

# Robert Swain Morison

*November 25, 1906 — December 2, 1986*

Robert Morison spent only eleven years of a long and distinguished career at Cornell University, but his accomplishments were immense. He played a crucially important role during the 1964-70 period in the development of Cornell's programs in the basic biological sciences. In the second half of his Cornell career he was of major importance as a teacher and adviser in helping to develop Cornell's new interdisciplinary Program on Science, Technology and Society (STS).

Morison was born in Milwaukee and spent his early years there; summers, however, invariably in New Hampshire. He attended the Phillips Exeter Academy and Harvard University, obtaining a medical degree in 1935. He spent several of the following years at Harvard doing research and teaching in physiology and anatomy. He there met and married Benigna Rempel, whose death preceded his by only three years. In 1944 Morison moved to the Rockefeller Foundation in New York, where, as a senior member of the foundation staff, he directed programs in medicine and public health for twenty years. Those were years in which programs of the Rockefeller Foundation contributed in major ways to the less-developed nations. The most-publicized accomplishments were in agriculture. The area of support that Robert Morison managed, however—medicine and public health—was equally important and equally successful.

Robert Morison came initially to Cornell to chair a committee of outside experts established by President Perkins in 1963 to study a problem of wide concern at the university—the need for new directions in teaching and research in biology. The Morison committee soon identified the major problems and recommended a bold solution—to establish a Division of Biological Sciences that would be a home for all of Cornell's biology efforts, excepting only the programs at the Medical College in New York and the College of Veterinary Medicine in Ithaca. Specifically, biologists from the state-supported colleges and those from the private colleges of Cornell were brought together to teach and do research as unified groups. Also recommended was a considerable expansion of the biology program to permit adequate attention to new subject areas like molecular biology and environmental studies. The proposal was ambitious in its call for new faculty, new buildings, and, inevitably, new funds. There was wide faculty support for the new direction. A university committee chaired by Provost Corson studied the recommendations and concluded that a university-wide division along the recommended lines operating under a single overall director was the desirable solution. The problem then was, Who should be the first director? Fortunately word had come

to President Perkins that Robert Morison might consider the Cornell position and, after some negotiation, in July 1964 Morison became a professor of biology and the division's first director.

The assignment was a formidable one. It called for a restructured group of basic biology sections with revised undergraduate and graduate teaching programs and for integration into them of faculty from Cornell's state and private colleges. Costly new buildings and equipment were needed for expanded teaching and research. Close to twenty new faculty positions were needed, for which funds were to come from both state and private sources. Chairpersons were needed for the new and modified sections. An essential requirement for the director was close and continued collaboration with the involved Cornell colleges and their deans. There was nearly universal agreement on the goals for the new program but no shortage of difficulties to be surmounted.

Remarkably, in only about four years the essential components of the new structure were in place: people, buildings, new sections, new majors, and new and revised courses of study. In accomplishing this there was credit enough for everyone involved, but a large portion of it must go to Robert Morison. He had the vision to see what could be done. He worked effectively with the entire Cornell faculty and with the administration. He participated actively and with considerable success in the recruitment of new faculty. His close connections with the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation helped in fund-raising. He was the chief architect of a structure that has grown and flourished and, along with it, Cornell's stature and effectiveness in the many fields of biology.

In accomplishing all this, Morison made many close friends and virtually no enemies. He became an integral part of the Cornell community and with his wife, Beny, entered into its social and cultural life. He and Beny greatly admired Bordeaux wines, and their wine-tasting dinners became famous.

In 1970 Robert Morison retired from the directorship of the division. He joined Cornell's Program on Science, Technology and Society and there became an active teacher and scholar. On this change of assignment he was awarded the first Richard J. Schwartz Chair of Science and Society. Morison taught both undergraduate and graduate courses in the STS program and contributed papers to major publications. He was a popular and widely admired teacher.

Robert Morison had wide outside interests. Among many other assignments he was a member of the National Science Board of the National Science Foundation from 1963 to 1972, a member of the science advisory committee of the General Motors Corporation, a trustee of Bennington College, and the author or co-editor of several books.

In 1975 Morison retired from Cornell, and he and Beny moved back to his family's ancestral home in Peterboro, New Hampshire. He was soon brought back into teaching, however, this time by Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which persuaded him to become a part-time member of its own new program in science, technology, and society. Once again Robert Morison became an admired and influential teacher and colleague. Illness finally led him to retire fully in 1985. Although in increasing pain in his last years, he remained intellectually vigorous, outgoing, and friendly until he died in his sleep in early December 1986.

To all of his friends Robert Morison was a very special person. He loved to converse, to speculate on new science, and to examine the ethical implications of science and medicine. He was deeply concerned with the governance of the United States and with the state of the world. It is typical that he joined the Hastings Center for Ethical Studies soon after it was established and contributed extensively to its meetings and its publications. Most of the papers authored by Morison in his later years were concerned with major social issues, such as, for example, "Where Is Biology Taking Us?" and "Misgivings about Life-extending Technologies." He was co-editor and contributor in 1979 for an influential book, *Limits of Scientific Inquiry*. In his writings, as in his teaching, the special features were his broad knowledge, his concerns about human progress and well-being, and his deep sense of social responsibility.

Robert Morison made major contributions to Cornell's administrative structure and to its teaching. More consequential to dozens of his friends and associates was the impact on our lives of a knowledgeable scholar who was bright, provocative, inquiring, and ethically concerned and who above all had a rare and special gift of friendship. He was a joy to know and to work with.

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