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Samuel Finley Breese Morse Edited by Edward Lind Morse

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### Samuel F.B. Morse

The American inventor Samuel Morse (1791–1872) spent decades fighting to be recognised for his key role in devising the electromagnetic telegraph. While he will always be remembered in the history of telecommunications, and for co-developing the code which bears his name, Morse started out as a painter and also involved himself in matters of politics over the course of his career. Published in 1914, this two-volume collection of personal papers was edited by his son, who provides helpful commentary throughout, illuminating the struggles and successes of a remarkable life. Volume 1 includes observations made in Europe while Morse studied painting. During the Napoleonic wars, he writes letters home describing the rising level of crime and social unrest in London, mentioning that he sleeps with a pistol. He is in London when Spencer Perceval is assassinated and later writes of meeting Turner, ‘the best landscape painter living’.

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# Samuel F.B. Morse

*His Letters and Journals*

VOLUME 1

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**IN TWO VOLUMES**  
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**BY HIS SON**

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**BEARING ON THE**

**INVENTION OF THE TELEGRAPH**

**VOLUME I**



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TO MY WIFE  
WHOSE LOVING INTEREST AND APT CRITICISM  
HAVE BEEN TO ME OF GREAT VALUE  
I DEDICATE THIS WORK

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“It is the hour of fate,  
And those who follow me reach every state  
Mortals desire, and conquer every foe  
Save death. But they who doubt or hesitate —  
Condemned to failure, penury and woe —  
Seek me in vain and uselessly implore.  
I hear them not, and I return no more.”

INGALLS, *Opportunity*.

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## PREFACE

ARTHUR CHRISTOPHER BENSON, in the introduction to his studies in biography entitled “The Leaves of the Tree,” says: —

“But when it comes to dealing with men who have played upon the whole a noble part in life, whose vision has been clear and whose heart has been wide, who have not merely followed their own personal ambitions, but have really desired to leave the world better and happier than they found it, — in such cases, indiscriminate praise is not only foolish and untruthful, it is positively harmful and noxious. What one desires to see in the lives of others is some sort of transformation, some evidence of patient struggling with faults, some hint of failings triumphed over, some gain of generosity and endurance and courage. To slur over the faults and failings of the great is not only inartistic: it is also faint-hearted and unjust. It alienates sympathy. It substitutes unreal adoration for wholesome admiration; it afflicts the reader, conscious of frailty and struggle, with a sense of hopeless despair in the presence of anything so supremely high-minded and flawless.”

The judgment of a son may, perhaps, be biased in favor of a beloved father; he may unconsciously “slur over the faults and failings,” and lay emphasis only on the virtues. In selecting and putting together the letters, diaries, etc., of my father, Samuel F. B. Morse, I have tried to avoid that fault; my desire has been to present a true portrait of the man, with both lights and

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shadows duly emphasized; but I can say with perfect truth that I have found but little to deplore. He was human, he had his faults, and he made mistakes. While honestly differing from him on certain questions, I am yet convinced that, in all his beliefs, he was absolutely sincere, and the deeper I have delved into his correspondence, the more I have been impressed by the true nobility and greatness of the man.

His fame is now secure, but, like all great men, he made enemies who pursued him with their calumnies even after his death; and others, perfectly honest and sincere, have questioned his right to be called the inventor of the telegraph. I have tried to give credit where credit is due with regard to certain points in the invention, but I have also given the documentary evidence, which I am confident will prove that he never claimed more than was his right. For many years after his invention was a proved success, almost to the day of his death, he was compelled to fight for his rights; but he was a good fighter, a skilled controversialist, and he has won out in the end.

He was born and brought up in a deeply religious atmosphere, in a faith which seems to us of the present day as narrow; but, as will appear from his correspondence, he was perfectly sincere in his beliefs, and unfalteringly held himself to be an instrument divinely appointed to bestow a great blessing upon humanity.

