dealt with the physicists who had designed the atomic bomb.<sup>1</sup> After his discharge from the military, he resumed his studies at Swarthmore College and received his bachelor’s degree in 1950.

Montgomery then left academia. He became a self-taught machinist and was also very active in the union movement. From 1951 to 1956 he was a member of Local 475 of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) in Brooklyn. He also joined the Communist Party, where the struggle for social equality and the anti-racist position inspired him. In 1952 he married Martel Wilcher, an African-American comrade; their mixed-race marriage was illegal in several states of the US at the time. Around 1957 Montgomery left the party, disillusioned by Khrushchev’s revelations, events in Hungary, and the party’s dogmatic ambience. Still, he remained a radical union activist and suffered discrimination from employers, ultimately rendering him unable to earn a decent living. The McCarthy era basically forced him back into academia. In 1959 he joined the graduate school of the University of Minnesota, where he obtained his Ph.D. in 1962. He later explained: “I was driven out of the factory; I was

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1. David Montgomery, “Introduction”, in Noam Chomsky *et al.*, *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York, 1997); James R. Barrett, “Class Act: An Interview with David Montgomery”, *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 1 (2004), pp. 23–54, 25.

blacklisted. Becoming a historian was *not* my first choice. I had to do something, so I took the second-best choice that was around then.”<sup>2</sup>

He became a historian while he was still a worker. His first article, published under a pseudonym, appeared in 1958 and was about the American Railway Union strike in Minneapolis in 1894.<sup>3</sup> Initially, his main source of intellectual inspiration was W.E.B. Du Bois, the great African-American scholar, who in the 1950s had also spoken at UE Local 475 and had enthralled many listeners there. Montgomery’s dissertation, a revised version of which was later published as *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans*, still reflected a pronounced political-historical orientation, even though the “labor question” served as “a prism with which to study the political spectrum of Reconstruction America”. Especially the failure of radical republicanism was attributed to the confrontation with the labour movement.<sup>4</sup> The book “set the stage for a broader account of American [post-Civil War] history in which class and collective action were the central theme, and creating a ‘republic of labor’ based not on acquisitiveness but mutualism still seemed within the realm of possibility”.<sup>5</sup>

Montgomery truly came into his own some years later. Although he joined the history department at the University of Pittsburgh in 1963, he was at the University of Warwick in the UK from 1967 until 1969, where he teamed up with E.P. Thompson, over three years his senior, to help establish the Centre for the Study of Social History. Again, he encountered opposition from political adversaries. Fellow historian Mel Dubofsky believed that by addressing trade-union groups in Britain as well as the US, Montgomery prompted “the Rootes Motor Company (a subsidiary of Chrysler) to employ a private detective to investigate [him] and then seek to have him deported from England as an ‘undesirable person’ through the offices of the university vice-chancellor”.<sup>6</sup>

Montgomery’s experience in Britain reinforced a view he shared with Thompson, that labour history should focus primarily on workers’ “common experiences (inherited or shared)”, and their confrontations with those “whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs”.<sup>7</sup>

2. [Mark Naison and Paul Buhle,] “David Montgomery”, in MARHO: The Radical Historians’ Organization (ed.), *Visions of History* (Manchester, 1983), pp. 167–183, 175.

3. Amos Flaherty [David Montgomery], “The Great Northern Strike of 1894: When Gene Debs Beat Jim Hill”, in Meridel Le Sueur *et al.* (eds), *The People Together: One Hundred Years of Minnesota, 1858–1958* (Minneapolis, MN, 1958).

4. David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York, 1967), quotation on p. x.

5. Shelton Stromquist, “Comments at Memorial Gathering for David Montgomery”, Pittsburgh, 11 February 2012.

6. [www.hillmanfoundation.org/blog/david-montgomery-1927–2011-internationally-renowned-historian-struck-fear-hearts-uk-auto-execs](http://www.hillmanfoundation.org/blog/david-montgomery-1927–2011-internationally-renowned-historian-struck-fear-hearts-uk-auto-execs), consulted 5 January 2012.

7. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), pp. 8–9.

He first presented this new perspective in articles on workers' control of machine production, immigrant workers, and managerial reform between the Civil War and World War II, which later provided the foundation for the anthology *Workers' Control in America* (1979), undoubtedly one of the most influential studies in English-language labour-history circles in the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> In *The Fall of the House of Labor* from 1987, clearly his most ambitious work, Montgomery elaborated on *Workers' Control in America*, while at the same time greatly expanding the scope. In addition to craftsmen, he examined the lives and work cultures of common labourers and operatives and extended his area of interest beyond the borders of the United States. His basic premise was that between 1870 and World War I "industrial society" comprised three distinct but interlocking geographic regions:

