

David Montgomery, Grand Master Workman

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When people first met him, they were sometimes confused or fooled. Surely this mild-mannered, shy, even a bit socially awkward man couldn't be the great David Montgomery, the towering figure at the top of US labor history? I remember once in 1985 I got a ride to a labor history conference in Vancouver from a retired union carpenter. On the way home he told me he'd had a nice unassuming chat with David over breakfast. He'd been completely stunned when that same man later emerged as the conference's fire-breathing keynote speaker, knocking everyone's socks off with a tale of workers' activism that made you feel down in your bones that working people could, in fact, run the world.

Born in 1927, David Montgomery was part of the generation of Communist historians that included E.P. Thompson and many others, who left the Party in 1956 and '57 but refused to turn anti-Communist. Instead, they turned to writing labor and working-class history as a way to proclaim their ongoing faith in working people. Rejecting the orthodox notion of workers as mere mechanical vectors in the inevitable march forward of Marxist history, they plunged into the rich and contradictory lives and aspirations of actual working people.

In the US that project, eventually known as the "New Labor History," expanded to include other pioneers including David Brody, Herbert Gutman, and Alice Kessler-Harris, and then blossomed as generations of labor and social historians took to the field in the 1970s, 80s and beyond. It seems obvious or even boring to say it now, but they blasted apart the earlier notion that labor history could be reduced to studying collective bargaining contracts or the machinations of labor leaders. Today we take it for granted that "labor history" encompasses a vast range of working people and their collective actions of every sort.

Of all those who shared that intellectual and political project, though, David Montgomery was in a class by himself. For so many of us—and not just his former graduate students such as myself—he was the deep moral center of the whole project of reviving and celebrating labor history in this country. To confer an official title from the Knights of Labor, the ubiquitous social movement of the late nineteenth century that David loved so much, he was the Grand Master Workman.

Two deep strands wove together at his core. First and foremost was his extraordinary passion for history. It was stunning quite how much he had packed into his head, how voracious his sheer accumulationist enthusiasm for whatever he, or any of us, might be currently researching. He'd hand out lists of possible paper topics full of unknown figures or organizations the enticing but obscure importance of which only he could fathom: "Who was Father McGlynn?" "What was the Home Club?" When I got my first real job in Binghamton, New York, he informed me jauntily in a letter: "You will now be living in the country's second-largest Carpatho-Ruthenian community."

Dan Letwin, a fellow student who served as Assistant Editor of *International Labor and Working-Class History*, the journal David edited for many years, remembers he would read a manuscript that had been submitted for publication and think, "What a mess." Montgomery, though, would arrive exulting, "Isn't this fascinating!?!," riveted by whatever nugget of historical information or insight he'd extracted from it.

As a historian, he was a master craftsman. He first established his scholarly reputation with *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (1967), which took up historians' more traditional concerns with political parties but did so in order to challenge liberal satisfaction with mere statutory equality: beyond the abolition of slavery, beyond the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, he argued, lay the labor movement's challenge to the now-triumphant market system's inability to guarantee justice.

It was the essays collected into *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (1979), though, that would express his key vision, make his name, and move quickly around the world in translation. *Workers' Control* zeroed in on "scientific management," the early 20th century field in which time-and-motion study experts tried to identify, take apart, and then put back together again workers' actual performance of their jobs, in the name of an "efficiency" that might produce higher productivity and thence profits, but that would repress workers' own initiative and creativity at work. Montgomery's great insight was that management, in crafting its assaults, was in fact acting on the defensive. "Both workers' submerged resistance and their articulate programs have turned out to be causes, as much as effects, of the rapid evolution and diffusion of managerial practice," he concluded.

That argument encapsulated his grand, fundamental understanding of the dialectical core of capitalist history. His arguments flowed from his beloved machinists outward: During and after World War I, he wrote, "metal workers, garment workers, railroad employees, and others simultaneously forced their employers to rescind various aspects of new managerial practice and demanded the immediate adoption of their own plans for the reorganization of work relations from below." Notice that last phrase: "their own plans for the reorganization of work relations from below." Most famously, he titled one essay "The Manager's Brains under the Workman's Cap," once again stressing that working people were smart and experienced and resourceful enough to run things—and he meant all things—themselves.

To catch all of what he had to teach you, you had to pay sharp attention; you had to see the pattern yourself; you had to feel it. In the introduction to *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (1987), his magnum opus, he established clearly his big arguments about the centrality of the working class in American history: By the 1920s, he wrote, "modern America had been created over its workers' protests, even though every step in its formation had been influenced by the activities, organizations, and proposals that had sprung from working-class life." Here again was his dialectical understanding of history, now writ large; here again, his insistence that daily life at the workplace and in the community was the wellspring of political action. And here again, his pitch for self-management: workers' solidarities, he insisted, "encompassed a lush variety of beliefs, loyalties, and activities within a common commitment to democratic direction of the country's economic and political life."

