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Grey Eagle: Major General Robert Huston Milroy and the Civil War

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Halleck would not hear me about the matter for fear he would . . . be suspected of having acted in the suggestion of a Volunteer. In the hands of such selfish, biggoted, supercellious, incompetent West Pointers, the destiny of our Great Country has been mistakenly placed and the lives of a million volunteers staked and 200,000 uselessly sacrificed. I have no faith . . . [that] the war will end in five years if the direction of our armies is left with Halleck and McClellan but if put in the hands of good volunteer officers it will be ended in 90 days . . . I consider West Point next to slavery the great bane of our country.¹

Standing six-feet-three-inches tall, Robert H. Milroy of Indiana had "piercing black eyes", an aquiline nose, and long silver hair." Because of his conspicuous features, men serving in his Civil War command affectionately and appropriately dubbed him "Grey Eagle."² Although Milroy's military career was a checkered one, his patriotism and courage were never questioned. He fought not simply for the love of fighting but for the justness of the cause: the protection of "his country, the integrity of the Republic, the freedom of the slave." As a general "he lived on a footing of very democratic comradeship with his men," and he was literally worshipped by many of them. A military colleague, General Carl Schurz, recalled that when confronting the enemy Milroy would "gallop up and down his front, fiercely shaking his fist at the 'rebel scoundrels over there,' and calling them all sorts of outrageous names," all the while admonishing, "Pitch in, boys; pitch in."³ Milroy had three horses shot from under him and received four swords from his offi-

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¹ Robert H. Milroy to Mary Jane Milroy, October 19, 1862, in "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," Volume I, "Milroy Family Letters, 1862-1863," 1965, comp. Margaret B. Paulus, bound typescript, p. 131. A copy of this work is located in the Jasper County Public Library, Rensselaer, Indiana; the Indiana University Library, Bloomington; and the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

² Carl M. Becker, "Tardy George' and 'Extra Billy': Nicknames in the Civil War," *Civil War History*, XXXV (December, 1989), 303.

³ Carl Schurz, *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz* (3 vols., New York, 1907-1908), II, 387-88.



GENERAL ROBERT HUSTON MILROY
C. 1875

Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

cers and men for meritorious service, one valued at one thousand dollars.⁴ "I doubt," conjectured one Federal trooper, "that in the whole history of the war, there was another instance where a regiment came nearer idolizing their commander." He "never asked his men to go where he did not lead, and he was brave almost to rashness."⁵ Another soldier described him to family members at home: "Imagine a large grey headed man with brown whiskers seated on an iron grey horse of the corresponding proportions and speaking in a low, sharp, quick voice and you have Milroy, one of the most impetuous, go ahead, fearless men in the whole army."⁶

Such respect and adulation would be glory enough for most men, but not for Milroy. He failed to achieve the military recognition that he sought for a good part of his life and for this failure blamed a military structure that he believed unjustly favored West Point graduates serving in the regular army over all other officers regardless of ability. Milroy's charge may not have been without foundation. West Point graduates were almost twice as likely to achieve the rank of major general in the Union Army than those not from West Point. Denied a United States Military Academy education, Milroy attributed many rebukes of his tactics and behavior solely to a lack of credentials from that institution.⁷

Milroy's paranoia regarding West Point and the regular army became clear in June, 1863, following the calamitous Second Battle of Winchester. Removed from command and placed under arrest, Milroy remained oblivious to the defeat's importance and his own deficiencies as a general, preferring to accuse a superior with trying to destroy him. Milroy's Civil War experience exemplifies an instance in which inflated ego, combined with overt suspicion of authority, nearly ruined a military career.

Robert Huston Milroy was born into a military family on June 11, 1816, near Salem in Washington County, Indiana. His father, Major General Samuel Milroy, served in the Indiana militia in both the War of 1812 and Indian wars in Indiana and Kentucky. His mother, Martha Huston Milroy, was General Sam Houston's second cousin. In 1826 the Milroys relocated to Delphi, Indiana, where

⁴ "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," Volume IV, "Supplementary Material," 1965, comp. Margaret B. Paulus, bound typescript, pp. 25-26.

⁵ Frank S. Reader to Robert B. Milroy, April 10, 1890, mss 2520, folder 1, box 1, Robert Huston Milroy Papers (Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon).

⁶ Carl M. Becker and Ritchie Thomas, eds., *Hearth and Knapsack: the Ladley Letters, 1857-1880* (Athens, Ohio, 1988), 31.

⁷ Of the 212 Union generals with West Point credentials, 66 were major generals and 145 were brigadier generals. Ulysses S. Grant held lieutenant general status. There were 156 non-West Point Union generals, 29 major generals, and 127 brigadiers. Thirty-one percent of the West Point generals in the Union Army held the rank of major general compared to 19 percent for non-West Point graduates. (This statistic may in part be explained by the fact that few non-West Pointers achieved Milroy's level of military training or that of their West Point counterparts.) See James Spencer, comp., *Civil War Generals: Categorical Listings and a Biographical Directory* (New York, 1986), 107-20.

Samuel took up farming. Robert received a common school education in the log schoolhouses of Delphi and years later continued his studies in college.⁸

The issue of educational opportunity was an important factor in deciding the course of Milroy's life. From a tender age he had dreamed of attending the United States Military Academy at West Point. As Milroy put it, "I have from the earliest boyhood been ambitious and intensely desirous of military fame and renown as a general . . ." Indeed, his ambition in this regard, he said, was as "insatiable as that of Alexander or Napoleon." Milroy's father, however, had a strong aversion to higher education and apparently to West Point in particular. Labeling its graduates "college trash," Samuel adamantly refused to pay for his son to go away to school even after Robert offered to relinquish all rights to his father's estate in return for assistance.⁹ Milroy recalled, "I importuned my father for years, before I was too old to procure me a position as a Cadet at West Point as I observed that that was the only avenue to honorable position in our army. But he blindly, flatly refused." Of Samuel Milroy's stance Robert asserted, "The old gentleman was so much of a Democrat in theory and practice that he had unconquerable prejudices."¹⁰ In this era of Jacksonian Democracy, politicians and voters alike frequently debated the need for a professional army. Samuel was a self-made man and volunteer soldier; perhaps he held a reverse prejudice against the regular army. Nevertheless, it is ironic that what proved so successful for Samuel would result in just the opposite outcome in his son's life. Robert's lack of West Point training caused him to feel persecuted throughout his military career.¹¹

Samuel Milroy did furnish a large family library, confident that his son "would take advantage of it if he had the elements and determination of greatness in him." Robert immersed himself in the library but never lost his hunger for a military education. Finally, at age twenty-four and with a relative's assistance, he acquired sufficient resources to leave the farm. In 1840 he visited an uncle in Pennsylvania who agreed to furnish tuition. Then, without informing his parents, Milroy continued on to Northfield, Vermont, and enrolled at Norwich Military Academy, putatively among the country's finest military schools next to West Point. Milroy excelled at

⁸ Colonel William Farrant Prosser, *A History of the Puget Sound Country* (2 vols., New York, 1903), II, 74-77.

⁹ Untitled biographical information, mss 2520, folder 1, box 1, Milroy Papers; Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, January 1, 1865, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 488; "Sketch of the Military Career of Robert Huston Milroy, up to the Battle of Alleghany Summit Dec 3 1861 Written by General Milroy for Publication October 1863," in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," IV, 42.

¹⁰ "Sketch of the Military Career of Robert Huston Milroy," in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," IV, 42.

¹¹ See note 9 above.

