

# Vermont History

THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



VOLUME XXX NUMBER 1

JANUARY 1962

MONTPELIER



## Nature's Nobleman: Justin Morrill, a Victorian Politician

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IF I am to do justice to my subject, you will have to take, as Yankees do their dinner, a great deal in a short time. Recently I was talking with a New York historian, and asked him what I should say about Justin Smith Morrill. "Tell them," he said, "that the Land Grant College Act was a mistake, adulterating the standard of higher education; that every other policy he advocated was wrong—annexation of Canada, high tariffs and repeal of the Canadian reciprocity treaty, a rigid and contracted currency, opposition to woman suffrage and the eight-hour law, voting for the impeachment of Johnson and acting with the Vindictives in Reconstruction by waving the Bloody Shirt. . . ." "Yes, yes," I replied, "I'll tell them that." But I couldn't stop him. "I will admit that he was in favor of federal aid to education and the reduction of the power of the Supreme Court—those nine old men—to its proper balance. . . ." And on he went.

I did get some benefit from this tirade. It reminded me how often Morrill spoke with the majority voice of his times; that he was emphatically a Victorian. Born in 1810, dying a Senator in 1898, Morrill's adult life closely paralleled Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901). Any period of threescore years contains enough conflicting trends to defy easy characterization. An American of those times fitted the prevailing patterns if he was eclectic and imitative in his taste for the decorative arts, genteel and elegant in letters, respectable in religion and morals, not slothful in business, ready to perform public service but no office seeker, and confidently expecting to rise in the world.

He exemplified the thousands upon thousands of Americans who rose from humble origins to affluence and prominence and gave reality to the nineteenth-century myth of the self-made man. He liked to remind audiences that he was the son of a blacksmith, with no formal schooling beyond two terms at grammar school ended at the age of fifteen.

Like many Victorian gentlemen of the genteel tradition he aspired to literary elegance. He started a subscription for a town library in 1827 and helped start a lyceum in 1831.<sup>1</sup> He began to form his own library, which became a Victorian gentleman's miscellany, not the tool of a specialist in taxes and tariffs.<sup>2</sup> He kept notebooks from the beginning of his merchant apprenticeship at Portland, Maine, in 1828, until his latest years. Into these he copied phrases, quotations, and anecdotes to improve and decorate his speaking style. Although his idol was Webster, the tenor of his speeches was factual and representatively moral rather than emotional and hortatory. The large proportion of these private notes, like his almost daily answers to Vermont constituents, he wrote himself, without benefit of secretary, with a quill pen, in a legible hand.<sup>3</sup>

Besides taking notes for practical reference, to inform friends or improve speeches, Morrill seemed to enjoy polishing and refining them. While still a young merchant and bank director, he "left the salt and crockery trade—all care behind" to watch Congress in session and see the Old Northwest by steamboat. Back at the Strafford store in the dull dog days of 1841 he translated his travel notes into a manuscript book with the title, "Wanderings and scribblings; or, A journey South and West in May, June and July. A.D. 1841."<sup>4</sup>

1. Contemporary documents about the first half of Morrill's life are scarce. W. B. Parker, *The life and public services of Justin Smith Morrill* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 1-57, summarizes the basic local materials and quotes from Morrill's later allusions to his early days. I have also relied on Parker's digest of the public documents referring to Morrill's Congressional record.

2. Wilbur K. Jordan, who has studied the marginalia in his library now at the Strafford homestead, is the authority on Morrill's choice and use of books. Letters to M. H. Buckham, June 14, 21, 1873 (MSS in the Wilbur Library, University of Vermont), refer to his reading Euripides in translation and reveal his love of Milton.

3. Eighteen of 81 letters on University of Vermont affairs, mostly to M. H. Buckham, in the Wilbur Library, are written by another hand.

