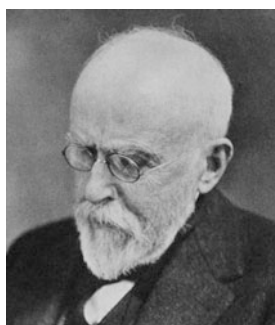


Edward S. Morse *Japan Day by Day, 1877, 1878–1879, 1882–1883 (1917)*



Yuzo Ota



Edward Sylvester Morse

Edward Sylvester Morse was born in Portland, Maine, U.S.A. in 1838. Although he worked mainly as a draftsman and did not go to university, Morse's research—which he had been passionate about since childhood (e.g., collecting shells)—caught the attention of Louis Agassiz, a renowned naturalist, thus launching his career as a zoologist. A singularly gifted lecturer on popular science, Morse used the money from his winter lectures to pursue vigorous research at his own expense, and he gained sufficient fame as both a scholar and a proponent of evolutionism, to be elected a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the equivalent of the Academy of Sciences in 1876. Three visits to Japan between 1877 and 1883 marked a turning point in Morse's life. The discovery of the Ōmori shell mound and a deep interest in Japanese ceramics and Japanese culture that was aroused during his visit

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to Japan led Morse to become a Japanologist rather than a zoologist. Morse wrote several excellent books on Japan, including *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* (1886) and *Japan Day by Day* (1917), and also gave numerous lectures on Japan, promoting understanding of Japan from a pro-Japanese standpoint. Morse's collection of Japanese ceramics (in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston) and Japanese folklore (in the Peabody Museum, Salem) are both world-renowned. He died in 1925.

Morse's *Japan Day by Day, 1877, 1878–1879, 1882–1883* (the numbers in the title indicate the length of Morse's stays in Japan) was published by the Houghton Mifflin Company in Boston in 1917, more than 30 years after his actual visits to Japan, although Morse had originally intended to publish his detailed diary (approximately 3500 pages long), which he had begun to keep immediately after his arrival in Japan.

In his preface, Morse explains that this long-held but unrealized plan finally came to fruition, largely by virtue of the advice of William Sturgis Bigelow, with whom he had worked during his third visit to Japan in 1882–1883. According to Morse, he was planning to use his long research leave after many years as director of the Peabody Museum in Salem and Japanese ceramics curator at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, to pursue his original zoological interests, when Bigelow suggested that Morse put aside his specialty of brachiopods and spend his time recording the customs and habits of the Japanese people, for posterity.

Morse's diary of his stay in Japan, which first appeared in the form of *Japan Day by Day* in 1917 had in fact been used as a "material book" for the countless lectures on Japan that Morse had given throughout the United States since 1877. Thus, even if *Japan Day by Day* had never been published, Morse's Japan diary was not wasted. On the contrary, this may have been one of the reasons why *Japan Day by Day* was published so long after his actual stay in Japan.

In Hozumi Shigetō's "Memories of an Overnight Talk with Dr. Morse" (an essay included in *Kagaku Chishiki* [Scientific Knowledge], December 1935), the following story is told: When Hozumi visited Morse in Salem in 1915 and said that Japan "has changed so much since then that I think you should come again," Morse replied, "No, it has changed so much that it's kind of scary to go and see it." Since his first encounter with Japan in 1877, Morse has talked about Japan constantly. His infatuation with Japan was so great that he was termed the "Japantheist" suggesting a person who worships Japan as if it were a god. The Japan that Morse spoke of with such passion—even though his lecture was given in 1910—was essentially the Japan he described in *Japan Day by Day*, the Japan that he had actually seen with his own eyes from 1877 to 1883 (the early Meiji 10s). In *Japan Day by Day* Morse stops time in 1883 to give his readers the best possible Japan, in his view, so when those who had listened to Morse's many lectures on Japan read *Japan Day by Day*, they would realize that Morse's "contemporary" Japan was actually the period from 1877 to approximately 5 years later.

Morse's original purpose of coming to Japan was not to study Japan but—as stated in the preface to *Japan Day by Day*—but to study the marine life of the abundant species in the waters around Japan as a zoologist. Initially he had little prior

knowledge of Japan. In fact, from the fragmentary words that appeared later in newspaper reports on Morse's lectures, it seems that Morse, like many Americans, initially thought of Japan as a province of China and imagined it to be a barbaric place with a backward culture.

However, when Morse arrived in Japan for the first time, he discovered a country quite different from what he had imagined. One of the charms of *Japan Day by Day* is that readers can feel the delight of Morse's "discovery" in what he sees and hears. When he landed in Yokohama late at night and looked around from his hotel window in the morning, "What a world of delight burst upon me as I looked out the hotel window this morning on the frigates of the various nations in the harbor and the curious native boats and junks, with everything novel but the ships and the sea," Morse writes.

Believing in the importance of recording his first impressions before the fresh wonder faded, Morse set out to document the "world of delight" he saw in Japan. What helped him then was his extraordinary sketching ability. Morse's lectures were well known for the amazingly fast and skillful drawings he made on the blackboard, and the 777 illustrations in *Japan Day by Day*, drawn by Morse himself (originally drawn on the spot), greatly enhance the reader's understanding and sense of reality.