Norwich. With a tall, muscular build, he was considered "one of the most powerful men" ever to attend the academy, was named class valedictorian for 1843, and graduated with master of arts degrees in law, civil engineering, and military science.¹²

Milroy left Norwich thinking he was ready to embark upon a glorious military career; however, the significance of his non-West Point background was soon apparent. After graduation he applied for an army commission but was denied appointment. While the likely cause of the rejection was the fact that the country was not at war, in Milroy's mind it was because he had not "passed through the royal door of West Point." Milroy resolved that "army favors and honors were considered the exclusive right of West Pointers, which discovery made me the enemy of that Institution . . ."¹³ Unable to obtain an assignment, Milroy maintained a peripatetic existence for the next year, traveling around New England boxing, fencing, and teaching. He returned to Indiana in 1844 to study law, though admittedly without enthusiasm.¹⁴

The desire to live an adventuresome life burned inside Milroy. He soon abandoned his law studies and went to Texas. In 1845 he took the Texas oath of allegiance, which conferred on him the citizenship of that young republic. He intended to spend the balance of his life there, but the deaths of Samuel Milroy and an older brother required that he come back to Delphi to settle the estate and lend assistance to his aging mother, who persuaded him to remain in Indiana. Events soon required, however, that he again journey south.¹⁵

In April, 1846, the United States went to war with Mexico. Robert, along with a younger brother, Samuel, immediately volunteered; and Indiana on June 20, 1846, commissioned the older Milroy as captain of the Wabash Invincibles, Company C, First Indiana Volunteers. The advent of war afforded the break for which Milroy had been waiting. Writing to his wife years later, he acknowledged, "I felt an irresistible desire for war and I felt sure that if ever opportunity offered I would excel in the profession of arms—you know how I jumped into the Mexican War . . ." At Camp Clark, between Jeffersonville and New Albany in southern Indiana, three Indiana regiments, including the First, were "assembled, organized, equipped, and mustered into the national service . . ."¹⁶

¹² Untitled biographical information, mss 2520, folder 1, box 1, Milroy Papers; "Sketch of the Military Career of Robert Huston Milroy," in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," IV, 42; William Arba Ellis, ed., *Norwich University, 1819-1911: Her History, Her Graduates, Her Roll of Honor* (2 vols., Montpelier, Vt., 1911), II, 360-61.

¹³ Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, January 1, 1865, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 488.

¹⁴ Prosser, *History of Puget Sound Country*, II, 74-77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, see also Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, January 1, 1865, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 488.

¹⁶ Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, January 1, 1865, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 488; Lewis Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography* (2 vols., New York, 1906), I, 115-17; Oran Perry, comp., *Indiana in the Mexican War* (Indianapolis, 1908), 347.

Second Lieutenant Lew Wallace, later a Civil War general and author of *Ben-Hur*, served with Milroy and the First Indiana. A lifelong friend, Wallace held Milroy in great regard and characterized his fellow Hoosier as “eager, impetuous, fierce in anger . . . a genuine colonel of cavalry.” Milroy, Wallace averred, represented one of only a handful of men he had met in his lifetime who truly loved combat: “In fence with sabres his wrist was like flexible steel,” and he possessed “a reach to make another swordsman, though ever so skillful, chary of engaging him.”¹⁷

After mobilizing, the Indianans sailed from New Albany to New Orleans. There they boarded ships for the Brazos River and service under General Zachary Taylor. Much to their chagrin, the brothers Milroy, Wallace, and the First Indiana participated in little combat in the next twelve months. Milroy’s company divided the majority of its time between a camp at the mouth of the Rio Grande and the Mexican towns of Matamoras and Monterey. Most days proved monotonous and boring. Milroy and the sixty-one soldiers under his command complained frequently about the vacuous nature of the experience. Milroy described Mexico as a “miserable cheerless place” and grumbled that his men were getting homesick & dying from inactivity.¹⁸ He also displayed what was to become a lifelong trait: a dislike for and suspicion of his superiors. To his brother James in Indiana Milroy wrote that his company would probably remain at its location on the Rio Grande since “our old Jackass of a Colonel gets at a rate of \$936.00 more per annum for guarding a separate post than if he was with the brigade under the Brig. Genl.”¹⁹

Milroy did not show deference even to officers of the highest rank. The First Indiana’s transfer to Monterey in the spring of 1847 let the Hoosier get to know General Taylor, one of many prominent people he would meet in his lifetime. “I see . . . [Taylor] every day and have got well acquainted with him . . .,” he penned in a letter to his sister in May, 1847; but despite the close association the young captain exhibited little admiration for the future president, portraying him as “a low chunky very common looking old man” who did not have “superior talents by any means . . .”²⁰

Although Milroy’s Mexican sojourn was mostly uneventful, one incident stood out. In late 1846 General Taylor placed four companies of the First Indiana in Milroy’s charge with orders to take them, first overland and then via the Rio Grande River, from Monterey to Matamoras. With only four days’ supplies for a journey that required ten, it became necessary for Milroy to dispatch small for-

¹⁷ Wallace, *An Autobiography*, I, 117.

¹⁸ Robert H. Milroy to James Milroy, [October 19, 1846], in “Mexican War Letters,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXV (June, 1929), 169.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Robert H. Milroy to Mrs. A. A. Grimes, May 9, 1847, in *ibid.*, 173.

aging parties to search for food. A band of guerrillas under General Jesús María Carvajal ambushed one five-man detachment; only two soldiers returned to the main company alive.²¹

The deaths of three comrades aroused Milroy. Aboard the *Enterprise* on the Rio Grande when he received the news, Milroy, according to Wallace, immediately "buckled on his sword, jumped ashore, and called for volunteers . . ." He boldly promised that he would be first to recover the dead Hoosiers' bodies and that his capture of General Carvajal would result in a burning of the nearby town with the "natives . . . [being] treated to a hanging in imitation of Haman's." So persuasive was Milroy's cry for revenge that not a soldier failed to respond; even the boatmen begged for guns.²²

Milroy and his men soon discovered the Americans' "horribly mutilated" cadavers. The brutality of the deaths only inflamed their desires to find and punish the Mexicans. After some searching they located Carvajal in a small village atop a bluff. Milroy showed no hesitation. He plotted a daring and courageous assault—similar to ones he would devise during the Civil War—that required an advance across an open meadow, the ascent of a hill, and the storming of the barricade protecting the town. Yelling, the Hoosiers rushed across the prairie in double file to the base of the bluff. "Heavens! What furnace heat there was in that go!" Wallace later wrote. Disappointingly for Milroy, as the troops scrambled up the hill, the Mexicans exited in the opposite direction. A short firefight with the few who offered resistance resulted in the killing of one of Carvajal's men and the wounding of four others. Rather than torching the town as promised, Captain Milroy ordered that the injured be attended.²³

The attack represented the apogee of Milroy's military career in Mexico. He raised a cavalry company near the end of his term of enlistment in the hope that he could take part in a significant battle before going home. The companies' services he offered to General Taylor, the governor of Texas, and the secretary of war. All turned him down. Discharged on June 16, 1847, Milroy left Mexico disheartened, summarizing his experience with the lament: "I unfortunately got into a Regiment . . . that was cursed by an incompetent Colonel" and this combined with "the shortness of the war prevented me from acquiring any reputation."²⁴

Back in Indiana, Milroy settled on law as a career. He enrolled in the Indiana University Law School and took his LL.B. degree in 1850. The eleven years that followed saw him primarily occupied with law and politics. In 1851 he served as a member of the conven-

²¹ Wallace, *An Autobiography*, I, 145-47.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, January 1, 1865, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 488; "Sketch of the Military Career of Robert Huston Milroy," in *ibid.*, IV, 43.



