

# Thomas Morton as America's first behavioral observer (in New England 1624-1646)

PHILIP HOWARD GRAY

Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana

As a falconer and lawyer in England, Thomas Morton was well trained to become the first behavioral observer in America. From his arrival in Massachusetts in 1624 to his forced removal in 1628 (he offended the Pilgrims by intercepting the beaver trade and offended the Puritans by refusing to accept their authority), he made many observations on the region's animals and Indians. These observations were collected in his book, published in 1637. Criticisms of Morton by the New England theocrats have been endlessly repeated by historians who fail to recognize Morton's value as an amateur psychologist and ethologist, and a very early one at that.

Thomas Morton, gentleman, lawyer, sportsman, and pioneer settler in Massachusetts, lived among the Indians, noted their manners and customs, hunted, traded, and made friends with them. Equally important, Morton was an eager observer and cataloguer of the animals of the woods, skies, and sea. This information was collected during the first two decades of New England's colonization and set down in his *New English Canaan or New Canaan*, published in Amsterdam in 1637 and readily available in both his and our time, although never mentioned, so far as I know, by a historical fraternity which otherwise endeavors to find America's earliest psychological observer. The date for such honor has been moving steadily backward, but it would appear to be difficult to find an earlier visitor to American shores who saw so much and described what he saw with such cogent wit.

## Historical Background

Primary material on Morton includes his own book (1637), legal material in England unearthed by Banks (1924-1925), and statements (not always accurate) by his contemporaries. Among the latter are Governors Bradford (Davis, 1908), Winthrop (Hosmer, 1959), and Dudley (Adams, 1892); the accounts of the Council for New England (Preston, 1953); and Captain Edward Johnson (Jameson, 1910), a Puritan often confused with Mr. Edward Johnson, gentleman trader and public official of York, Maine, where Morton died and was buried (Noyes, Libby, & Davis, 1972/1928-1931).

As often happens, once the name of a person out of tune with the sentiment of the times is blackened, the historians, rather than doing their own investigating, merely repeat canards. The colonial leaders disliked Morton's relaxed social attitude, as we know from the contemporary dia-

tribes of William Bradford, who believed Morton to be guilty of everything from selling guns to the Indian men to dancing around the maypole with Indian women, treating the latter "most filthily" (Davis, 1908, p. 238). This type of complaint is echoed by Adams (1892, p. 170), who called Morton an old debauchee, tippler, and reckless libertine with neither morals nor religion, and Andrews (1934), who extended Morton's presumed lack of morals to both conduct and thought. Neither historian has a known genealogical link to New England. Banks (1931), who was descended from Maine families opposed to the Puritans, was sympathetic to Morton and critical of the Puritan leaders, while Morison (1930), a descendant of the Massachusetts Puritans, balanced a sympathetic attitude toward both the Puritans and the man they harried. Critics from quite different ancestral backgrounds, for example, Bailyn (1955), may have neither empathy for a dissident like Morton nor understanding for the motivations of the Puritans. More recently, Zuckerman (1977) appears to have availed himself of psychoanalytic icons by charging that Morton and his companions related to the Indians in an erotic mode which elicited from the Pilgrim and Puritan leaders some anxiety about the discipline of their own impulses. That historical analysis may be shaped by the scholar's ethnic and genealogical centrality or isolation is a truth which scientists may recognize long before historians do.

Ranlet (1980) suggested that Morton's problem was not his concupiscent relationship with the Indians but the mistake of selling guns to them. However, since Indians in New England had no trouble obtaining firearms from other sources (Vaughan, 1965), perhaps the real reason the settlers at Plymouth hated Morton was that he and his men were successfully intercepting the fur trade which the Pilgrims so desperately needed in order to pay their creditors in England (Morton, 1637; Willison, 1945). Beating the Pilgrims in trade was not an indictable offense, nor was thumbing one's religious nose at the Puritan rebels, but endangering the King's subjects by selling guns to savages was a serious charge.

This is the third in a series of papers analyzing problems in the history of science with the help of specific information and techniques of genealogical scholarship. The two previous articles were Eberts and Gray (1982) and Gray (1983). Reprint requests should be sent to Philip Howard Gray, Department of Psychology, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT 59717.