An industrial core, throbbing with manufacturing activity at continually rising levels, was roughly bounded by Chicago and St Louis in the west, by Toronto, Glasgow, and Berlin in the north, by Warsaw, Lodz, and later Budapest (as rather isolated outposts) in the east, and by Milan, Barcelona, Richmond, and Louisville in the south. Surrounding that core [...] lay a vast agricultural domain in which capitalist development shattered long-established patterns of economic activity, without cultivating more than scattered pockets of extractive and processing industry. [...]. Although this territory shipped agricultural produce, minerals, and forest products to the industrial core, it also exported people. Beyond the periphery lay an even larger third world that became increasingly tightly integrated into the economy of the core as the nineteenth century drew to a close, although it sent forth few emigrants. On the contrary, capital investment as well as workers migrated from western Europe and North America into that portion of the world to develop mines, plantations, railroads, and ports.<sup>9</sup>

With this approach Montgomery, who from 1979 to 1989 edited the journal *International Labor and Working-Class History* and spoke several languages, was one of the scholars who prepared the ground for transnational labour history. Montgomery's last book, *Citizen Worker* (1993), was based on the Tanner Lectures he had given at Oxford in 1991. In these lectures he explored the link between the rise of popular democracy and the "free market", demonstrating that labour markets function entirely thanks to physical coercion and statist intervention.<sup>10</sup> Montgomery made clear once again that he did not regard labour history as an intrinsic

8. David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge, 1979).

9. *Idem*, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 70–71.

10. *Idem*, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1993).

objective but as part of a broader effort to understand capitalism.<sup>11</sup> He tried continuously to relate the micro-history of everyday work to an analysis of broader political and economic developments.

Montgomery had a brilliant career parallel to this work. After teaching at the University of Pittsburgh from 1963–1979 and serving as chair of the history department from 1973–1976, he joined the faculty at Yale University in 1979. Subsequently, he was named the Henry Farnham Professor of History. This appointment at one of the most prestigious universities in the United States signified not only acknowledgment of Montgomery's intellectual stature but also a breakthrough for labour history as an academic discipline, which had long had a fairly marginal status. He trained three generations of graduate students who carried the field in myriad new directions and who now occupy major academic positions throughout the US. Montgomery received other tokens of recognition in recent decades as well, including Visiting Professorships at Oxford, Campinas, and Amsterdam, an honorary degree from Swarthmore College in 1990, election as President of the Organization of American Historians from 1999 to 2000, and the first Sol Stetin Award from the Sidney Hillman Foundation in 2007.

These tributes did not mean that Montgomery was fully incorporated into the academic establishment. Nor did his attitude toward capitalist society soften. He remained the scholar-activist or activist-scholar he had been for so long, fighting against the war in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and later actively supporting several union campaigns by Yale University staff and hospital workers. In New Haven he once showed me the street where he helped striking employees of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company build a barricade. Throughout his life, he based his political orientation – as did Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson – largely on the Popular Front politics of the 1930s, when communist parties in his view highlighted the unity of the working class.

As a university instructor, Montgomery was widely regarded as deeply inspiring. In a 1998 anthology compiled by students, the editors wrote: “Montgomery's pedagogy has involved a clear vision of egalitarian and politically informed engagement, yet his hallmark as a teacher has been his genuine openness and wide-ranging appreciation for the multitude of questions that labor history addresses.”<sup>12</sup>

11. “Although my specialty is working-class history, the subject I am trying to get at is the history of capitalism. From this vantage point I have as much respect and esteem for the study of economy or of foreign relations as for that of working people. But the subject I have been looking at, shop-floor relations, does have a special importance because on-the-job workers must define their own world themselves. To study the ways they have done this, however, takes an all-consuming amount of time and effort”; MARHO, *Visions of History*, pp. 176–177.

12. Eric Arnesen, Julie Greene, and Bruce Laurie, “Preface”, in *idem* (eds), *Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working-Class Experience* (Urbana, IL [etc.], 1998), p. xiii.

Working with Montgomery was always pleasant. He had no air of superiority, was principled but free of dogma, and was consistently inquisitive. In the mid 1990s we decided to publish several articles by the German economist August Sartorius von Waltershausen in English. Sartorius had journeyed across the United States in 1879–1880 to study the labour movement (particularly the German-speaking one) and had reported his observations extensively and analytically. This exemplary teamwork impressed me, especially in that we related to each other entirely as equals, despite Montgomery being a quarter of a century older and of course far more renowned than I was.<sup>13</sup>

The last time I met Montgomery was at a conference in Washington DC, in late September 2011. When I asked him how he was, he answered cheerfully: “I’m retiring from life” – though he still seemed to be full of energy. Two months later, he died. Montgomery is survived by his beloved Martel, their sons Edward and Claude, and five grandchildren.

*Marcel van der Linden*

13. August Sartorius von Waltershausen, *The Workers’ Movement in the United States, 1879–1885*, David Montgomery and Marcel van der Linden (eds) (Cambridge, 1998).