ROBERT HUSTON MILROY, MARY JANE ARMITAGE MILROY, AND
MEMBERS OF THEIR FAMILY

Jasper County Public Library, Rensselaer, Indiana.
Photograph by DoubleTake Photography, Monticello, Indiana.

tion that adopted a new Indiana state constitution. Also that year the governor commissioned him judge for the Eighth Judicial District. He lived in Delphi until May, 1854, then transferred his law practice to Rensselaer, Indiana. He started a family as well, on May 17, 1849, marrying Mary Jane Armitage, an Alexander, Pennsylvania, native. In the next seventeen years she bore him seven children.²⁵

A staunch Republican after the formation of the party in 1856, Milroy kept abreast of national political issues, became a fervent abolitionist, and backed Lincoln's candidacy for president. So ardent were Milroy's convictions on African-American rights that a regimental commander at the Second Battle of Winchester later said, "The colored people of America should erect a monument to his memory. He was their friend when to be so drew upon him much adverse criticism."²⁶

Milroy correctly foresaw the coming of war. On February 7, 1861, he issued one of the earliest calls for volunteer troops in the United States, keeping the muster roll in his law office. In April,

²⁵ Prosser, *History of the Puget Sound Country*, II, 74-77; see also "Sketch of the Military Career of Robert Huston Milroy," in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," IV, 43; family Bible record of Robert Huston Milroy, in *ibid.*, 1-2.

²⁶ Regimental Commander Joseph Warren Keifer quoted in Charles S. Grunder and Brandon H. Beck, *The Second Battle of Winchester, June 12-15, 1863* (Lynchburg, Va., 1989), 9.

when the Confederacy fired upon Fort Sumter, only two men had pledged their names; therefore, in the morning darkness on that fateful day Milroy went to the Jasper County Courthouse to raise recruits. He alerted the citizens of Rensselaer by ringing the bell in the bell tower, and with the playing of a fife and drum he assembled his entire company of the Iroquois Guards before breakfast, thereby laying the groundwork for a regiment that became known as the "Bloody Ninth"—the Ninth Indiana Volunteer Infantry. On April 23, 1861, Milroy was commissioned captain, Company G, Ninth Indiana Volunteers. Four days later he was unanimously elected colonel.²⁷

Colonel Milroy spent the first months of the war under General George B. McClellan's command in the counties that would, in 1863, become West Virginia. His forces protected that soon-to-be state from southern incursion. From June to September, 1861, Milroy participated in Union victories at Grafton, Philippi, Carrick's Ford, and Laurel Hill. He began the latter engagement in violation of orders but "completely routed" the enemy. The positive results of these conflicts won McClellan acclaim and led ultimately to Lincoln's giving him command of the Army of the Potomac. Milroy shared in the praise. On September 3, 1861, he was promoted to brigadier general. With a force nearly six thousand strong, Milroy assumed charge of the Cheat Mountain District in northern Virginia, part of the Mountain Department commanded by the "Pathfinder of the West," Major General John C. Frémont.²⁸

Perhaps the most crucial events for Milroy in 1862 were the battles of McDowell and Second Bull Run. Though neither engagement produced a Union victory, each exemplified Milroy's style of generalship and philosophy of warfare. What is most important, he survived these defeats with his reputation intact, seemingly ready to ascend the ladder of Union military leadership; however, the battles made clear as well Milroy's attitude toward the regular army, West Point, and the generals of each.

The Battle of McDowell on May 8, 1862, was one of many confrontations during Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's Shenandoah Valley campaign. Jackson had to create a strategic diversion to prevent the armies of Generals Frémont and Nathaniel Banks from uniting with McClellan in his planned assault on Richmond. At McDowell, Jackson undertook "one of the muddiest, most difficult marches of the entire war" to position his

²⁷ Untitled biographical information, mss 2520, folder 1, box 1, Milroy Papers; [William H. H. Terrell], *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Indiana* (8 vols., Indianapolis, 1866-1869), II, 17-21; see also "Sketch of the Military Career of Robert Huston Milroy," in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," IV, 43-44.

²⁸ See note 27 above; Mark M. Boatner III, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York, 1988), 552.

troops to attack Milroy.²⁹ As Jackson's thirteen thousand men prepared to engage his troops, Milroy, although outnumbered three to one, boldly avowed that he "would not yield a foot to treason, and so we must fight." And they did fight. Believing he could not wait for reinforcements from sixty miles distant, Milroy formulated a plan to "deliver a blow [at Jackson], if . . . [he] could, and then retire from his [Jackson's] front before he had recovered from the surprise . . ."³⁰

Milroy's offensive called for crossing rugged terrain and confronting well-fortified Confederates entrenched on a bluff called Sitlington's Hill. The strategy ensured a "bitter and bloody" encounter. Milroy's forces charged against a "devastating shower of lead." Despite initially gaining headway, by nightfall, weary and short of ammunition, the Union general had to recall his two brigades and fall back to Franklin, Virginia. In four hours of desperate fighting—at times hand-to-hand—Milroy sustained 259 casualties to Jackson's 498. Although ultimately repulsed by "Old Jack," Milroy believed that he had successfully accomplished his goals of engaging the Confederates, penetrating their defenses, and relocating to safer ground. If anything, he chastised Frémont for placing too many strictures upon him. Declaring in a letter to his wife that the old Pathfinder was "played out' and down forever," Milroy gave a caustic appraisal of his superior: "The world has been greatly deceived in that man. He is intellectually a poor thing . . . As a General . . . a perfect failure."³¹

Milroy spent the summer of 1862 under Generals Frémont and Franz Sigel. From August 9-28, in command of the Independent Brigade, First Corps of the Army of Virginia, Milroy fought at Cedar Mountain, Freeman's Ford, Sulphur Springs, and Waterloo Bridge—skirmishes preceding Second Bull Run. During the latter, on August 29-30, Milroy's men stood at the front of the Union line, embroiled in fierce, ferocious fighting. At one point a musket ball killed Milroy's horse as the general cheered on his troops. The engagement's climax for Milroy occurred on the evening of August 30 when he questioned the leadership and tactics of his superior, General Irvin McDowell.³²

