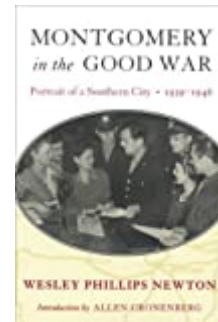


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wesley Phillips Newton. *Montgomery in the Good War: Portrait of a Southern City, 1939-1946.* Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2000. xxix + 321 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1043-1.



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Wesley Phillips Newton has added a significant chapter to our understanding of the homefront in World War II. The book is organized in a narrative fashion around a chronological structure. He begins with a crucial chapter on Montgomery on the eve of the conflict, then turns to the response to Pearl Harbor, the experience of young men going to the services, their transfer overseas, the development of the homefront, and the black community at war. He adds another chapter on life during the war, three chapters on the interaction of homefront and fighting fronts from Overlord onwards, and an epilogue which sums up the story.

Some of this story is well known, but it would be difficult to write a book on Montgomery at war without touching on experiences universal to all American communities. However, much of the book is original. Thus, the book goes into great detail on matters like the homefront. Montgomery responded to the war with a will, creating a civil defense corps, establishing many Red Cross services, building canteens for servicemen, scouring the community for scrap materials for ships and explosives and equally thoroughly for spare cash for bonds, pressing women into work, and so forth. The treatment of the home front is quite comprehensive. These stories are told with many local touches and considerable sensitivity.

And the author adds ample detail to our understanding of the experiences of war. One is never in doubt about the reaction of Montgomerians to overseas events. When Pearl Harbor wrenched the state capital from its peacetime pursuits, Newton explains how the various groups reacted to the news, how military formations were raised, how nearby Maxwell Field was accelerated, how other military institutions proliferated, how the airport was coopted by the military, and how men drew lots for the draft. When the Normandy invasion occurred, the radios heard of it first and the news spread from there to newspapers, newsboys, and onto the city's front porches and stoops. Soon American flags blossomed along streets and sidewalks; medical personnel in the hospital paused at 1:00 to meditate the meaning of the invasion; at 5:00 p. m. buglers from Maxwell Air Force Base, Gunter Field, Sidney Lanier High School, and Hurt Military Academy sounded "Call to the Colors," and all traffic was halted to listen. At 6:00 p. m. all movie projectors halted briefly to allow for prayer. The churches opened for services; some were nearly empty, some nearly full. The author excels at this kind of essential detail. His descriptions of the local scene at war are among the best in the literature.

Still, Newton's emphasis on the interaction between fighting front and home front is even more outstanding. It is not unknown to include both fronts in the same book.

Both William O'Neill and Paul Casdorph used this technique to great effect. However, Newton makes the link in a different way, by following individuals overseas to the scenes of slaughter and then connecting them back to the home folks through letters, diaries, memoirs, oral history, and newspaper stories. This technique personalizes the war very effectively. The approach owes something to the Stephen Ambrose narratives of the GIs in Normandy, the McNeill topical approach, and the Casdorph narrative technique. The sum is greater than the parts, however. The effect is employed not only to demonstrate how the soldiers felt about war, but to experience the anxieties of the loved ones as well. Remarkably, the book overcomes the disjuncture between homefront and war zone. Some books conclude that the homefront could not possibly understand how the fighting men felt. Professor Newton shows that the homefront was a lot better informed than that traditional view would admit.

The book is also important because of its urban focus. Most studies of the war have been written from a national perspective or that of a group – women, blacks, gays, Mexicans, or Southwestern whites. Newton's tale of Montgomery adds to a growing counter literature about the urban role in the Good War. It also treats the groups in interaction rather than alone and stresses the urban level where most of the experience in the arsenals of democracy occurred.

This book is also painstakingly accurate and fair-minded. Newton doesn't play the race card, but he makes it abundantly clear that segregation continued despite the war's appeal to democratic values. The war did little to alter the prevailing oppressive system of discrimination. Illustrative of how pervasive prejudice was, the author notes that Gentiles excluded Jews from their exclusive clubs, Jews excluded gentiles from theirs, and both excluded blacks. Interestingly, unlike most treatments, he does not claim that military authorities ignored police brutality against African Americans. When police violence against blacks occurred in Montgomery, the authorities at the military bases insisted on ground rules for treating African Americans equally.

Newton also brings in discussions missing in many accounts. These include his discussion of the painful ethical controversy among religious people over the bombing of Axis cities, a topic that needs more attention from historians of the war, as opposed to historians of religion.

The book's flaws are minor. The urbanist might like to hear more about a state capital at war because this is the only scholarly book on one. And historians might

like to hear more about the bottom of white society, as opposed to middling whites and gentry. Some historians might object to the heavy reliance on newspaper sources for the narrative. However, it could equally be seen as a strength because the newspapers keep the focus on what contemporaries experienced and felt, as opposed to what later historians might have wanted them to. They also provide the structure essential for a narrative approach.

The only jarring note is that between the body of the book and the introduction by Allen Cronenberg, author of a study on the state of Alabama. Cronenberg wants this study of Montgomery to say that the war had an extraordinary impact on Montgomery, much the same as Gerald Nash argued for the American West. Therefore, he cites all kinds of facts and figures to make this point, before Newton gets a chance to say a thing. The thesis is paraphrased from Morton Sosna, that "World War II had a profound impact on America, including Alabama and the rest of the American South, and perhaps shaped society even more than the Civil War" (p. xv). That view is still held by some, but there is not much support for it in this book by Wesley Newton. To give just a few examples, Newton notes that the war did not change Montgomery from a largely non-industrialized to an industrialized city; the capital continued to be the city's main claim to fame; its politics remained those of the machine; the much heralded GI bill did not take a very great percentage of people into college in the early years after the war; demographic growth remained modest and segregation remained solidly in place and most whites remained solidly in favor of it.

Cronenberg's introduction claims that the war was the catalyst for any later changes, including the civil rights movement. Nonetheless, Professor Newton presents a much more modest picture. The book notes that there was virtually no civil rights activity in Montgomery during the war. When an African American lawyer, Arthur Madison, sued to allow sixteen blacks to register to vote, many of the sixteen were intimidated into claiming that they never wanted to be registered, and the lawyer was tried for "illegally representing people in court, (p. 237)" found guilty, and disbarred from practicing in the state. Thereupon, he moved to the North. There were no sit-ins, no demonstrations, no church-led marches, no confrontations with the police, no other civil rights suits, no explosion of NAACP chapters, and very little other activism. The newspapers largely ignored the African American community. Wesley Newton's narrative of the black community at war comes much closer to validating the interpretation of Harvard Sitkoff that the

black leadership was inert during the war than it does to backing the claim that the conflict laid the foundations for the civil rights movement. In short, Montgomery fought the Second World War on its own terms. Much of the change came later.

Newton has provided a model study of an important southern city at war. It joins the work of Cronenberg,

Robert Spinney, and Mary Martha Thomas in beginning to create a body of literature on southern cities in the Good War.

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