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American Statesmen

EDITED BY

JOHN T. MORSE, JR.

American Statesmen

GOVERNEUR MORRIS

BY

THEODORE ROOSEVELT



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
The Riverside Press, Cambridge

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The Riverside Press, Cambridge, Mass., U. S. A.
Electrotyped and Printed by H. O. Houghton and Company.

INTRODUCTION.

Two generations ago the average American biographer was certainly a marvel of turgid and aimless verbosity; and the reputations of our early statesmen have in no way proved their vitality more clearly than by surviving their entombment in the pages of the authors who immediately succeeded them. No one of the founders of the Constitution has suffered more in this respect than has he who was perhaps the most brilliant, although by no means the greatest, of the whole number, — Gouverneur Morris.

Jared Sparks, hitherto Morris's sole biographer, wrote innumerable volumes on American history, many of which are still very valuable, and some of them almost indispensable, to the student. The value, however, comes wholly from the matter; Mr. Sparks is not only a very voluminous writer, but he is also a quite abnormally dull one. His "Life of Gouverneur Morris" is typical of most of his work.

He collected with great industry facts about Mr. Morris, and edited a large number of his letters and state papers, with numerous selections, not always well chosen, from his Diary. Other merits the book has none, and it has one or two marked faults. He failed to understand that a biographer's duties are not necessarily identical with those of a professional eulogist; but for this he is hardly to blame, as all our writers then seemed to think it necessary to shower indiscriminate praise on every dead American—whether author, soldier, politician, or what not—save only Benedict Arnold. He was funnily unconscious of his own prolix dullness; and actually makes profuse apologies for introducing extracts from Morris's bright, interesting writings into his own drearily platitudinous pages, hoping that "candor and justice" will make his readers pardon the "negligence" and "defects of style," which the extracts contain. He could not resist the temptation now and then to improve Morris's English, and to soften down, or omit anything that he deemed either improper or beneath the stilted "dignity" of history. For example, Morris states that Marie Antoinette, when pursued by the Parisian fishwives, fled from her bed "in her shift and petticoat, with her stockings in her hand;" such particularity struck

Mr. Sparks as shockingly coarse, and with much refinement he replaced the whole phrase by "in her undress." An oath he would not permit to sully his pages on any terms; thus when Morris wrote that Pennsylvania would find Sir Henry Clinton "a most damnable physician," Mr. Sparks simply left out the offending sentence altogether. This kind of thing he did again and again.

Still he gives almost all of Morris's writings that are of political interest. It is, however, greatly to be desired that we should have a much more complete edition of his letters and Diary, on account of the extremely interesting descriptions they contain of the social life of the period, both in America and in Europe. As regards his public career, and his views and writings on public subjects, we already have ample material, much of which has appeared since Sparks's biography was written, and some of which is here presented for the first time.

Morris's speeches in the Constitutional Convention have been preserved, in summarized form, by Madison in his "Debates:" of these, of course, Sparks was necessarily ignorant. Miss Annie Carey Morris has written two articles in "Scribner's Magazine" for January and February, 1887, on her grandfather's life in Paris during the French Revolution, giving some new

and interesting details. A good article appeared in "Macmillan's Magazine" for November, 1885, the writer evidently having been attracted to the subject by the way in which Taine made Morris's writings a basis for so much of his own great work on the Revolution. Decidedly the best piece upon Morris that has yet been written, however, is the admirable sketch by Mr. Henry Cabot Lodge in the "Atlantic Monthly" for April, 1886.

My thanks are especially due the Hon. John Jay for furnishing me many valuable letters, hitherto unpublished, of both Jay and Morris; and for giving me additional information about Morris's private life, and other matters. All the letters here quoted that are not given by Sparks are to be found either in the Jay MSS. or the Pickering MSS. Mr. Jay also furnished me with the account of the way in which Louis Philippe was finally persuaded to pay the debt he owed Morris.

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