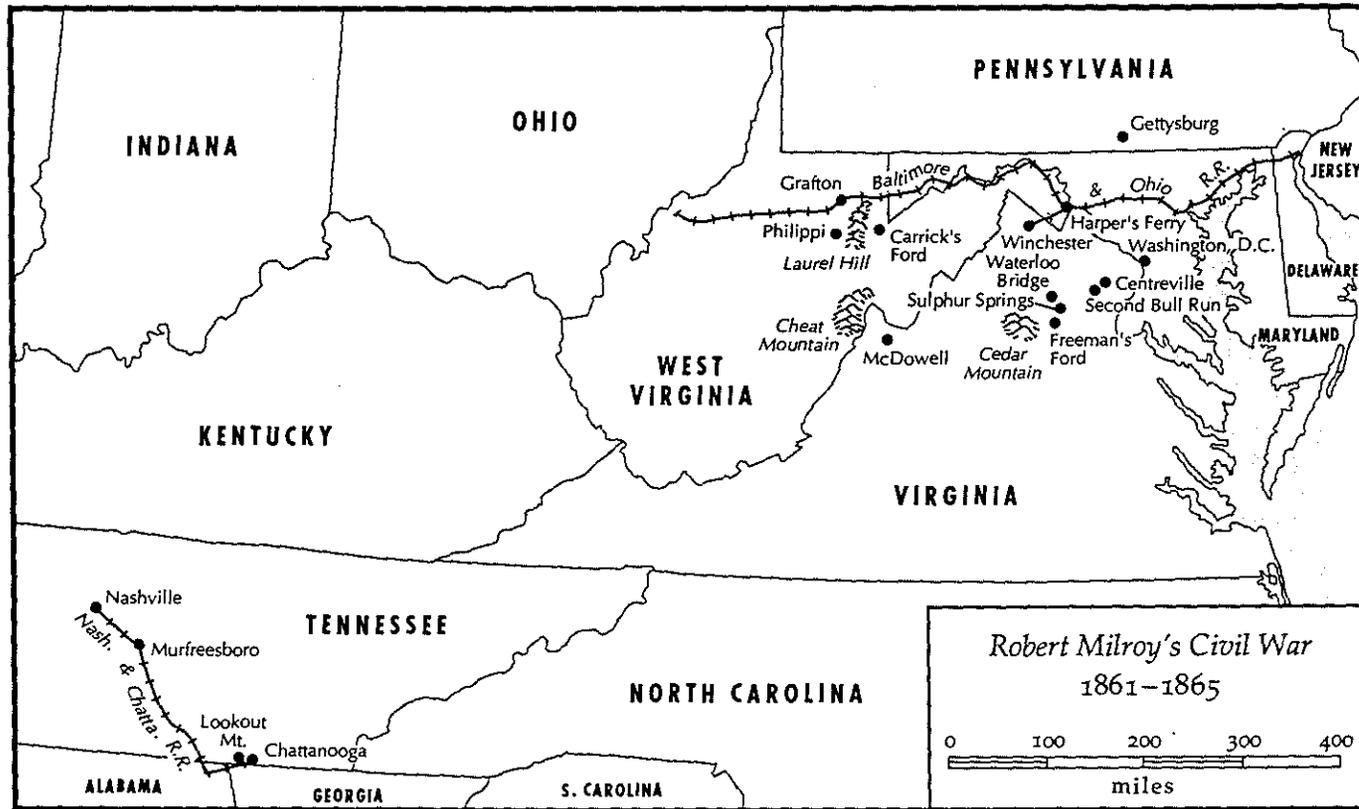
In the thick of battle, Milroy believed he was not receiving adequate reinforcements for his battered and beleaguered troops. The general hurried back to McDowell's headquarters and demanded that the Union commander send a brigade forward "at once to save the day or all would be lost." Desperate circumstances aside, McDowell and other officers characterized Milroy's behavior as

²⁹ Boatner, *Civil War Dictionary*, 531-32, quotation 532; Richard L. Armstrong, *Jackson's Valley Campaign: The Battle of McDowell* (Lynchburg, Va., 1990), 58.

³⁰ Milroy's comments quoted in Armstrong, *Jackson's Valley Campaign*, 47, 58.

³¹ Armstrong, *Jackson's Valley Campaign*, 58-66; Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, July 4, 1862, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 54.

³² Untitled biographical information, mss 2520, folder 1, box 1, Milroy Papers; Terrell, *Report of the Adjutant General*, II, 17-21.



Map by Graphic Arts Department, Audio-Visual Center,
Indiana University, Bloomington.

unusual. General Robert Buchanan described him as "riding about in an obviously agitated state bellowing such improbable epithets as 'Hell and chickens' and other strange oaths." Ordered to leave after several minutes, Buchanan said that the Hoosier general was still "haranguing and gesticulating most emphatically . . . rushing about the field without any special aim or object." Another officer alleged that Milroy, hat off and sword drawn, confronted McDowell with the invective, "For God's sake, general, send a few regiments into these woods; my poor men are being cut to pieces."³³

Milroy saw nothing peculiar about his demeanor. Military etiquette, he explained, meant little to him, just results: "After my own Bgd was used up and out of ammunition I dashed back and brought up others—one after another and pitched them in the fight. I asked no questions who they were or who commanded them."³⁴ McDowell finally reinforced Milroy who, whatever his previous mental state, seized the opportunity, "dashed in front of them, waved . . . [his] sword, and cheered them forward." As evening hung over the battlefield, Milroy felt certain that victory was in sight. In his vernacular, a brigade under General Ambrose E. Burnside had that night "dashed back the tide of armed treason, and sent such a tempest of shot, shell, and leaden death into the dark forest after the rebels that they did not again renew the attack."³⁵

The general was mistaken. The Union Army had not won at Second Bull Run. Unknown to Milroy, General John Pope had ordered an overall withdrawal back to Centreville to protect Washington. Denouncing that decision, Milroy said he first learned of it with "agonizing surprise." "I was thunderstruck upon finding no troops in my rear for nearly a mile and when I overtook Gen Sigel I was struck dumb with horror when told by him that he was retreating by order of Gen. Pope . . ." Pouring out his anger, Milroy blamed the defeat on what he judged to be a West Point aristocracy that undeservedly dominated most positions of importance in the northern military establishment:

Oh! How horrible I have felt for my poor bleeding lost country—our noble Govt. I feel like I am attending her funeral—and all this has been brought about by *West Pointers*—Soulless, brainless—Selfish Villians who having made their *Profession*—Care nothing for the country, so they can be hoisted into high places. Had an advance of all our vast reserve forces been ordered up we could have pushed on the next day and cut the rebles to pieces and captured them. The retreat was dictated by cowardice,

³³ Records of the McDowell Court of Inquiry, February 3, 1863, in U. S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (128 vols., Washington, D. C., 1880–1901), ser. 1, vol. XII, part 1, pp. 268–73, 318–25, quotations 268, 273, 321. This work is hereafter cited as *Official Records*. See also Timothy J. Reese, *Sykes' Regular Infantry Division, 1861–1864: A History of Regular United States Infantry Operations in the Civil War's Eastern Theater* (Jefferson, N. C., 1990), 122.

³⁴ Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, September, [1862], in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 122.

³⁵ *Official Records*, ser. 1, vol. XII, part 1, p. 273.

treason and incompetence. We had plenty of troops to whip them but McDowell is a traitor and Pope is an incompetent egotist vain braggadocio and was Governed by McDowell—Lincoln is blinded and under bad advisors and things will go from bad to worse. I see no hope. Our Govt is lost and we must bequeath war misery and anarchy to our children. I have about lost all hope—I have never had the blues so bad in my life . . . All Military Power is in the hands of *West Pointers* near *Military Gamblers* who have ruined the country and wrecked and lost the Noble institution bequeathed us by our forefathers. We have soldiers plenty—too—many—but no brains—true patriotism and Military talent with them.³⁶

Although his blanket condemnation of West Pointers was wide of the mark, Milroy could not be faulted for lamenting that military prowess in the top ranks of the Union Army had not yet emerged.

