

Samuel Eliot Morison, Historian

Author(s): Wilcomb E. Washburn

Source: *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Jul., 1979, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Jul., 1979), pp. 325-352

Published by: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1943380>

## REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/1943380?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1943380?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The William and Mary Quarterly*

JSTOR

# Samuel Eliot Morison, Historian

Wilcomb E. Washburn

WHEN Samuel Eliot Morison died at age eighty-eight on May 15, 1976, the historical profession lost its foremost practitioner and advocate of narrative history. My purpose is to offer a picture of Morison the man, give some account of Morison the teacher and writer, and consider whether Morison's studies of early America from the era of discovery to the age of Andrew Jackson possess explanatory power equal to alternative theoretical interpretations. Morison's choice of an epitaph suggests the character of the man and his work: "Dream dreams, then write them—aye, but live them first!"<sup>1</sup> His immediate personal engagement with his historical subjects, together with his vivid presentation of them, imbued his scholarship with lasting interest and power. Not only was his pen enormously productive, and its products wide-ranging and diverse, but, more effectively than any other historian of his generation, Morison brought history to life.

Born in Boston, of Brahmin stock with a strong tradition of professional and public vocation, Morison was schooled at Noble and Greenough (1897-1901) and St. Paul's (1901-1903), before matriculating at Harvard College. At the age of fourteen he learned to sail—the first thing, he claimed, he ever did well; the second thing was horsemanship, which he acquired during a period in California between prep school and college.<sup>2</sup> These skills served him well in his historical work, not only in retracing the routes of Christopher Columbus and other navigators and explorers of the Americas but also in informing his understanding of the equestrian culture of such Virginians as George Washington, whose "superb poise, self-discipline, and character that met every test" Morison attributed in no small part to youthful training in the handling of spirited mounts.<sup>3</sup> As a schoolboy Morison, by his own

Mr. Washburn is director of the Office of American Studies at the Smithsonian Institution and current president of the American Studies Association.

<sup>1</sup> Cited following the title page in *By Land and By Sea: Essays and Addresses by Samuel Eliot Morison* (New York, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> William Bentinck-Smith, "Samuel Eliot Morison," Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings*, LXXXVIII (1976), 121-122.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, I (New York, 1962), 120, hereafter cited as *Growth of the American Republic*. Only the 1962 edition is used throughout this article. Emily Morison Beck, ed., *Sailor Historian: The Best of Samuel Eliot Morison* (Boston, 1977), 258.

account, was "weak, timid, awkward at games," and envious of classmates whose physical prowess made them natural and popular leaders.<sup>4</sup> His later mastery of sail and steed reinforced his conviction that leaders in every walk of life must be capable of action as well as thought. He admired those who could achieve physically, especially when they overcame weaknesses to do so.

The youthful Morison was also a political idealist who took an intense, even partisan, interest in public affairs. But he early perceived that his own gifts were less suited to political activism than to the more reflective pursuit of writing history. "In my twenties," he noted in "Experiences and Principles of an Historian,"

having inherited a somewhat attenuated Puritan conscience, I thought it incumbent on me to take part in various "causes," sit on committees, teach night school to trade-unionists, etc. Oh, those boring evenings working out a housing code for Massachusetts that the legislature refused to adopt! Alas, those exhausting efforts to interest young plumbers and electricians in Andrew Jackson and Daniel Webster! There came a point when I laid my problems before my friend and father-confessor, the Rev. Smith O. Dexter, and he said (bless him!): "God has given you a great gift and vocation—concentrate on it, and don't wear yourself out working for good causes." Twice, however, I disregarded his advice and went all out for two lost causes—freeing Sacco and Vanzetti and opposing loyalty oaths for teachers. In neither case did I accomplish anything.<sup>5</sup>

With the exception of these occasional involvements Morison reserved all his energies for his historical work, choosing to address his times through his writings and to use the past to instruct and, if possible, to inspire the present.

To that work he brought not only a composed self-discipline and an adventurous spirit but also a set of deep-founded convictions that gave purpose and character to his scholarship. Fundamental among these was his commitment to discovering and telling the truth about the events of the past without reference to theoretical presuppositions, whether of a theological or an ideological character. As he put it in "Faith of an Historian": "No person without an inherent loyalty to truth, a high degree of intellectual honesty, and a sense of balance can be a great or even a good historian. Truth about the past is the essence of history and historical biography, the thing that distinguishes them from every other branch of literature."<sup>6</sup> Morison realized that the fundamental values of the profession were threatened if historians devoted themselves to promoting some presumably desirable social purpose

<sup>4</sup> Bentinck-Smith, "Samuel Eliot Morison," *Mass. Hist. Soc., Procs.*, LXXXVIII (1976), 121-122.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Vistas of History* (New York, 1964), 56, hereafter cited as *Vistas of History*.

<sup>6</sup> *By Land and By Sea*, 347.



THIS PHOTOGRAPH OF SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON IS COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES, WASHINGTON, D.C. THE ORIGINAL WAS TAKEN BY BORIS OF BOSTON, AND IS ALSO AT THE HARVARD UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES.

rather than to finding out what happened. This was a main point of his criticism of Charles A. Beard in his inaugural address as president of the American Historical Association in 1950, as well as in a devastating review of Beard's *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941* (1948), reprinted under the title "History through a Beard."<sup>7</sup>

Writing the history of Harvard, he found his fundamental commitment exemplified by the college's *Veritas* motto and seal. In *Three Centuries of Harvard, 1636-1936*, after quoting President Josiah Quincy's bristling refusal to impose tests of religious orthodoxy on his often unorthodox faculty despite a critical report by the Overseers' Committee of Visitation in 1845, Morison editorialized: "Brave 'old Quin'! He was none of your mealy-mouthed, apologetic liberals; he had definite beliefs, and was ready to defend them, whatever the consequences. The good ship Harvard might lose her freight and the number of her mess; but the *Veritas* banner was nailed to her mast."<sup>8</sup> That academic, or intellectual, freedom was one of Morison's cardinal personal values is evident in his continuing defense of it in his writings. His *Freedom in Contemporary Society* stated his philosophy in this regard. Even his belief that "communists are not entitled to civil rights, so long as they deny them to others," was an expression of his dedication to free expression as the highest human value.<sup>9</sup>

Personal freedom, to Morison, was neither separable from social order nor tolerable without the exercise of restraint by both individuals and groups. Though he found moral sustenance in the tradition of Jeffersonian libertarianism, he recognized the pressing need for orderliness in the social and intellectual realms. He was appalled by the attitudes of extreme liberals in the 1950s and 1960s who he felt ignored this need. In the same way, he was critical of the attacks of Jeffersonians on the Alien and Sedition acts of 1798. "Nobody now denies that the safety of the Republic requires executive authority to expel aliens," he commented, "but the Jeffersonians bawled over the Alien Act as though it had killed liberty." Similarly, he defended the Sedition Act, though deploring the fact that it "was so foolishly enforced as to confound political opposition with sedition."<sup>10</sup> To Morison, liberty without discipline was not only abominable but impossible.

Morison's address on "The Conservative American Revolution" to the Society of the Cincinnati in 1975 expressed his deep antipathy toward radical

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 328-359.

<sup>8</sup> (Cambridge, Mass., 1965 [orig. publ. 1937]), 259-260.