The publication of Morton's book gave the Puritans and Pilgrims additional reasons to dislike him. The former were offended by Morton's description of the mistreatment of the early planters in Massachusetts Bay by the Puritans after they bought the charter from Reverend John White and his egalitarian followers (Rose-Troup, 1930). The latter resented his description of the Indians' mistreatment at Plymouth (founded by the Pilgrims in 1620), at Wessagusset (founded by Thomas Weston in 1622 after he despaired of getting any of his money back from the Pilgrims), and at Weymouth (founded in 1623 by Robert Gorges, whose father, Sir Ferdinando, was a dominant force on the Council of New England). Although Morton is informed about the goings-on at Weymouth during the winter of 1623-1624, he does not speak as one who was there in person, and very likely got his information from the aforementioned Mr. Edward Johnson, who was the "spetiall judge of this business" (Morton, 1637, p. 109). The business in question became a legend that worked its way into poetry and opera and had to do with how one of the Weymouth men should be punished for stealing seed corn from an Indian, a heinous offense at a time and in a place where starvation faced Englishman and Indian alike. As Morton tells the story, it was first suggested that the member of the English party who was closest to death should be dressed in the offender's clothes and hanged, thus preserving the life of the brawny criminal, whose strength might later be needed. The suggestion was not followed; the criminal was tricked into being bound and then, to his astonishment, hanged. Edward Johnson, the judge, later avoided a massacre of the Weymouth men when warned by a friendly Indian (Banks, 1931).

Of Morton's life before New England little is known. He himself says he was the son of a soldier, brought up in the ways of a country gentleman. He was a lawyer by profession, and in such occupation he is seen in the English records as late as the summer of 1622. That and other evidence shows that Morton did not arrive in New England before 1624 (Connors, 1939).

Certainly Morton could not have maintained his good relationships with the Indians if he had been involved in the ambush and murder of several of them at Wessagusset in the winter of 1622-1623 by some of Weston's men, led by Miles Standish from Plymouth (Willison, 1945). It is believed that Morton was a passenger on Captain Wollaston's ship, the *Unity* of London, which was bound for Virginia with a cargo of indentured servants whose time had been bought up in England to be sold in Virginia at a profit. But head winds and a leak, among other problems, caused the *Unity* to put in at Massachusetts Bay in May of 1624. When Wollaston departed with some of the servants, Morton enticed those remaining to escape the fate of their brethren by becoming partners with him in a new colony to trade with the Indians (Bolton, 1929/1974; Willison, 1945).

This trade was so successful that the Pilgrims took revenge by charging Morton with selling guns and powder to the Indians. Morton was taken prisoner and then inhumanely marooned for part of the winter of 1628-1629 on the Isles of Shoals until his transport to England under letters of complaint could be arranged. The charges were not taken seriously (Morton, 1637). In August 1629, Morton returned to Plymouth aboard the *Lyon* of Bristol as scribe to Isaac Allerton, now acting for the Council of New England. Morton soon slipped back to Mount Wollaston, to his home which he called Ma-re Mount and which the Pilgrims, not understanding the Latin pun, called Merry Mount. Now, however, Morton was under the jurisdiction of the Puritans, who asked for a pledge of conformance. Morton was uncooperative. But in 1630 Winthrop arrived with many followers and a determination to make an example of the independent older planters, of whom Morton was the most notorious (Willison, 1945).

Morton was arrested on patently false charges. His property was seized and as the ship carrying him back to England stood the bay he could see the smoke from his burning house, as the Puritan magistrates had planned he should (Ranlet, 1980). Morton was soon released from his English jail, probably at the instigation of Sir Ferdinando Gorges, into whose intrigues Morton now entered, so much so that by 1635 he was appointed solicitor for the confirmation of the deeds under the Great Seal and to prosecute suit for the repeal of the Massachusetts Bay Company's charter, which Winthrop had taken with him to New England (Preston, 1953). In 1641 Morton attested the charter that Gorges obtained for the first American city to be created by fiat, Gorgeana (now York, Maine (Banks, 1931).

It was perhaps in the euphoria of an expected triumphant return to Massachusetts that Morton wrote his book. But the political troubles between King Charles and the Puritans in England must have disturbed his expectations. In the summer of 1643, Morton reappeared at Plymouth, asking only that he be allowed to spend his declining years near his former haunts, for he was then well into his 60s (Connors, 1939; Willison, 1945). With no family, Morton had obviously come back to New England to die. He would not die in peace. The Pilgrims had no copy of his book, but they seemed to know all about his acid treatment of them, exemplified by his statement that the Pilgrims' man of medicine had succeeded in curing Governor John Endicott of "a disease called a wife" (Willison, 1945, p. 305).