The main text of *The Fall* starts out orderly and crisp, with expositions of the lives and hopes of first skilled, then semi-skilled, then unskilled workers. By the book's end, though, the overall direction was less clear, frustrating some. But the visionary pieces that demonstrated his main arguments were in there, all right; you just had to work it out for yourself how you might use them. As a graduate student, it used to drive me nuts when I'd make an appointment with him to ask about a possible job or an article I might submit to a journal, and he'd spend most of our precious time together telling me some anecdote about the Railroad Brotherhoods in the 1890s. Only two years later, when the same story popped up in an article or a speech, would I figure out what he was saying. And it would be brilliant (although how, exactly, escapes me today, alas.)

His range, both historical and geographical, was astounding. In August of 1994 he wrote me that he was off to Amsterdam the next week "to give a talk on the multiple identities question to the

advisory board of the International Review of Social History. From there I fly to Ireland to talk to the joint meeting of the Irish Labour History Society and the Irish Congress of Trades Unions on the 100th anniversary of the ICUT," which, he confided, was "actually a phony anniversary...but, what the hell! It should be a great occasion." Then he would fly to Indiana to talk at Notre Dame "about workers' citizenship, self-help, and charity in the nineteenth century," and finally deliver the keynote speech at a conference in Illinois celebrating the centenary of the Pullman strike and boycott.

The second great strand at his core was his political activism. Despite all David's immersion in the historical, he was completely engaged with labor struggles and other movements for social justice in the here and now. After serving in the Army at Los Alamos, he graduated from Swarthmore in 1950 and then spent ten years working as a union machinist before being blacklisted; then he went to graduate school. He was a member of the machinists' and teamsters' unions, but his heart lay with his third union, the United Electrical Workers, the famous left-led union that survived the McCarthyist labor purges of the late 1940s. Throughout his academic career, for every talk he gave at a scholarly conference or a university, he gave another at a local union hall or a trade union convention. As graduate students we routinely tromped out to join picket lines at local factories at five in the morning in the snow. That was just what you did if you were a labor historian, he taught us, without ever saying a word.

Tall, white, handsome, and from the right class background, David could pass as the classic Great Man Historian while at Yale or while he visited for a year at Oxford. But he chose to marry Martel Montgomery, a lifelong activist for social justice herself, who is African-American, and that meant he passed through the social worlds of those elite institutions quite differently than most. David reached the heights of the profession when he served as President of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) in 2000. That year the Adam's Mark Hotel in St. Louis, where the OAH annual convention was supposed to be held, was charged in court with discrimination against African Americans. With tremendous grace he led the organization to break its contract with the Adam's Mark—at enormous financial cost—and moved the convention out into St. Louis University and the larger community.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, David was a spectacular teacher. His undergraduate lectures, I think, were his best work—always delivered after a beer and an espresso at lunch. I heard a full year's lectures on US labor and working-class history three times through, and each time I could appreciate new layers of argument. It took fortitude, though, because he was an inveterate ham. I'd slink down in my seat at the beginning, vowing I wouldn't get caught up in his hokey gestures and pacing drama one more time. But by halfway through I'd be pulled in hook line and sinker, and by the end I'd be on my feet cheering. (Yes, we clapped.) His most over-the-top moment came in a lecture about coal miners. "What's the worse thing that can happen in a coal town?!" he would demand, shaking his fist at us. "THE CLOTHESLINE WOULD BREAK ON WASH DAY!!!" Well, of course that wasn't the worst thing, and he knew we knew that. But he was endearingly trying to make a point about women's unwaged labor in the home: for a miner's wife, it was a small disaster if the clothes she'd just spent two days boiling and beating the coal dust out of suddenly fell to the coal-covered ground.

He always greeted us with cheery enthusiasm: "How might you be?" And you always had the sense—though he was never one to lay on the praise—that he believed in you and your work. When I read his letters now, as a graduate advisor myself, I am startled by how deeply he engaged with the political and intellectual issues with which I was grappling. I'd query, How do you understand class consciousness? or What is the origin of the term "business unionism"? and he'd send back reflective mini-essays drawing on writers from two centuries on four continents. He taught us, as he put it with classic tact, "Not everything that's useful is shiny and new." That often meant sending us to obscure studies produced in 1893 or 1928 rather than to the latest trendy new academic book. We knew how

lucky we were that he gave such a big piece of himself to us, for decades.

The Grand teacher, the Master historian, and the activist Workman all came together in his speeches on big occasions, especially for audiences that bridged the academic and the political worlds. With his famous hand gestures and his impossible-to-spell “hunph?” punctuating an overflowing generosity toward his audience, with his case for a “democratic direction of the country’s economic and political life” thundering out, you could feel in your own deep heart his faith in history’s ability to show the way, his faith in working people’s capacity for self-management, his faith in your own ability to serve that project, and his faith that yes, another world is possible. If you listened carefully to dozens of those speeches—and I had the great privilege of doing so—you’d notice that the very last line was almost always a subtle, but carefully crafted pitch for socialism.

Dana Frank, December 19, 2011

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<http://www.thenation.com/article/165235/david-montgomery-grand-master-workman?rel=emailNation>

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