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SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON AND THE OCEAN SEA

Samuel Eliot Morison has described how, early in life, he took from the career of Francis Parkman inspiration for his own career as an historian. In selecting as an undergraduate the grand theme of the struggle between New France and England in America, Parkman had a subject of heroic proportions, which had as its background the panorama of the North American forest. However, Morison noted that "Parkman above all was a land man and a devotee of the forest; he had no interest in the sea, and after one transatlantic voyage under sail, which he found completely unpleasant, he visited Europe only by steamship, to study in the archives."¹ Morison, from youth an amateur sailor with "remote ancestors in the old China trade", observed, "here was my opportunity", and thus he devoted himself for much of his career to histories—of Columbus and the European discoveries of America, the maritime trade and naval heroes, and the operations of the United States Navy in World War II—"in which the ocean provides both basis and background".²

Morison also attributed to Parkman credit for demonstrating the importance of bringing to written history the qualities that result from imaginative field work. It is all the more important "to write history in three dimensions" in the twentieth century, Morison claims, for "the background, the common knowledge", that an historian formerly could assume of his audience, "has slipped away, driven out by the internal-combustion engine, nuclear fission, and Dr. Freud".³ He argues that "visiting, examining, and studying the spot where the events happened is indispensable. This not only gives you the lay of the land or the aspect of the sea; but by letting nature put you in tune with the event, and giving your imagination scope to fill in the lacunae in the

recorded sources, you may reconstruct the event."⁴ The result then that Morison strived for, as he describes Parkman's method and achievement, is history that describes "no mere flat land made of words out of other words on paper, but a fresh creation in three dimensions, a story in which the reader is conscious of space and light, of the earth underfoot, the sky overhead, and God in His Heaven."⁵

It would seem that there is a fourth dimension listed here, but perhaps Morison meant only to convey the attitude expressed in Browning's poem, of contentment amid the joys of nature. Certainly there are in Morison's histories many scenes which describe and call forth this emotion. At the same time, however, there is an expression, throughout Morison's work, of the twentieth century as being a time out of joint, a time in which a recollection of the earlier age of sail "delights us and fortifies us against a mechanized culture which reduces man to a moron."⁶ World War II, in Morison's view, reaffirmed and reestablished the "eternal values and immutable principles, which had come down to us from ancient Hellas",⁷ but he also saw the first fifty years of this century as years in which "the bulldozer had done more to change the face of the past of the world inhabited by Europeans than any earlier devices of man."⁸ He found in the ocean, as his grand theme of a lifetime, an advantage over land historians such as Parkman, who "when visiting scenes of conflict, find the terrain so changed as to be almost unrecognizable."⁹ He found as well, fitting symbols with which to affirm his faith in eternal values and immutable principles, for it is the ocean, he says, that "like the starry firmament that hangs over it, changeth not."¹⁰

In the years just prior to World War II, Morison, in preparation for his biography of Columbus, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, twice sailed to the islands of the West Indies discovered on Columbus' voyages. He arranged the Harvard Columbus Expedition, which during a six-month period investigated all the European ports which Columbus had visited and sailed from Spain in the route of Columbus' outward voyage. In the process of identifying thirty or forty places in the New World where Columbus made landfalls and covering about nine thousand miles in the same waters and conditions as had Columbus, the expedition attempted to determine Columbus' competence as a navigator.¹¹ Happy accidents along the way lent support to Morison's argument on behalf of the

historian who visits the scenes of the past: the loss of a rudder occurred to one of the boats on the expedition in rough waters similar to those that disabled one of Columbus' caravels,¹² and far out at sea the visit by a migrating mourning dove to one of the expedition's vessels confirmed Columbus' mention of the sighting of such a bird, an identification which had been considered to be mistaken.¹³ In the resulting biography, moreover, are countless scenes from the expedition, impressed upon the narrative of Columbus' voyages, which present seascapes, landfalls, and islands as through the eyes of Columbus.

