

A GENIUS
FOR MONEY
BUSINESS, ART AND
THE MORRISONS

CAROLINE DAKERS

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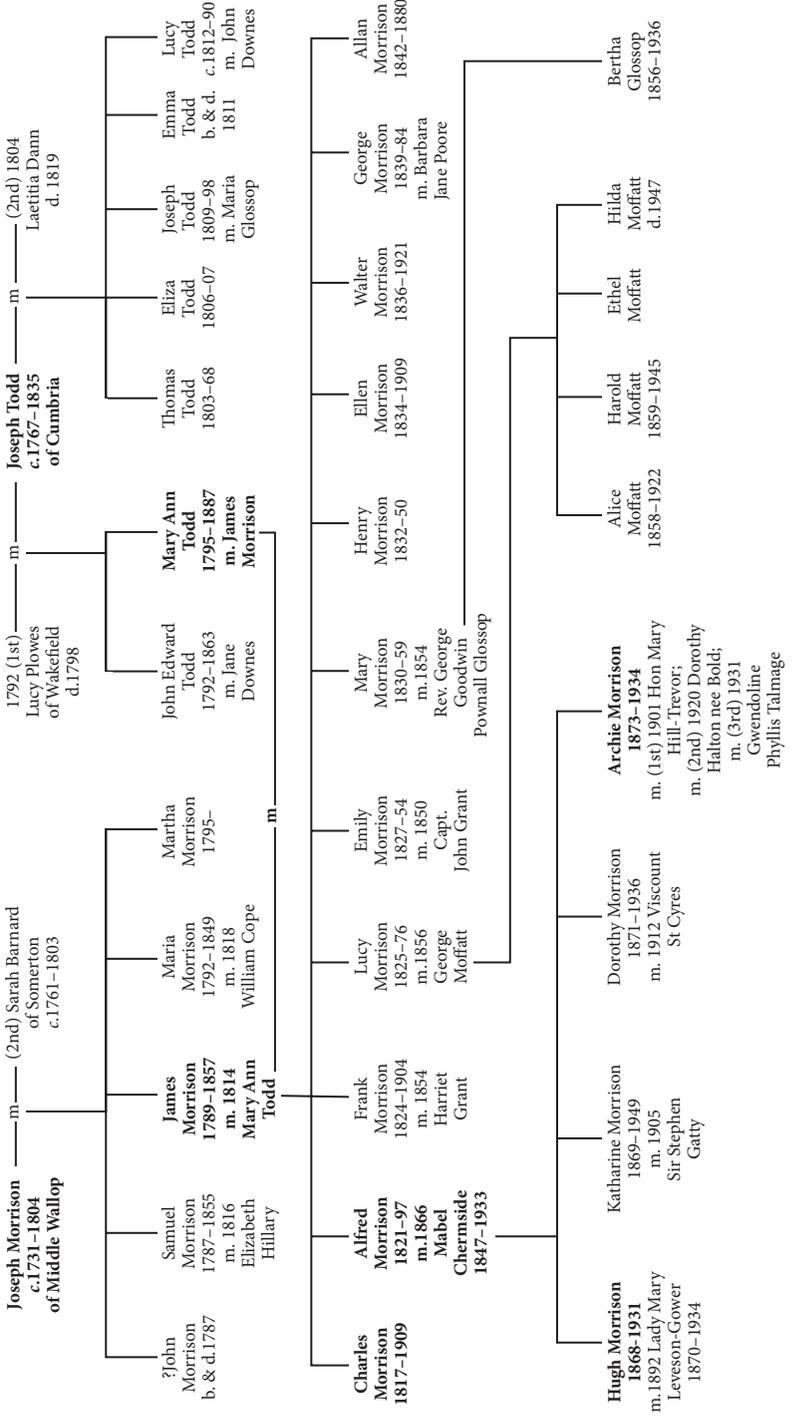
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The Family Tree





Introduction

In England, personal distinction is the only passport to the society of the great. Whether this distinction arise from fortune, family, or talent, is immaterial; but certain it is, to enter into high society, a man must either have blood, a million, or a genius.

