

'Edward Sylvester Morse: Scientist and Japanologist'

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Edward Sylvester Morse (1838 – 1925) was famous in two very different realms: he was both an important natural scientist and one of America's first experts on Japan. In the latter half of the 19th century, Morse was a popular lecturer on the national circuit, author of three books (including the influential *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings*) and more than 100 articles on Japan, curator of Japanese pottery at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and Director of the Peabody Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, which housed the extensive collection of Japanese folk art that he had made. Please see for example:

[Box 68 Folder 1: Proofs of sketches for *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings*](#)

[Box 70 Folder 3: Reviews of *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings*, 1886](#)

[Box 55 Folder 9: Lecture Notes on Temples, Theatres and Music in Japan](#)

[Box 55 Folder 12: Lecture Notes on Education in Japan.](#)

Morse seems the quintessential Yankee, self-made, practical, down-to-earth, democratic, little interested in matters aesthetic, historical or philosophical. Having shed the Calvinism of his ancestors at an early age, Morse always remained captive of a secular Puritanism. Work was clearly the center of his existence. Family, love, idle pleasure and friendship were all less important to him than the pursuit of his professions. In the realm of science he was no dreamer, no theoretician. Morse was content to believe in things he could see, touch, smell, dissect and sketch. Everything which would not be described by such activities -- and this came to include God -- was of no interest to him. There was no pleasure or gain to be taken in the unseen and unknowable. To be interested in such matters was to waste time, and for the unreligious Morse, time-wasting was a cardinal sin.¹

All this which was true before Morse arrived in Japan at the age of forty was almost as true afterwards. But one must stress the word "almost." Something in the experience of Asia served to alter both Morse's career and his mentality. Three years of living and working in Japan made Morse so interested in the culture that during the second half of his life studies of Japan took precedence over scientific pursuits. At the same time this alien social order, full of invitations towards other ways of being, upset some of his lifelong beliefs. To combat its strong and subtle pull he was forced to cling tightly to old intellectual patterns. Morse's Japan scholarship was more than a way of explaining that nation; it also may be seen as a way of warding off its attraction and reducing the strangeness of experience by confining it to familiar categories that he could easily understand.

I

Little in Edward S. Morse's life prepared him to appreciate the culture of Japan, but several factors made him receptive to it. He was an open minded man who had few social, religious or political reservations about alien societies. This attitude sprang from Morse's most enduring passion, his major way of relating to reality. From an early age his deepest love was to collect, classify and compare things. Pursued with single-minded fervor, such activity helped to turn him into a scientist and brought him to the Orient in 1877. There he continued to act in the same manner he had at home, observing things carefully, sketching their shape and contour, noting their salient characteristics in words. In theory, this process involved no judgment of the behavior of what was being studied. What was necessary was to distance oneself from the subject of study so that emotional reactions did not color one's observations. See for example:

[Box 20 Folder 1: Japan Diary, 1877; Maps of travels in Japan, c1877- 1882](#)

It would not be accurate to say that Morse was a man without feelings, but only that he managed to keep them under tight control. Few flights of imagination ever dis-turbed his consciousness. This was true from his earliest days. In 1850, at the age of twelve, he was already a collector, on the hunt for tiny, shelled creatures in the woods and river banks and at the seashore near his hometown of Portland, Maine. His dreams tended towards the mundane; his major aim was to make a complete collection of local land shells. These tended to be tiny, unattractive, and of little value, but Morse's interests were neither aesthetic nor monetary. Satisfaction came from the process itself, from studying shells through a three-dollar microscope, drawing them, arranging them neatly in the drawers of his cabinet.

This was a democratic kind of science, well suited to nineteenth-century America. Natural history, in fact, was the only scientific discipline in which Americans of that era excelled. In part this was because the abundant plant and animal life of the continent, even in long-settled regions like New England, was still dimly known. An amateur like Morse could quickly make a mark in such a realm. All that was necessary was intelligence, persistence, energy and a good set of eyes. Ned possessed all of these. At the age of seventeen he was overseer of the scientific collection of the Portland Society of Natural History. By the time he reached twenty his name had been listed three times in the Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History as discoverer of a new species.