Milroy was convinced that McDowell and Second Bull Run had moved him closer to achieving distinction as a brilliant general, one who was both bold and courageous. His stance toward Confederate guerrillas operating in West Virginia in the autumn and winter of 1862 did little to tarnish that image. The Confederate government in April, 1862, authorized the formation of civilians into companies of Partisan Rangers to protect the rights of southerners in a region torn between North and South. Milroy considered the Rangers nothing more than armed vigilantes who despoiled property belonging to citizens with Union loyalties. He gained such a notorious reputation for retaliating against southerners that the Confederate government ultimately offered a bounty for his capture.³⁷

Milroy had ample reason to suspect the Rangers' motives. As Colonel John D. Imboden, the Rangers' organizer and commander, defined their mission, the partisans were "to wage the most active warfare against our brutal invaders and their domestic allies; to hang about their [Union sympathizers'] camps and shoot down every sentinel, picket, courier and wagon driver we can find . . . and thus render the country so unsafe that they will not dare to move except in large bodies." He further declared:

I hold that by the laws of God and man, it is our duty to slay them by all the legitimate means in our power. . . . It is only men I want; men who are not afraid to be shot at in such a cause; men who will pull a trigger on a Yankee with as much alacrity as they would on a mad dog; men whose consciences wont be disturbed by the sight of a vandal carcass.³⁸

In April Confederate guerrillas ambushed a foraging column near Williamsville. Milroy reacted as he had in Mexico when his men were savagely killed. With Frémont's blessing he sent 250 soldiers from the 73rd Ohio to investigate, instructing Major Richard Long, detachment commander, "to destroy the town if . . . [he] found

³⁶ *Ibid.*, part 2, p. 323; see also Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, September, [1862], in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 123-24.

³⁷ Richard O. Curry and F. Gerald Ham, eds., "The Bushwhackers' War: Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in West Virginia," *Civil War History*, X (December, 1964), 423-33.

³⁸ John D. Imboden's comments quoted in *ibid.*, 424-25.

that the citizens had assisted in the destruction of the train or if the guerrillas had been harbored or assisted there" Milroy told Long "to kill all that . . . [he] could capture and hang their bodies by the roadside as a warning." Later that month one of Milroy's cavalry units captured Frederick W. Chewning, a notorious guerrilla. Milroy asked Frémont what he should do with him and then suggested that it would "have a good effect" on other Rangers "to try him by drum-head court-martial and hang him."³⁹

To inhibit further atrocities Milroy issued a draconian order: Federal officers would appraise any loyal Unionists' property seized or destroyed by southern guerrillas. The loss would be assessed against known Confederate sympathizers living in the area. They, in turn, would have twenty-four hours to pay the victims the judgment or face the death penalty. The order stated: "If they fail to pay at the end of the time you have named their houses will be burned and themselves shot and their property all seized . . ." To ensure that Union officers understood his resolve, Milroy solemnly added, "be sure that you carry out this threat rigidly and show them that you are not trifling or to be trifled with."⁴⁰

Union soldiers executed the order exactly as Milroy advised. In Saint George they extracted from one family a thousand-dollar payment. Another southerner, Adam Harper, an eighty-two-year-old, crippled, infirm Dutchman, was forced to remit \$285 to save his life. In Tucker County alone Milroy collected over \$6,000 in compensatory payments. The rigorous proclamation and its subsequent enforcement prompted Confederate military officers stationed in the Shenandoah Valley to characterize Milroy as "bloodthirsty" and "savage" and a "fiend."⁴¹

Francis H. Pierpont, governor of the Virginia government in exile at Wheeling, condoned Milroy's conduct. He judged the method of warfare to be righteous and just, the alternative being, he said, to allow "these rebels to enjoy, peaceably, their property, while Union men are robbed." Pierpont proclaimed Milroy "universally popular" among northerners who "endorse him, while the rebels censure . . ." He hoped Milroy would be "encouraged and sustained." The United States marshal at Wheeling said he had seen Milroy's men "carry . . . [him] in their arms and kiss . . . [his] hands and garments." Such reverence, he felt, derived both from Milroy's courage and his stand against the Partisan Rangers. Similarly, the surveyor of customs of that city conjectured that only tac-

³⁹ Armstrong, *Jackson's Valley Campaign*, 30; John C. Frémont to Edwin M. Stanton, April 20, 1862, *Official Records*, ser. 1, vol. V, part 3, p. 95. Williamsburg was not destroyed nor Chewning hanged though he was jailed. See Virgil Carrington Jones, *Gray Ghosts and Rebel Raiders* (New York, 1956), 89, 92.

⁴⁰ *Official Records*, ser. 2, vol. V, pp. 780-811, quotation 810; *ibid.*, ser. 3, vol. III, pp. 3-23 *passim*.

⁴¹ See note 40 above.

tics such as Milroy's could soon end the "damnable slaveholders' rebellion."⁴²

Not everyone shared their viewpoint. When President Jefferson Davis learned of Milroy's actions, he found them not in accordance with the "recognized usages of war." On January 7, 1863, he directed General Robert E. Lee to contact General Henry W. Halleck, commander-in-chief of the United States Army, to learn whether Milroy's deportment had governmental sanction. Lee wrote, "I am instructed to ask whether your Government will tolerate the execution of an order so barbarous and so revolting to every principle of justice and humanity." He threatened that a continuation of Milroy's policies would result in severe retaliatory measures by the Confederate Army.⁴³

Halleck's resolution of this matter marked the first of several decisions that Milroy thought rooted in prejudice. After examining Lee's allegations, Halleck refused to support the Hoosier general. Milroy, he determined, had not only acted with authority he did not possess but also had, as Lee suggested, violated the rules of war. Halleck directed Milroy to revoke the edict and, in a letter to Lee on January 14, offered what amounted to an apology, excusing the proclamation as the unjustified act of an irresponsible subordinate.⁴⁴

Milroy, with Lincoln's tacit support, refused to ease his severe tactics. Though no direct documentation exists, the president apparently believed Milroy's suppression of guerrilla activities to be an appropriate response. If anything, the Hoosier's "all-out" strategy foresaw methods effectively employed later by Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman. At the stage of the war in 1862, however, Lincoln was unprepared to give anything more than implicit approval to policies that he would eventually sanction publicly.

The developing Milroy-Halleck feud affected Milroy's nomination for promotion in January, 1863. The president had placed Milroy on a list of candidates for major general, but Halleck balked, removing his name. Lincoln overrode Halleck's veto and reinserted Milroy as a nominee. Halleck's opposition, Milroy surmised, was a direct consequence of events that had occurred in West Virginia. Lincoln and War Secretary Edwin M. Stanton had favored the promotion for several months, Milroy thought, but it had been, in his words, "baffled and kept back by the vindictive malice and little

⁴² Francis H. Pierpont quoted in Curry and Ham, "The Bushwhackers' War," 430-31; Edward M. Morton to Robert H. Milroy, October 28, 1862, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," IV, 54; Surveyor of Customs, Wheeling, Virginia, to Robert H. Milroy, March 9, 1863, Robert H. Milroy Collection (Jasper County Public Library, Rensselaer, Indiana).

⁴³ *Official Records*, ser. 2, vol. V, pp. 780-811; *ibid.*, ser. 3, vol. III, pp. 3-23 *passim*, quotations 8, 10.