Benjamin Disraeli, *Vivian Grey*, 1826–7

James Morrison (1789–1857) is one of the least known but most extraordinary of nineteenth-century merchant millionaires. The son of a village innkeeper, he was sent to London as apprentice to a haberdasher. There, he proved to be a genius at making money and became the kingpin of textiles and the Napoleon of shopkeepers, creating a business with a turnover in 1830 of nearly £2 million, the equivalent of £200 million today. He invested almost a million (c. £100 million) in North American railways, he was involved in global trade from Canton to Valparaiso, and acquired land, houses and works of art to rival the grandest of aristocrats. When he died in 1857 he left his wife and all his nine children fortunes. He turned down the opportunity to buy a title (he considered it a poor investment), so remained a commoner – the richest commoner in the whole of the nineteenth century.¹

Like a character in Samuel Smiles' Victorian best-seller *Self-Help*, Morrison rose to the top 'by his own unaided efforts and through self-improvement, self-help, abstinence, thrift, hard work, acquisitive drive, innovative flair, and grasp of market opportunities.' On the way he created hundreds of jobs and 'flooded the world' with his goods.² He relished the intellectual pleasure in what he called 'the science of business.'³

Morrison's 'rags to riches' story is at the heart of this book: his very modern business techniques, his self-education, his election to Parliament as a radical Whig. His achievements illuminate the decades just before the accession of Queen Victoria and the early years of her reign. It was the age of reform, a period of unusual social mobility, the end of slavery and the beginning of empire, with fortunes to be made and lost in textiles, railways, overseas trade and banking. Morrison was part of the circle of political economists who extolled the virtues of free trade, competition and entrepreneurship. London's supremacy as a world city was unchallenged; a 'bottomless pit of consumption.'⁴ It was the best time to make a commercial fortune and for a millionaire like Morrison it was also an unprecedented time to acquire great works of art.

Morrison's artistic taste, which developed from nothing in just a few years, was aristocratic and cosmopolitan: along with collectors such as King George IV and the Rothschilds, he shared a passion for luxury and decoration, for tables of Florentine marble, Italian tortoiseshell, ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl and ivory, and Egyptian porphyry; lacquer bureau-cabinets and bouffe furniture; Etruscan vases and classical statues; gold inlay. He took the Grand Tour to Italy, visiting museums and palaces – he called them 'lions' – and artists' studios. He bought paintings by his contemporaries, including Constable and Turner (the latter was a friend and a guest at his houses in London and in the country), as well as collecting Old Masters. The National Gallery in London has two of his paintings, Rembrandt's *Portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels* and Poussin's *Triumph of Pan*, while the Getty in California owns another Poussin, *Un Temps calme*, and Rubens' *Miracles of St Francis of Paolo*. Constable's *The Lock* is in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection in Madrid. So a major part of this book examines his collecting, the display in his country and town houses, and his patronage of architects and designers.

Like Disraeli's canny tailor Sir Peter Vigo (*Endymion*), Morrison 'had the wisdom to retain his millions, which few manage to do, as it is admitted that it is easier to make a fortune than to keep one'. At his death, his wife and all of his surviving children were left fortunes; four of his sons also inherited their own country estates. While none of Morrison's children were able to match the formidable range of his achievements, his eldest sons did add substantially to the family wealth. Their activities are so important that they form the subject of separate chapters.

The eldest, Charles, though a shy reclusive bachelor was a brilliant financier, investing heavily in South America. By his death in 1909 he had turned his inheritance of one million into fourteen to become the richest commoner of his own generation. Alfred was a connoisseur. Dubbed the 'Victorian Maecenas', he commissioned the architect-designer Owen Jones and a team of talented craftsmen to turn his town and country houses into palaces of art where he displayed the greatest private collections of Imperial Chinese porcelain and autograph letters of the day.