Morton was permitted to stay at Plymouth only until the spring of 1644. He moved on to Maine, narrowly escaping a trap set by Endicott. For reasons unknown, Morton passed through Boston in September of 1644 and the Bay magistrates had him. As Winthrop said, "There was laid to his charge his complaint against us at the council board, which he denied. . . . Having been kept in prison about a year . . . he was fined one hundred pounds, and set

at liberty... He had nothing... being old and crazy... and he went to Acomenticus, and living there poor and despised, he died within two years after" (Hosmer, 1959, vol. 2, p. 196).

### Morton on New England Animal Life

Morton's *New English Canaan or New Canaan* was written as three books. The last vents his asperity toward his New England enemies. We shall be concerned with the first two books, which cover the native inhabitants.

He began his section on animals with the largest of the fowl, the swan, which lived in the Merrimack River and other parts. Their flesh was not greatly desired by the Indians but the feathers and skins were commodities. The geese were of three sorts: brant, white, and gray. Morton had often seen a thousand or more before the mouth of his gun; the feathers he collected paid for all his powder and shot for the year. There were black, white, and pied ducks, as well as blue ducks, teal, and widgeons. Snipes were about, but Morton shot only enough to see whether he could find a difference between those in America and those in England. Fat sanderlings could be killed by the dozens with one shot. Cranes were useful as food and their bones were used to make tools. Turkeys were abundant, some weighing as much as 48 pounds, and were easily killed at roost when they would not fly away. The partridge seemed much like the ones of England; so did the quail, although they were larger; but Morton could not decide about a pheasant-like bird. The American larks, he noticed, did not sing. The crows, kites, and rooks seemed to differ from those in England. "There are Owles of divers kinde: but I did never heare any of them whop as ours doe" (Morton, 1637, p. 71).

Trained at falconry, Morton secured a lanneret (male falcon) and found it of a "farre better kinde, then any that have bin used in England" (Morton, 1637, p. 71). He described falcons, goshawks, and sparrowhawks. He ended his description of birds by expressing his amazement at the hummingbird, which he mistakenly thought to be a predator of bees.

Among the beasts of the forest was an elk-like animal, the size of a great horse, which the Indians called a "mose." Its hide was used by the savages, especially for footwear. It knelt to feed on grass and brought forth three fawns at a time, which were large enough for use as draft animals and which Morton thought might be tamed.

Morton described the two kinds of deer, as well as the methods by which Indians and wolves caught them. He described the beaver, whose tail the Indians considered to be an aphrodisiac, and how it created its habitation; in this he was two centuries ahead of Lewis Henry Morgan (1868). The otter also was known to Morton, as was the cat he called a Luseran or Luseret, which must have been either the bobcat or the lynx. It sounds like an Indian name, perhaps derived from the French, who had long been trading with Indians along the St. Lawrence River. As a child I heard my mother use a phonetically

similar name to refer to an animal on Cape Rosier of which she was frightened, a wild cat larger than a bobcat; surely this was the lynx. Morton saw no lions.

Martins, raccoons, red and gray foxes, and wolves of divers colors attracted Morton's eye, as well as squirrels, rabbits, hedgehogs and porcupines, snakes, mice, and bears, which he found of much interest.

Bears do no harm to man, said Morton, and will readily run from him. They feed upon "hurtleberries" (Morton must have considered the American blueberry and perhaps cranberry, both acid-loving plants, as the English huckleberry), nuts, and fish, especially shellfish. The bear, added Morton, is very fond of lobster, and at low tide will go down to the rocks and grope after them with great diligence. Would that we could do the same now!

### Morton on the Indians

Morton must have made friends with the Indians at the outset. He found that they had no systematic form of worship, but he believed that they had a general belief in a God or Great Spirit. They buried their dead ceremoniously and marked the graves according to the rank of the dead person. Failure to understand the Indian attitude toward their marked graves is what got the Pilgrims into trouble originally, for they had desecrated a grave by removing the symbol of rank from it. The Indians in turn presumed that the Plymouth settlers were all of a low and common class, since the graves of the leaders were not distinguished in any way. As much as anything else, the obvious contempt of the local Indians for the Plymouth Pilgrims stemmed from this assumption, namely, that there could be no great men among them because their graves were all common. I do not recall seeing anywhere that the historians who write about the early discords between the English settlers and the local Indians were familiar with this fact, which seems ironic in several ways.

Morton observed that the natives built houses much like those of the wild Irish. He explained how the dwellings were constructed, ventilated, and kept warm. He explained how the Indians dressed themselves and commented on their extreme modesty, men and women alike; indirectly, this cast doubt on the Pilgrims' charge of "riotous prodigalities" (Davis, 1908, p. 238). Although each Indian knew which articles belonged to him he shared them as needed, just as he shared his food. The Indians were hostile people, observed Morton, and suspicious of strangers, but nonetheless they were quick to come to the aid of persons in trouble. Here, perhaps, he was thinking back to his being deliberately marooned on the Isles of Shoals by his countrymen, and being saved from likely death by Indians who did not know him personally but had heard about him.