<sup>9</sup> (Boston, 1956), 136. Morison's grandfather, Samuel Eliot, wrote a *History of Liberty*, 4 vols. (Boston, 1853), dealing with freedom in the classical world.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Harrison Gray Otis, 1765-1848: The Urbane Federalist* (Boston, 1969), 118, hereafter cited as *Harrison Gray Otis*. The current Democratic administration policy toward "undocumented aliens" would have elicited a similar response from Morison, I believe.

extremists. He made much of the "mob element" in Pennsylvania that threatened James Wilson in his Philadelphia townhouse on October 4, 1779. Wilson assembled and armed his friends and turned back the threat. Morison concluded: "Had James Wilson and his friends not defended themselves, this brawl of October 4, 1779, would have been to the American Revolution what the capture of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, was to the French Revolution." Morison's distaste for mob rule was also apparent in his horror at the violence directed against Alexander C. Hanson, editor of a Federalist newspaper in Baltimore, which came out for peace during the War of 1812. The attack, in which one person was killed, caused the Federalists to "shudder," Morison asserted, "recalling as it did the cowardly massacres of prisoners in the French Revolution . . ." <sup>11</sup>

In mid-twentieth-century context Morison's balancing of liberty and order appear conservative, yet his stance was never that of the rich, well-born Federalists about whom he wrote in his first book, a study of the life and times of Harrison Gray Otis, published in 1913. Repelled by their identification of the public good with self-interest, Morison insisted on the primacy of Jeffersonian principles. These, above all, were the values and virtues that had sustained and—in his view—should continue to sustain the republic. Though he had scant respect for Jefferson himself, Morison proclaimed his intellectual affinity with the "Jeffersonian 'line,'" which he called in "Faith of an Historian" "the one that the main stream of United States 'actuality' has followed." Thus in his address to the Cincinnati he heatedly objected to "the conservatives of the Revolution being called counterrevolutionaries." He pointed out that "they believed in all the fundamental things of our Revolution—independence, the abolition of hereditary elements, starting with monarchy; and the rights of man." Alexander Hamilton, "the particular target of our young left-wingers," and a favorite of Morison, was defended for his commitment to the ideals of the Revolution. <sup>12</sup>

These political beliefs were elements in the character of a man to whom religious faith and national patriotism were intensely important, contrary to John Quincy Adams's dictum that "a Historian . . . must have neither Religion or Country." <sup>13</sup> Though Morison's religious commitment was a private matter, rarely expressed except through his steady attendance at the Episcopal Church of the Advent close by his home at 44 Brimmer Street, Boston, that commitment was lively and strong. "My feeling for the sea," he wrote, "is such that writing about it is almost as embarrassing as making a

<sup>11</sup> Beck, ed., *Sailor Historian*, 243; *Growth of the American Republic*, I, 408.

<sup>12</sup> *By Land and By Sea*, 357; Beck, ed., *Sailor Historian*, 251.

<sup>13</sup> John Quincy Adams to Brantz Mayer, July 6, 1847, in Wilcomb E. Washburn, ed., *Two Lectures on the Smithsonian Bequest by John Quincy Adams* (Washington, D.C., 1965), 36.



confession of religious faith."<sup>14</sup> The two faiths were related. Nothing is so uncertain as a man's fate upon the sea. Nothing is so strong as the faith of men of the sea who rely on God to preserve them amid the perils of the deep. It is no accident that Morison's greatest hero, Columbus, was also the most devout of seamen who took literally his name—Christ-bearer—and who believed himself directed by a divine hand in the service of a divine mission. Others of Morison's heroes, like Samuel de Champlain, also demonstrated an intense faith in God and lived with Christian restraint.

Morison quoted with deep emotion the last recorded words of Sir Humphrey Gilbert on the quarterdeck of the *Squirrel* as he returned from America in 1583 reading what Morison concluded must have been Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and calling to his men, "We are as near Heaven by sea as by land."<sup>15</sup> Morison's religious convictions were revealingly described by the Reverend G. Harris Collingwood at Morison's funeral, May 18, 1976, at the Church of the Advent. When Morison was about to leave for South America to retrace the voyage of Magellan, Collingwood remarked to him on the courage of the early explorers. "He was silent for a moment as we walked along. Then he said, 'Courage, yes, but a courage sustained by prayer.'" Collingwood also recalled that on April 11, 1974, Morison waited to speak to him after the noon Mass. "'Would it be possible,' he asked, 'for you to make a public statement of my thankfulness for God's mercy? Today I finished the volume of the southern voyages; it was a plan of writing I began fifty years ago.' . . . I used the example of Samuel Eliot Morison the next day, Good Friday, when I preached on the Sixth Word, 'It is finished.'" <sup>16</sup>

Despite Morison's high-church inclinations, he did not denigrate the Puritans who peopled New England, but his views on the evangelical Christianity of the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century were somewhat jaundiced. In *The Growth of the American Republic* he noted that the Awakening, by giving "ignorant and emotional people . . . the strong drink of revivalism," split churches, set congregations at odds with their pastors, and revived religious intolerance. "Calmer souls," he remarked, "sought refuge in the Anglican churches or Quaker meetings, which were the least affected by the Awakening."<sup>17</sup> Morison, one of the "calmer souls," went on to praise Jonathan Edwards, whom he called "one of the three greatest Americans of the age," for his theological writings, certain passages of which "express more effectively the beauty of holiness and the supreme importance to man of his relation with God, than any in American literature."<sup>18</sup> To

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Spring Tides* (Boston, 1965), vii.

<sup>15</sup> *Growth of the American Republic*, I, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Walter M. Whitehill's foreword to Beck, ed., *Sailor Historian*, xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>17</sup> *Growth of the American Republic*, I, 119.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-120.

Morison, Edwards's powerful religious prose outweighed his doctrinaire zeal and evangelical fervor. Quite different was his view of George Whitefield, who, in his account, "made violent gestures, danced about the pulpit, roared and ranted, greatly to the delight of the common people . . ." Yet Morison balanced this judgment by noting that these same common people had grown "tired of gentlemanly, unemotional sermons from college-bred ministers."<sup>19</sup>

In addition to being a religious man, Morison was a patriotic one. In both *The Growth of the American Republic* and *The Oxford History of the American People*, in ending his chapter on the Indian background to American history, he asserted: "It was a good thing for our forebears that they had to fight their way into the New World; it will be a sorry day for their descendants if they become too civilized to resist nations who covet what they have. The Algonquian warrior . . . drank the blood of his fallen enemy in order to absorb his courage; and the peoples of America owe a deep debt to the courageous enemy who made them pay dear for the mastery of a continent."<sup>20</sup>

In the 1962 edition of *The Growth of the American Republic*, written in the flush of John F. Kennedy's election to the presidency, Morison's patriotic faith in the future of the republic held fast. In a section entitled "'America the Hope of the World'" (the phrase came from the French statesman Turgot's letter of 1778 to Richard Price), Morison concluded,

The frontier has vanished with the wild Indian, and America's youth is waning fast. Some thought, during the great depression, that it had altogether gone, and that a premature old age was creeping over American society. They were wrong. It is the story of a youthful people that you are to read; of a people constantly in movement, expanding and upheaving, blithely accepting new forces that were to strain their body politic, seeking to assimilate them to the democratic principle and to recover equilibrium between liberty and order, or security. And, as we write, America, with the confidence of youth and with a young and vigorous President born in the opening year of World War I, is organizing her resources to keep the peace and defend the freedom of the Western World. Possibly that effort will destroy her youthfulness forever. We believe not; that, on the contrary, the faith and energy of

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 118. See also Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York, 1965), 152.