It may seem surprising that the Morrisons are virtually unknown, but there are several reasons for their obscurity. A biography of James Morrison, *Portrait of a Merchant Prince*, was written by a descendant, Richard Gatty. Though serious and competent, only 200 copies were privately printed in 1976 so it never reached a wide readership. Since then economic historians have established the wealth of James and Charles Morrison, and analysed their business practices.⁵ Martin Daunton writes: 'The greatest fortune in the textile trades was not made by Richard Arkwright in the production of yarn; it was accumulated by James Morrison ... whose textile warehouse in the City of London supplied the inland trade with its handkerchiefs, ribbons, braids, and fabrics.'⁶ But commerce is not a sexy subject. Unlike Rothschild, the Morrison name has no resonance.⁷ James Morrison's wealth creation was in part because of the industrial revolution and the explosion in cheap textiles, but he was neither a manufacturer nor an inventor; Arkwright and Wedgwood are better-known names.

James Morrison acquired a very large number of properties, from artisans' dwellings and shops to country mansions, and also commissioned warehouses from his favourite architect J.B. Papworth. As his wealth increased he moved his family from the City of London across the Thames to Balham, then to grander houses in more prestigious locations, all the time adding to his portfolio. It is unfortunate that there is no property still occupied by Morrisons and open to the public on which to base his story.

The textile warehouse in Fore Street, Cripplegate, where James Morrison made his fortune, took a direct hit the first night of the Blitz. The Morrisons' grandest country house was Basildon Park, a fine late Palladian mansion set within a park close to the River Thames. After the First World War it was sold by a grandson, Archie Morrison, along with most of its contents, and is now the property of the National Trust. The Morrisons owned Basildon for almost

a century, James Morrison engaging Papworth and David Brandon to complete the interiors and the pleasure grounds, design cottages, farm buildings and a school, and restore the church, but the National Trust's narrative concentrates on the (comparatively recent) post-war occupation by the Iliffes.

Alfred Morrison's London house, 16 Carlton House Terrace, with startling interiors by Owen Jones, was sold by his widow along with a substantial part of his collections. His house at Fonthill was demolished by his eldest son Hugh who commissioned Detmar Blow to design a new house on another part of the estate. Sixty years later this was demolished by his son John Granville Morrison, the 1st Baron Margadale, and much of the contents sold.⁸ Fortunately the estate itself remains in the hands of the 3rd Baron Margadale, James' great-great-grandson.

James and his son Alfred were very important collectors and patrons of the arts but the dispersal of their treasures makes it extremely difficult to recreate their collections and assess their visual impact. Many paintings are now hanging in public and private collections around the world but the Morrison provenance is not always acknowledged. A number of James Morrison's paintings from Basildon and 57 (now 93) Harley Street still hang together at Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire, the property of his descendants the Dent-Brocklehursts, and the house is open to the public. However, visitors are, not surprisingly, attracted by Sudeley's connection with Henry VIII rather than the as yet little-known James Morrison.

There *is* an extensive archive, but even this raises more issues. Though James Morrison refused to 'invest' in a baronetcy, he was sufficiently proud of his achievements to begin ordering his papers in preparation for writing his memoirs: black tin trunks stuffed with correspondence, deeds, Fore Street ledgers, invoices and bills, share certificates, inventories and diaries. He paid a clerk to copy all the correspondence relating to his takeover of his father-in-law's business, and kept his own list of art purchases, including details of how much was paid at which sale. He also kept detailed lists, every six months, of his assets, so that he (and we) can track the steady accumulation of his fortune. Letters from architects, his land agents, parliamentary colleagues, partners in Fore Street, merchants and bankers in London and the United States, were preserved alphabetically, year by year.

All of this provides valuable material for plotting his public and commercial life, what he did and where he went; but personal data are missing. There

are virtually no letters between him and his wife Mary Ann or their children. Mary Ann's presence was essential to Morrison's success. Already well read when they married, she was his travelling companion, she provided constant encouragement and support, security and stability, she was his 'helpmeet' in all aspects of his life. But it was probably she, together with Charles (who inherited his father's papers), who destroyed material in the archive. Only odd exceptions have survived, accidentally or deliberately misplaced; Morrison's declaration of love for Mary Ann is such an example, tucked into a Fore Street account book.

