

Conrad Vernon Morton (1905–1972)¹

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Conrad Vernon Morton, named Walter Vernon Morton at the time of his birth on 24 October 1905, was the son of Walter Crow Morton and Nioma (later Noma) Bartholomew Morton. He was born in Fresno, California, where his parents had been life-long residents and his father had a roofing and building contractor's business. Walter Crow Morton died when Walter was still young, and in about 1917 his mother married Alva B. McCray, a friend of the family who also had been a resident of Fresno for many years. Mr. McCray was employed by the Santa Fe Railroad. The family home at Fresno included a vineyard and various gardens on the property, and so young Walter was introduced to plants at an early age. As a child, he planted and tended a small garden of his own. His mother was well known in the area for her rose garden; she grew about 130 varieties abundantly.

During his junior and senior high school years, the family lived in Berkeley, where Mrs. McCray's sister and family also resided. The climate there, more moderate than in Fresno, was better for Mrs. McCray's health. When he was in high school, Walter won a fellowship to the local Art Institute. Of all the students in the class, he was the only boy and, for this reason, he did not pursue his study of art very far at that time. After he began his professional career, however, he studied both painting and the piano diligently and mastered and practiced both arts with great pleasure for himself and his friends for the remainder of his life. He was also interested in the history of the cinema, in dramatics, and in philately. (For a more detailed account of Morton's nonbotanical interests, see J. A. Ewan, 1973, *Taxon*, 22: 271–274.)

Morton entered the University of California at Berkeley in 1924.

¹ An earlier version of this essay was issued 22 June 1973 in the *American Fern Journal*, 63(2): 25–48. The author is indebted to Mr. Morton's sister, Mrs. Howard King, for most of the details of his early years.

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At that time he changed his first name to Conrad (the legal change was made on 14 April 1926). His interests at first included the physical sciences, mathematics, astronomy, and slavic languages and literature. During the latter part of his freshman year he began a course in general botany, and in his sophomore year he studied elementary taxonomy under Prof. Willis L. Jepson. Apparently this course triggered a strong interest in taxonomic botany, for he took several more courses from Prof. Jepson, algology and mycology from Prof. Gardner, plant physiology from Prof. Holman, and cytology and genetics from Prof. Goodspeed. Morton's first botanical collections were made around Berkeley in January 1926. He held tuition scholarships at the university for the last three of his undergraduate years: a Levi Strauss Scholar in 1925-26, a Henry Morgan Holbrook Scholar in 1926-27, and a Carrie M. Jones Scholar in 1927-28. He was elected to membership in the scientific fraternity Sigma Xi and in the biological sciences fraternity Phi Sigma. In October 1926 he was inducted into the Alpha chapter (California) of Phi Beta Kappa. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree cum laude from the University of California in May 1928.

After he graduated, he was appointed a Teaching Fellow in Botany for the summer session, but he resigned to take a position as Phanerogamic Aid in the Division of Plants, United States National Museum, Smithsonian Institution. Prof. Jepson wrote a highly favorable recommendation in his behalf.

In his early years at the Smithsonian, Morton worked on flowering plants in general. His first assignment, he once told the author, was to identify some specimens from North Africa. This, in the face of scant literature and fewer specimens, was an initiation—which he surmounted. Much of his time was taken up with identification of phanerogams from the western United States, the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America. He soon took up the Gesneriaceae and Solanaceae as specialties; both became life-long interests. He spent the spring of 1933 making general collections in Oaxaca, Mexico. On this trip he fell ill with malaria, which recurred from time to time in succeeding years. In 1936 and 1941 he took collecting trips to Cuba. In addition to his research interests, he made thousands of identifications, helped to curate the herbarium, began to compile an index of the genera to the flowering plants (which was not completed), and made indices to some of the larger fern genera in the New World based on the "Index Filicum" and the "Gray Herbarium Card Index." In 1939 he was appointed Assistant Curator of Phanerogams in the Division of Plants. He also began to take post-graduate courses in botany at nearby George Washington University. Although he did not hold a master's degree, he was admitted to the doctoral program

on the strength of several lengthy scientific papers that he had published.

Having published on ferns occasionally since 1932, by the middle 1930s he began to devote more and more of his time to research on, and identification of, the ferns. This was done under the guidance of Dr. William R. Maxon, who was a fern specialist and the Curator of the Division of Plants.