Yet it is from a later biography, "*Old Bruin*" *Commodore Matthew C. Perry*, written twenty-five years later, that Morison's pictorial impressions from the Harvard Columbus Expedition, reawakened for a scene on these same Atlantic waters, find their most distilled and concentrated expression. It is a scene which echoes the conventions of Francis Parkman yet distinctly reveals some of Morison's own values. The situation described is the Somers' Mutiny, an attempt on the part of a few of the crew and midshipmen (one the son of the Secretary of War and grandson of the Chief Justice of the New York Supreme Court) to seize their United States man-o'-war brig and turn it into a raiding ship on the trade in the Caribbean. Their plot is discovered and four of their number are chained to the ship's rails, but the number of mutineers is still unknown; here is the scene:

Somers was rolling along, sailing large with the tradewind on her starboard quarter; but the wind appeared to be diminishing....

Let us pause a moment to consider the dramatic contrast between the brightly illuminated setting, with the dark designs of the plotters and dismal apprehensions of the intended victims. Sailing west to "the Indies" in the winter northeast trades is perhaps the most beautiful sailing in any ocean; and *Somers*, rolling and dipping in the long swells, had the wind just where she wanted it, on the quarter, to make best time over a sapphire ocean flecked with whitcaps. Flying fish flashed silver past the foam at her bow. Puffy tradewind clouds raced her overhead, and occasionally one lashed her with rain. No throb of engines assaulted the ear; there were no sounds but the striking of the ship's bell, the creaking of spars and timbers, lines slatting against the sails, and the rush and gurgle of great waters. Every few hours the square sails changed color: golden gossamer when the last-quarter moon rose, polished silver just before dawn, ruddy at sunrise, and cream-white at high noon. But the fatigued, harassed and anxious officers, and the conspirators guessing whether or not they were found out, had neither taste nor time for aesthetic appreciation. Sailors collected in knots to exchange gossip. Officers,

divided "watch and watch" (eight hours on eight off), armed themselves with two pistols and a cutlass each, and even in their watch below kept continually moving about the vessel, to break up any attempt at rescue. Thus Monday passed, and Tuesday, with increasing tension and fatigue on the part of the loyal officers and increasing insubordination on the part of the crew.¹⁴

Organized by dramatic contrast between the bright setting and the "dark designs" and "dismal apprehensions" of the participants, this passage is an interlude in the narrative which presses on even at the end of the passage with the mention of the passing days and the increasing tension that mark the progress of the scene. In addition, the appreciation for the ocean's beauty, the sounds of sail as contrasted with the assault on the modern ear made by engines, and the attention to process and routine (the how-to-do-it interest in seamen's tasks which is common in Morison's books) make this scene a compact collection of some of Morison's attitudes. It is followed shortly by a description of the execution of the four men, including quotations from the burial service of the Book of Common Prayer, and then this description, shifted to the present tense, of their burial at sea:

There are three loud splashes as the corpses drop into a three-thousand-fathom deep. Ensign and pendant, half-masted for the burial, are now two-blocked and *Somers* continues on her course—west and by north—from which she had never deviated during these five days of fear and tension.¹⁵

Thus, with this summary the earlier dramatic scene of *Somers'* course at sea is not merely a graphic interlude in the narrative but is put to work as having depicted the resolve of the ship's officers in a situation where fear and doubt might as well have produced indecision.

Scene and character, however, are sometimes separated entities in Morison's histories. He describes Columbus as being a man of action who "looked so constantly ahead and not astern that reminiscent passages in his writings are very few."¹⁶ Consequently, though Morison's identification with Columbus is directly expressed ("*Nina* was the Admiral's favorite and so mine")¹⁷ and cultivated in many ways on the Harvard Columbus Expedition (navigational sightings made where Columbus had made his; an astrolabe from shortly after Columbus' time examined and sighted with) there are scenes and situations which the historian must, as it were, write on his own because the man of action failed to. Bernard DeVoto did this in his history *The Course of Empire*, which concludes with the narrative of

