

FRANCIS ORPEN MORRIS: ORNITHOLOGIST AND  
ANTI-DARWINIST

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THE lives, methods of work, opinions, and influences of those who have preceded us in our various fields of investigation have contributed to the background into which our work of today is continuously merging. It is of value to us to follow back along these streams of influences to their sources and by comparison to scan our own trends and that of our science in the light of the past. To these ends I bring before you a unique figure out of the past whose influence in the field of popular ornithology in Great Britain was stimulating, widespread and lasting and whose opinions on the place of natural history in education, on conservation of wildlife, on vivisection, and on evolution, particularly Darwinism, were reiterated widely, and often with emphasis and rancor.

Francis Orpen Morris (1810–1893), a British ornithologist and entomologist, was born near Cork, Ireland, son of Admiral Morris. His paternal grandfather was Captain Roger Morris, aide-de-camp of General Braddock, comrade and friend of George Washington. The grandmother of F. O. Morris was Mary Philipse, sister of Mrs. Beverly Robinson of a wealthy New York family in whose home Washington visited, and, as family tradition records, courted this charming young lady and proposed to her without success, though Washington Irving in his 'Life of Washington' doubts this. In the handsome New York home of the successful suitor, Colonel Roger Morris, Washington stopped, in 1776, on his way to assume command of the Continental Army in Cambridge, and later made it his headquarters in New York even though Colonel Morris was a Loyalist and later fled to England. Fenimore Cooper drew the character of the heroine of his novel 'The Spy,' from that of Mrs. Morris. The second son of this marriage, the father of F. O. Morris, entered the British Navy at the tender age of six. He married Rebecca Orpen, daughter of the vicar of Kelvargan of County Kerry, Ireland. Their eldest son, Francis Orpen, is the subject of this notice. He grew up on the western shores of Ireland where his love of natural history kept pace with his studies of insects and birds. In school he rapidly advanced into the collecting stage, rigging up a moth trap in his bedroom, and adding the rarest of birds to his local list. At Worcester College, Oxford, he made the acquaintance of J. L. Duncan, the entomologist, arranged the insects in the Ashmolean Museum, and began his life-long extensive scientific correspondence. Rather significantly, he loved the classics and hated mathematics. He was devoted to logic, Aristotle's ethics, and Butler's 'Analogy.' In his 'Great Go,' one of the subjects in which he chose to be

examined was books 8 to 11 of Pliny's 'Natural History' in which to his delight, he quite floored his examiner. He took Orders and was appointed throughout his life to parishes in Yorkshire. This environment in the home of the Quakers did little to pacify his irascibility, but seems to have stimulated his zeal for reform. The country-folk rebelled at his energetic efforts for progress in education, sanitation, postal service, and social reforms; for the abolition of stocks for petty offenders and the annual hiring day for servants; and for the installation of a village school and library, so much that he was moved several times in his early clerical career.

His rural environment fitted his avocations as fisherman and naturalist but it was not until he was forty that he launched his intensive activity in publication in ornithology and popular natural history. A list of his major publications in these lines follows:

1834. A guide to an arrangement of British birds; being a catalogue of all the species hitherto discovered in Great Britain and Ireland. 20 pp., Longmans.
1849. A Bible natural history. Groombridge.
1850. An essay on the eternal duration of the earth. 15 pp., Groombridge.
1850. An essay on scientific nomenclature. 10 pp., Groombridge. (An attack on species-splitters and an appeal for a board of experts with authority to stabilize nomenclature.)
- 1850-1857. A natural history of British birds. 6 vols., 8vo, Groombridge. 3d edition, revised, corrected, and enlarged, John C. Nimmo, 1891. 4th edition; vol. 1, 1895; vols. 2, and 3, 1896.
- 1851-53. A natural history of the nests and eggs of British birds. 3 vols., royal 8vo, Groombridge. 3d edition, revised, corrected, and enlarged, John C. Nimmo, 1892. 4th edition (edited by W. B. Tegetmeier), 1896.
1852. A natural history of British butterflies. Royal 8vo, Groombridge. 6th edition, 1889, John C. Nimmo. 7th edition, 1893. 8th edition, 1895.
1856. A book of natural history. Groombridge.
- 1859-70. A natural history of British moths. 4 vols., royal 8vo, Longmans. 5th edition, 1896, John C. Nimmo.
1860. Anecdotes of natural history. Longmans.
1861. Records of animal sagacity and character. Longmans.
1865. A catalogue of British insects in all the orders. 125 pp., Longmans.
1870. Dogs and their doings. Partridge.

Morris was a frequent and voluminous correspondent of the 'London Times' and an irrepressible pamphleteer. He had the tenacity of a bulldog and a fixity of purpose which rose in some fields almost to the level of persecution. His correspondence was gathered together at times in part in pamphlet form as in 'The Game Keeper's Museum,' 'Letters to the Times about Birds,' and a booklet on 'Dogs and their doings.'

He had four major antipathies, viz:—feminism; fox hunting and wanton destruction of wildlife; cruelty to animals and vivisection; and evolution as centered in Charles Darwin's 'Origin of Species.' His antipathy to feminism

reached its highest sarcasm when, before a Parliamentary hearing on a bill to authorize the reduction of the population of the English Sparrow in the interest of the farmers whose grain they were charged with destroying, he turned his invective against Miss Ormerod, the long-time economic zoologist of the Government, charged her with utter neglect in observation on the food and feeding habits of sparrows, the use of unscientific hearsay evidence, and suggested that her time and intellect would be better employed if she would go home, sit down, and knit for the worthy poor. His ire was roused to the highest pitch by the fox-hunting squires of the countryside who raced over fields and hedges in a brutal sport which not only destroyed crops and meadows but wrought suffering to the poor victims and brutalized the youth of the land. With equal intensity he assailed the lads and farmers who shot the omnipresent English Sparrows in their fields and orchards and the hunters who baited and slaughtered the visiting gulls.