4. This consists of 179 pages including index, in the Library of Congress Manu-

When he toured Europe with James G. Blaine in 1867 he wrote his wife an accurate if somewhat dull report of what the normal tourist would observe. The other example of literary ambition was a brief anthology, *The self-consciousness of noted persons*.<sup>5</sup> Long years of keeping commonplace books provided the materials, which he expanded in the second edition.<sup>6</sup> The persistence of his literary-moralistic interest is shown by the notes and revisions for a third edition. Within two years of his death he was still enjoying the labors of literary compiler, publishing three articles entitled "Notable Letters from my political friends."<sup>7</sup>

Morrill's artistic taste was Victorian. Having won a competence as a merchant before the age of forty, he built a house in Strafford for the bride he had chosen. It distinguished him as a substantial citizen, appreciative of the current style in country houses and of the comfortable life. Later, when it was clear that his Washington tenure was for life if he chose, he built a solid, unpretentious, comfortable mansion on Thomas Circle, where the best Washington society could be fittingly entertained at his dinners, birthday parties, and receptions. As a member of the Senate Committee on Buildings and Grounds, he placed his Victorian imprint on at least three capital landmarks: Statuary Hall, the Library of Congress, and the Washington Monument. He resisted the move to scrap the original plan for an obelisk and saw the languishing project to completion. His not to change nor tear down, but to conserve and express the Victorian sense of historical continuity.

A mild and tolerant Christian, he showed in his letters a familiarity with the Bible and theology common to the age, but was given neither to theological speculation nor Moody revivalism. "Revivals may do some good, but as a whole I regard their work as fleeting and spasmodic. True Religion cannot be made to spread like an epidemic, or brought about by a miracle but must be the

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scripts Division, which has the major collection of Morrill Papers. Quotation from microcopy in the Wilbur Library, 3.

5. (Cambridge, Mass.: John Wilson and Son, University Press, 1882), 81 pages.

6. (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1887), 187 pages. One indication of the compiler's reading interests: two thirds of the "notable persons" quoted were Anglo-Americans, one eighth were French and one eighth ancient or medieval.

7. *The Forum*, xxiv (Oct.-Dec. 1897), 137-149, 267-281, 402-415.



result of intelligent growth."<sup>8</sup> He favored churchgoing "for example's sake,"<sup>9</sup> but varied his attendance with the circumstances. Single, thirty-one, and on tour, he went to church twice in two months—in Washington (high mass) and in Ohio.<sup>10</sup> While in Congress he attended the Unitarian Church; at home he was a Congregationalist.

His morals were Yankee-Victorian. "I never swear," he wrote, when he was tempted to by the mud and swine of Albany. The youth at the "Jockey Club" near Washington, although he confessed a keen interest in good horseflesh and skillful riding, concluded that races had a "great tendency to immorality."<sup>11</sup> During his two weeks in Washington he took soda and strawberry lemonade against the heat, and on one occasion, a glass of wine with the daughter of an Italian pianist. And he sprinkled his journal with observations of the bad effects of liquor.<sup>12</sup> In St. Louis it seemed "queer to New England eyes to see so little respect paid to the Sabbath."<sup>13</sup>

The core of his ethics, however, touched the Victorian ideals of probity in business and service. He spoke out against Grant corruption on three occasions, and resisted the coming Spanish-American War as both unnecessary and wasteful. Indeed, except for his steady expectation that Canada would eventually be part of the United States, he was steadfastly anti-imperialist. He was a statesman of the old free-enterprise school, comfortable in the conviction that where American business could penetrate, American government need not.

For the shaping of a Vermont politician, Morrill's business experience from 1825 to 1850 was ideal. The country general store keeper saw the world in microcosm. His business was to satisfy his diverse customers, keep books on debtors, find ways to help them pay off, report the news from the cities visited with a freight wagon of produce on buying trips. The rural shopkeeper is always on 'change; never in the ivory tower. He does not invent; he markets

8. J. S. Morrill to M. H. Buckham, Oct. 28, 1877, ms in Wilbur Library.

9. Morrill to his wife from Washington, June 11, 1868, quoted in W. B. Parker, *Justin Smith Morrill*, 357.

10. J. S. Morrill, "Wanderings and scribblings," 39, 100-103.

11. *Ibid.*, 49-55, quotation on p. 55.

12. *Ibid.*, 39-73.

13. *Ibid.*, 125. He refers to a bowling alley as "vicious."

inventions. He does not theorize; he entertains the theories of the neighborhood in cracker-barrel conversations when farm work ebbs. He neither begets nor conceives, but acts as midwife. He does not write but delivers the message. He does not make the thing of value, but makes it pay off. He is a broker who stays in business by not going broke.