the Lewis and Clark Expedition. When the expedition reached the Pacific, Clark's entry in his notebook was " 'Ocean in view! O! the joy.' " ¹⁸ The accomplishment of their continental crossing stands larger than the words, however, and so the historian attempted to create the symbols with which to fix their journey and found them in a scene from their return down the Missouri River, "the West at their backs". "The others came afterward," he writes. "A dugout leaves no wake in the water but the boat they spoke above the Platte was following in theirs." ¹⁹ Similarly, serving as an intermediary between the reader and Columbus, who recorded long stretches of his voyages as no more than distances covered, here is how Morison describes a scene from Columbus' return from discovering the New World:

Speed under sail, because of the beauty of the ship herself, the music of wind and water, and also because of some deep, unfathomable sentiment in the soul of a seaman, yields even today an acute sensation of speed, comparable only to skiing or riding a fast horse in a steeplechase. Motorized travel afloat or ashore, or even in the air...is slow and tame in comparison. Imagine then if you can what a glorious experience those seamen were having aboard *Nina* and *Pinta*. Unless any of them had ridden a racehorse, 11 knots was a greater absolute speed than they had ever known. They were homeward bound after the greatest sea adventure in the history of mankind, bursting with stories of a world unknown even to the boldest sea rovers of antiquity. ²⁰

Still elsewhere, in Las Casas' abstract of Columbus' sea journal, Morison, fortunate in the character of the life he chose to describe, does find the kind of aesthetic appreciation of the sea which he himself enjoys. Columbus' observation " 'that the savor of the mornings was a great delight' ", is one which Morison recognizes with enthusiasm and adds to with memories which the phrase evokes. ²¹ He makes the observation that "Columbus was unique among early navigators in appreciating the beauty of seascapes and landscapes" and cites as a further example Columbus' description of the atmosphere on his outward voyage as " 'like April in Andalusia—the only thing wanting was the song of the Nightingale.' " ²²

The Harvard Columbus Expedition over, Morison describes it as like "a distant and beautiful dream; something that one accomplished long ago, in one's youth in the golden age of sail." ²³ He describes himself at Ponkapoag, Massachusetts, stepping outside into snowdrifts on a February night, and (in a gesture suggesting both his remoteness from and kinship with the great navigator of his biography) looking up at the

stars, the same ones, and especially the favorites, from which Columbus took his sightings.²⁴ However, the stars are symbols in Morison's sphere of aesthetic pleasures, not Columbus', for as Morison has noted, "Columbus was not conscious of the stars even from the aesthetic point of view" and though he spoke sometimes of the "glory of the sea" he never remarked on "the splendor of the stars in the tropics".²⁵

Other explorers and seamen about whom Morison has written have failed to express an appreciation of the beauties of the sea, land, or sky; Cartier, for instance, is mentioned in this regard. There is a certain irony here, a key to the perspective from which Morison writes, for he finds between the awe-inspiring difficulties and achievements of the early ocean explorers and the astronauts who landed on the moon in his own time, "no basis of comparison".²⁶ Yet these distinct achievements are uniquely the same in that ocean mariner and astronaut on the edge of their journeys stood before new and strange landscapes for which they could not discover adequate expression in words, and for which they were unable to convey their aesthetic appreciation to the world from which they came except through the wonderful artifacts stored in the holds, the photographic images wound in metal canisters. Intervening between the age of discovery and our own, of course, came a revolution in navigational concepts and aesthetic appreciation in the eighteenth century, and it is from the vantage of that century and the romantic age that developed out of it that Morison writes; he is the historian describing the eternal face of the ocean and the sky and scenes of men's actions against this backdrop, much as they saw it themselves—or ought to have seen it.

