

James Montgomery: Abolitionist Warrior

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Review

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During a 1999 restoration of the Kansas Statehouse in Topeka, workers found the names of ten prominent abolitionist free-staters under a coat of plaster above ten windows in the House chamber. Among those putative luminaries were James H. Lane, John Brown, and James Montgomery, whose deeds of 1856-1864 would easily qualify them as terrorists today; not even Kansans have named any middle schools in their honor. That those three names have nevertheless been preserved on freshly painted friezes rather than sandblasted into oblivion says much about the Sunflower State's bipolar historical consciousness. Like other Americans, Kansans do more hand wringing about the past than before. Unlike most of them, we're still likely to give jayhawkers a free pass. Just ask those who rally behind Kansas University's mascot or pay the interior decorators in Topeka.

Former journalist Robert C. Conner offers only the second full-length biography of Montgomery, the least known or written about of those inconvenient heroes. Often dismissed as a follower of Brown, underling of Lane, or the commander nominally in charge of Charles "Doc" Jennison, who perhaps because of the amount of blood on his hands got no frieze of his own, Montgomery presents us with more of a mystery than any of those peers. An incomplete and partisan historical record of his career, which also comprised two controversial brigade commands in the Department of the Atlantic (1863-64) and a regimental command back on the Kansas-Missouri border during Sterling Price's August-December 1864 raid, has stymied researchers ever since. To Missouri historian John Edwards (1877) he was little more than a murderer whereas Kansas historian John N. Holloway (1868) thought him brave and magnanimous. Almost a century after Montgomery's 1871 passing, more even-handed treatments began to settle in between. Beginning with Dudley Cornish in 1965, most scholarly reassessments have aligned with A.T. Andreas (1883), who held that Montgomery's brand of

jayhawker violence was more judicious than most, and William A. Mitchell (1928), who emphasized the lawless environment in which Montgomery and his contemporaries lived. Cornish's student, Tom Holman, furthered that line in his 1973 doctoral dissertation which, until now, was Montgomery's only full-length biography. Like Holman, Dale Watts (1995) rejected the more damning nineteenth century characterizations and added that Montgomery may have been directly responsible for only two deaths prior to the Civil War. More recently, Brian Dirck (2004) ascribed to Montgomery a "dual moral scaffolding" that paired legalism with fundamentalism.

Connor does not attempt to rehabilitate Montgomery on the strength of fewer murders, more rationalizing, or environmental determinism but, like Cornish and Holman, presents us with an immigrant who sought land in 1854 Linn County, Kansas rather than trouble, and a commander whose later Civil War career saw at least as much success as failure. Brutalized by far more combat than Brown or Lane, Conner's Montgomery nevertheless learned from his mistakes when Jennison did not. Nor was Montgomery an abolitionist crusader like Brown when the Kansas-Nebraska Act became law. To the contrary, his search for cheap land was also an attempt to escape the agitation over slavery in Missouri, where he had moved in 1852 after fifteen years in Kentucky. Only when a proslavery raiding party torched his home did he change.

Montgomery's military career, both in Bleeding Kansas and the Civil War, assumes a similar image: that of a usually devout Campbellite preacher-turned-warrior whose inexcusable acts such as the killing of prisoners taken during a September 1861 action at Morristown, Missouri, and the June 1863 burning of Darien, Georgia, appear as exceptions—exceptions that neither attracted official disapproval from his own side nor presaged any escalation of violence on his part. The historical record bears Conner out: When, in December 1862 and May 1863, Jefferson Davis and the Confederate Congress authorized the execution of black prisoners and their white commanders, Montgomery committed no atrocities in response and showed similar restraint after soldiers of Alfred Colquitt's command killed USCT wounded from Montgomery's brigade following the February 1864 fight at Olustee, Florida. Similarly, "Bloody" Bill Anderson's September 1864 murder of unarmed Union recruits at Centralia, Missouri, inspired no like behavior from Montgomery a month later at Westport, where he commanded a regiment of Kansas volunteers. To the contrary, Montgomery's destruction of plantations and freeing of over 700 slaves during the June 1863 Combahee River operation was the same brand of