<sup>20</sup> *Growth of the American Republic*, I, 17. In Morison's *Oxford History* the initial portion of the quotation is the same but the latter portion is somewhat changed: "it will be a sorry day for their descendants if they become too civilized to defend themselves. As the Algonquian warrior of old drank the blood of his fallen enemy in order to absorb his courage, so the people of America may thank the brave redskins who made their ancestors pay dear for the mastery of a continent" (pp. 15-16).



the United States are still, in an even deeper sense than Turgot meant it, "the hope of the human race."<sup>21</sup>

Despite his immense productivity, Morison published nothing until he was nearly thirty years old. He attributed his eventual achievement as a historian "mostly to a painstaking cultivation of moderate abilities," together with a favorable family background; an inspiring environment (Boston); a solid classical education, which brought him knowledge of both ancient and modern languages; and the good fortune of having had "as instructors the Harvard History Department of 1904-14, certainly the most distinguished group of historical scholars and teachers ever assembled on this continent."<sup>22</sup> A member of the class of 1908, Morison took his Ph.D. in 1912. His long historical preparation included a year in Paris at the *École des Sciences Politiques* before he began his graduate work, and another nine-months' interlude in the same city after he had finished his dissertation in 1911 but before he received the degree.<sup>23</sup> Morison, living in Paris in 1911, while concerned lest "some unlucky incident might even precipitate a European war," looked forward to starting on "my next subject, the transatlantic influence of Revolutionary France," and hoped "to get a sketch of it into one of the French *Revue*s before I leave."<sup>24</sup> Although he was widely read in European history, his ambition was to be "an historian of my own country."<sup>25</sup>

Morison began his academic career in 1914 at the University of California at Berkeley but soon realized that he preferred scholarship to teaching. He had hardly met his first class when he wrote to his friend Professor Barrett Wendell of Harvard, who had recommended him for the Berkeley position: "I am beginning to feel that you were right, last autumn, when you advised me to go in for a scholarly, rather than a teaching, career. As the weeks go by, the teaching becomes less of a novelty and pleasure, and more of a burden. It leaves me little time for pleasure, and none for thought or writing. I enjoy getting up new lectures, but do *not* have time to do it properly; and repeating the old lectures, without doing more work on them, seems a bore."<sup>26</sup>

Although offered, while at Berkeley, a history tutorship at Harvard by President A. Lawrence Lowell, Morison declined on the grounds that "the

<sup>21</sup> *Growth of the American Republic*, I, 316.

<sup>22</sup> *Vistas of History*, 24, 46, 55.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Muir Whitehill, *Analecta Biographica: A Handful of New England Portraits* (Brattleboro, Vt., 1969), 230.

<sup>24</sup> Morison to Barrett Wendell, Mar. 28, 1911, Wendell Papers, b M S Am 1907, 1(913), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>25</sup> *Vistas of History*, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Morison to Wendell, Oct. 7, 1914, Wendell Papers, b M S Am 1907, 1(913).

work could only be done properly by a bachelor, living in Cambridge, and in close touch with the undergraduates and with the history courses as they are now given; and I have none of those qualifications. Also it would have been hard to start in *medias res*." The same considerations, Morison indicated, applied to an assistantship with Professor Edward Channing which Wendell had requested for Morison.<sup>27</sup> Working for a salary of \$1200 at Berkeley (three times his salary as Albert Bushnell "Bushy" Hart's assistant from 1910 to 1912), Morison felt the "need for a regular and steady occupation, and also of a salary!" His ideal would be scholarly work and occasional lecturing. "Yet I do not wish to give up teaching (as distinguished from mere lecturing) without a further trial, at Cambridge if possible."<sup>28</sup> He did not attempt to conceal his unhappiness with teaching at that time. "I do not feel that I am being the success with the students that I should," he wrote Wendell: "It is hard adjusting oneself to the fact that they have practically no background, owing to the wretched school system here. But it is splendid training in objectivity, and I am learning much more than I teach, from intercourse with my colleagues."<sup>29</sup>

Morison's concern with the Puritans, usually dated from the 1920s, emerged in his History of New England course given at a summer session at Berkeley in 1914. The first question on the first exam given to the thirty students in the class (which, Morison noted, "I made the central theme of the course") was "The religious creed and ecclesiastical government of the seventeenth century in New England and its effect on the character of the people and on their history." Morison was pleased with how well the students did on that question, noting that, "contrary to my expectation, I find here a very healthy respect for the achievements of our forefathers." Morison was at this time preparing to teach the colonial history course in the fall semester and speculated on whether the University of California would offer him a satisfactory position for the following year.<sup>30</sup> But the call came from Cambridge (the position still a tutorship but one whose requirements Morison felt he could accept), and he returned to Harvard for the academic year 1915-1916.<sup>31</sup> In 1916 the "break" came: at age twenty-nine, he was appointed instructor in history, and Channing turned over his course on American colonial history to him. "At Concord, Massachusetts, where I had taken up residence with my beloved first wife, Bessie, I started in August to prepare my lectures for the next term, opening about September 25. By the 24th I was

<sup>27</sup> Morison to Wendell, Oct. 31, 1914, *ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> Morison to Wendell, Oct. 7, 1914, *ibid*. See also Morison's letters of Oct. 31 and Nov. 20, 1914, *ibid*.

<sup>29</sup> Morison to Wendell, Sept. 26, 1914, *ibid*.

<sup>30</sup> Morison to Wendell, Aug. 7, 1914, *ibid*.

<sup>31</sup> Whitehill, *Analecta Biographica*, 231.

still working on Christopher Columbus! The man, and the printed literature about him, fascinated me; and I then decided that the only way to solve the problem of this great navigator, really to 'get at' him, was to explore, under sail, the coasts and islands that he discovered."<sup>32</sup>

No student begrudged Morison his fascination with Columbus and with the early discoveries, though it was traditional to joke that he did not reach America in his colonial history course until the term was almost over. In 1919 Channing gave Morison another opportunity: his project for a history of Massachusetts. Not long after, finding himself concentrating on the maritime aspects of the project, Morison conceived the idea of treating that material separately. Houghton Mifflin agreed, "and I was off." The resulting book, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860* (Boston, 1921), was "written in an atmosphere of euphoria. If inspiration lagged, I would take one of my books of printed sea chanteys to the piano, where Bessie vigorously banged out the tune while I bawled 'Blow the Man Down' or one of the other deep-sea classics." Such was Morison's enthusiasm for the task that the entire book "took only eleven months, during half of which I was actually teaching at Harvard."<sup>33</sup>

In the early years of his teaching career Morison gave nine to twelve lectures per week for thirty-six weeks a year. In later years his teaching load diminished and became "no hardship."<sup>34</sup> In the early years, Morison sometimes took a printed text, like his *Sources and Documents illustrating the American Revolution*, and taught his undergraduate students by question and answer in the manner of a high school teacher who did not deviate from the authority of a school text. For the most part, however, he conformed to the lecture format in his undergraduate classes, presenting the principal events of the period under consideration in a lively narrative interspersed with analytical conclusions. In all his classes, Morison kept students at a distance both by his manner and teaching style. Adding to the dignity of the class was the site of many of his lectures, Harvard Hall, in the room where Washington had his headquarters during the Revolutionary siege of Boston. Morison was a stickler for proper dress and was known to require students who appeared without a coat and tie to leave.<sup>35</sup>

Morison's dealings with graduate students were more relaxed, and they received from him useful practical counsel. Perhaps his most valuable piece of advice was that the student should start writing almost as soon as he began his research. Morison well knew the deadly disease of procrastination that caused Harvard graduate students, some in their tenth or twelfth year of

<sup>32</sup> Beck, ed., *Sailor Historian*, 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>34</sup> *Vistas of History*, 41.

<sup>35</sup> In one instance, the object of his displeasure turned out unexpectedly to be a disabled veteran who painfully hobbled out at Morison's command.

graduate study, to pile up notes in Widener Library rather than sit down and write. He cited his book on *Portuguese Voyages to America in the Fifteenth Century*, published in 1940, two years before the Columbus biography to which it was related, as an example of the advantages of writing even while one's research was proceeding. This willingness to grapple rapidly with the problem of writing, constantly revising as new data were accumulated, helps explain Morison's remarkable prolificacy. No Harvard professor of his time (or probably before or since) wrote more than he.

Morison also urged his students to put themselves forward professionally, as he himself did in becoming the historian for Harvard's tercentenary and for the United States Navy in World War II. Do not wait to be invited, he would urge his students, or you are liable to be ignored. At the same time, Morison actively promoted the careers of his graduate students whenever he could with pungent letters of recommendation and information to potential employers.

Morison was not an easy person to know, and he did not try to develop a coterie of devoted graduate students. But it is wrong to think that he was not a considerate and dedicated advisor to the few who did seek the privilege of working with him. His principal gift was respect for his students' individuality. One of the reasons I chose to work under Morison was a perception that I would not be forced into a mold—ideological or methodological—as I feared I would be by others of his Harvard colleagues. The dependency accepted by most Harvard graduate students, in my opinion, exacted too great a loss of personal integrity. Morison never sought to impose a master-disciple relationship on his students.