Morrill made conscious choice of the broker's business when he refused a job as district school teacher and took a clerkship in Royal Hatch's store, although it paid \$11 a month less. After five years of experience he was offered a partnership with Judge Jedediah H. Harris of South Strafford. Harris's backing became an important element in his success. Harris was a pillar in that part of Vermont, in both Whig and business circles, and the society of his home was an education in itself. With Harris's daughters he had gone to Thetford and Randolph Academies, he borrowed freely from Harris's library, and his wife was a Harris cousin met in Harris's house. Morrill's alliance with Portus Baxter, the Judge's son-in-law, was another asset.<sup>14</sup> I think that Morrill was fortunate, too, in the death of Harris in 1855, when Morrill was still on the threshold of public service. Although it is helpful to have a sponsor when you are getting started, it is better to be your own man thereafter.

Another necessary qualification for political life is the ability to apply the seat of the pants to the seat of the committeeman's chair, or the seat of the vehicle taking you to a party caucus or convention. The party works for the few who work tirelessly for the party. "I was always ready," Morrill reminisced, "to make a speech or write a political platform resolution, and after a time they began to expect them from me."<sup>15</sup> Party jobs, unlike public jobs, are more numerous than candidates. In the decade to 1848 when the Whig Party was "the Star that never sets" in Vermont, Morrill went rapidly up the ladder from town to county to state committee.

His political training was finished in the turbulent multi-party years of 1848-1854. Each side could accuse the other of "truck and dicker" for the votes of Free Soilers and other "one-idea men" in

14. See for example H. B. Stacy to Portus Baxter, June 11, 1852 (microcopy in Wilbur Library), Portus Baxter to J. S. Morrill, May 4, 1859, Aug. 3, Nov. 7, 1865; originals in Library of Congress.

15. Quoted in W. P. Parker, *Justin Smith Morrill*, 39.

the Temperance and American (Nativist) Parties. A discreet "Cotton Whig," he stumped for Taylor and, as a delegate to the Baltimore convention of 1852, supported Webster. Now talked of for major office, he waited his turn. Hard feelings, dissension, and bolting must be prevented at all costs. By waiting he won later support from those who benefited from his refusal to push his fortunes against them in a caucus—notably Jacob Collamer.

In 1854, without ever having served in state office, Morrill jumped into the Second District Congressional seat. He was an attractive candidate because he had been clear of the antagonisms of the fusion period just ending. He had never publicly taken sides in any legislative brawl—and there had been plenty from 1848 to 1854—over railroads, liquor, and just plain personality clashes between rival candidates. Furthermore, he came from Orange County, ever since the Antimasonic excitement of the early 1830s a Democratic stronghold. After the 1850 census had deprived Vermont of its Fourth District (which with one exception had returned Democrats since Jackson's time), the state was redistricted so as to divide this Democratic strength. New districts could have been devised with minimum disparity of population which would have concentrated this Democratic strength. Instead, Orange and Caledonia were linked to the more populous and Whig-dominated lower Connecticut Valley; Washington and Bennington Democrats were buried under the Whig strongholds in Rutland and Addison Counties; and the rest joined in a close Third District with a smaller Whig advantage. In 1852 the Second District elected Andrew Tracy, a Woodstock Whig. When he chose not to run again the Party turned to Morrill. With no strong contest at the district nominating convention, he won handily with a plurality of over 2,500, 15% of the 17,000 votes cast. The Free Soilers, not yet merged into the new Anti-Nebraska Party in the Second District, cut his majority to 69; but he would have been eventually elected if he had lost 35 votes to either rival and the election had gone to the General Assembly. On the eve of the election he spoke clearly but cautiously for the major Free Soil and Temperance planks.<sup>16</sup>

16. I deal with Vermont party politics, 1840-54, in my unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Urban penetration of rural Vermont, 1840-80" (Harvard University, 1952), 157-194, 433-451.

