

RICHARD BRANDON MORRIS

Richard Brandon Morris, one of the giants in the field of American history, died on March 3, 1989, in New York City at the age of eighty-four. A prolific pioneer in the profession, Dr. Morris made seminal contributions in the colonial, Revolutionary, Confederation, and Constitution periods. He made a profound impact upon such diverse fields as legal, labor, diplomatic, social, and political history. He blazed new paths for research as a publishing scholar, talented teacher, tireless archivist, and energetic spokesman in both recent national bicentennials. Julian P. Boyd bestowed on him the well-deserved title 'master historian.'

Dr. Morris was born July 24, 1904, in New York City, and his brilliant promise became evident at an early age, when he published his first scholarly article at fifteen. Entering the City College of New York, he came under the influence of the famed legal philosopher Morris Raphael Cohen. He then attended Columbia University where he continued his reputation as a prodigy—earning his Ph.D. in colonial legal history at twenty-six, while at the same time carrying a full course-load at the law school. While still in graduate school, he collaborated with his mentor, Evarts B. Greene, to publish *A Guide to the Principal Sources for Early American History (1600–1800) in the City of New York*, a bibliography that stimulated similar publications in local history. Dr. Morris emerged from Columbia as America's first full-fledged professional legal historian, providing a model for subsequent scholars in the field.

His doctoral dissertation, *Studies in the History of American Law*, published in 1930, broke new ground. Dr. Morris himself considered this work a pilot study, one that sought to examine in a comparative way certain principles of law as they evolved in the American colonies. At the same time he took up topics of substantive law to determine whether they were susceptible to social, intellectual, and environmental forces. Although influenced by the institutional school of historians like Herbert L. Osgood, and

the Turnerian approach to legal history, Dr. Morris transcended the methodologies of both schools. He succeeded as well in identifying some of the major issues in legal history such as women's rights in American law, and his insights still serve to lead scholars into new and unexplored subjects.

Besides writing about the law, Dr. Morris played an important role in preserving archives that contained legal materials and other local and state records. In the 1930s he became secretary of the Committee on Legal History of the American Historical Association and set out to search the archives of the Atlantic coastal states. Out of his survey came his *Early American Court Records: A Publication Program* (1941), which laid the groundwork for subsequent studies. He mounted a vigorous campaign for preserving, cataloguing, and publishing historical documents, this effort eventually helped to establish the National Archives system of regional repositories. His interest in archival work was a lifelong commitment, and he served as chairman of the task force on New York's municipal archives under Mayor John V. Lindsay in the 1960s.

Labor as well as legal history were areas where Dr. Morris helped shed new light on a hitherto obscure field. His magisterial *Government and Labor in Early America* (1946) was a work without precedent, and remains useful to scholars to this day. Conducting a massive study of twenty thousand cases, many of them unpublished, Dr. Morris reconstructed a picture of the legal and social status of free and bound labor and analyzed the relationship of government to labor in the colonial and Revolutionary eras. The experience of government with labor in the first two centuries of American history, he concluded, 'holds numerous clues to later developments and provides significant parallels to current patterns.' This classic work, arguably his best book, led to further articles on labor history and to his recognition as one of the early founders of this field.

The Revolutionary era occupied Dr. Morris's interest throughout his long career, but from the 1950s on his writings and edited works focused increasingly upon three areas: biographical studies

of America's early statesmen, the problems of nation building, and revisionist studies of the role of the Revolution in national and international terms. Of the founding fathers, John Jay became the object of Dr. Morris's attention. He restored Jay to his rightful place in the national pantheon alongside Washington and Hamilton in three projects: *The Peacemakers* (1965), a brilliant work based on multiarchival research in eight countries that was awarded the Bancroft Prize; *John Jay, the Nation and the Court* (1967), which documented the towering achievements of America's first chief justice; and the long-term four-volume *Papers of John Jay*, of which two are already published. The nation-building process was treated in the multiple biographies in *Seven Who Shaped Our Destiny* (1973) and *The Forging of the Union, 1781-1789* (1987). When dealing with the Revolution within a national context, Dr. Morris dissented from the view held by many that it was a conservative movement and that the Antifederalists represented the more progressive forces in the Confederation period. In *The American Revolution Reconsidered* (1967), he held that the Revolution was a truly revolutionary anticolonial war, one with numerous political reforms stemming directly from the people, and that the Federalists, not the Antifederalists, were the real radicals of that day. Viewing the repercussions of the Revolution around the world, Dr. Morris argued in his volume *The Emerging Nations and the American Revolution* (1970) that it had been more influential than the French Revolution in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

