
A.L. Morton and the Poetics of People's History

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Abstract

In May 1938, the path-breaking *A People's History of England* by Arthur Leslie Morton was published by Victor Gollancz as part of the Left Book Club series. It proved to be a popular work, going through many reprinting and forming the basis of the discussions of the Communist Party Historians' Group which formed in 1946 and which Morton himself chaired. This paper will discuss the work and its influence, arguing that it deserves to be rightly recognised as a classic contribution to Marxist historiography. The paper will also explore the life and wider work of Morton himself – one of the more neglected of the members of the Communist Party Historians' Group – and in particular will try and give some sense of the context in which the writing of Morton's grand narrative took place, and how and why he came to write such a powerful work. It will examine some of the key intellectual and political influences inspiring Morton, and also tentatively explore what might be called 'the poetics of people's history', some of the imaginative theoretical and literary strategies that marked Morton's work and arguably helped to inspire and shape the writings of other 'people's historians'.

Key words: A.L. Morton, *People's History of England*, CPGB, romanticism, Marxism, historiography

Introduction

Engels once wrote that the new tendency represented by Marx's thought recognised that the key to the understanding of the whole history of society lay in the historical development of labour – and 'having recognised this', the 'new tendency addressed itself by preference to the working class and here found the response which it neither sought nor

expected from officially recognised science'.¹ One testament to Engels's argument might be seen in the response to the publication in May 1938 of the path-breaking work *A People's History of England* by Arthur Leslie Morton. Published by Victor Gollancz as part of the Left Book Club series, and including fifteen maps by the socialist cartographer, cartoonist and former Labour MP for Peterborough, J.F. Horrabin, like its author *A People's History of England* never received much critical attention from professional historians, but nonetheless it proved to be a popular work. Soon after it first appeared, the left-wing writer Olaf Stapleton declared it 'a treasure ... it makes familiar historical facts display their inner nature, and take their place in a pattern that is urgently significant for us today', while the educationalist A.S. Neill (for whom Morton had taught at his progressive school Summerhill) declared that 'I think it is great ... full of facts and at the same time so clear in outline ... its unity is fine. I have never before been so gripped by a history book'.² It was republished in 1945 amid the optimistic, collectivist 'spirit of '45' by Lawrence and Wishart and remained in print, going through many reprintings over the next decades (in 1948, 1951, 1956, 1957, 1965 – with a new foreword and a slight revision, ending the story with the 1917 Russian Revolution and adding an extended bibliography – 1968, 1971, 1974, 1976, 1984 and 1989).

Along with Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946) the work formed the basis of the discussions of the Communist Party Historians' Group which had formed in 1946. This group was an outstanding constellation of Marxist intellectuals that included Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson, Rodney Hilton, Victor Kiernan, John Saville, Brian Pearce, Raphael Samuel and George Rudé. That Leslie Morton had the honour of chairing this group, and came to be seen as 'the fountainhead' of the group in the words of Willie Thompson, gives some sense of the respect his work had. For Eric Hobsbawm, Morton was 'a tall, latterly stooping figure, full of charm, tongue-tied in speech, but eloquent when he wrote his limpid prose, which carried both learning and deep commitment'.³ In 1992, Christopher Hill recalled that

Leslie never held an academic post: he was too politically active. He did not write for academic historians; he wrote for and was read by a much wider public than any of us could aspire to. But his standards were those of high scholarship, as his collected articles show. The Historians' Group in its early days spent many sessions discussing with Morton revising the first edition of *A People's History of England*, and in these discussions Leslie gave as much as he got. He taught us all something

– though not enough – of the necessity of writing comprehensively for a wide audience. He was a very great scholar and a marvellous man.⁴

Dorothy Thompson, the historian of Chartism, also remembers ‘cutting her historical teeth’ on Morton’s history. Despite Morton’s own lack of a post and profile as a professional historian, it proved genuinely ‘popular’. Harvey Kaye, writing after Morton’s death in 1987, noted that ‘though no accurate figures are available, the publishers estimate that well over one hundred thousand copies have been sold in the UK alone, and it is worth noting that in addition to thirteen translations, the book remains in print in the United States’.⁵

This paper will discuss A.L. Morton’s work and its influence, arguing that it deserves to be rightly recognised as a pioneering contribution to Marxist historiography and the classic socialist introduction to the history of England with its narrative stretching – in the words of the publishers Lawrence and Wishart – ‘from Stonehenge to the Somme’. For Christopher Hill, it was ‘The best history of England for the ordinary reader’.⁶ The paper will also explore the life and wider work of Morton himself – one of the more neglected of the members of the Communist Party Historians’ Group – and in particular will try and give some sense of the context in which the writing of Morton’s ‘grand narrative’ took place, and how and why he came to write such a powerful work. It will examine some of the key intellectual and political influences inspiring Morton, and also tentatively explore what might be called ‘the poetics of people’s history’, some of the imaginative theoretical and literary strategies that marked Morton’s work and arguably helped to inspire and shape the writings of other ‘people’s historians’. To paraphrase the scholar David Scott, it will pose the question, what is the literary-theoretical aspect of ‘People’s History’ – through what narrative or literary strategy is the effect of ‘people’s history’ produced?⁷

A.L. Morton and the writing of *A People’s History of England*

(Arthur) Leslie Morton was born on 4 July 1903 at Stanchils Farm, in Hengrave, just outside Bury St Edmunds, in West Suffolk into a generally conservative but tolerant farming family.⁸ Personally as someone who was born in Bury St Edmunds into a generally conservative but tolerant farming family, I can testify that today Bury St Edmunds looks like a fairly sleepy market town marketed as ‘the Jewel of Suffolk’ by the local tourist board, but in fact as Morton himself pointed out it was once a key site of one of the major class struggles in English history – the