⁴⁴ See note 43 above.

souled jealousy of Halleck . . .” Milroy boasted that his “acceptance of the promotion . . . [represented] a complete triumph over old Halleck” and was “the first appointment ever made over his protest since he discredited the office of Genl in Chief . . .” With perhaps an attempt at humility Milroy continued, “I am indebted for it to my own merit and the indefatigable and untiring energy of friend [Schuyler] Colfax and others.”⁴⁵

In a letter to his wife Milroy tendered his version of the way that Halleck had tried to discredit him. He contended that after Lincoln sent the nominations to Stanton and Halleck for their approval, “Halleck struck out my name, Old Abe asked him the reason, Halleck said I had issued some very severe unmilitary and outrageous orders in West Va. for which reason he could not approve of my promotion.” Viewing this as tantamount to Halleck’s being in bed with the Confederacy and doubtless fueling what was already acute paranoia respecting the commander-in-chief, Milroy theorized, “The guerillas, Bushwackers, Robbers and Horsethieves of W. Va. whom I undertook to suppress and exterminate, complained to Jeff Davis of my stringent and successful orders.” Then, he continued,

Jeff complained to Halleck of my violation of the rules of war with these cut-throats and Halleck agreed with his friend Jeff, and sent me a severe reprimand and ordered that the orders that I issued that were so repugnant to Jeff Davis and his fellow traitors, should be immediately rescinded, and upon evidence of Jeff Davis alone he condemned me and struck my name out of the list of nominees of the Presdt. for Majr Gen’l without waiting to hear my justification or a word from me in explanation. I drew up a defence of my point. The W. Va Officers in my command also drew up a complete vindication of my poling and orders, and the W. Va. Legislature hearing of Hallecks course toward me, passed the enclosed preamble and resolutions. When Old Abe saw me so strongly sustained by the soldiers with whom I had been fighting and the people I had been defending, he did not wait for Hallecks approval but sent in my nomination, so I have the gratification of having beaten Halleck and his friend Jeff.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, Jefferson Davis denounced Milroy’s West Virginia policy in a speech before the Confederate congress on January 12. Perhaps taking a cue from Halleck, the Confederate president declared: “Humanity shudders at the appalling atrocities which are being daily multiplied under the sanction of those who have obtained temporary possession of power in the United States.” The Virginia legislature responded by branding Milroy an outlaw, offering a \$100,000 reward for his capture (dead or alive), and promising to hang him if brought in alive. General Lee recommended to Con-

⁴⁵ Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, February 10, 1863, in Paulus, “Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy,” I, 233-34. Schuyler Colfax of Indiana served in the United States House of Representatives from 1854 to 1869 and was speaker of the House from 1863 to 1869. He was vice-president of the United States during Grant’s first administration.

⁴⁶ Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, February 10, 1863, in Paulus, “Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy,” I, 234.

federate Secretary of War James Seddon that prisoners captured from Milroy's command be retained "as hostages for the protection of our people against the outrages which he is reported to be committing."⁴⁷

Milroy—the West Virginia equivalent of "Beast" Ben Butler, the Union Army commander in Louisiana—continued his adverse relationship with southern citizenry after leaving Cheat Mountain. When finally promoted to major general, back-dated from November 29, 1862, he took charge of the Second Division, Eighth Army Corps headquartered at Winchester, Virginia. Residents of that city—they called him a modern Nero—alleged that Milroy confiscated and destroyed private property, only let civilians swearing loyalty oaths buy supplies in town, censored mail, forbade women to congregate on the streets, and allowed blacks to "shoulder whites off the sidewalks and into the gutters"—the last a common complaint of southern whites when under Union occupation. The general admittedly had little empathy for the people of Winchester, professing that he was "very tired of living in the midst of treason" To his wife he wrote, "I feel a strong disposition to play the tyrent among these traitors."⁴⁸

Milroy's enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation also failed to win him favor with Winchester townspeople. The general bragged that he was the first Union Army officer to carry out the decree. On January 3 in an announcement bearing the heading "Freedom To Slaves!" Milroy threatened that those who refused to comply with the president's order would be "regarded as rebels in arms against the lawful authority of the Federal Government and dealt with accordingly." Milroy, ecstatic over Lincoln's declaration, buoyantly confessed to Mary, "Plainly these events are directed and controlled by that Infinite Being who holds the nations of Earth in the hollow of His hand, and who delivered Israels' host from slavery. "The spirit of Old John Brown is Marching, Marching, Marching, On."⁴⁹

Milroy's occupation policies were controversial, even among fellow officers. Upon discovering what he believed to be Confederate loyalists operating the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, Milroy reported

⁴⁷ James D. Richardson, comp., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Confederacy Including the Diplomatic Correspondence, 1851-1865* (2 vols., Nashville, 1905), I, 290; copy of the journal of the Senate of Virginia for Saturday, January 10, 1863, Milroy Collection; Robert E. Lee to James A. Seddon, January 10, 1863, *Official Records*, ser. 2, vol. V, pp. 806-807.

⁴⁸ Grunder and Beck, *Second Battle of Winchester*, 8-13, quotations 9, 13; Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1989), 227; Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, January 18, 1863, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 228.

⁴⁹ Order for freeing slaves of Winchester and vicinity, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," IV, 55; Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, January 18, 1863, in *ibid.*, I, 230.

to Generals Robert C. Schenck and Benjamin F. Kelley, "This Augean stable needs cleaning out badly." To Milroy's disgust Kelley failed to act, prompting the Hoosier general to denounce him as "one of those good-natured, kind-hearted gentleman who would much rather at any time meet a traitor with a stick of candy than the sword . . ."⁵⁰

Brigadier General Gustave P. Cluseret, who arrived in Winchester ahead of Milroy, became convinced that the Hoosier general erred in failing to adopt a more lenient stance that would garner support rather than wrath from local citizens. When Milroy reversed Cluseret's accommodationist orders regarding residents sympathetic to the Confederacy, the enraged Frenchman demanded that he be removed from Milroy's command, complaining that he had not "come to fight for negroes and to arrest women" and that he believed it "contrary to the usages of the war to refuse to feed prisoners."⁵¹ Milroy brushed aside Cluseret's request and wrote to Halleck in Washington, "I have been grossly deceived and humbugged by this foreigner, and recommend that he be not only relieved from service in my division but also in the U. S. army, for the good of the service." Milroy's Winchester policies earned him a lasting, notorious reputation. One local historian decades later in 1908 described him as a "ruffian and braggart" and a total "disgrace to the soldierly of America . . . whose name is never mentioned except to point to his infamy and ultimate overthrow."⁵²

The Second Battle of Winchester, fought on June 13-15, 1863, was the seminal event for Milroy in the Civil War. It brought his career as a field general to an abrupt, albeit temporary, end. He had taken command of federal troops at Winchester on New Year's Day with orders to maintain a Union presence and guard the rebuilding of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. In the spring of 1863 General Lee and Jefferson Davis chose an offensive strategy that required the Army of Northern Virginia to cross the Blue Ridge Mountains and invade Pennsylvania. The campaign culminated in the Battle of Gettysburg. Milroy and Winchester stood in the way.⁵³

Milroy had command of 9,000 infantry and cavalry at Winchester, including two artillery batteries. Approximately 6,900 troops were at his immediate disposal. The Confederate army was a massive force in comparison, consisting of 20,000 to 30,000 hardened veterans under Generals Richard S. Ewell, Jubal A. Early, and

⁵⁰ Robert H. Milroy to Robert C. Schenck, February 15, 1863, in *Official Records*, ser. 1, vol. XXV, part 2, pp. 81-82.

⁵¹ Quoted in Grunder and Beck, *Second Battle of Winchester*, 10.

⁵² For an account of Gustave P. Cluseret's Civil War career see Lowell L. Blaisdell, "A French Civil War Adventurer: Fact and Fancy," *Civil War History*, XII (September, 1966), 250-52; Milroy quoted in *ibid.*, 252; historian quoted in Grunder and Beck, *Second Battle of Winchester*, 10.

⁵³ The following account of the Second Battle of Winchester is based on Grunder and Beck, *Second Battle of Winchester*, 45-53.

