

Montgomery, (William) Eric (Wolfe)

by Linde Lunney

Montgomery, (William) Eric (Wolfe) (1916—2003), civil servant and pioneer of the study of Scotch-Irish folk history, was born 19 April 1916 in Moy, Co. Tyrone, son of John Montgomery, a methodist minister, who was president of the Methodist Church in Ireland in 1952, and of his wife Minnie (née Wolfe), from Co. Cork, who died in 1983. There were five sons. Eric attended Methodist College, Belfast, and Queen's University, Belfast, from where he graduated. He first worked as a cub reporter on two local newspapers, the *Impartial Reporter* in Enniskillen, and the *Banbridge Chronicle*, until he joined the Royal Irish Fusiliers in 1940 to serve in the second world war. Transferring to the North Irish Horse, he was seconded to the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers attached to the Guards Armoured Division; he spent part of his military career in Washington, DC, overseeing the supply of Sherman tanks and other equipment to the British war effort. After the war, he worked for a time in public relations in the British army, and then, having attained the rank of major and having been awarded a Military MBE, he returned to civilian life as a civil servant in the Northern Ireland administration.

In 1956 Montgomery established the Government Information Service, operating at first with just one assistant, and was responsible for organizing various initiatives to publicise trade opportunities and to counter the negative publicity generated by the deteriorating political and security situation of the early 1970s. He established a youth employment scheme which in 1973 became Enterprise Ulster, an important government-funded training and coordinating body. Montgomery was in charge of 'Ulster '71', planned as an ambitious celebration of the fifty years of existence of the Northern Ireland parliament and state, a celebration which was adversely affected by the reduced confidence of the government and the difficulties of attracting visitors to a province sinking into violence. A major exhibition did take place in Belfast, and there were civic weeks and arts events, but Montgomery, possibly in reaction to the disappointment, started to work on other less contentious ways of celebrating Ulster's past.

Montgomery had at one time thought of focusing on transport as one of the main themes of 'Ulster '71'; he had organized the salvage of a number of redundant railway items and led the campaign to establish the Ulster Transport Museum at Cultra, Co. Down. Increasingly he was fascinated by the continuities within the transatlantic culture of the people sometimes referred to as 'the Scotch-Irish'; those who had lived in Ulster in the eighteenth century before emigrating to America to become an important element in the settlement history of the New World. In 1956 he was one of the founding trustees of the Ulster-Scots Historical Society, and retained a guiding role when it developed into the Ulster Historical Foundation in 1975. From the mid 1960s, aware of their potential importance in the historical consciousness of

many Ulster people and those of Ulster descent in the United States, Montgomery was involved with fundraising for, and organizing the restoration of, the ancestral homes of some of the twelve American presidents with connections in Ulster. He was contacted by Matthew Mellon, a grandson of Thomas Mellon (qv), who with other family members agreed to help fund the restoration of the Mellon ancestral home near Omagh, Co. Tyrone. It was opened to the public in 1968 and became the nucleus of the Ulster American Folk Park at Castletown, near Omagh, which opened in 1976. Montgomery lobbied tirelessly for the development of the folk park as a tourist and educational attraction, and in 1976, on retiring from the civil service, became its first director. Typical or individually significant buildings from both Ulster and the New World were dismantled on their original sites and rebuilt in the folk park to form a landscape physically embodying aspects of the historical links between Ulster and North America.

At the same time, Montgomery proposed the establishment of another outdoor museum in the United States to portray the cultures of the various peoples who had settled the American frontier; in 1976, along with Alan Burgess, vice-chancellor of the New University of Ulster, and Professor E. R. R. Green (qv) of Queen's University Belfast, he visited the US to discuss his proposal, and in 1978 the American Frontier Culture Museum opened in Staunton, Virginia. A newly developed area of this museum was in 2008 named Montgomery Springs, in honour of Eric Montgomery.

He was president of West Tyrone Historical Society, and in 1989 suggested the creation of the 'North West Passage', subsequently planned and marketed as a tourist route from Dublin to Donegal, passing through both Northern and Southern counties. His valuable contribution to the cultural and economic life of Northern Ireland was recognized in 1991, when he was appointed OBE.

Montgomery married Joan James, daughter of George James of Ranelagh, Dublin, on 3 September 1955, in Sandford parish church; they had one son. Eric Montgomery died in Belfast on 29 September 2003, and was buried after a service in Cleenish parish church, Bellanaleck, Co. Fermanagh.

Ir. Times, 5 Sept. 1955; *NHI*, ix, 451; Francis M. Carroll, *The American presence in Ulster; a diplomatic history 1796–1996* (2005), 207-8; Gillian McIntosh, 'Stormont's ill-timed Jubilee: the Ulster '71 exhibition', *New Hibernia Review*, 11:2 (summer 2007), 17–39; *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 Oct. 2003; *Ir. Times*, 1, 18 Oct. 2003; 'Newsletter American Frontier Culture Foundation', vol. 22:1 (summer 2008), 1–2; *ibid.*, 22:2 (fall 2008), 3; William Fahy, 'Wo(u)lfe family links', www.westcorkgenealogy.com