His requirements were severe. In his graduate seminar in colonial history his work requirements exceeded those of any other seminar I took at Harvard. I wrote three papers, one of twenty-five pages, one of forty pages, and one of seventy pages, for one semester, while carrying three other graduate courses. Morison demanded knowledge of all the appropriate languages, however numerous, that were required to do one's work in a comprehensive manner, but his rein was deliberately light. He did not put one through a series of wringers with constant demands for reworking, reorganizing, and rewriting material. If he thought you could write a narrative that moved, he let you develop your own style, whether or not it imitated his. He cheerfully accepted my desire to change my thesis topic in mid-stream after I had discovered new documents in England relating to Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia. He gave freely of his advice during the writing of the dissertation, and even more of his support after the award of the degree. But he expected me to write the dissertation without clearing every chapter of it with him along the way. For this respect, deeper than that accorded by many of his colleagues to their students, I, who was not even a history Ph.D. candidate (I took my degree in the History of American

Civilization), honored and respected him. I might add that he generously gave me books and even pictures from his home, to which I and other graduate students were frequently invited. Such gifts were characteristic of his support of students who worked closely with him.

Morison was never a crowd-pleasing lecturer. He normally spoke from typewritten notes, frequently revised, in a fluent but uninspired manner. He did not follow his master Channing, who advocated lecturing without notes "not only because it impressed the students, but because it enabled the unimportant details to sift themselves out of the professor's mind."<sup>36</sup> Although Morison asserted in "The Experiences and Principles of an Historian," that teaching was "no hardship" and that lecturing to young men and women "is a great assistance to one's prose style" because of "the need to simplify, clarify, and impress youthful minds," I do not believe that his heart was in it.<sup>37</sup> He performed the task adequately and well but without enthusiasm, and he preferred to shape his history in written form. The lectures might serve to whet student appetites and goad oafish undergraduates, but Morison clearly did not take pleasure in exciting student awe and worship by dazzling platform performances.

I believe Morison prepared his lectures as he did partly as a concession to the tradition of the formal lecture system at American universities and partly from shyness and uncertainty about his ability to sustain a lecture without a text or detailed outline. Certainly, he would have had no trouble had he presented himself more casually to his undergraduate classes (as he did to his graduate seminars), stimulating questions and going off on tangents in the manner of Perry Miller, whose "lectures" were at the opposite extreme of organization from Morison's. But he never did, to my knowledge. He knew that his lasting message would be conveyed by his published words, and he used the lectures to polish his style and meet his instructional obligations.

In his writings on the Puritans, Morison frequently alluded to the fact that, of all sins, idleness was the most heinous in Puritan eyes. And though he did not share their religious faith, he did inherit their intense respect for achievement and their horror of a wasted life. He dedicated his entire life to the accomplishment of his literary mission. In the execution of that task he carefully freed himself from other burdens. Visitors, even younger Harvard faculty who would drop by at his suggestion—he preferred not to make appointments—would sometimes go unrecognized. I, personally, never experienced any unwillingness on his part to interrupt his work to talk with me. When I would apologize for interrupting, he would say, "That is what I am

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, "Edward Channing: A Memoir," *Mass. Hist. Soc., Procs.*, LXIV (1932), 250-284; reprinted in *By Land and By Sea*, 314, 321. Hereafter cited as "Edward Channing."

<sup>37</sup> *Vistas of History*, 41.

here for." However, one always avoided interrupting him during the hour before his 10:00 A.M. class, as he scanned and altered the text of his lecture. Morison's reception of students in Widener 417 reminded me of his account of Channing's reception of students in the same study: "If a student appeared in his corner of old Gore Hall, or before the glass door of Widener 417, the master would at once drop what he was doing and, after a preliminary glare of recognition, welcome the intruder with the utmost cordiality. It should be said, however, that Channing was not one to suffer fools gladly. The shy boy who had good stuff in him was kindly encouraged and drawn out; but the windbag was quickly deflated by piercing sarcasm, and the hopeless dullard was sent quickly on his way, by no means rejoicing."<sup>38</sup>

Henry Adams, a predecessor of Morison at Harvard, once observed that "a teacher . . . can never tell where his influence stops."<sup>39</sup> Morison's teaching was not confined to the classroom or to the professional society of fellow historians but reached out, in a positive commitment of responsibility on his part, to a general readership whose interest he solicited and whose thought he wished to influence. Though such concern for "popularity" may seem strange in this most aristocratic of American historians, it reflected his respect for, and sense of affiliation with, an earlier tradition of historical writing, exemplified by Francis Parkman, whom Morison regarded as "America's number one historian."<sup>40</sup> It also demonstrated his desire that the accounts of our national past read by citizens of the republic be presented by scholars committed to truth and accuracy rather than by writers who followed the less rigorous and more flexible tenets of journalism. The unwillingness or inability of the academic historian to appeal to a wide audience Morison viewed as intellectual laziness and irresponsibility rather than intellectual purity. Accordingly, in "History as a Literary Art" he expressed the strong hope of seeing "a few more Ph.D.'s in history winning book-of-the-month adoptions and reaping the harvest of dividends."<sup>41</sup> But the dividends he chiefly valued—the only ones that could satisfy his deep sense of professional and civic noblesse oblige—would flow from the enlightening influence of his work on the minds of his fellow citizens.

Morison's first popular success was his *Maritime History*, which sold so well as to prove, in his words, "that I could fuse hobby and profession in a manner to please the public."<sup>42</sup> Tightly organized and gracefully composed,

<sup>38</sup> "Edward Channing," 320.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston, 1918), 300.

<sup>40</sup> Beck, ed., *Sailor Historian*, 356.

<sup>41</sup> *By Land and By Sea*, 289-298. Morison's position is caricatured and attacked by David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York, 1970), 293-294.

<sup>42</sup> Beck, ed., *Sailor Historian*, 147.



it well deserves the description of a book written "in one swoop," as Bernard Berenson later urged Morison to write his *Oxford History of the American People*.<sup>43</sup> The *Maritime History* was Morison's first confident attempt to move beyond the conventions of traditional historical scholarship, which he had fully met in his biography of Otis, to the type of history he felt ought to be written. His later successes—among them most notably the prize-winning work on Columbus, which established his public reputation, and the textbook, *The Growth of the American Republic*, co-authored with Henry Steele Commager (first edition, 1930)—need no comment here. It is worth noting, however, as further evidence of Morison's commitment to popular history, that, after finishing his books on Harvard, Columbus, and Otis, as well as his naval histories, he published short, readable editions of each work for the general reader.

Beyond doubt, the secret of Morison's success was his mastery of a literary style that mingled wit and learning with an artistry equaled by few historians of our time and excelled by none. David McCord, in "Some Reflections on Style," a prefatory contribution to *Sailor Historian* (1977), goes, I think, to the heart of Morison's popular appeal. What made his style "so attractive to eye and ear," McCord asserts, "is neither dazzling brilliance nor velvet smoothness, but the effortless, unaffected quality of vocabulary and cadence, and the full sense of partnership with the reader which, paradoxically, the surprise of discovering such informality on a high intellectual plane almost instantly conveys."<sup>44</sup> This "sense of partnership" arises from the conversational, sometimes earthy, mode assumed by a writer who feels himself engaged in a pleasant exchange with his readers. It can be illustrated, to take one example only, by the dry humor with which Morison, in the *Maritime History*, described a hypothetical Salem merchant gazing through his telescope from the captain's walk at the panorama of the North Shore: "Across the harbor, obscuring the southerly channel, Marblehead presents her backside of rocky pasture to the world at large, and Salem in particular."<sup>45</sup>

Morison's stylistic felicity owed much to his sense of the linkage of the written word to oral expression—a view unfortunately not held, or only ineffectively practiced, by most of his fellow historians. He wrote to be read aloud, with the reader's voice in his mind's ear; he sometimes tested his prose by reading it to his wife. The oral quality of his writings could puzzle his academic critics and cause them to cluck with high-toned displeasure. But Morison knew how to spin a yarn, and his gift for unbuttoned speech, free of stiffness or stuffiness, came naturally to him as a scion of the tribe of

<sup>43</sup> *Vistas of History*, 50.