Edward Johnson. Grossly outnumbered, Milroy was in a difficult, if not impossible, situation. President Lincoln realized this and on June 14 sent Milroy's superior, General Schenck, the department commander in Baltimore, an ominous telegram: "Get Milroy from Winchester to Harper's Ferry if possible. He will be gobbled up, if he remains, if he is not already past salvation." A short time later Lincoln received a dispatch from General Daniel Tyler in Baltimore informing him that "Milroy is in a tight place. If he gets out, it will be by good luck and hard fighting. Not a straggler from his army is yet in; it is neck or nothing."⁵⁴

Unfortunately, Milroy had neither good luck nor hard fighting on his side. Most detrimental was a total lack of information regarding the size and strength of the opposing force. He also underestimated the abilities of Lee. As late as the night of June 12 Milroy believed

it impossible that Lee's army, with its immense artillery and baggage trains, could have escaped from the Army of the Potomac, and crossed the Blue Ridge . . . The movement must have occupied five or six days and notice . . . could have been conveyed to me from General Hooker's headquarters in five minutes . . .⁵⁵

Milroy did not find out until the next day that he confronted two corps of Lee's army. Not realizing the potential for disaster, the cocksure general decided to remain at Winchester. He sent word to General Ewell that he would defend the town until "hell froze over" rather than fall back to Harper's Ferry. And when Schenck finally reversed his order that Milroy hold Winchester, the Confederates had cut telegraphic communications, and the message was never received. Not until 9:00 p.m. on June 14—the day he was nearly surrounded and in jeopardy of being overrun—did Milroy, in a conference with his staff, finally order a retreat to Harper's Ferry. Milroy said he "called a council of war after dark and the officers were all for an evacuation or a surrender. I told them that the latter was out of the question and reluctantly consented to an evacuation."⁵⁶

June 14 had been disastrous for Milroy. General Early's attack from the south and west had forced him to recall and consolidate his forces around Fort Milroy near Winchester. Cornelia McDonald, a local resident who witnessed the scene in the evening twilight, described it as confused and chaotic, with Rebel cannon echoing in the distance and bleeding horses and men everywhere.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Abraham Lincoln to Robert C. Schenck, June 14, 1863, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (8 vols., New Brunswick, N. J., 1953), VI, 274, 275n.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Grunder and Beck, *Second Battle of Winchester*, 26.

⁵⁶ Terry L. Jones, ed., *The Civil War Memoirs of Captain William J. Seymour: Reminiscences of a Louisiana Tiger* (Baton Rouge, La., 1991), 60-63; Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, June 21, 1863, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 252.

⁵⁷ Grunder and Beck, *Second Battle of Winchester*, 43.

While Milroy and his officers convened the war council, Ewell anticipated the Federal's next move and sent Johnson several miles up the Martinsburg Road to wait for Milroy's troops. At two o'clock in the morning, leaving artillery and wagons behind, Milroy abandoned Winchester and started toward Harper's Ferry. Two hours later the Confederate ambush took him by complete surprise. Galantly, Milroy rushed to the front. Rallying the disorganized Federals, he led a fierce, hour-long skirmish. At daybreak, assessing the situation as hopeless, he ordered his soldiers to cease fighting and to resume their retreat toward Harper's Ferry.⁵⁸ In a matter of hours Milroy had witnessed almost the whole of his command evaporate. He had sustained losses of 443 casualties, 23 artillery pieces, 200,000 rounds of small arms ammunition, and 300 wagons. Most devastating of all, 3,358 Union soldiers were captured. Confederate casualties, in contrast, numbered only 269.⁵⁹

Lincoln was despondent. He met that night at the War Department with Halleck and Navy Secretary Gideon Welles. The president, Welles recalled in his memoirs, told them that he felt very low and that Winchester looked like Harper's Ferry, a similar Union collapse in September, 1862, all over again. From statements the "white with rage" Halleck uttered, Welles concluded that "poor Milroy . . . [was] to be made the scapegoat, and blamed for the stupid blunders, neglects, and mistakes of those who should have warned and advised him."⁶⁰

Welles was right. On June 27 Halleck removed Milroy from command and had him taken into custody. Though outraged by his arrest, Milroy realized the leverage that the Winchester defeat afforded the commander-in-chief. The following day he penned an urgent letter to Lincoln in care of Interior Secretary John P. Usher, also a Hoosier. Of Usher, Milroy requested, "I ask you as a friend in Gods name, to go with it [enclosed letter] to the President at once & try to procure my release from the grasp of an incompetent, unprincipled tyrant." The communication delivered to Lincoln contained a tone of desperation. Milroy maintained that Halleck had arrested him like a "common fellow" because the general unjustly hated him "with the blind unreasoning hatred of an Indian . . ." He offered to "take any command, or go into the ranks as a private, rather than

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 45-53; Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, June 21, 1863, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 252-54.

⁵⁹ Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (New York, 1968), 89.

⁶⁰ Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles: Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson* (2 vols., Boston, 1909), I, 328. Interestingly, evidence suggests that Schenck was, indeed, primarily responsible for the Winchester disaster. On June 14 Halleck telegraphed Schenck: "I have so repeatedly urged you to withdraw your main forces from Winchester, and so recently (the 11th) directed it, that I cannot understand how Milroy could have been left there to be invested." Regardless, it was Milroy, not Schenck, that Halleck placed under arrest. Henry W. Halleck to Robert C. Schenck, June 14, 1863, in *Official Records*, ser. 1, vol. XXVII, part 2, p. 171.

remain idle at this critical period." Milroy concluded his plea, "After the crisis is passed, & my country is saved, Halleck may have me tried to his hearts content and hang me if he can."⁶¹

Milroy had indeed had a rocky relationship with Halleck. The commander-in-chief had opposed Milroy's handling of Confederate guerrillas in West Virginia, his promotion to major general, his appointment to command at Winchester, and his decision to remain there and fight. Further, Halleck frequently disparaged Milroy's generalship. Two cases illustrate Halleck's attitude. To Milroy's request for reinforcements in January, 1863, Halleck wrote to General Burnside: "I do not rely much upon General Milroy's statement of the enemy's movements. He cries wolf so often that he may be caught. I send you the substance of his telegraph for what it is worth." And immediately following Winchester, Halleck ordered Schenck not to allow Milroy any command at Harper's Ferry with the blunt denunciation, "We have had enough of that sort of military genius."⁶²

Lincoln's response understandably disappointed Milroy. Although the president was sympathetic, Winchester had placed Lincoln in a difficult position. He reacted coolly to Milroy's request for another command: "I have never doubted your courage and devotion to the cause. But you have just lost a Division, and prima facie the fault is upon you; and while that remains unchanged, for me to put you in command again, is to justly subject me to the charge of having put you there on purpose to have you lose another." Lincoln refused to accept Milroy's assertion that the wellspring of Halleck's dislike for him was personal pique. In fact, Lincoln lectured Milroy concerning the Hoosier's own prejudices: "I have scarcely seen anything from you at any time, that did not contain imputations against your superiors, and a chafing against acting the part they had assigned you." Lincoln continued: "You have constantly urged the idea that you were persecuted because you did not come from West-Point . . . This, my dear general, is I fear, the rock on which you have split." Milroy responded with a typical Milroyism, confiding to his wife: "Old Abe seems to be a mear tool for Halleck."⁶³

In August Lincoln, at Milroy's behest, appointed a court of inquiry to investigate what went awry at Winchester. It required twenty-seven days and eighteen witnesses to exonerate Milroy of any wrongdoing. The Hoosier general insisted that he had simply followed his superiors' stated orders, specifically those of Schenck,

⁶¹ Quoted in Basler, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, VI, 309n.

⁶² Halleck to Ambrose E. Burnside, January 7, 1863, *Official Records*, ser. 1, vol. XXI, p. 954; Halleck to Schenck, June 15, 1863, *ibid.*, ser. 1, vol. XXVII, part 2, p. 171.