Japan Day by Day is by no means a systematically organized book. With an insatiable curiosity, a flexible mind that is easily surprised, and a foreigner's eye for discovering interest in little things in the daily life and culture, considered commonplace by the Japanese, Morse tries to record what he sees, no matter how big or small. Therefore, the topics covered often shift from one to another without any context, except for the temporal relationship of the order in which they are seen by Morse. However, perhaps because of the overall style of the book, which is very plain and easy to read, this does not amount to a flaw, but rather contributes to heightening the reader's sense of reality, as if they were touring around Japan with Morse in the Meiji 10s.

One of the reasons why *Japan Day by Day* is more than a mere encyclopedia of information about Japan is that, if Japan is the main character of the book, Morse, an innocent, energetic, and pleasant man, appears as an interesting secondary character. He is exceptional among foreigners of his time in that he is deeply and actively involved in Japanese culture, learning about Noh chanting and tea ceremonies. Morse, a man with a sense of humor, a bit of mischievousness, and a curious spirit, who would run out—even in the middle of the night—at the mention of a fire, participates very naturally in the Japanese community.

The view of Japan expressed in *Japan Day by Day* differs from the average Westerner's view of the country during Morse's time. Speaking in broad generalities, I dare say that the majority of Westerners at the time believed in the superiority of the West over Japan. Many of them seem to have believed that Japan was a barbaric and uncivilized country before Perry's arrival, and that it was only with the opening of Japan that it began its journey to civilization. From their perspective, Japan's Westernization was tantamount to civilization. This Western-centric view was embodied in the most aggressive form—even if implicitly—by the Western

missionaries of the time, who came to Japan to “elevate” the country through Christianity.

Morse acknowledged this view as erroneous soon after his arrival. While he was impressed by the rapid adoption of Western culture in Japan at the time—especially in the capital city of Tokyo—and by the Japanese people’s eagerness to learn from foreign strengths without any hesitation, Morse’s primary interest was in the traditional Japanese culture that had not yet been so changed by Western influences. Morse did not take the Japanese adoption of Western culture as evidence that Japan lacked a civilized culture. He had the opportunity to observe regions of Japan that were still largely untouched by the waves of Westernization, including a trip to Nikkō and a stay on Enoshima Island upon his arrival in Japan, as well as to observe the high level of traditional Japanese culture, and believed that Japan’s rapid adoption of Western civilization was possible only with an advanced indigenous civilization. Morse thought that Westerners who came to Japan thinking they could teach the Japanese anything would find themselves with much to learn if they observed the Japanese and their culture with an open mind. In *Japan Day by Day*, Morse makes a number of comparisons between Japan and the U.S., but in most cases, it is Japan he favors. When Morse saw something in Japan that impressed him, such as the politeness of rickshaw men, the kindness of the Japanese toward animals, the good mood of Japanese babies, the tolerance of the Japanese toward foreigners, the safety of Japanese society, the aesthetic sense and love of nature that is evident in so many aspects of Japanese life, it usually created in his mind a feeling of how far his homeland, the United States, fell short of Japan’s standards.

Many readers of *Japan Day by Day* may find the Japan depicted in the book too utopian. In the preface to *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* (*Nihon no Sumai*), Morse writes, “In the study of another people one should if possible look through colorless glasses; though if one is to err in this respect, it were better that his spectacles should be rose-colored than grimed with the smoke of prejudice” (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1889, p. xxviii).

However, no matter how much one tries to view a foreign country favorably, it is unlikely that such deliberate efforts alone will make it appear rose-colored. Morse’s *Glimpses of China and Chinese Homes* (1902), in which he wrote about his impressions of China based on his brief stay there, does not necessarily portray it in a favorable light. The “rose-colored Japan” that emerges through *Japan Day by Day* seems based not on a mere whim but on his genuine recognition of a wonder hidden in traditional Japanese culture, often considered old-fashioned and outdated by the Japanese themselves, which has been gradually disappearing in the process of modernization. However, if the degree of “rose-coloredness” is stronger than it should be, it may be partly because Morse had almost no unpleasant experiences in Japan. Morse’s warm and engaging personality probably helped bring out the best in others.

Morse’s natural charm often made people feel compelled to do things for him. For example, during his stay in Japan, Morse once visited the statesman Ōkuma Shigenobu’s house to show him his ceramics, and on this occasion, Ōkuma gave Morse many of his own treasured ceramics. Ōkuma later told Ishikawa Chiyomatsu,

who was accompanying Morse as an interpreter at the time, “I didn’t want to give up the pottery when you came as an interpreter, but during our conversation, I had to do it.” (Ishikawa Chiyomatsu, “Ah, Dr. Morse!” *The Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shimbun*, December 25, 1925 [Taishō 14]). When *Japan Day by Day* was published in 1917, it was favorably reviewed in Western book reviews. However—probably because it was published at a time when knowledge of Japan was already somewhat widespread—its impact seemed to be less than that of *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings*, which Morse had published more than 30 years earlier in 1886, and which had opened the eyes of many Americans to Japanese culture for the first time.

However, *Japan Day by Day* is even more interesting to contemporary Japanese readers than it was to Western readers in the 1910s. As can be seen in the preface, Morse himself placed the main value of *Japan Day by Day* on the fact that it documented an old Japan that would soon be transformed and disappear. It is becoming much more difficult to find such vestiges of old Japan in today’s Japan than it was a couple of decades ago. This book may be one of the best guides for the younger generation of McDonald’s hamburger-eaters and motorcycle-riders if they want to gain a concrete picture of the lifestyle and culture of their grandparents’ generation.

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