<sup>44</sup> Beck, ed., *Sailor Historian*, xxxii.

<sup>45</sup> *Maritime History*, 81.

Brahmins that sometimes affects, in a good-natured way, inelegant but expressive "country phrases."

Though Morison admired Parkman's prose, in which, he wrote, "the forests ever murmur, the rapids perpetually foam and roar, the people have parts and passions,"<sup>46</sup> his work, like that of Ernest Hemingway in fiction, required a less inflated style, one better attuned to twentieth-century tastes. Accordingly, he perfected the art of concealing art through prose that was spare and direct, devoid of rhetorical flourishes. But when metaphor was wanted, he could supply one that etched on the reader's mind the gist of the matter. Of the Edward Wigglesworths, father and son, of eighteenth-century Massachusetts, he observed that they "trained the pioneers of liberal Christianity in New England—the ministers who led the way out of the lush fearsome jungles of Calvinism, into the thin, clear light of Unitarianism." Morison also displayed a talent for "set pieces of narrative or description," as P. A. M. Taylor has called them. Among Taylor's favorites were the merchant's day in the *Maritime History*, a day on board the Santa Maria in *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, and the night action off Flamborough Head in *John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography*.<sup>47</sup> Morison's descriptions of the ports from which the European explorers sailed to the New World, in *The European Discovery of America: Northern Voyages, A.D. 500-1600*, provide further examples of his skill. He used the set piece effectively to summarize otherwise scattered facts (such as the details of shipboard life), to provide breathing space before some major event, and to advance historical knowledge in a manner at once attractive to the reader and serviceable to the scholar.

An important tool in Morison's literary armory was the apt analogy between past and present, sometimes off-hand and light-hearted, often serious, always pointed. Thus he remarked that when President Henry Dunster of Harvard, in 1653, refused to allow his youngest child to be baptized—a scandalous departure from Puritan orthodoxy—he "created much the same sensation in New England as would be aroused in the country today if President Conant should announce his adherence to communism."<sup>48</sup> In the same vein, commenting on the troubles of President John Leverett beginning in 1717, Morison noted that

the controversies of his administration are readily understandable if we translate the religious conservatism or orthodoxy of his day into the 'patriotic society' brand of 'Americanism' that has been causing our

<sup>46</sup> Beck, ed., *Sailor Historian*, 356.

<sup>47</sup> Taylor, "Samuel Eliot Morison: Historian," *Journal of American Studies*, XI (1977), 13-26.

<sup>48</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Harvard College in the Seventeenth Century*, I (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), 305.

colleges no little vexation in the last few years. As today, the inevitable concessions of college authorities to the needs and tastes of post-war youth were made the occasion for a general attack on enlightenment. In 1720, important elements of New England society were, in imagination, still living in the puritan century, just as today numerous very worthy people believe in the economic and social theories of the last century, and resent the fact that it is no longer possible to live by those formulae. Then, as now, the fundamentalist elements looked with extreme disfavor on educational institutions which endeavored to prepare their alumni for the age in which they were to live, and which sought to advance knowledge rather than to embalm it. In both eras the enemies of enlightenment were led by good men of the ruling class who were genuinely concerned for the integrity of a form of society that they believed to be divinely ordained, and were supported by half-educated masses who enjoyed disturbing men of learning whose serenity they resented.<sup>49</sup>

Morison thought to instruct as well as to amuse by his analogies between the present and the past. How better to persuade readers that they were not dealing with abstractions or figures in a costume drama, but with human beings? How better to bring alive such remote and intractable characters as the Puritans?

To conclude these illustrations of Morison's technique, one may note that in his popular writings he habitually suppressed the apparatus of scholarship that burdened the books of colleagues more susceptible than he to the academic demands of a profession that was becoming increasingly formalistic. It was his practice, especially in his later works, to make his narrative more fluent by eliminating footnotes, relegating such matter to appendices. "Readers may take a certain amount of erudition for granted!," he noted with no false modesty in his preface to the 1965 edition of *The Oxford History of the American People*.<sup>50</sup> Morison derived the practice of relegating scholarly citations to unobtrusive bibliographical essays from Justin Winsor's *Narrative and Critical History of America* of the 1880s. Far from being newfangled, it had the license of tradition, and Morison used it to good effect. It was especially appropriate for criticism of the secondary literature on the European voyages to America, which ranges from the worthless to the profound and is studded with the work of cranks, special pleaders, and visionaries. Morison's judgments on these writings were sometimes too quick

<sup>49</sup> Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard*, 63-64. Morison, in *Harvard College*, offered opinions on subjects as varied as modern teaching methods, the historical error of judging a 17th-century Puritan by 20th-century values, and the pathos of forcing a "proficiency in the Seven Arts and Learned Tongues" upon the Indian students at the college" (I, 155, 162, 312, 360).

<sup>50</sup> Morison, *Oxford History*, vii.

and frequently sharp, but his notes set forth clearly the basis for his acceptance or rejection of a work.

Of what did Morison's view of history—he eschewed pretentious words like “theory” and “philosophy” of history—consist?

First, he believed that history is a *story*. A historian's responsibility, he thought, is to write in a way that captures and holds the attention of the general reader, much as the story-tellers of pre-literate ages did. That did not mean that Morison rejected explanation—indeed, his narratives carried their own explanatory force—nor was he reluctant to honor the work of scholars whose approaches differed from his own. But he maintained that history is, above all else, a faithful account of events and a description of the people who participated in those events, told in an artful and comprehensible manner.

Secondly, Morison believed that history was a story of *individuals*. He was well aware of the theoretically oriented and statistically based “histories” that were beginning to emerge in his time, and he made selective and critical use of the insights of scholars who contributed to knowledge in any way, but he kept his mind on the personality of the actors in history. Hence much of his work can be characterized as biography, even when it appears in institutional guise.

Thirdly, Morison was deeply skeptical of general interpretations that seemed to him to be imposed on the historical record, rather than drawn from it. That was the basis of his rejection of James Truslow Adams's materialistic theory of the settlement of Massachusetts, a “theory,” Morison wrote, that “fits in so neatly with the economic interpretation of history, with the fashionable dislike of what to-day is called puritanism, and with the American love for statistics . . .”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, he resisted the interpretation of the American Revolution by “a school of American historians”—Frederick Jackson Turner and his followers—who, “working back from a time when the West was radical and the East conservative, have tried to prove that the American Revolution, too, was a Western movement”—a view not sustained, in his judgment, by the facts.<sup>52</sup> As for Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., Charles A. Beard, and other Progressive historians who laboriously constructed interpretations that emphasized class, regional, and economic conflicts within the colonies as vital determinants of the Revolution, Morison quietly ignored their work in constructing his own accounts of the past. The fashionable theories espoused by his colleagues seemed to him to distort the truth of the past by forcing history into the categories of the present.

Morison took his lumps as well as gave them. The principal methodolog-

<sup>51</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony* (Boston, 1930), 340.