The road from Portland to recognition as a scientist was direct. Morse lived a version of the national myth, that rags-to-riches -- in his case obscurity to fame -- story which so fixated the consciousness of the nineteenth-century American middle class. Normally the tale was one of diligence flavored with a little luck. The first characteristic Morse had in abundance; the second he knew how to capitalize upon. That early recognition by the BSNH was the springboard to success. In 1859 he came to the attention of Swiss-born Louis Agassiz, then considered by many to be the leading natural scientist in the world. Agassiz was on the eve of his greatest triumph, building at Harvard the largest Museum of Comparative Zoology in the world. Morse impressed him enough to be taken on as one of a dozen student assistants; he was the only one not to have completed a secondary education.

Two years with Agassiz provided training and contacts enough to last a lifetime. When Morse left the Museum in 1861, he had a good deal of theory and an immense amount of practical experience under his belt. As the assistant in charge of mollusks -- one of the four branches of living creatures according to the classification system of the time -- he had sorted tens of thousands of specimens of some 4,000 species and had started on the track of his most important scientific contribution. His focus was on Brachiopods, tiny shelled creatures considered mollusks because, like clams and oysters, they were bivalves. For a decade Morse tracked these creatures, living, dead and fossilized, on dredging expeditions from the coast of North Carolina to the St. Lawrence River. Years devoted to dissecting and studying shells and the internal organs of creatures often only one-eighth of an inch in length led to his major findings published in 1870: Brachiopods were not mollusks, but worms. This conclusion put Morse on the scientific map, drew praise from scientists at home and abroad and brought a complimentary letter from Charles Darwin (see Box 3 Folder 11: Incoming Correspondence, images 38-39). For a natural scientist of that time, there could be no sweeter sign of recognition.²

That Morse's major achievement should be the result of such routine, even dull labor, the product less of brilliance than of sheer doggedness, says much about the man and his age. Certainly this kind of science suited an ideology of egalitarianism. If Morse himself was an instinctive democrat, the attitude also brought financial reward. In the years after leaving the Museum it was one thing to be elected to the National Academy of Sciences and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, to receive an honorary Ph.D. from Bowdoin, to give an occasional course at Harvard or to deliver the Lowell Lectures in Boston, but his daily bread and butter came from more popular activities. The bulk of Morse's income derived from writing for popular journals and delivering lectures to general audiences on topics like "Flowers and their Friends," "Glimpses of Insect Life"(Box 55 Folder 27) and "Glaciers."(Box 55 Folder 23) Such activity partook of the American faith in the common people; it was part of a national belief in both the possibility of self-improvement and in science as a practical pursuit. In the introduction to the *American Naturalist*, a magazine which Morse helped to found, this was expressed with the suggestion that all scientific theories should be "subordin-ated to the practical

advantage as well as to the intellectual and moral elevation of man . . . our science will be ennobled by publishing those facts and principles which interest alike the philosopher and the day laborer."³

His scrapbook, with news-clippings, advertisements and other ephemera, covering his popular lecture series on Natural History from 1868 onwards can be found in [Box 23 Folder 1](#).

To describe Morse's life primarily in terms of career is to see it through his own eyes. He possessed the mentality of a culture taught to believe the surfaces of the outer world are more important, more real than the experiences of the inner one. Unlike natural phenomena, which could be neatly categorized, emotions were messy and uncontrollable and best avoided. Morse knew this as early as his teenage years. His pursuit of shells made for a stormy relationship with his father, a deacon of the Baptist Church, a wrathful man who never approved of his son's impractical aims. So disturbed was young Ned by his father's assaults with violent words and even more violent prayers that once he was driven to the edge of suicide. Momentarily that could seem preferable to abandoning shells which, as he confided to his diary, were "the only thing I care to live for."⁴ (See [Diary entry for 27 April 1858, Box 18 Folder 8, images 79-81](#)).