The Morrises were obviously a devoted family. From the parliamentary campaign trail James Morrison wrote home regularly, wishing his children were with him, asking after the youngest, expressing his pleasure in receiving their letters. Orphaned at a young age, sent as an apprentice into a formidable and unknown city, he considered a home as desirable as wealth: 'a state of mind', according to John Tosh, 'as well as a physical orientation'. 'Its defining attributes are privacy and comfort, separation from the workplace and the merging of domestic space and family members into a single commanding concept ... home.'⁹ The Morrises' apparent perfect domesticity exemplifies the Victorian ideal. And as Morrison moved his family into ever grander properties he never disposed of anything, so that when his sons grew up he could give them homes from his portfolio of country houses; he also bought property in Middle Wallop, his modest birthplace in Hampshire. He was not ashamed of his roots.

The Morrises' wealth was legendary in their lifetimes; their land, their country houses and their collections of art were the subject of notice, sometimes envy. James Morrison was also respected in Parliament as a 'practising' political economist and free-trader. His knowledge of textiles, railways and investment in North America was second to none, while his son Charles was an expert on (and made a fortune out of) investing in Canada and Argentina. They provided inspiration for contemporary novelists, from Dickens, Disraeli and Thackeray to Trollope, George Eliot and Henry James, all of whom wrote of the world in which the Morrises moved and made their millions. In this study, novels are consequently used on occasion to supplement archival evidence, to flesh out the Morrises.

There is added justification in referencing fiction, as many of the novelists had personal knowledge of the family. Dickens, for example, reported on

James Morrison's political campaigning in Ipswich and stayed at Niagara Falls in the same hotel as Alfred; Disraeli sat opposite James in Parliament and made love to Henrietta Sykes of Basildon; Henry James shared acquaintances with Alfred, while George Eliot and her partner G.H. Lewes shared with Alfred his architect-designer Owen Jones, visited his London home and entertained his young wife.

In their novels excessive wealth, and the desire for it, are mostly linked to excessive and immoral behaviour. Bankers, merchants, industrialists and moneylenders appear as villains (rarely heroes). Dickens' *Dombey* is typical: 'The earth was made for Dombey & Son to trade in ... Dombey & Son had often dealt in hides but never in hearts.' Our understanding of the period, its *history*, is profoundly coloured by their invented characters. Indeed Henry James claimed 'the novel is history', and the historian Beverley Southgate has recently gone further, suggesting that fiction 'represents and actually embodies some of the widely accepted social mores and intellectual presuppositions of its age'.¹⁰

In *Self-Help* Samuel Smiles defined the 'use and abuse of money':

Some of the finest qualities of human nature are intimately related to the right use of money, such as generosity, honesty, justice, and self-sacrifice; as well as the practical virtues of economy and providence. On the other hand, there are their counterparts of avarice, fraud, injustice, and selfishness, as displayed by inordinate lovers of gain; and the vices of thriftlessness, extravagance, and improvidence, on the part of those who misuse and abuse the means entrusted to them.¹¹

While Melmotte and Merdle are guilty of the majority of Smiles' list of abuses, James Morrison's *actual* life presents a very different model, closer indeed to the 'right use of money'. He was a loving husband and father, hard-working, above all honest, a Cheeryble rather than a Dombey. Disraeli's tailor Sir Peter Vigo is perhaps the closest in contemporary fiction:

He was one who obtained influence over all with whom he came in contact, and as his business placed him in contact with various classes, but especially with the class socially most distinguished, his influence was great. ... He was neither pretentious nor servile, but simple, and with

becoming respect for others and for himself. He never took a liberty with any one, and such treatment, as is generally the case, was reciprocated.¹²

Morrison's London and country houses were palaces of art, filled with the physical evidence of his wealth and good taste; he never squandered, only increased his immense fortune, which was shared between his wife and all his surviving children: he was a model millionaire.