Although best known for his own multifaceted scholarly works, Dr. Morris also had a well-earned reputation as a splendid editor, compiler of primary sources, and publisher of reference books. With his colleague, Henry Steele Commager, he edited the *New American Nation* series, a reexamination of the entire history of the American people, which now numbers more than forty volumes. Together with Commager he edited *The Spirit of '76*, a superb collection of eyewitness accounts of the Revolution, and on his own edited other primary sources in *The American Revolution, 1763-1783* and *Basic Documents on the Confederation and Constitution*.

His *Encyclopedia of American History* was for thirty years the standard one-volume reference work on the subject, and he was at work on the seventh edition when he died.

Dr. Morris's scholarly publications, which ran to more than forty volumes, were marked by a distinctive style. His inquiring mind was constantly engaged in substantive new problems, in revising older interpretations, and in broadening fields of inquiry with searching questions. A sturdy, independent cast of thought enabled him to introduce innovations in almost every subject that he touched. His insistence upon primary sources was legendary and led him to dig deeply in less well-known archives. He was a superb literary craftsman, possessing a crisp, lucid narrative style that was filled with pungent phrases and arresting conclusions.

As a teacher, he began his career at his alma mater, City College, in 1927. He first went to Columbia in 1946 as a visiting professor and was given the title of full professor in 1949. A decade later, he was named Gouverneur Morris Professor and held that position until his retirement in 1973. Hardly a retirement! The years after 1973 proved to be among the most productive of his life: he published and edited numerous books; lectured at Columbia and other universities throughout the world; served as chairman for the American Historical Association to celebrate the bicentennial of the Revolution in 1976; and was cochairman of Project '87, a program to commemorate the bicentennial of the Constitution.

Dr. Morris trained more than forty-four graduate students, of whom this writer is proud to be one. Of that number, 18 percent were women, indicating his sympathy for change within the profession. As a lecturer, his rapid-fire delivery, his enthusiasm for his subject, and his wry humor made his classes both lively and challenging. He had a real affection for his students, counseling them at times on personal as well as professional matters. His students, in turn, respected his learning and generosity as a dissertation advisor, responded to his ebullience—which was infectious as well as effective—and admired him for his willingness to listen to their ideas.

His peers recognized his abilities also. They elected him president of two of their leading organizations, the American Historical Association in 1976 and the Society of American Historians, 1984-87. In 1988 the latter organization awarded him the Bruce Catton Prize for his lifetime achievements in writing American history. He was elected a member of the American Antiquarian Society in 1969.

Dr. Morris is survived by his wife of fifty-six years, the former Berenice Robinson, a musician, composer, and college teacher. He had two sons, Jeffrey Brandon Morris, himself a professor of law, and Donald Robinson Morris, who teaches in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Richard B. Morris will be missed not only by his family, colleagues, and students, but by the nation at large. As a public-spirited citizen, informed by his knowledge of history, he had the courage to speak out in times of national crisis. When he retired in 1973 in the midst of the Watergate scandal, he related this episode to the Revolutionary era he knew so well in a remark that is characteristic both for its broad sweep of history and for its principled aptness of judgment: 'In the founding of the nation we needed charismatic figures, but today we could do with honest ones. In Harding's time, they stole national assets; at Watergate, they tried to steal the country.'

George Athan Billias

WALLACE WOODSOME ROBBINS

Wallace Woodsome Robbins, retired minister of the First Unitarian Church in Worcester, died at his home on November 11, 1988. The funeral was witness to his enthusiastic support of ecumenism. Participants included his friends, Rev. Barbara Merritt, Bishop Bernard Flanagan, Rabbi Joseph Klein, Rev. Clyde Cox, and Dr. Donald Simpson, representing local Unitarians, Roman Catholics, Jews, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists.

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