After Maxon's retirement in 1946, the Division of Plants was reorganized as the Department of Botany. Morton was appointed Associate Curator of the Division of Ferns. At this time, owing to the press of official duties, he withdrew from the doctoral program at George Washington University. The following year he made extensive general collections on the island of St. Vincent and explored a newly discovered valley in the mountainous interior of the island. In 1948 he was appointed Curator of the Division of Ferns, a position he held until 1970. From 1948 to 1959 he also held the title of Acting Curator of the Division of Cryptogams. This was a period of severe staff shortages, and his role in that division did not extend beyond maintaining the collections.

From 1950 to 1954 Morton was a member of the International Botanical Congress Committee on Nomenclature. In 1951 he accompanied Dr. L. O. Williams on a field trip to Honduras. The fern specimens from this trip were to help form the basis for a fern Flora of that country, but the project remained in rough manuscript, as did a similar project on the ferns of Guatemala.

Morton realized that the greatest obstacle to preparing tropical fern floristic works was inadequate nomenclatural research. He knew that long trips to study in European herbaria would be necessary to produce adequate treatments of the ferns. He applied for, and in 1954 received, a Simon Guggenheim Foundation fellowship to study type specimens of ferns in European herbaria. The National Science Foundation awarded him grants for the same purpose in 1957 and 1963. He searched portions of the herbaria at Berlin, Brussels, Copenhagen, Edinburgh, Florence, Geneva, Hamburg, Kew, Leiden, Liverpool, London (British Museum), Oslo, Oxford, Munich, Paris, Stockholm, Utrecht, Vienna, and Zurich, and took more than 22,000 photographs, including some in his phanerogamic specialties. The extensive labels that accompany the photographs are valuable because they convey the results of Morton's painstaking research into the type status and taxonomic disposition of each specimen.

In 1956 he took a third and last field trip to Cuba. From that time on he was fully occupied with administrative, research, and identification duties. Occasionally he attended field forays sponsored by the American Fern Society. He also took several pack trips in the western

United States, but these were an extension of his interest in wilderness and its conservation and were not undertaken from a botanical standpoint. In 1961 he suffered the first of a series of heart attacks. For a decade he felt that these precluded field work. Despite his afflictions, which included the almost total loss of sight in one eye because of a detached retina, he continued to work in the herbarium and to take frequent trips to other herbaria.

From the early 1960s he worked mostly on ferns and, for a time, did little with his phanerogamic specialties. He headed the International Botanical Congress Special Committee for the Study of Superfluous Names during its period of activity in 1968 and 1969. In June 1970 he represented the Smithsonian Institution at the tercentenary celebration of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh. He greatly enjoyed a tour on which he visited gardens all over Scotland. In 1970 he was made a Senior Botanist at the Smithsonian, a position that freed him from administrative duties. He returned to his interest in the Solanaceae and began to complete a manuscript on Argentine *Solanum*. He was awarded a Smithsonian Research Foundation grant for field work and herbarium study in Argentina and spent three months there in early 1972. On his return from the field, he continued to work hard on his *Solanum* manuscript and seemed to be in better health than usual, but a few months later, on 29 July 1972, he passed away unexpectedly at his home in Washington.

Morton was an honorary life member of the American Gesneria Society and an honorary member of the American Fern Society. He served as associate editor of the *American Fern Journal* from 1941 to 1947 and from 1962 to 1972, and he was the editor-in-chief from 1948 to 1961. He is commemorated by the genera *Mortoniella* Woodson and *Mortoniiodendron* Standl., and by the following botanical names: *Asplenium mortonii* Duek, *Banisteria sprucei* var. *mortoniana* Macbr., *Besleria mortoniana* Steyerl., *Capsicum mortonii* Raymond, *Clidemia mortoniana* Standl., *Columnnea mortonii* Raymond, *Cyphomandra mortoniana* Smith & Downs, *Erigeron mortonianum* Reveal, *Eupatorium* × *mortonianum* Alain, *Gesneria mortonii* Wiehler, *Hiraea sprucei* var. *mortoniana* Macbr., *Inga mortoniana* León, *Milla mortoniana* Moore, *Niphidium mortonianum* Lellinger, *Schoenocaulon mortonii* Brinker, *Selaginella mortoniana* Crabbe & Jermy, *Tetrapteris jamesonii* var. *mortonii* Macbr. [= *T. mortonii* (Macbr.) Cuatr.], *Thelypteris mortonii* A. Reid Smith, *Tigridia mortonii* Molseed, *Topobea mortoniana* Wurdack, *Viburnum mortonianum* Standl. & Steyerl., *Witheringia mortonii* Hunziker, *Xiphopteris mortonii* Copel., and *Microgramma mortoniana* de la Sota.