The chilliness of that remark touched his human relationships. Even his worshipful biographer admits that Morse's heart "burned for science and humanity, rather than for those of his immediate circle."⁵ To desert the ways of a harsh, narrow-minded father in favor of one's own desires may be to act in a manner common to generations of young American males, but Morse took the pattern one step farther: he was always deserting those closest to him. His mother, a lively woman of intellectual bent, provided love and support to counterbalance the influence of his father, but Ned was unable to repay her devotion in kind. Nor was he any more caring with his siblings. After his father's death in 1860, Morse allowed his older brother to shoulder the entire burden of supporting their mother and three sisters. His one lifelong friend, John Gould, received slightly better treatment. They had begun by sharing an enthusiasm for shells, but, responding to the call of practicality, Gould had gone to work in a bank. For years Morse would shamelessly borrow money from John - to study with Agassiz, to finance scientific ventures, to go to Japan.

Indifference to intimacy and more than a hint of exploitation also marked his fifty-year relationship with Ellen Owen. At twenty Morse worried that he would never love a woman; for the rest of his life his actions seemed to indicate that he never did. When he met Nellie in 1860, Ned felt himself unworthy and up she went on pedestal: "She is the one to whom I will look for advice, one who will lead me to a higher scale of thought, and one I shall love to please by good behavior." So moved was he by some unaccustomed feeling in the heart that at first he attempted to share his passion with her, hauling Nellie off to the Zoology Museum in Cambridge for private lectures on the animal kingdom. In theory marriage for Morse was a two-way street, a matter of sharing with someone "who will strive for my happiness in the same way I shall strive for hers."⁶ (See [Diary entries for 31 October 1860, Box 18 Folder 8, image 210](#) and for [31 December 1860, Box 18 Folder 8, image 220](#)). The reality ran in one direction. Married life was foreshadowed when, on the eve of the wedding in 1863, Morse invited John Gould to come along and help turn the honeymoon into a snail-collecting expedition, exclaiming: "*What a delightful time we should have!*"⁷ (See [letter to John Gould, 29 March 1863, Box 17 Folder 8, images 3-5](#)). In the years ahead, Nellie's role was to raise the children, take care of the household and stay out of his way. On many of his extended trips Morse left her and the two children at home.

It was easier to leave human beings behind than to desert the Lord. Torn as a teenager by a religious crisis, Ned ended it after attending a revival meeting where the doleful cadences of the minister's gloomy sermon were intoned in a voice that seemed to issue from a coffin. Emphatically he rejected all notions of hellfire and damnation, but he did not abandon the Almighty. When the controversy over *Origin of Species* erupted in the early sixties, Morse - under the sway of Agassiz, who never did accept Darwin's theory - rejected natural selection because it meant the world was the produce of mere "chance." More unusual and telling was his complaint that "Darwin's chapter on the struggle for existence smacks too strongly of Calvinism, and . . . Darwin's picture looks a good deal like Calvin's drawing of us poor worms. . ."⁸ (See [letter to John Gould, 11 March 1860, Box 17 Folder 6, images 17-20](#)). By 1873 Morse had reversed his position, but no more than Darwin himself did he renounce "the wisdom and goodness of the Creator."⁹

The shift on Darwin shows off two of Morse's most winning traits; he was both fearless and open-minded. After a decade full of careful study and contacts with other scientists had served to convince him that Darwin was right, he did not hesitate to speak out on what was still a touchy issue. To John Gould's suggestion that he tone down such remarks rather than endanger public support for his lectures, Morse answered sharply: "I should rather come down to one meal a day and lumber along in debt than follow so humiliating a path. . . ." He needed to speak the truth "My chief care must be to avoid that 'rigidity of mind' that prevents one from remodeling his opinions; there is nothing [more] glorious to my mind than the graceful abandoning of one's position if it be false. . ."10

Gould's letter of 23 October 1873 to Morse on this subject, including Gould's comment that "*I am a Darwinian myself – an evolutionist – or I take it as "the best working theory"*" and his suggestions to Morse concerning his public lectures on evolutionary theories can be found in Box 5 Folder 6, images 154-156.