He commented on the division of labor between the sexes and noted that women continued working almost to the moment of delivery. In a day or two a woman delivered of a child was able to travel or trudge about. The infants were born with hair on their heads and with complexions as white as those of the Englishmen. The mothers

made a bath of walnut leaves or husks to darken the skins of their infants. Morton knew about the Indian cradleboard and certified its lack of ill effects on the children.

Age was honored among the Indians. They were given to a belief in magic and engaged in conjuring tricks which they used for entertainment and medicine. The savages were not apt to quarrel among themselves, said Morton, but from time to time enmities did occur, to be settled by duels. Reputation counted for much among the Indians, and marriages were arranged with class distinctions in mind. The manner of their trading is described, and Morton is at pains to deny that he ever traded liquor or permitted its consumption except with the higher class, such as sachems (chiefs) or *winnaytue* (men of estimation).

Morton praised the acute senses of the Indians, especially their senses of sight and smell. He had a high regard for their intelligence. It was here at Ma-re Mount, as Thomas Morton whimsically renamed the Wollaston settlement, that the only really idyllic relationship between Indians and Englishmen seemed to have occurred. Considering the Indian terrors which were later to fall upon the white man, perhaps the supercilious Pilgrims and Puritans could have learned something about goodwill from this man toward whom they extended none.

#### REFERENCES

- ADAMS, C. F. (1892). *Three episodes of Massachusetts history*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.
- ANDREWS, C. M. (1955). *The colonial period of American history*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- BAILYN, B. (1934). *The New England merchants in the seventeenth century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- BANKS, C. E. (1924-1925). Thomas Morton of Merry Mount. *Massachusetts Historical Society*, 58, 147-192; 59, 92-95.
- BANKS, C. E. (1931). *History of York, Maine: Successively known as Bristol (1632), Agamenticus (1641), Gorgeana (1642), and York (1652)*. Boston: Calkins Press.
- BOLTON, C. K. (1974). *The real founders of New England: Stories of their life along the coast 1602-1628*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing. (Original work published 1929)
- CONNORS, D. F. (1939). Thomas Morton of Merry Mount: His first arrival in New England. *American Literature*, 11, 160-166.
- DAVIS, W. T. (Ed.). (1908). *Bradford's history of Plymouth Plantation 1606-1646*. New York: Scribner's.
- EBERTS, C. C., & GRAY, P. H. (1982). Evaluating the historical treatment of female psychologists of distinction using citation analysis and textbook coverage. *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, 20, 7-10.
- GRAY, P. H. (1983). Heredity genius revisited: Were Galton's missing scientists the aftermath of the Puritan brain drain to America? *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, 21, 120-122.
- HOSMER, J. K. (Ed.). (1959). *Winthrop's journal "History of New England" 1630-1649*. New York: Barnes & Noble. (Original work published 1908)
- JAMESON, J. F. (Ed.) (1910). *Johnson's wonder-working Providence*. New York: Barnes & Noble.
- MORGAN, L. H. (1868). *The American beaver and his works*. Philadelphia: Lippincott.
- MORTON, T. (1637). *New English Canaan or New Canaan*. Amsterdam: Jacob Frederick Stam.
- MORISON, S. E. (1930). *Builders of the Bay Colony*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- NOYES, S., LIBBY, C. T., & DAVIS, W. G. (1972). *Genealogical dictionary of Maine and New Hampshire*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing. (Original work published 1928-1931)
- PRESTON, R. A. (1953). *Gorges of Plymouth Fort: A life of Sir Ferdinando Gorges, Captain of Plymouth Fort, Governor of New England, and Lord of the Province of Maine*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- RANLET, P. (1980). The lord of misrule: Thomas Morton of Merry Mount. *New England Historical & Genealogical Register*, 134, 282-290.
- ROSE-TROUP, F. (1930). *The Massachusetts Bay Company and its predecessors*. New York: Grafton Press.
- VAUGHAN, A. T. (1965). *New England frontier: Puritans and Indians 1620-1675*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- WILLISON, G. F. (1945). *Saints and strangers*. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock.
- ZUCKERMAN, M. (1977). Pilgrims in the wilderness: Community, modernity, and the maypole at Merry Mount. *New England Quarterly*, 50, 255-277.

(Manuscript received for publication July 12, 1986.)