

American Statesmen

EDITED BY

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GOUVERNEUR MORRIS

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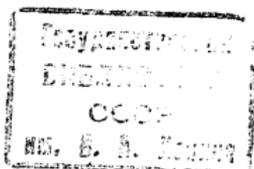
THEODORE ROOSEVELT



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INTRODUCTION.



TWO generations ago the average American biographer was certainly a marvel of turgid and aimless verbosity; and the reputations of our early statesmen have in no way proved their vitality more clearly than by surviving their entombment in the pages of the authors who immediately succeeded them. No one of the founders of the Constitution has suffered more in this respect than has he who was perhaps the most brilliant, although by no means the greatest, of the whole number, — Gouverneur Morris.

Jared Sparks, hitherto Morris's sole biographer, wrote innumerable volumes on American history, many of which are still very valuable, and some of them almost indispensable, to the student. The value, however, comes wholly from the matter; Mr. Sparks is not only a very voluminous writer, but he is also a quite abnormally dull one. His "Life of Gouverneur Morris" is typical of most of his work.

He collected with great industry facts about Mr. Morris, and edited a large number of his letters and state papers, with numerous selections, not always well chosen, from his Diary. Other merits the book has none, and it has one or two marked faults. He failed to understand that a biographer's duties are not necessarily identical with those of a professional eulogist; but for this he is hardly to blame, as all our writers then seemed to think it necessary to shower indiscriminate praise on every dead American — whether author, soldier, politician, or what not — save only Benedict Arnold. He was funnily unconscious of his own prolix dullness; and actually makes profuse apologies for introducing extracts from Morris's bright, interesting writings into his own drearily platitudinous pages, hoping that "candor and justice" will make his readers pardon the "negligence" and "defects of style," which the extracts contain. He could not resist the temptation now and then to improve Morris's English, and to soften down, or omit anything that he deemed either improper or beneath the stilted "dignity" of history. For example, Morris states that Marie Antoinette, when pursued by the Parisian fishwives, fled from her bed "in her shift and petticoat, with her stockings in her hand;" such particularity struck