economic warfare waged by less maligned Union commanders, and Army Chief of Staff Henry W. Halleck endorsed it as such. That Montgomery's bent for mayhem receded as the war escalated places him in stark contrast to fellow jayhawker Jennison, whose ransacking of Missouri farms following Price's Raid led to his court martial and dismissal. Conner also takes Hollywood screenwriters to task for their robustly ahistorical portrayals in *Harriet* (2019), where Harriet Tubman leads the Combahee River raid and Montgomery does not even appear, and *Glory* (1989)—there is no record of Montgomery ever shooting one of his own troops for looting.

Unfortunately, Conner's narrative falls into some of the same gaps as Holman's for lack of sources. We must still guess about the extent to which living near abolitionists in 1830s Ashtabula County, Ohio, made young Montgomery into one, as well as the degree to which abolitionist sentiment fueled his attraction to a sect whose doctrine treated slavery as a political problem rather than a moral one. And if the influence of Ashtabula County abolitionists Josh Giddings and Ben Wade was as strong as Conner suggests, what of the future free-stater's next fifteen years—in Kentucky? Conner takes Holman's word that Montgomery was an acolyte of noted Kentucky abolitionist Cassius Clay, yet Holman relied on spotty sources for those years and admitted as much.

Less of a mystery is Montgomery's time in Kansas, but Conner does not always cite the primary sources (mostly from Montgomery's papers in the Kansas State Historical Society archives) fully, leaving the reader to wonder if he saw everything he should have. Montgomery's letters to George Stearns of the Secret Six do appear often, but some sources not available to Holman, most notably Montgomery's correspondence with his sister, Hannah, could have shed additional light. Most curiously, Conner does not mention David Cobb's correspondence of April 1858—the earliest primary source reference to Linn County jayhawkers and one that explicitly relates the actions of Montgomery's militia company rather than Brown's or Jennison's. Also absent is a key source that calls Montgomery's moral outrage into question: Charles Leonhardt's account of a Montgomery-led raid that freed everything but the slaves.

Reassessment of Montgomery's brigade commands during 1863-1864 also presents challenges, given that his two biggest critics were his regimental commanders, Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1st South Carolina) and Robert Gould Shaw (54th Massachusetts). Add to that the illiteracy rate in Montgomery's own regiment (2nd South Carolina, which unlike the

54th Massachusetts, comprised recently freed slaves) and the dearth of corroboration for a commander's after-action reports that one normally finds in soldier letters and memoirs is readily understood.

Conner's early acknowledgement of Wikipedia as an uncited source is less understandable even though he is writing for a general readership. Self-incrimination aside, it presages several distortions of the historical background that an editor should have caught and *Civil War Book Review* readers no doubt will. Any mention of Thomas Jefferson's efforts to outlaw the international slave trade should at least give a nod to the two-house majority that transformed an idea from a state of the union address into political reality. And while six debates in 1858 exposed Abraham Lincoln's disagreements with Stephen A. Douglas about slavery and race, their commonly expressed belief in white racial superiority at the time does not make it into print. Conner could also have paid more attention to the causes of the New York and Philadelphia draft riots before labeling them as pro-slavery, pro-Confederate actions. He also notes incorrectly that Kansas Senator Edmund G. Ross saved Andrew Johnson from impeachment rather than conviction. Readers unfamiliar with the demographics of Missouri slavery may also come away with an additional misimpression, as its strongest presence was in the Missouri Valley's "Little Dixie" rather than directly across the border from the Southeast Kansas counties of Linn and Bourbon as the author suggests.

All of the above said, C. Vann Woodward was at least partly right about professional historians having forsaken their primary role as storyteller for that of analyst. That being the case, one must keep any quibbles about a former journalist's storytelling in their proper perspective. Like the professional historians who have limited themselves to the more thoroughly documented stages of James Montgomery's controversial career, Conner's stated mission in this more broadly focused work is to help the reader understand rather than forgive. In this he succeeds.

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