
EDMUND SEARS MORGAN



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EDMUND S. MORGAN, one of the most talented historians to write about early America, died on 8 July 2013. He was 97. Morgan was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to Edmund Morris and Elsie Smith Morgan. He had a sister, Roberta.

Morgan's family was one of considerable attainments. His father, a distinguished lawyer and scholar, taught in the law schools of the University of Minnesota, Yale University, and Harvard University. When World War I began, he was at Minnesota, but he then moved to Washington D.C. to work as an assistant to the judge advocate general of the United States. He returned to teaching shortly after the war ended. Morgan's sister, Roberta Wohlstetter, never held an academic appointment, but she published a book that won the Bancroft Prize (given by Columbia University) in 1963 titled *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*.

Morgan spent most of his childhood in or around Cambridge, Massachusetts. His high school years did not see the birth of his interests in the past and, indeed, were not especially significant for his early education. He graduated from the Belmont School in 1933. Harvard, which he entered after graduation, provided the stimulus that made him a historian. These were the years of several great scholars at Harvard—F. O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, and Samuel Eliot Morison—who provided inspiration as well as examples of distinguished work in the humanities. Morgan's own interests may not have been clearly in focus when he arrived at Harvard; they seem to have been in English literature and perhaps English history. However, after a course from Matthiessen, he turned to a new program in American history and literature. Perry Miller served as his tutor, but Matthiessen remained a good friend and influence in these beginning years.

After graduating with an A. B. in 1937, Morgan went to the London School of Economics for one year, where he listened, he later said, with little satisfaction to lectures. He had attended the school at the suggestion of Felix Frankfurter, a friend of his father. Frankfurter was a man of strong opinions and had influence with the Morgan family. Morgan did not share his high estimate of the school and, later in his life, confessed that he had learned little there.

Harvard was another matter. He entered the university's graduate program in history and received a Ph.D. in 1942. Perry Miller directed his dissertation, a study of the Puritan family in New England. It was a fresh look at the Puritans and has remained one of the most important studies in the field since its publication in 1942, as it fleshed out a rounded view of Puritan culture. Miller's great books, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* and *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, had reconstructed the intellectual basis of Puritan culture in a magnificent way. Morgan admired these books—he

was primarily an intellectual historian—but he attempted to describe in *The Puritan Family* the social side of Puritan culture. The book, written in a deceptively simple style, examines almost all aspects of the organized family—the role of parents, the rearing of children and their education, the conduct of domestic servants, and the place of the family in the social order. He concludes his story with an imaginative argument of the linkage of Puritan tribalism to the family. Historians have relied on the book ever since its appearance.

Morgan added to the field of Puritan studies in the years following his first foray into the subject. His books have all been written with grace and clarity. *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* demonstrated that his ability extended to biography; but the book is much more than the history of the life of a Puritan leader. It explores the contours of the early political system in Massachusetts and, in the process, explains the development of representative government and the policy of intolerance, while also offering suggestive accounts of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson.

Morgan was not inflexibly committed to his own arguments: Twelve years after the publication of his book on John Winthrop, he returned to Roger Williams, a leading figure in *The Puritan Dilemma*. He explained in his new study, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State*, that he had changed his mind, prompted by a reading of the complete publications of Roger Williams that had been recently issued. Morgan's new interpretation rested on his study of the assumptions held by Williams about the relations of church and state. His new book on Williams reveals Morgan's humility and his effort—always made—to get at the truth.

Morgan's determination to get at the core of any subject he studied is clear in his *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea*, a short book published a few years before his study of Roger Williams. In it he examines the ideas underlying the Puritan church in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the importance of the experience of conversion in the making of Puritan saints. Like all of his work, this book rests on a wide and deep study of the evidence.

While studying the Puritan family, Morgan had also turned to the American Revolution. Puritanism and the Revolution were to remain at the center of his historical work throughout his life. One of his best books came out of his research into the Revolution in these early years: *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (1953), written with his first wife, Helen Morgan. He explains in the preface that although “the original conception of the book” and “the actual writing of it” were his, “the structure of the thought and the final expression have been the product of so close a cooperation that it would be misleading to assign the book to a single author.” The book itself rested on the use of a

technique of analysis and exposition he used in other books. This method involved expressing the issues in the Stamp Act crisis through the ideas and experience of “particular men”—in this case, the men of a few colonies who played vital parts in the conflict between Great Britain and America. Rather than reconstruct fully the crisis in all 13 colonies, Morgan confined his exposition (not his analysis) to only a small number, concentrating on the defining events of the affair that made it important. In the examination of the two critical years of the crisis, certain individuals stood out, as did the larger implications of actual events and their meaning in the constitutional theory developed by the Americans at the time. It was—and is—an important book, as well as a wonderful example of the wit and literary grace found in all of Morgan’s work. He was, indeed, one of the most accomplished stylists writing history in the second half of the twentieth century.

Morgan’s interest in the Revolution was one aspect of his fascination with the prevailing ideas in early America. All of his scholarship reveals a profound interest in the intellectual basis of American experience. This interest in ideas is even apparent in the only general essay he wrote—*Birth of the Republic*, an intellectual study of the entire Revolution. In it he argued that certain enlightened principles defined revolutionary experience. The Americans, he insisted, meant what they said in the Revolution, an argument he always made in refutation of “progressive historians” who had been inspired by Charles Beard.

Midway through his scholarly life, he wrote *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (1975). In this book, he showed the relationship of slavery to political liberty in Virginia, suggesting in a quiet way the importance of the unfree to the thought and practice of the Virginia aristocracy. The first part of the book offers a brilliant social history of the colony. All in all, it is a remarkably suggestive account, and it is fair to say that it has had a profound influence on the study of slavery and the conditions underlying freedom in early America.

Morgan’s final big book was *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (1988), in which he argued for the importance of a “political fiction” in the shaping of representative government in the two countries. It has provoked a healthy discussion of the large subject it treats—in that sense, it is a typical Morgan book. His short biography, *Benjamin Franklin* (2002), though a little one-sided as he said, is also typical in its wit and graceful prose. Like almost all of his published work, his ripe wisdom comes through, a quality he shared with Franklin.

I have given almost all of this memorial to Morgan as a scholar. He was also a marvelous teacher. His lectures usually did not glitter, and

there was nothing fancy in his approach to his students—no showing off, no showmanship, no straining for his listeners' approval. But there was content, a substance lifted to stimulation by his clarity and insights. His method in his graduate seminars showed a light touch; he could draw the best out of students, apparently without effort. Here his generous interest proved especially effective. One sensed that his interest was genuine, and the students usually responded with all that they had, wishing not to disappoint their teacher—for Morgan's standards were high. His openness and kindness gave students significant room to try out their own ideas, but they soon learned that although their teacher gave much by way of opportunity, he also expected much from them.

Although Morgan received many honors, including the presidency of the Organization of American Historians, the Bancroft Prize, a special Pulitzer citation for his long record of scholarly distinction, and a gold medal for lifetime achievement from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he remained a genuinely modest man. His was a quiet voice in the classroom and profession—quiet, but it will be heard for a very long time.

Elected 1964

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