<sup>52</sup> Morison, *Oxford History*, 194.

ical fault alleged against him by professional historians was, as one put it, that he conceived of history as "a-wandering in the dark forest of the past, gathering facts like nuts and berries, until he has enough to make a general truth."<sup>53</sup> The charge has superficial relevance. Morison admitted his essential skepticism about the utility of the search for (as Henry Adams put it) a "law of history."<sup>54</sup> "So I have cultivated the vast garden of human experience which is history, without troubling myself overmuch about laws, essential first causes, or how it is all coming out."<sup>55</sup> Morison urged young historians to follow his example: "It matters little what 'method' the young historian follows, if he acquires the necessary tools of research, a sense of balance, and an overriding urge to get at the truth. Courses on historical methodology are not worth the time they take up. I shall never give one myself, and I have observed that many of my colleagues who do give such courses refrain from exemplifying their methods by writing anything."<sup>56</sup>

Morison's approach to history through personality was strongly influenced by his own background. For his first venture into full-scale biography he chose an ancestor, Harrison Gray Otis, and he did not fail to notice that the divisions in the Otis family could be more easily explained by personal beliefs than by social or economic constraints. Otis's maternal grandfather, who was a royal official, and Otis's uncle remained loyal to the crown and went into voluntary exile in England. In one of his few theoretical generalizations on the phenomenon, Morison noted in the one-volume edition of *Harrison Gray Otis* that "men of means and established position, although liberal in their ideas, generally take the conservative side when the issue is fairly joined between rebellion and loyalty. Self-interest would have led Harrison Gray to remain a Whig, for his tenure of office was dependent on the popularly elected general court. But he believed that Parliament had conceded enough in repealing the Stamp Act; and, abhorring boycotts, riots and other illegal methods employed by the patriots, he refused to make an issue out of the tax on tea."<sup>57</sup> At the Revolutionary end of the Otis (and hence Morison) family spectrum was "Uncle Jim" Otis, a Massachusetts representative to the Stamp Act Congress in 1765 and author of the famous pamphlets, *Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* and *Vindication of the British Colonies*, published in 1764 and 1765.

In the post-Revolutionary period Morison found a similar divergence of political views in the bosom of the Otis clan. Harrison Gray Otis's "Aunt Warren" (Mercy Otis Warren) and his wife Sally's father (William Foster)

<sup>53</sup> Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> *By Land and By Sea*, 346.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>57</sup> *Harrison Gray Otis*, 18.

were ardent Jeffersonians. Morison, in pointing out these divisions, was also at pains to note another ambiguity: Otis and his Federalist friends, "who dreaded democracy in theory, were in some respects more democratic socially than the bloated billionaires of today."<sup>58</sup>

Morison continued to emphasize the personal rather than the class or sectional basis of political action in his analysis of the post-Revolutionary contests between Federalists and Republicans. "An individual's political choice," Morison wrote, "depended more on local friendships, personal contacts and basic ideas than on class or section. The frontier or sectional test does not work in Massachusetts, where the two frontier counties of Berkshire and Washington went and stayed Federalist; whilst the rich farming country of Middlesex, extending from Cambridge to the Merrimac River, could always be counted on to vote Republican. Class certainly was no determinant; the Republican leaders in Massachusetts, as throughout the country, were as well born as the Federalists."<sup>59</sup>

Morison's sympathy for Otis and for the Federalist position in the early years of the Republic certainly owed much to his personal identification with the society and region of his ancestor. The New England Federalists' support of the infant U.S. Navy (in contrast to Jefferson's hostility to a strong navy) struck a responsive chord. Their defense of a New England isolated and discriminated against by a futile Jeffersonian embargo also resonated with Morison's sectional sympathies.

Whatever Morison's bias, his major contribution in *Otis* was to reject the idea prevalent at the time and common in later historical interpretations that the Hartford Convention of 1814-1815 was an attempt to take New England out of the Union and give treasonous aid and comfort to Great Britain, with whom the United States was then at war. "Democratic politicians, seeking a foil to their own mismanagement of the war and to discredit the still formidable Federalist party, caressed and fed this infant myth until it became so tough and lusty as to defy both solemn denials and documentary proof."<sup>60</sup> Morison's argument is convincing. At least it must stand until greater evidence can refute it.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-207.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 394. Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson's misunderstanding of the period is dealt with by Morison in Samuel Eliot Morison, Frederick Merk, and Frank Freidel, *Dissent in Three American Wars* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), 29-30.

<sup>61</sup> Fischer cited Morison's *Harrison Gray Otis* as an example of the fallacy of the apposite proof. According to Fischer, Morison tried to make his great-grandfather look good as a statesman by contrasting him "with a semimythical society of stubborn malcontents called the Essex Junto, who purportedly possessed great power in New England politics, and a great desire to smash up the Union after they lost control of it" (*Historians' Fallacies*, 56-57). Fischer's full argument is contained in his article, "The Myth of the Essex Junto," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser.,



In his studies of the Puritans, as in his biography of Otis, Morison was concerned to break down "certain current delusions . . . upon which historians have placed the stamp of authority" and which were spread abroad, with journalistic zeal, by H. L. Mencken and other rambunctious critics of American culture. These delusions included the Puritans' alleged preoccupation with hell and damnation, their kill-joy social regimen, and their peculiar bigotry. To knock down these errors, and to stimulate scholarly and popular appreciation of "the dynamic force called puritanism," as he expressed it in the preface to *Builders of the Bay Colony* (1930), Morison took a biographical approach, emphasizing the "outstanding, pungent" individuality of his subjects. He noted that "my attitude toward seventeenth-century puritanism has passed through scorn and boredom to a warm interest and respect. The ways of the puritans are not my ways, and their faith is not my faith; nevertheless they appear to me a courageous, humane, brave, and significant people."<sup>62</sup>

Many scholars followed Morison's lead, most notably Perry Miller, who acknowledged his debt to Morison and dedicated his anthology, *The Puritans*, to him. But unlike Miller, who separated the "external" biography from the "mind" of his subjects, Morison saw the Puritans as complete persons, meeting challenges, solving problems, using their intellects as one aspect of their personalities. Accordingly, he shaped *Builders* in the form of a series of biographies of individuals who "appealed to me most." "Even by enlarging the scope of biography beyond the conventional lines of piety and politics," he noted, "it is not easy to describe these people truthfully, yet with meaning to moderns." Yet he proposed to do just this, using individual lives, sometimes in groups, to illustrate a movement. Defining his intent in his chapter on John Winthrop, Morison informed his readers that he would not "detain" them with "a summary of [the puritans'] beliefs and practices; these will appear as the lives of those commonwealth builders, puritans all, unfold."<sup>63</sup>

While encouraging associates like Miller, Morison was too much a man of action, and too involved with the ways people actually did things, to focus exclusively on what they thought and wrote. Intellectual history had its fascination for him—witness *Puritan Pronaos* (1936), reissued as *The In-*

---

XXI (1964), 191-235. Morison, in a bibliographic note to his 1969 edition of *Harrison Gray Otis*, p. 30, attempted to refute Fischer's assertion by reference to the frequent use of the "Essex Junto" by contemporaries. Fischer's assertion, Morison wrote, "would certainly have astonished Otis."

<sup>62</sup> Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony*, vi.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 58. The dedication in Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson's *The Puritans* (New York, 1938) includes one of Morison's favorite sayings, *Liberali liberaliter instituendi* (gentlemen must be educated like gentlemen), taken from Harvard College tutor William Brattle's college oration of 1689.

*Intellectual Life of Colonial New England* (1960)—and he understood Miller's delight in discovering hidden meanings in the thought of the much-misunderstood Puritans. But, to Morison, far from being the higher and more significant enterprise, the study of ideas touched only one facet of Puritan life, and not the most vital. He agreed with Miller, however, in taking the Puritans seriously, on their own terms. Those terms, he maintained, were essentially religious. Accordingly, against the materialism of such historians as J. T. Adams, which he regarded as a twentieth-century delusion, he declared his "own opinion, one arrived at by considerable reading of what the puritans wrote, . . . that religion, not economics nor politics, was the center and focus of the puritan dissatisfaction with England, and the puritan migration to New England."<sup>64</sup>

Morison's studies of the Puritans were mostly the product of his early years. Yet one wonders, after considering the research of nearly half-a-century since *Builders* and *Puritan Pronaos*, how different is the present understanding of Puritanism from Morison's own? The accomplishment of Miller, the acknowledged shaper of modern Puritan studies, is being less reverently assessed. Scholars are turning back to study the events, individuals, and institutions, rather than exclusively the religious formulations, of the Puritans. As they do so, they are finding that Morison's pioneering work of rehabilitation has suffered very little from subsequent research.<sup>65</sup>

It might seem unlikely that a man as devoted to personality as Morison should write great institutional history—the driest of dry forms of historiography—but one of Morison's greatest achievements was his history of Harvard University. As the tercentenary of Harvard approached, Morison urged on President Lowell the idea of an official history, and coolly nominated himself as the author. Lowell agreed, and Morison accomplished, in his usual fashion, prodigies of research, producing, in time for the celebration, a massive account of *The Founding of Harvard College* (1935) and *Harvard College in the Seventeenth Century* (two volumes, 1936), together with a one-volume version covering the entire life of the university, *Three Centuries of Harvard, 1636-1936* (1936). Morison announced the last of these books as "a private venture of the author and the publishers," which he wrote "as an individual and not as the official historian."<sup>66</sup>

Though the Harvard histories, like most of Morison's projects, are basically chronological and narrative in form, they can rightly stand as an

<sup>64</sup> Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony*, 346.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Michael McGiffert, "American Puritan Studies in the 1960's," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXVII (1970), 36-37, and David D. Hall, "Understanding the Puritans," in Herbert J. Bass, ed., *The State of American History* (Chicago, 1970), 330-349, esp. 340.