This attitude extended no farther than the realms of science and religion. Nowhere is there any indication that before going to Japan Morse ever questioned or displayed any curiosity about the premises of the social order in which he had been raised. His opinions in the realms of art, politics, history and general culture are a blank. Up to the age of forty such matters rarely impinge upon his detailed diary, and what few entries exist indicate a conventional mentality. He was, after all, a largely self-educated small-town product who, according to his biographer "had never read a book on history, or philosophy, or art. Architecture, music, and sculpture were terra incognita to him."¹¹ He had resided in Cambridge but was ignorant of the politics and literary works of such local figures as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Bronson Alcott, Charles Eliot Norton or Julia Ward Howe. In the troubled political times leading up to the Civil War, Morse never expressed an opinion on either slavery or abolitionism, though when the call to arms came in 1861 he responded like a good patriot and was in despair when poor health barred him from joining the ranks.

To characterize Morse at the time he first went to Japan as a typical American would be to do him a disservice. If in personal tastes and priorities he seems to express a national pattern, clearly in talents, energy and professional interests he was unusual. The path from obscurity to fame might be a cultural ideal, but Morse followed it in his own way. Wealth meant nothing to him. In his own way, Morse was a kind of adventurer. The first of Agassiz's students to go out on his own, he for the most part avoided institutional or long-term commitments. His place of residence for sixty years was Salem, Massachusetts, but he was a restless sort, one who liked movement and diversity. More than once he quit good positions. After helping to found the *American Naturalist*, he left its editorial board; secure as curator of mollusks at the Peabody Academy, he then left the post. His writings included everything from newspaper articles to textbooks.¹² Briefly he served on the faculty of Maine State, Bowdoin and Harvard Colleges, and regularly he lectured all over the country, from Maine to Mississippi, from New York to California.

In 1874 Morse had a first taste of Asian culture in San Francisco's Chinatown; on the same trip he learned that the waters of Japan were loaded with varieties of Brachiopods unknown in the United States. Seized by a desire to study them, he spent three years of hard work attempting to raise the money and arrange the free time for an expedition to Asia. For Morse no price was too high nor any distance too great when it was a matter of learning more about those fascinating creatures who lived in shells.

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Professor Robert Rosenstone's essay can be read in full by all registered users of *America, Asia and the Pacific: The Edwards Sylvester Morse Collection*. For further information on free, four-week trials or purchases of this resource, please contact us at info@amdigital.co.uk

Endnotes:

1. For the basic outline but not the interpretation of Morse's life, this article follows Dorothy Wayman, *Edward Sylvester Morse* (Cambridge, Mass.; 1942). Though admiring and uncritical, the work can be trusted for the overall picture; it also contains significant extracts from his unpublished journals. Other biographical accounts include the following: J. S. Kingsley, "Edward Sylvester Morse," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 61 (Boston, 1926), 549-555; Leland O. Howard, "Biographical Memoir of Edward Sylvester Morse," Biographical Memoires, *National Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 17 (Washington, D.C., 1937), 3-29; Merrill E. Champion, "Edward Sylvester Morse, With a Bibliography and a Catalogue of His Species," *Occasional Papers on Mollusks*, (Harvard University Museum of Comparative Zoology) 1 (Sept. 20, 1947), 129-144.
2. Morse's findings were first reported as "The Brachiopoda: A Division of Annelida," *The American Journal of Science and Arts*, 50 (July, 1870), 1-5. The full research paper was "On the Systematic Position of the Brachiopods," *Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History*, 15 (March 19, 1873), and reprinted with the same title as a separate volume (Boston, 1873). Darwin's letter is quoted in Wayman, *Morse*, 222-23.
3. *The American Naturalist*, 1 (1868), 2.
4. Entry for April 27, 1858, quoted in Wayman, *Morse*, 24-5.
5. Wayman, *Morse*, 427.
6. Diary entries Oct. 31 and Dec. 31, 1860, quoted in Wayman, *Morse*, 145, 155.
7. Letter to John Gould, March 29, 1863, quoted in Wayman, *Morse*, 223
8. Letter to John Gould, March 11, 1860, quoted in Wayman, *Morse*, 226.
9. Letter to John Gould, Oct. 25, 1873, quoted in Wayman, *Morse*, 225.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Wayman, *Morse*, 104
12. Albert P. Morse, "Bibliography of Edward Sylvester Morse" (unpublished typescript, in possession of Peabody Museum, Salem, Mass.), is the only full bibliography of Morse material. Of its 558 items, 150 were published before his trip to Japan.