

# TWO AMERICAN TALES: FROM TASMANIA TO MONTANA AND VICE-VERSA

Nigel S. Roberts

The capitol building – or state house – in Helena, Montana, resembles the capitol buildings in many of the American states, as well as in Washington, DC. It's an impressive building with traditional ionic columns and a large dome.

In front of the Montana capitol building, there is also a traditional man-on-horseback statue. However, the dramatic statue of a cavalry officer brandishing a drawn cutlass in front of the Montana legislature is unique in America, because it's of a man who spent time in Tasmania.

The statue is of Thomas Francis Meagher, who was born in Waterford, Ireland, in 1823. Meagher was found guilty in 1848 of participating in the Irish insurrectionary movement against English rule and sentenced to death, later commuted to transportation to Van Diemen's Land. Three years later, Meagher escaped and made his way to America, where he was highly successful as a soldier on the Union side during the Civil War.

The battles in which Meagher fought were some of the main clashes between the northern and southern states: Manassas, Fredericksburg, Antietam, and Chancellorsville.

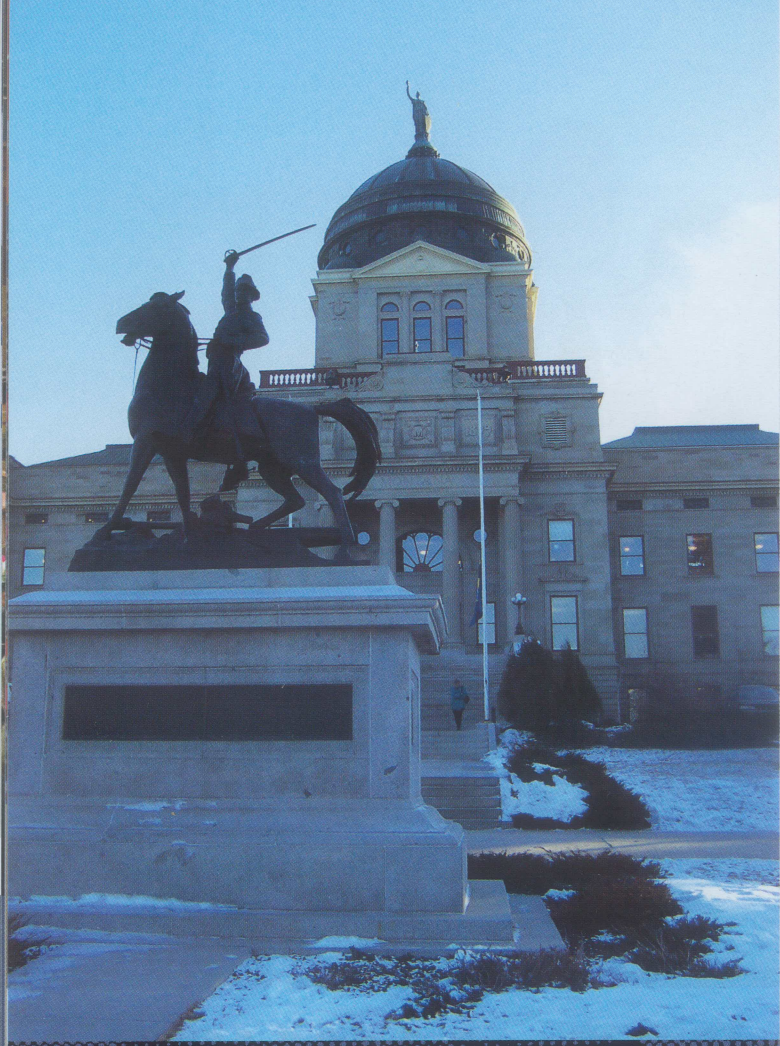
After exceptional Civil War service, Meagher was appointed Acting Governor of the Montana territory, where he died in mysterious circumstances in 1867.

But Thomas Francis Meagher isn't the Montana capitol building's sole link with Tasmania. When I was an undergraduate at the University of Tasmania in the mid-1960s, I was taught American government and politics by Dr Myron Tripp.

At times it seemed as though he began every second sentence of his lectures with the words, "When I was a member of the Montana state legislature".

As a result, when I had the chance to visit Montana earlier this year and see the state legislature in session, I took advantage of the opportunity to research Myron Tripp's career as a legislator in Montana.

Myron Tripp was born in Michigan in January 1917. After obtaining graduate degrees from Ohio State and Zurich, he completed a doctorate of jurisprudence at the University of Chicago prior to his appointment in June



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1948 to an assistant professorship (i.e., to the equivalent of a University of Tasmania lectureship) at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana. In November that year, the 31-year-old Dr Myron Tripp was elected as a Democrat to represent Yellowstone County in the Montana House of Representatives.

