Distress Signals

"SUPERB"- Wall Street Journal

lightning man

the accursed life of SAMUEL F. B. MORSE

KENNETH SILVERMAN
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

DA CAPO PRESS

Lightning Man: The Accursed Life of Samuel F. B. Morse

What exactly was so “accursed” about the life of Samuel F. B. Morse? Here is a man whose invention of the telegraph brought him both fame and fortune. In the last years of his life, Morse was presented to Emperor Napoleon III, his image adorned the Capitol dome, and admirers from San Francisco to Bombay wired messages of tribute to a celebratory banquet attended by thousands. Just what kind of curse could this be?

Kenneth Silverman makes abundantly clear that the curse was very much of Morse’s own making. Morse did not bring about all his misfortunes—the death of his first wife, for example—but he was at least partly responsible for some of his deepest sorrows. He more or less abandoned the children of his first marriage to one relative or another, so that it is probably no surprise that they came to no good end. But if Silverman presents Morse’s life as accursed, it is less because Morse created his own calamities than because Morse himself, first as an artist, then as an inventor, and always as an American, interpreted his existence as a series of humiliations and horrors.

Before he turned his hand to invention, Morse made his living as an artist. This was not an easy path to follow. When he graduated from Yale in 1810, there was no suitable training in art available in America. Nor did Morse’s father, a prominent Massachusetts clergyman, have an artistic career in mind for his oldest son. But the father did relent and sent him to England to study painting. There Morse met with modest acclaim but on his return in 1815 faced the reality that, in America, there was little taste for high-minded history painting, only a market for society portraits. To make a living, Morse painted the worthies of New York and the planters of Charleston. He achieved national prominence as the founder and leader of the National Academy of Design. But that is not how Morse sized up his life as an artist. In his view, his career as a painter came to a mortifying close in 1836 when Congress passed over him in commissioning paintings for the Capitol rotunda.

By then, Morse had been experimenting with a telegraphic device for four years. He was no scientist, but he did have a central insight into the potential of an electromagnet to convey information through space. On his own, Morse could see his way to creating an apparatus that could transmit messages over a distance of forty feet. By 1837, with the help of chemist Leonard D. Gale, he was able to increase that distance to ten miles. From there, Morse could imagine how a series of relays might carry the information over vast distances—across continents, even under the oceans!—in ten-mile increments. There were others in the United States and Europe working on similar devices, but Morse worked persistently on his version, consulting, experimenting, perfecting, promoting. In the end, it was the Morse telegraph that was triumphant and Morse celebrated as the “Lightning Man.” Silverman outlines both the rapid expansion of the telegraphic network, from the first Baltimore-to-Washington line laid in 1844

("What hath God wrought?") to the transatlantic cable of 1866, and the giddy expectations of a new era that the invention generated.

But as with art, Morse experienced his life as an inventor as a tragedy. Periodically, collaborators and rivals challenged him for a share of the credit and the profits, some fairly, others unfairly. Morse gave little ground. Behind the decades of lawsuits and pamphlet wars lay his increasingly obsessive insistence that he be universally recognized as the sole inventor of the telegraph. Never mind the fact that he grew wealthy off the telegraph, that European governments awarded him 400,000 francs in recognition of his status as the inventor of the device, that honors were bestowed upon him from around the globe. For Morse, life was one smear campaign and betrayal after another.

Nowhere is the image of Morse less appealing than in the account of him as a nativist and anti-abolitionist. In the antebellum era, Morse authored such virulently anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant tracts as *A Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States* (1835) and ran as a nativist candidate for mayor of New York and member of Congress. In the same years, Morse abhorred the abolitionists as not merely irresponsible and radical, but dead wrong. When the Civil War came, and especially when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Morse reacted with horror. He labored to get the Proclamation revoked, published a proslavery tract, and actively campaigned to defeat Lincoln. So alienated was he that this man who grew up literally in the shadow of Bunker Hill considered self-exile in Europe. While most Victorians celebrated the moral and material progress of America, Morse regarded the fortunes of his nation as—what else?—cursed.

Silverman allows Morse's personality to emerge from his life story, much as he allows Morse's evaluation of his life as accursed to predominate over the world's adulation of him as "Lightning Man." We get to know Morse as sanctimonious and vain, incapable of deep self-awareness, not because Silverman explicitly characterizes him as such, but because that is how he materializes in Silverman's finely grained and scrupulously documented account. In one sense, then, we are left with an almost intuitive grasp of the man, but in another sense, we close the book in a state of bewilderment. What made the man tick? Why did he respond to his life the way he did? In these pages, Silverman has argued that biographers neither impose patterns of cause and effect on their subjects' lives nor seek to draw meanings from those patterns. Rather, he insists, "[T]he biographer seeks what the subject's life meant *to the subject*, how the subject's experience registered on his or her consciousness, the satisfactions it supplied, dilemmas it produced. This inwardness is what distinguishes it from history."

Silverman is as good as his word, but I wish he had not been. Separating biography from history removes the subject from his or her own life, creating a disembodied individual with little more than a characteristic modus operandi. We know how the experience of war and emancipation registered on Morse's consciousness, for example, but we do not know why. It was not every New

Englander, after all, who became a Copperhead. We have little sense of how circumstances and ideologies characteristic of his times shaped the way Morse experienced his life. Without such insights, we cannot really comprehend the ironies of his life and contradictions in his thought, his simultaneous embrace of republicanism and awe of European monarchy, for example, or his disdain for American money scrambling and his own persistence in peddling, first portraits, then telegraphs. As you and I go through our lives today, we cannot see how the ways in which we experience our existence are, as our teenage kids would say (with a roll of the eyes), just *so* 2004. But if we are lucky enough to have biographers one day, I hope *they* can.

This article originally appeared in issue 4.4 (July, 2004).

Tamara Plakins Thornton is professor of history at the State University of New York, Buffalo. Her books include *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life among the Boston Elite, 1785-1860* (New Haven, 1989) and *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven, 1996). She is working on a biography of Nathaniel Bowditch.