<sup>66</sup> Preface, v. All volumes were published by the Harvard University Press and have been reissued in recent years.

impressive institutional and intellectual study of America's oldest educational institution. The vastness of the canvas and the complexity of the design make these volumes a fundamental contribution to the history of education in America. Morison did not attempt to fit Harvard education into a theoretical framework but presented a running account of the life of the university and the individuals—presidents, tutors, and students—who lived it. The least emphasis is placed on the financial structure and support by which the institution was shaped. *Three Centuries of Harvard* provided a popular alternative to the more detailed volumes, but even the longer works on Harvard in the seventeenth century are readable in the sense that Morison felt good history had to be readable: they have movement and pace, interspersed at carefully chosen points with set pieces on student life, the curriculum, and special topics such as the Indian College and the Press. No one can complain of the absence of a scholarly approach to the material, as Morison flattered the reader with long untranslated Latin quotations and presented extraordinarily detailed references to the minutiae of college life. Particularly helpful are the bibliographical appendices discussing the archival sources for his history. But all of the scholarly "burden" can readily be jettisoned by following the author's instructions to readers to skip portions that might be of minor interest.<sup>67</sup>

Morison's confidence that the biographical form could not only interest and amuse his audience but effectively tell the story of Harvard was borne out by the reviews. *The New York Herald Tribune*, for example, called *Three Centuries of Harvard* "social history in the best sense, as earthy and humorous as a Dickens novel, but in a spirit better to be compared, perhaps, with biography of the Strachey school. Professor Morison has brought Harvard so much alive in his pages that biography seems a better term for his book than history."<sup>68</sup>

Did Morison err and create an imaginary Harvard determined by personality rather than by the sweep of larger social, economic, and political movements? If he did, no one has demonstrated it. Few would even attempt to go over the ground again, much less challenge his interpretations. Perhaps there is no better book to illustrate Morison's conviction that personalities play a determining role in history and that they are more likely to influence mass movements and economic trends than vice versa.

<sup>67</sup> For example, Morison, *Harvard College*, I, 165. The Harvard history is particularly valuable because of Morison's willingness to go beyond extant sources in providing (with the help of H. R. Shurtleff) conjectural reconstructions of early college buildings, his painstaking effort to relate Harvard's tradition with its European educational precedents (providing in the process a succinct history of the development of university life in England and on the Continent), and his willingness to check his assessments of special topics (such as Algonquian linguistics, metaphysical theses, or Hebrew pronunciation) with experts in those fields.

<sup>68</sup> July 26, 1936.

Morison's accounts of European seamen and explorers, which display the same fascination with personality, began with one of his early masterpieces, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, and ended just before his death, after fifty years of work, with a comprehensive two-volume account, at once scholarly and readable, of *The European Discovery of America* (1971-1974). Morison felt a particularly close kinship with Columbus, Magellan, Frobisher, Champlain, and other explorers who combined thought and action, creative imagination and commanding presence. Columbus was, without a doubt, his favorite. "My interest," he wrote in *Admiral*, "is in what Columbus did rather than what he proposed to do," and he described the admiral's character in an eloquent passage on the disagreements aboard ship on October 10, 1492, just after flocks of birds had flown overhead during the night:

Notwithstanding this encouraging sign, October 10 was the most critical day of the entire voyage, when the enterprise came nearest to failure through the stubborn conservatism of the men. It is unfair to present the issue between Columbus and his crew as one between a brave man and cowards. Nor was it one between knowledge and ignorance, education and superstition. . . . It was, rather, the inevitable conflict between a man of one great, compelling idea and those who did not share it in anything like the same degree. . . . So can we fairly blame the men? Their issue with their commander was the eternal one between imagination and doubt, between the spirit that creates and the spirit that denies. Oftentimes the doubters are right, for mankind has a hundred foolish notions for every sound one; it is at times of crisis, when unpredictable forces are dissolving society, that the do-nothings are tragically wrong. There are tides in the affairs of men, and this was one of them.<sup>69</sup>

It was Morison's concern with the *achievement* of Columbus and other explorers of the New World that distinguishes him most from European and Latin American writers on the same subject. Arguments such as Edmundo O'Gorman's in *The Invention of America* struck him as metaphysical nonsense far removed from the reality of history.<sup>70</sup> Morison considered himself closer to historical truth than other historians because he felt, perhaps immodestly, that like Thucydides he was an actor in the events he described, either by duplicating the feats of his subjects—as he did in sailing the routes of Columbus—or by participating in the naval engagements that

<sup>69</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus* (Boston, 1942), 214-215.

<sup>70</sup> Edmundo O'Gorman, *The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of Its History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1961); Samuel Eliot Morison, trans. and ed., *Journals and Other Documents of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (New York, 1963), 278n. Morison also dealt with O'Gorman's thesis in *History and Theory*, II (1963), 292-296.

he described in his multi-volume history of United States naval operations in World War II.

For this sensitive age it is well to make clear the difference between Morison's admiration for Columbus and the brutal realities of the Spanish conquest that followed his discovery. Morison, the historian of discovery, did not try to be the historian of conquest, as his fellow Bostonians, Prescott and Parkman, did. When he followed his explorers ashore, he was always eager to get back on board. He did not, in the manner of Bartolomé de Las Casas, condemn the hypocrisy, greed, and cruelty of the conquistadors; neither did he ignore these aspects of the conquest. Hence it is beside the point to criticize him, as some recent critics have done, for not writing a history of Spanish conquest from the perspective of an outraged moralist.<sup>71</sup>

Many of the qualities that attracted Morison to Columbus he also found exemplified by Andrew Jackson. One might expect a blue-blooded gentleman of Morison's sort to take offense at Jackson's vulgarity. Far from it. "Jacksonian Democracy was vulgar, it catered to mediocrity, diluted politics with the incompetent and the corrupt, and made conditions increasingly unpleasant for gentlemen in public life. But there was nothing low or vulgar about Jackson himself; he was one of nature's gentlemen." How can one explain Morison's view of Jackson? He was not blind to the man's faults, as I am sure he felt his young colleague, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., was. He wrote that "Jacksonian Democracy believed in equality, but only for white men; it was far less charitable toward the Indian and the Negro than its 'aristocratic' opponents."<sup>72</sup> Morison could have poured satire and vitriol on Jackson as he did on Jefferson (whom he also criticized for blindness and hypocrisy toward Indians and blacks), but he did not. Why? I think basically because he admired Jackson as a man of action, courage, and decision. While declaring him "credulous, intolerant, and unlearned," and asserting that he was "no champion of the poor, or even the 'common man,'" he credited him with a frontier simplicity and strength. He admired his military presence and bearing. And I think he respected his chivalrous attitude toward "the ladies," particularly in his defense of Peggy Eaton, wife of his Secretary of War who was snubbed by the other ladies of the administration.<sup>73</sup>

Morison's explanation of the elevation of Jackson to the presidency cut through all the speculative formulations of quantified political history to arrive at a judgment that is now more accepted than when Morison wrote it:

<sup>71</sup> Hans Koning [Hans Koningsberger], *Columbus: His Enterprise* (New York, 1976), 92, 126. Koningsberger's book is of no scholarly value but was elevated in dignity by being reviewed with Fredi Chiappelli, ed., *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old* (Berkeley, Calif., 1976), in *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 25, 1976.