It was one thing to enter Congress, and quite another to stay there twelve years—the fourth longest term of any Vermont Congressman.<sup>17</sup> Fifteen months after his election, he took his seat, and for over two months more, his only business was to vote some 133 times for Nathaniel Banks for Speaker. But old leaders had recently left the Washington scene, and the opportunities for rapid advancement were many. His early speeches were for home consumption: for free Kansas, against polygamy. He introduced a resolution for a national agricultural school on the service academy model, and worked assiduously to get pensions for Vermont veterans.<sup>18</sup>

He found his forte in opposing the low tariff bill of 1857, and building on his experience in this fight, piloted a high tariff measure through the House in 1860. This satisfied the majority of his constituents, who still thought that the Vermont economy revolved around wool, and blamed low farm prices on the Democratic low tariff instead of Western competition. Morrill was as faithful in attendance as he had been on party committees, and he distributed vast quantities of government documents where they would do the most good (over 17,000 copies during the last session before his third election).

"Few men ever excel all the world in more than one faculty," he wrote in 1882.<sup>19</sup> Morrill came nearest this excellence in the role of parliamentary manager. By learning how to use the rules, by being on hand to capitalize his opportunities, by a consistently conciliatory and courteous bearing in discussion, by knowing thoroughly the whole field of the bills he was concerned with, and by working every angle of association and influence to collect votes, he could get bills through which no one else could. During his whole career in Washington he is said to have participated 2,477 times in the debates, which amounts to something like once every two or three days, although on the average he made only two or three lengthy

17. Horace Everett (1829-43), W. W. Grout (1881-83, 1885-1901), and Charles A. Plumley (1934-50) had longer terms.

18. A large percentage of the Morrill Papers in the Library of Congress are requests from constituents. An example of the care Morrill took is in the G. P. Marsh Papers of the Wilbur Library. Sixteen letters, June 21, 1856-June 4, 1860, show that Morrill kept watch until he could report Marsh's claim bill through the House.

19. *Self-consciousness of noted persons*, 1; retained in 2d ed., [xi]. "Wanderings and scribblings," 71.



speeches a year. By 1858 he was on the powerful Ways and Means Committee. When the Civil War came and Southern leaders left, his position among House Union men was shown when they offered him the chairmanship. Although he yielded that honor to Thaddeus Stevens, he did a great deal of the work.

From this position of leadership he put through the Land Grant College Act, whose centennial we celebrate this year. Its passage was his top legislative accomplishment at the peak of his career, but the idea was not his. Neither he nor anyone else acquainted with the long history of the movement to expand higher education beyond the classical curriculum of the church-related college ever claimed it was. But he did direct the campaign that made the bill a law embodying the idea.

He had a sheaf of motivations. He held the old Hamiltonian view that public property was a public trust, and hated to see the public domain squandered by get-rich-quick settlers. He thought that bad farming practices induced by cheap land prices were mining the soil, and hoped scientific agriculture would rescue what fertility was left. Exposed to a modicum of the classical preparatory course and to much learning by doing, he had grounds for being skeptical of the established curriculum as the only way to learn. Yet he resolutely resisted the move to divorce the new colleges from a liberal education because he had felt his own lack.<sup>20</sup> Because existing colleges prepared chiefly for the professions he thought new ones, or branches of the old, should extend the benefits of further education to those seeking nonprofessional careers. And finally he knew that the bill suited his Vermont constituents, both because it gave them as eastern stay-at-homes the benefits of part of the public domain, and because they would expect to enjoy the opportunities provided.

The way he put through the land-grant college bill is an excellent illustration of his parliamentary skill. He introduced his first bill

20. The Morrill correspondence in the Wilbur Library deals mostly with the Senator's suggestions of ways to win support for the Agricultural College as part of the University of Vermont—by getting an overseas appointment for one of President Buckham's opponents, by establishing an experimental farm, or by promoting the union of the Vermont colleges. See especially Morrill to M. H. Buckham, Jan. 28, 1873, Feb. 12, 1874, Oct. 4, 15, 1875, Nov. 25, 1890.

three and a half years before the successful version passed the House. The first time it came up he maneuvered to send it to the right committee, kept on the alert against innocent-looking amendments, buttonholed possible supporters and kept them on hand for votes, got the President of Michigan Agricultural College to write a speech for his senator, pried the bill out of committee but with an adverse report, armed himself and other supporters with facts, and squeezed it through the House only to meet Buchanan's veto after an equally narrow victory in the Senate. In December 1861 the Southern Congressmen were gone who had objected on states rights grounds to this form of federal aid, and the President was sympathetic. Opponents still had to be watched, but the precedent of previous passage made the way smoother to a 90-25 victory, and on July 2 Lincoln signed the bill.<sup>21</sup>