He combined in one group the anatomists, vivisectionists, and evolutionists for his direst wrath and most continuous assaults. His motive for making this combination was perhaps his antipathy to Huxley, whom he most vigorously attacked. Thomas H. Huxley once replied to his request for answers to his criticisms of evolution suggesting that he study anatomy and physiology in the laboratory for four years and read all of Darwin's 'Origin of Species,' for this information. Morris's reply to Darwin's bull-dog suggested that Huxley take a well-planned course in ethics and logic at Oxford. Since experimental physiology was even then in its vigorous infancy the anti-vivisection movement was 'well under way. Huxley's elementary textbook of physiology was widely known and this perhaps in the mind of Morris linked him and Darwinism for attack by the incipient anti-vivisection movement. Morris's son in writing of his father's attitude on this subject says: "Certain it is that, of all the forms of cruelty against which he carried on such a long and determined crusade, there was none which he held in greater loathing and abhorrence, none which, in his conviction, was fraught with more dire consequences, than that which is involved in the term vivisection. It would be impossible to describe his feelings with regard to this practice; no words seemed strong enough to express what he thought about it, and therefore no trouble was too great for him to take in his endeavor to influence public opinion against it. He looked upon it as something infinitely worse than any ordinary cruelty. To be in any way a party to the torturing and experimenting upon any one of these was in his eyes to descend to the lowest depths of degradation and cruelty. Rather would he have died a hundred deaths than have had his life prolonged, if such a thing were possible, by any discovery that might be made through the abominations of the vivisectioning-room.

"Column after column in correspondence to newspapers and magazines

enough to fill volumes, did he write during the last twenty years of his life, besides private letters innumerable, upon this burning subject, never deviating from his uncompromising opposition to the vivisectionists of every shade and colour."

This agitation was followed by a licensing bill for all animal experimentation. He later even petitioned Parliament to limit the extension of licenses for such experimentation to those who had shown valuable results. His 'Curse of Cruelty' (1886), a sermon preached at York Minster, was his swan song on this subject. In it he definitely linked vivisection with atheism, evolution, and Darwinism. Nevertheless, with characteristic inconsistency, he was a great fisherman, caught trout on a barbed hook and doomed them to a lingering death in his creel, and yearly reaped the profits on the sales of his 'Eggs and Nests of British Birds,' which through four editions and forty years was the inspiration and sanction of many a collector and more boys of lesser and greater stature who systematically plundered the nests of birds with resulting distress of the expectant parents and devastation of the rarer species.

His antipathy to Darwinism found even more persistent expression, and, because of his position as a well-known naturalist and his wide acquaintance in clerical, educational, and military circles, probably had some temporary influence as shown by appreciative letters which he copied in the later editions of his anti-Darwinian pamphlets. These writings included his 'All the Articles of the Darwin Faith' (4 editions, 1875-1882), 'A Double Dilemma of Darwinism' (1877) read before the British Association, 'The Darwin Craze' (1880), and 'The Curse of Cruelty.' His long experience as a naturalist seemed not to have given him any insight into the phenomenon of adaptation, the existence of natural selection, or the meaning of an experiment. His Oxford training in logic did not help him to the significance of an hypothesis nor that in ethics to an appreciation of courtesy in argument.

His work as an ornithologist falls into the mid-Victorian Period of widespread active interest in natural history which resulted in a flood of books written by those observant lovers of plant and animal life in the wild. Its underlying motive was aesthetic and the rewards were personal enjoyment and an extension and cultivation of an interest in natural phenomena. Much of it unconsciously was scientifically uncritical and at the best merely factual. Indirectly and socially its value was very great. It contributed to the widely diffused knowledge of and interest in the living world which prepared the way for the placement of the biological sciences in the educational systems of English-speaking peoples. It also afforded the starting point for the rise of realism in literature as seen in the lately emerged literary appreciation of the works of W. H. Hudson, Richard Jefferies, and J. A. Owen. The ornithological works of Morris held a unique and influential position in the

literature of this period. They were sufficiently scientific to command general approval—witness their continuance through four editions from 1850 to 1896—and sufficiently popular to furnish a useful guide to amateurs. Their beautifully colored plates made identification of birds relatively easy for the novice unfamiliar with technical terms of plumage and their gossipy notes on occurrence lent zest to the formation of local lists. An inspection of these works shows a rather wide but undocumented use of literature, technical accuracy and completeness in description and comprehensiveness in scope, including, for example, notes on juvenile plumages, food, behavior, habits, habitat, and records of occurrence. The content is factual rather than aesthetic. His 'Nests and Eggs of British Birds' lapses occasionally into poetical quotations, but Tegetmeier's fourth edition brutally elides these in his rewritten text.

This brief survey of the work of this versatile, irascible, dogmatic, and persistent critic and naturalist leaves us with the inference that the net result of his activities was to extend the interest in natural history at a critical period in the history of science and to forward, rather than deter, those movements in civilization and those currents in human thought which he fought and sought to stem throughout his life. He served the useful function of the opposition party.

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