Prior to the 1970s, the Montana legislature met for only two months every second year, and Myron Tripp thus attended Montana's 31st legislative assembly session in Helena from 3 January until 3 March 1949.

Following the 1948 elections (in which "Give-'em-hell" Harry S Truman had won the presidency somewhat against the odds for the Democrats), the Democratic Party also had a comfortable majority in the Montana House of Representatives, and Tripp was appointed Chairman of the House Committee on Constitutional Amendments.

Myron Tripp was an active legislator. He introduced, promoted, and supported a wide range of bills in the Montana legislature. Even in a Democratic-controlled House, however, Tripp was often unsuccessful.

Myron Tripp's interest in constitutional affairs and government structures saw him sponsor a bill to turn the Montana legislature into "a unicameral assembly of not less than forty nor more than sixty members". It failed, and – as Myron Tripp told his students in Tasmania – Nebraska is still the only American state with a single-chamber legislature.

Bills introduced by Tripp to prohibit discrimination by employers, to increase taxes on mining licences, and to stop "any person under eighteen years from entering or remaining in places where beer, wine or intoxicating liquor is sold" all failed to garner enough support.

On the other hand, Tripp's support for including "disfigurement awards under the workmen's compensation act", and for establishing hours for the sale and consumption of liquor were successful.

When the 1949 Montana legislative session was over, however, Tripp was in for a major shock. His contract at Rocky Mountain College was terminated.

For years afterwards, Tripp contested this, claiming he had been discriminated against as a result of his beliefs. A political opponent of Tripp's lent inadvertent weight to this when he "denied calling Tripp a Communist" but nevertheless said that Tripp was "too fanatical in working for prohibition and moral reforms".

Seven years later – in mid-1956 – the American Association of University Professors concluded that "the termination of Professor Tripp's services without due notice, in punishment for proper and well-conducted political activity, ... was in violation of the principles of academic freedom and tenure". It is, of course, somewhat ironic that three-and-a-half years after the AAUP published its opinions stemming from Tripp's complaint, Tripp left the United States to teach at the University of Tasmania – where the Orr case was still an open controversy of considerable proportions (and remained so until the 1966 settlement between Sydney Sparkes Orr and the University).

After losing his college post in Billings, Tripp was appointed Superintendent of Schools in Neihart, Montana, in March 1950, and in November of that year he was re-elected to the Montana House of Representatives – again as a Democrat, but representing Cascade County instead of Yellowstone.

The Montana legislature's 32nd session was held over 58 days from 1 January to 1 March 1951. The Republicans were now in a majority in the House, and Myron Tripp lost his position as chairman of the Constitutional Amendments Committee.

Although he was appointed to the House Privileges and Elections Committee, it was an unimportant committee; and despite Dr Tripp's expertise in the field of workers' compensation and his success in this field during the 31st session of the Montana state legislature, he could not even win a seat on the House Committee on Workmen's Compensation during the legislature's 32nd session.

Over and over again in the 1951 legislative session, bills supported by Myron Tripp failed to get back onto the floor of the House. He supported legislation to "discharge pauper prisoners"; to increase the "amount of old age assistance"; to ensure that "eight hours shall constitute a day's work"; to regulate the activities of lobbyists; to license people making loans; and to control liquor licensing. None of these bills passed.

Myron Tripp's career as member of the Montana state legislature finished at the end of the state's 32nd legislative session on 1 March 1951. A short while later, he left his post in Neihart and moved to Ohio, where his mother was seriously ill. Always a deeply religious man, Tripp taught at the Dayton Bible School for a couple of years before moving to the Great Lakes College in Detroit, and then – in 1960 – to the University of Tasmania.

Although Myron Tripp's career as a legislator was brief and, by his own standards, not especially successful, it gave him a host of examples to draw on as a lecturer in Political Science at the University of Tasmania. During the six years he spent in Tasmania, he would always illustrate what he was talking about in class with colourful and pertinent examples.

More than 40 years after I first met Myron Tripp, I'm currently teaching an American government and politics course at the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. I know that if I'd had practical experiences of politics like those that Myron Tripp had, they would undoubtedly inform my teaching too.

*Professor Nigel Roberts graduated in 1967 with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Tasmania, where he majored in Political Science and English. After graduate studies at the University of Essex in England, he moved to New Zealand in January 1970 to teach at the University of Canterbury, and since 1981 has taught at the Victoria University of Wellington.* 