This was only the acorn of a state university system, but Morrill contributed steadfast support to the gains of the next generation.<sup>22</sup> As trustee of the University of Vermont and State Agricultural College he worked successfully to keep the land grant institution attached to the older college, and unsuccessfully to win financial support from the legislature.<sup>23</sup>

Morrill built a substantial record of legislative accomplishments approved by Vermonters. They also approved with their votes because Morrill never gave the slightest appearance of wanting to stay in office. Even from the first his position was that of bowing to the wishes of the voters, and the opening gun of each campaign was his offer to retire. Consequently his majorities at district nominating conventions—and nomination was already tantamount to election

21. William E. Sawyer traces the details of the Morrill bills' parliamentary history and evaluates the pressures and motivations on each side in his unpublished doctoral dissertation, "The evolution of the Morrill Act of 1862" (Boston University, 1948).

22. The figure of speech is Morrill's in his *National colleges. Speech . . . in the Senate . . . December 5, 1872* (repr. from the *Congressional Globe*, Washington, 1872), 15. See also *Remarks of Senator Morrill before the House Committee on Education respecting Land Grant Colleges*, Oct. 24, 1890 (n.p., n.d.).

23. See the Morrill-Buckham correspondence, 1872-98, referred to in notes 3 and 17; also J. S. Morrill, *State aid to the U. S. land-grant colleges. An address on behalf of the University of Vermont and State Agricultural College, delivered in the hall of the House of Representatives, at Montpelier, October 10, 1888*. (Burlington: Free Press Association, 1888) with "Remarks of Judge [H. H.] Powers," [25]-28; also Montpelier, *Argus and Patriot* imprint without Powers' "Remarks."

—kept increasing, until for his sixth term all opposition had disappeared. The fact that he did not even bring his wife to Washington until his fifth term helped create the image of Morrill as unusually dedicated to his job.

All these political virtues gave him a legitimate claim for consideration as the next East Side senator when Jacob Collamer died in 1865. But before he won the office, he waged one of the most skillful behind-the-scenes campaigns in Vermont politics.<sup>24</sup> Governor Dillingham had appointed Luke P. Poland, Chief Judge of the State Supreme Court, to complete Collamer's term. As Poland wrote a Vergennes Republican, he had not left the bench for a short visit to Washington, but expected the nomination in 1866 for the full term. Recognizing Morrill's solid position with the voters, he took the line that Morrill's talents shone brightest in the House, while his ten years on the bench made him more valuable in the Senate. The Morrill forces, he said, had offered him their support for Morrill's House seat if he would withdraw from the 1866 Senate race.<sup>25</sup> Morrill never lifted a finger—except to correspond—nor published a word against Poland; yet his canvassers were on every trail. By the time the Second District convention met in August, he who ran could read that Morrill had the votes in the next legislature. Poland changed his mind and went on to a distinguished House career, although his rival's fame has eclipsed the memory of his remarkable talents.

Morrill's thirty-one years in the Senate, the longest tenure there of any Vermonter, were in a sense anticlimactic. He remained a working legislator, but fashioned himself no further monument. He saw less need for new laws than when the Republicans first took power. They had by 1865 fulfilled their platform promises of 1860 and saw their function thereafter as holding that line. Morrill went along with the Party's view of Reconstruction, but he was no radi-

24. Until 1946 the "Mountain Rule" elected one Senator from each side of the Green Mountains. Nearly a hundred letters in the Morrill Papers of the Library of Congress, Nov. 1865–Aug. 1866, notably from E. P. Walton of Montpelier, E. C. Redington and Horace Fairbanks of St. Johnsbury, J. T. Drew and the Benedicts of Burlington, H. H. Henry of Chester, and A. N. Swain of Bellows Falls, document this fight.

25. Poland to G. W. Grandey, Feb. 8, 1866; ms in the Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, Vt.



cal, and his special talents as conciliator and defender of what was established were not those of the knight errant. As his greatest bill promoted the arts of peace, so his greatest effectiveness was in conciliating factions and cementing alliances. For the few times he failed, as with Sumner and Greeley, there were untold triumphs where his friendship smoothed the way to congressional co-operation. He remains a model democratic politician, one who plays the game to win but according to the rules, who studies the temper of his people and tries to fit the laws to their diverse opinions and capacities.