Following the outbreak of World War II, Morison received at his own request, from Franklin Roosevelt, a commission in the United States Navy, and the staff and access necessary to write a history of the naval activities which were to take place for the duration of the war. In this task, which occupied his labors for two decades, he enjoyed the advantage of having been a participant in the events he described, sailing on all types of ships and being witness to actual naval engagements. Moreover, he "visited every scene of action" in which he had not personally participated, even remote Sicilian beaches which by his own account, binoculars in hand, he reconnoitered as late as 1953 in the company of his wife, with a chief petty officer for a chauffeur.²⁷ The resulting fourteen-volume history of *United States Naval Opera-*

tions in *World War II* and its condensed version in one volume, *The Two-Ocean War*, are readable, often exciting, accounts of naval activities from early disasters to final victory. However, Morison found less place for the graphic richness that characterizes his other works in this, the history for which he most fully realized the position of a participant.

The naval battles of World War II were fought at great distances, of course, so that even participants rarely saw the enemy with whom they were engaged. Overall, the scale against which the individual participant or witness had to measure events was enormous. The place for scenic details such as the coal fire in the office of a Salem merchant who could see through the small paned windows his firm's new ship being rigged under his own eye—this from one of Morison's histories of an earlier period—is lost in the gigantic scope of events from his own time. Lost, too, is much of the scenic beauty from works where Morison describes the remote past—Columbus' caravels retiring from the West Indies before strong winds; Flamborough Head seen from the *Bonhomme Richard* about to engage the *Serapis*; the black ships of Commodore Perry in Tokyo Harbor and the panorama of Canton Harbor to the eyes of a Yankee seaman; and clipper ships, the flowering, Morison says, of a practical, hard-working race whose Rheims was the *Flying Cloud*, whose Parthenon was the *Sovereign of the Seas*, and whose Amiens was the *Lightning*, and all were "monuments in snow" that "disappeared with the sudden completeness of the wild pigeon."²⁸

One man is incredibly small when placed against the magnitude of the ocean, the remoteness of the stars, and small, too, placed in a theatre of war fought between industrialized nations utilizing their technologies across global distances. Yet the magnitude of the ocean and the stars, symbols in Morison's histories of time unchanged where no man etches his story, have been aesthetically authorized, as it were, since the eighteenth century and before, in the concept of the sublime. Suggesting that there is loss as well as gain as men's perceptions change, no commensurate aesthetic concept has emerged to bless the mammoth effects of man's technological reach. It was in that earlier time, as Morison and others have noted, that the sailing ship was the foremost creation of man and took his measure in turn, testing his strength, intelligence, and endurance without displacing his significance. It is fitting that Morison, who has memorialized the golden age of sail and

described it as one which "still delights and fortifies us against a mechanized culture"²⁹ should so often have placed himself physically and imaginatively on the spot where the events he described took place, though today one may wonder if a diminished function is served by the historian standing at the scene in an age when man is no longer the measure.

Footnotes

1. "The Experiences and Principles of an Historian," in *Vistas of History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 27.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
5. *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1942), p. xvi.
6. *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 147.
7. *The Two-Ocean War* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1963), p. 370.
8. "The Experiences and Principles of an Historian," in *Vistas of History*, p. 28.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. "Letters on the Harvard Columbus Expedition," in *By Land and By Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 99, 102, and 122.
12. *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, pp. 160-161.
13. "Letters on the Harvard Columbus Expedition," in *By Land and By Sea*, p. 101.
14. "Old Bruin" *Commodore Mathew C. Perry: 1774-1858* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1967), p. 154.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
16. *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, p. 83.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
18. Bernard DeVoto, *The Course of Empire* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952), p. 549.
19. DeVoto, p. 549.
20. *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, p. 320.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
22. "The Experiences and Principles of an Historian," in *Vistas of History*, p. 29.
23. "Letters on the Harvard Columbus Expedition," in *By Land and By Sea*, p. 116.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, p. 268.
26. *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages*, p. xi.
27. "The Experiences and Principles of an Historian," in *Vistas of History*, pp. 35-36.
28. *The Maritime History of Massachusetts: 1783-1860* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921), p. 370.
29. *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages* p. 147.