It seems not to be generally known that he was an artist of great ability, that for more than half his life he devoted himself to painting, and that he is ranked with the best of our earlier painters.

In my selection of letters to be published I have tried

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to place much emphasis on this phase of his career, a most interesting one. I have found so many letters, diaries, and sketch-books of those earlier years, never before published, that seemed to me of great human interest, that I have ventured to let a large number of these documents chronicle the history of Morse the artist.

Many of the letters here published have already appeared in Mr. S. Irenaeus Prime's biography of Morse, but others are now printed for the first time, and I have omitted many which Mr. Prime included. I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. Prime for the possibility of filling in certain gaps in the correspondence; and for much interesting material not now otherwise obtainable.

Before the telegraph had demonstrated its practical utility, its inventor was subjected to ridicule most galling to a sensitive nature, and after it was a proved success he was vilified by the enemies he was obliged to make on account of his own probity, and by the unscrupulous men who tried to rob him of the fruits of his genius; but in this he was only paying the penalty of greatness, and, as the perspective of time enables us to render a more impartial verdict, his character will be found to emerge triumphant.

His versatility and abounding vitality were astounding. He would have been an eminent man in his day had he never invented the telegraph; but it is of absorbing interest, in following his career, to note how he was forced to give up one ambition after another, to suffer blow after blow which would have overwhelmed a man of less indomitable perseverance, until all his great

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energies were impelled into the one channel which ultimately led to undying fame.

In every great achievement in the history of progress one man must stand preëminent, one name must symbolize to future generations the thing accomplished, whether it be the founding of an empire, the discovery of a new world, or the invention of a new and useful art; and this one man must be so endowed by nature as to be capable of carrying to a successful issue the great enterprise, be it what it may. He must, in short, be a man of destiny. That he should call to his assistance other men, that he should legitimately make use of the labors of others, in no wise detracts from his claims to greatness. It is futile to say that without this one or that one the enterprise would have been a failure; that without his officers and his men the general could not have waged a successful campaign. We must, in every great accomplishment which has influenced the history of the world, search out the master mind to whom, under Heaven, the epoch-making result is due, and him must we crown with the laurel wreath.

Of nothing is this more true than of invention, for I venture to assert that no great invention has ever sprung Minerva-like from the brain of one man. It has been the culmination of the discoveries, the researches, yes, and the failures, of others, until the time was ripe and the destined man appeared. While due credit and all honor must be given to the other laborers in the field, the niche in the temple of fame must be reserved for the one man whose genius has combined all the known elements and added the connecting link to produce the great result.



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As an invention the telegraph was truly epoch-making. It came at a time when steam navigation on land and water was yet in its infancy, and it is idle to speculate on the slow progress which this would have made had it not been for the assistance of the electric spark.

The science of electricity itself was but an academic curiosity, and it was not until the telegraph had demonstrated that this mysterious force could be harnessed to the use of man, that other men of genius arose to extend its usefulness in other directions; and this, in turn, stimulated invention in many other fields, and the end is not yet.

It has been necessary, in selecting letters, to omit many fully as interesting as those which have been included; barely to touch on subjects of research, or of political and religious discussion, which are worthy of being pursued further, and to omit some subjects entirely. Very probably another more experienced hand would have made a better selection, but my aim has been to give, through characteristic letters and contemporary opinions, an accurate portrait of the man, and a succinct history of his life and labors. If I have succeeded in throwing a new light on some points which are still the subject of discussion, if I have been able to call attention to any facts which until now have been overlooked or unknown, I shall be satisfied. If I have been compelled to use very plain language with regard to some of those who were his open or secret enemies, or who have been posthumously glorified by others, I have done so with regret.

Such as it is I send the book forth in the hope that it may add to the knowledge and appreciation of the

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character of one of the world's great men, and that it may, perhaps, be an inspiration to others who are striving, against great odds, to benefit their fellow men, or to those who are championing the cause of justice and truth.

EDWARD LIND MORSE.

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