

## General Robert Morse (1743 – 1818)

*Military Engineer and Author*

*born* 29 Feb. 1743/44 in the parish of Lamyatt, England, son of Thomas Morse, the rector;

*married* 1785 Sophia Godin, and they had one daughter, Harriet, who married James Carmichael-Smyth;

*died* 20 Jan. 1818 in London, England. Robert, and his wife Sophia, who died a few days before him, is commemorated on the west gallery with a nicely carved shield in a roundel above a panel with shelf, on a shaped black backing. The monument is an example of the work of Samuel Colecom, sculptor of the monument to Samuel Joliffe in Petersfield Church\*.

As was the case with several graduates of the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich (London) in the 1750s, Robert Morse received his first practical experience in the half-hearted raids on the French coast in 1758. After service in the West Indies and elsewhere, he was with the British contingent in Westphalia (Federal Republic of Germany) from 1761 to 1763, and then was employed on the construction of coastal defences in England. From 1773 to 1779 he served as chief engineer in the West Indies, but the loss of the British-held islands to the French in the latter year resulted in his return once again to coastal defence work at home.

His Westphalian service marked the point at which Morse's career diverged from that of many of his colleagues. Although he had much field experience, he seems to have discerned that the key to advancement was not the disdainful and lonely chauvinism of his fellow professionals. He knew the rights and privileges of engineers, but merely by examining the bald record of his life one must conclude that he also understood and had the advantage of "connection," and used it skilfully. He appears as a formally trained and experienced engineer who combined professional credentials with social graces to build an unusually successful career. In Westphalia he had served as aide-de-camp to the Marquess of Granby, and both there and at home varied his engineering duties with staff appointments as an assistant quartermaster general.

Morse's brief connection with Canada began in New York City, where in 1782 he was serving as chief engineer under Sir Guy Carleton appears to have favoured Morse, and supported the engineer's successful quest for promotion to lieutenant-colonel, obtained in 1783. By the summer of that year plans were well under way for the evacuation of New York, and it was apparent that the future condition of Nova Scotia and its defences was important to post-war British interests in North America. Possibly because he did not want to rely on Governor John Parr of Nova Scotia, Carleton decided to obtain an independent assessment of the province by sending Morse "to obtain a general knowledge . . . and examine its Military defences, and its natural strengths and advantages." Morse was charged to study particularly the protection of navigation, fisheries, and communications links with Canada, with special attention to Saint John harbour (N.B.), the Strait of Canso, and the sensitive St Croix River area, where the boundary question was causing concern.

Morse left New York at the end of July 1783, arriving at Halifax, N.S., in August while the exodus from New York was gathering momentum. He embarked immediately on a seven-week exploration of the Fundy and Passamaquoddy areas in the armed brigantine *Maria*. Not surprisingly, he noted to Carleton that his relations with Parr were “not such as I could wish.” Parr had first learned of the mission when Morse arrived in Halifax, and there is little doubt that the querulous and beleaguered governor saw Morse as another intrusion by the detested Carleton. Parr believed that Morse thought him guilty of reserving land for himself at Passamaquoddy Bay, and as late as June 1785 he was begging his patron Lord Shelburne not to credit any stories Morse might spread in London to that effect.

The mission took much longer than expected, for Morse faced the additional engineering task of sorting out the chaotic stores situation for the Nova Scotia garrison in Halifax. During the winter of 1783–84 he busied himself inspecting fortifications in the province, advising the local army command on the repair of barracks, and gathering materials for his forthcoming report. He was styled “Commanding Royal Engineer in North America” at this period, and consequently was officially listed as stationed at Quebec; but the title fell to the senior ranking engineer in Canada, and there is no evidence that he actually went to Quebec.

He finished his report sometime after July 1784, entitling it “A General Description of the Province of Nova Scotia, and a Report of the present State of the Defences . . . .” It is not clear whether he wrote it in Nova Scotia or completed it after he sailed for England in October 1784, or whether it was ever presented to Carleton, who had long since returned home.

Morse’s subsequent career is a story of advancement. After promotion to colonel in 1788 and five years (1791–96) as commanding engineer at Gibraltar, he joined the Board of Ordnance’s prestigious Tower Committee. He served as acting chief engineer of Great Britain, and apparently carried through a reorganization of the board. The result was the abolition of the chief engineer’s office and the creation of the post of inspector general of fortifications, Morse being the first occupant, from 1802 to 1811. Until a good history of the Royal Engineers is written, there is no way of knowing whether Morse filled the post perfunctorily or governed the corps with an iron but remote hand. He reached the rank of general in 1808, and upon his retirement in 1811 was given a generous extra pension by royal warrant. His services do not seem to have been long remembered, however, for the obituary notice in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* merely stated: “Jan. 28. In Devonshire Place, Gen. Morse.” He was buried in Marylebone Church.

Morse’s relevance to Canadian history arises from his “General Description” and perhaps his recognition from the fact that Douglas Brymner published it in his *Report on Canadian archives for 1884*. Brymner noted that Morse had made “a suggestion for the Union of the Maritime Provinces with Canada, the Seat of Government to be in the Island of Cape Breton.” Certainly there is much in the report that is of interest, and Morse’s clear style makes it very readable. His descriptions of places and natural features are brisk and factual, and his observations on natural history ring true. Nova Scotians might not like his descriptions of their weather, but they are very astute. He briefly analyses the geographical complexity of the St Croix dispute; sympathizes with the problems of the loyalists, which he attributes in part to “lack of foresight and wisdom” by the authorities (presumably provincial); and has a low opinion of the loyalty and character of the pre-loyalist inhabitants. He is on more familiar ground when he comments on the defences, and is predictably critical of the false economy which poured money repeatedly into temporary repairs while

leaving no enduring fortifications. The 13 plans attached to the report are re-drawn versions of plans done by earlier royal engineers, with the exception of a fine plan of Halifax prepared for Morse by Charles Blaskowitz.

The report ends with the suggestion of “uniting these Provinces with Canada” alluded to by Brymner. In addition, Morse recommends “employing an able man to preside over the whole . . . a man of integrity and ability, with a comprehensive understanding” – Carleton?

MAXWELL SUTHERLAND

BL, King's {{mss}} 208–9, Robert Morse, “A general description of the province of Nova Scotia, and a report of the present state of the defences . . .” (also published in *PACReport*, 1884: xxvii-lix). PAC, MG 11, [CO 217] Nova Scotia A, 105: 25, 27; MG 23, A4, 88: Parr to Lord Shelburne, 27 June 1785 (typescripts). PRO, PRO 30/55, nos.5583, 8538, 8540, 9521, 9535 (typescripts at PAC). *Annual Reg.* (London), 1808 (new ed., 1820): 175. Douglas Brymner, “Report on historical archives,” *PAC Report*, 1884: xi. *Gentleman's Magazine*, January–June 1818: 91, 377. *Winslow papers* (Raymond), 294. *DNB. Roll of officers of the Corps of Royal Engineers from 1660 to 1898 . . .*, ed. R. F. Edwards (Chatham, Eng., 1898), 8. Whitworth Porter *et al.*, *History of the Corps of Royal Engineers* (9v. to date, London and Chatham, 1889– ; vols.1–3 repr. Chatham, 1951–54), 1: 98, 183–84, 189, 198; 2: 94, 204.

General Bibliography

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\*<http://www.speel.me.uk/chlondon/marylebonenewch.htm>