⁶³ Lincoln to Robert H. Milroy, June 29, 1863, in Basler, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, VI, 308; Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, June 30, 1863, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 258.



GENERAL ROBERT H. MILROY AND STAFF ON LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN,
1864

Jasper County Public Library, Rensselaer, Indiana.
Photograph by DoubleTake Photography, Monticello, Indiana.

whose last dispatch had told him to hold the ground at Winchester as long as possible. On a personal level Milroy blamed Halleck for his troubling circumstances. The commander-in-chief, he believed, remained angry over the situation with the West Virginia guerrillas and continued to slight him because he had no West Point credentials.⁶⁴

It took eleven months for Milroy to garner another command. In December, 1863, Lincoln, agreeing with the court of inquiry that found Milroy innocent of blame for the Winchester debacle and pressured by the Indiana congressional delegation, asked General Grant through Brigadier General James H. Wilson if he could find Milroy a position. He "is not a difficult man to satisfy," Lincoln wrote, "sincerity and courage being his strong traits. Believing in our cause, and wanting to fight in it, is the whole matter with him. Could you, without embarrassment, assign him a place, if directed

⁶⁴ Basler, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, IV, 309n; Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, July 13, 1863, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 259-60; *Official Records*, ser. 1, vol. XXVII, part 2, pp. 88-197 *passim*; Grunder and Beck, *Second Battle of Winchester*, 69-71.

to report to you." Despite executive support neither Wilson nor Grant wanted Milroy's services. The former stated that any brigadier general would prove as competent as Milroy. The latter told Lincoln he could not "give General Milroy a command without prejudice to the service nor without doing injustice to other officers."⁶⁶

These reverses did not dampen Milroy's resolve to return to the field. In March, 1864, he implored Grant, "try me—try me where there is danger and hard fighting to be done, and if I fail, then have me shot." He had hoped for a cavalry commission, but Grant refused after General George Meade, apparently unfamiliar with Milroy's military training and background, said that Milroy lacked adequate qualifications to head a cavalry unit.⁶⁶ Twice rejected by Grant, Milroy traveled to Georgia. At Kingston he met and dined with General Sherman. Milroy remembered the evening as pleasant but unproductive, "He is very much of a gentleman and I am pleased with him but I could not get him to consent to give me an active comd in front." From Kingston, Milroy walked five miles to General George H. Thomas's headquarters where he was also denied a front-line assignment. Thomas instead ordered him to report to Nashville to assume charge of a unit of 100-day men.⁶⁷ A lesser appointment than he had sought, Milroy's duties included receiving and organizing militia regiments and defending the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad. At Murfreesboro, Tennessee, in December, 1864, however, Milroy at least partially redeemed himself for Winchester. He routed General Nathan Bedford Forrest, captured two artillery pieces, and took 207 prisoners including 18 officers.⁶⁸

Unfortunately, even substantial victories were not enough to make up for the disappointments and setbacks Milroy had suffered. The epic battles, the ones capable of producing heroes, he realized, had been fought without him. Deprived of the rewards, accolades, and glory of which he deemed himself worthy, Milroy left the Union Army in July, 1865, an embittered man. His assessment of what had gone awry in his bid for fame was typical. A letter to his wife near the war's end provided his rationalization and attested to his bitterness:

For twenty-seven months I did not sleep away from my command a single night, and in that time I come up from the rank of Captain to that of Maj. Genl. but my rapid

⁶⁶ Lincoln to Ulysses S. Grant, December 19, 1863, in Basler, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, VII, 80; John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* (18 vols., Carbondale, Ill., 1979-1991), IX, 552n.

⁶⁷ Simon, *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, X, 278-79n.

⁶⁸ Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, November 23, 1863, May 29, 1864, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 276, 353-54.⁶⁸ George H. Thomas to Henry W. Halleck, December 11, 1864, *Official Records*, ser. 1, Vol. XLV, part 2, p. 143.

⁶⁹ George H. Thomas to Henry W. Halleck, December 11, 1864, *Official Records*, ser. 1, Vol. XLV, part 2, p. 143.

promotion together with my popularity with the troops attracted the attention of the West Point aristocracy who looked upon me as a trespasser upon their special rights and the baleful eyes of the infamous Halleck were fixed on me. Failing in his efforts to prevent my promotion he determined to ruin me, and through the imbecility of Lincoln he has been allowed to carry out and gratify his malicious vilany.⁶⁹

Milroy continued his diatribe against Halleck:

First [he] placed me in arrest like a felon without even the pretence of any cause. Then [he] kept [me] on the shelf a year, and then . . . [gave me] an obscure inactive Comd. Thus the dream of my life has been wrecked and destroyed by the grossest, most cruel, brutal injustice[.] for over two years my prospects were brilliant. I felt that I was living to some purpose that I was doing glorious service for my country and the cause of human freedom and free Government of Earth. That I was making a name that would be a proud heritage for my children and a pride to my posterity and one that would live in history. In short that the brightest dreams of my youth were to be realized.⁷⁰

Although separated by hundreds of miles, Mary Milroy must have literally felt her husband's pain when he then wrote:

But Oh! How excruciating, how bitter the disappointment. My brightest hopes and most cherished dreamed are destroyed. For eighteen months my disappointment (except when asleep) has caused me constant anguish. But I am trying hard to throw it off. I have experienced most vividly the truth of Solomons writing, that all is vanity and vexation of Spirit and [I] have realized with certainty that the things of this life are inconstant, uncertain and unsatisfying. This gross injustice I have suffered is sufficient, were I without conscience and principle, to make me an Arnold. What little reputation I have acquired, so is so small, so insignificant, in comparison to what it would have been, had I been fairly delt by and justly treated, that I regard it as nothing—almost with contempt. I feel entirely hopeless of any redress of my wrongs. I am under the heel of West Pointers despotism and must remain there while in the army—for the reason that the army is in the hands and wholly under the controll of West Pointers, who are as selfish, as clanish, as jealous of their cast as are the Brahmans of India and equally as intolerent towards any officer, not a West Pointer, who presumes to intrude among the Stars which they regard as a military sacrilige.⁷¹

Not unique among military figures, Robert Huston Milroy longed for the fame and honors that war could sometimes bestow. Despite a military education, Mexican War service similar to many other Civil War generals, and a willingness to take the fight to the foe, such laurels always seemed out of reach. Reasons for the Hoosier general's disappointments are difficult to ascertain. The injury to his reputation from the grim result at Winchester was a factor, as was the issue of Milroy's personality. Too often he questioned the judgment of superiors, and when confronted with difficult problems or ordered to perform tasks contrary to what he considered correct, he became quarrelsome and abrupt. Milroy, unfortunately, had a flaw for which even victories and mettle could

⁶⁹ Robert H. Milroy to Mary J. Milroy, January 1, 1865, in Paulus, "Papers of General Robert Huston Milroy," I, 489.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 489-90.

not compensate: an overweening sense of persecution deriving from the fact that he was a volunteer soldier and had never, as he put it, darkened the hallowed halls of West Point—a persecution complex undoubtedly exacerbated by the fact that West Point had been his life's goal well into early adulthood. Because of real and imagined slights, he effectively alienated himself from generals such as Grant, Sherman, and Halleck, whose support, not surprisingly, proved tenuous or nonexistent when Winchester-type setbacks occurred. In a real sense Milroy's Civil War experience was a self-fulfilling prophecy—he expected superiors to impede the realization of a glory-filled career, and, in large measure, that is what happened.