<sup>72</sup> *Growth of the American Republic*, I, 469-470.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 473.

in the election of 1828, "the first to leave a bad smell," he noted, Jackson was catapulted into office by voters who "cared little for policies, but much for personality, and they voted for Jackson because he was their sort of man. After all, the most sophisticated among us often have no better reason for voting as we do than had the American democracy of 1828."<sup>74</sup>

Morison's belief in leadership as a determinative factor in history is forcefully affirmed in his general works. Discussing the Federal Convention of 1787 in *The Oxford History of the American People*, he dismissed recent theoretical formulations and asserted the primacy of personal considerations. "This Federalist-Antifederalist contest," he wrote, "was largely personal; it was not a class, a sectional, or an economic cleavage." He noted that some of the wealthiest men in the country, like George Mason and James Winthrop, wrote pamphlets against the Constitution. Delegates to the Virginia ratifying convention from the old tidewater region, he pointed out, were mostly Antifederalist; those from the recently settled Shenandoah Valley, mostly Federalist. "And so it went, all over the country. The only generalization that can stand the test of fact is that the cleavage was one of age against youth."<sup>75</sup>

A historian who, like Morison, finds history fascinating chiefly as a story of leading individuals in action amidst a swirl of events in which accident may often rule is likely to feel restive in the presence of deterministic historical theories. Regarding the American Revolution, Morison held that "there was nothing foreordained about it" and that "historians who argue that the Revolution was inevitable can only make out a case by insisting that the Thirteen Colonies were becoming too big and self-conscious to continue as colonies."<sup>76</sup> Rejecting the views of Turnerians and Beardians, Morison interpreted the Revolution, as he did Puritanism, in its own terms, emphasizing contests and decisions that were essentially political. To this purpose he liked to quote an evocative passage from an 1842 interview with Captain Preston, a ninety-one-year-old former participant in the fight at Concord Bridge, which he used to dismiss some of the traditional explanations of the Revolution. The old man refused to swallow the convenient explanations offered by his twenty-one-year-old interrogator concerning "intolerable oppressions," the Stamp Act, the tax on tea, and the writings of Harrington, Sidney, and Locke. "Well, then, what was the matter? And what did you mean in going to the fight?" asked the exasperated questioner. "Young man, what we meant in going for those redcoats was this: *we always had governed ourselves, and we always meant to. They didn't mean we should.*"<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 466-467. But Morison added that "in the last instance, classes rather than sections that elected Jackson" (p. 469), though he obviously defined class more in terms of personality than of income or social status.

<sup>75</sup> Morison, *Oxford History*, 313.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 212-213.



After a generation or two of detailed monographs, the historical profession has come back to the view of the matter held by many of the participants and by Morison himself. It is a view that accents the significance of the political debate over the rights of Englishmen, de-emphasizes concealed or overt conflicts between classes and sections, and minimizes the hidden motives either of malevolent British or of scheming colonials. In ignoring the long debate over socioeconomic interpretations of the American Revolution, Morison was ahead of his time, not behind.

Morison's rejection of the theory of the American Revolution as a social movement is gracefully put in *The Growth of the American Republic*:

Thus, when we go a-fishing for evidence of reforms in this period, the catch is very meager. The American Revolution was no social revolution, like those of France and Russia. No class as such was expropriated, slavery was not abolished, the structure of society was not altered. Our Revolution was primarily political, like the English Revolution of 1640-60. Even the confiscation of loyalist property affected the relations of persons rather than of classes: one set of proprietors was impoverished, and another enriched; and it was not long before the patriots who obtained Tory farms and mansions were just as conservative as the former owners. Yet the Revolution was a powerful catalytic agent in American society. It released pent-up energies and gave them form and direction. It crystallized the American character and institutions. The established order of things was questioned if not replaced. Ideals heretofore nebulous were given concrete formulation; hopes and aspirations heretofore formless were realized. Democracy would not have been achieved as early as it was, but for the fillip that war and independence gave to democratic elements in the American society.<sup>78</sup>

The casualness with which Morison would touch on general theory, primarily to refute it, is illustrated in his concluding comments on the American Revolution in *The Oxford History of the American People*. "According to the natural history of revolutions," he wrote, "we would expect the American Confederation to fall apart, or that the army or some outstanding leader would set up a military despotism." "What actually happened," he noted, "was the establishment of government under law." Morison explained the "anomaly," if that is what it was, by emphasizing that "the principles of the American Revolution were essentially conservative; the leaders were thinking of preserving and securing the freedom they already enjoyed rather than, like the Russians, building something new and different." Morison captured the thought in a pungent phrase. "As John Dickinson said in the Federal Convention, 'Experience must be our only

<sup>78</sup> *Growth of the American Republic*, I, 246.

guide, reason may mislead us.' One cannot imagine such a thing being said by a French or a Russian revolutionist."<sup>79</sup>

Morison's personality-based, chance-oriented vision of the past draws its strength and validity not only from his narrative skill but also from its explanatory power. Because Morison did not cast his work in a formal theoretical framework, historians have assumed that he lacked any theory of history. I would assert, to the contrary, that he did have a theory, though he would not have called it that and though he advanced it largely by indirection. His narratives incorporate an analytical and interpretive point of view that, though articulated chiefly by his rejection of most of the theories—social, economic, intellectual—favored by his colleagues, nevertheless constitutes a sophisticated explanation of the past.

When Morison had completed, at the age of 87, all the books that he had planned, he was adamant about not taking on any more. It was as though he knew he had finished his historical work. Walter Muir Whitehill, in his introduction to *Sailor Historian*, notes that Morison "firmly but quietly" rejected his urging to continue to write.<sup>80</sup> I can attest to the same firm rejection in his response to my similar suggestion after he had completed *The European Discovery of America*. I could not conceive of Morison not writing history. I feared he would die when he stopped writing. And so he did, and I think he was quite aware that his life and his calling, which he regarded as identical, ceased with the completion of his self-assigned writing tasks. Page Smith, who had been Morison's "reader" when I took his colonial history course in 1948, visited the Admiral at his summer home, Good Hope, on Maine's Mt. Desert Island, in the late summer of 1974 and noted his failing legs but unfailing courage in the face of adversity.<sup>81</sup> Rarely did Morison allow despair or sentiment to cloud that stoic vision. In *The Oxford History of the American People*, commenting on John Adams's nostalgic dream during the American Revolution of a return to the old colonial system, he wrote: "Long wars always change conditions so fundamentally that neither victor nor vanquished can ever re-create 'the good old days.' Never, never will they return, any more than an old man's lost youth."<sup>82</sup>

Morison's daughter, Mrs. Emily Morison Beck, tells me that one of her father's favorite quotations was from Dryden's *Oedipus* (1679), Act IV, sc. 1—a quotation that may serve as a conclusion to this article:

<sup>79</sup> Morison, *Oxford History*, 270.

<sup>80</sup> Beck, ed., *Sailor Historian*, xxv.

<sup>81</sup> Page Smith, "Samuel Eliot Morison, 1887-1976: He Kept on Going Right to the End," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1976.

<sup>82</sup> Morison, *Oxford History*, 180.

Of no distemper, of no blast he died,  
But fell like autumn fruit that mellow'd long—  
Even wonder'd at, because he dropp'd no sooner,  
Fate seem'd to wind him up for fourscore years,  
Yet freshly ran he on ten winters more;  
Till like a clock worn out with eating time,  
The wheels of weary life at last stood still.

Morison died as he lived, detached from the hurly-burly of historical scholarship. While respected—indeed, held in awe—by fellow historians, he was not followed or imitated. Professional historians pronounced narrative history dead with Morison's death. But history does not live or die according to the pronouncements of historians. It lives or dies depending upon whether it is read or unread. Morison's histories continue to appeal to the general public, and his definition of history will, I believe, find increasing favor among students and scholars.