Peasant's Revolt of 1381, where a former priest John Wrawe led the revolt locally.⁹ After a series of governesses at home, in 1912 a nine year old Leslie Morton attended King Edward VI Grammar School at Bury St Edmunds, cycling the four miles there and back each day. In 1918 aged fifteen he was sent to a minor public school on the south coast in East Sussex, Eastbourne College, which he detested.¹⁰ Interestingly Eric Blair, later better known as the writer George Orwell and born the same year as Morton, was also at a school he detested in Eastbourne in this period – St Cyprian's School – and Orwell denounced the brutality of the masters there in his essay 'Such, Such Were the Joys'. Again today Eastbourne is not a particularly radical place at all, but a couple of decades before Morton and Orwell arrived, Engels had lived there in his retirement for periods, and thought it his favourite place – his ashes were scattered off Beachy Head. Marx and Sidney Webb also had connections there. Morton did achieve academic success nonetheless, returning to East Anglia and entering Cambridge University in 1921 where he studied at Peterhouse College. Morton studied History in his first two years and English in his third year. Morton also joined Cambridge University Labour Club along with two others who would also later become prominent Communists, Allen Hutt and Ivor Montagu, while he would also meet Maurice Dobb, a brilliant Economics postgraduate who had joined the newly launched Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1920.¹¹ Morton slowly began to radicalise politically and in the Labour Club was in the minority siding with strikes by miners and railwaymen against their employers in the aftermath of the First World War.¹² Yet Morton was not primarily a political thinker during the early 1920s, but – like another Cambridge graduate from this period, Edward Upward, with whom Morton's life has many parallels – instead wrote poetry and his real love at this stage was English literature and the English literary tradition.¹³

After the horrors of the First World War, which had been brought to an end by the Russian Revolution and then the German Revolution before Morton could be called up, literature and culture was radicalising, and Maurice Cornforth notes that 'left wing ideas were then associated and mixed up with protests against social conventions, respectabilities and inhibitions which the war ... had done much to bring to a head, and which for free-thinking intellectuals were enshrined in new literary and artistic movements'.¹⁴ Symptomatic of the shift underway was the influence of the editor of *The Criterion*, the Anglo-American poet T.S. Eliot, who was to have a formative impact on Morton. As he later wrote in 'T.S. Eliot – A Personal View',

Of the three indisputably major poets writing in English in the twentieth century – Hardy, Yeats and Eliot, Eliot, though perhaps the least in stature, was nevertheless the most influential. And it was, I think, by my particular generation, those who were young in the 1920s ... that his influence was most deeply felt ... when in 1923, at the age of 20, I first came across *The Waste Land*, I was already a socialist, or rather, perhaps, was feeling my way, with many hesitations, towards socialism.

For young intellectuals like Morton, the impact of reading Eliot's poem was 'all the greater because of its difference from anything then current ... we found in *The Wasteland* not all that was there, but rather the things we most needed at the time and could find nowhere else'. Its title alone seemed rather apt to the situation of post-War Britain and Europe, which Morton remembers 'seemed a desperate chaos ... we indeed welcomed the October Revolution but were far from understanding its significance... we saw hunger and misery and unemployment everywhere ... Europe was a wasteland and any contrived appearance of a solution would have offended and repelled us ... Eliot's bleak pessimism was one of the things which commanded our respect'.¹⁵ In 1927, Morton published an essay on Eliot's poetry, which led to a meeting with Eliot and for the next ten years Morton contributed to Eliot's *Criterion*. Morton remembers 'the editorial policy of the *Criterion* was avowedly reactionary. Eliot's high Toryism was shared by many of his contributors ... the *Criterion's* policy was the defence of the West and of Christian values ... yet alongside all this it contained a remarkable amount of positive and evenly actively progressive writing, both critical and creative – Hugh MacDiarmid's *Second Hymn to Lenin* to give only one example'.¹⁶

On leaving Cambridge University in 1924, Morton had become a school teacher, returning to Sussex to teach at Steyning Grammar School. One of his colleagues there was Charlie Easton, who later ran a Communist Party bookshop, while he was also in touch with a local left wing poet, Victor Neuburg, and Morton helped Neuburg organise the 'poetry corner' of *Sunday Referee*.¹⁷ Though a Labour Party member, from 1925, Morton had started reading the CPGB paper the *Sunday Worker*, which would later become the *Daily Worker*, regularly, and during the General Strike of May 1926 in Britain, Morton along with most other teachers had sided with the strike, supporting local railway workers, which saw him lose his work at Steyning Grammar the next year. In 1927, Morton then returned to East Anglia, moving back to Ipswich and his parents. Here he saw an advertisement for a teacher at A.S. Neill's progressive school, Summerhill,

at Leiston near Suffolk coast, to which he applied straightaway and secured the job. From 1927-28, Morton taught at Summerhill, where he met his first wife – Bronwen ('Gwen') Jones, a fellow teacher who had been there a while and already had a son, Nicholas.¹⁸ At the end of 1928, Morton moved to London with his wife and in his own words 'bummed around', but ultimately kept a second hand bookshop near Finsbury Park. On 1 January 1929 Morton joined the CPGB.¹⁹ As Graham Stevenson notes, during this period, he was a member of the Holloway Group of Islington Communist Party, which had headquarters in a disused workshop in Andover Yard, just opposite the Hornsey Road Baths. 'Much of our work', he was to recall, 'was concentrated in the area lying in the angle of Hornsey Road and Seven Sisters Road, we canvassed all the streets in the area and tackled the Campbell Road, said to be the poorest street in the district and the one where people lived in the worst conditions'.²⁰ He recalled it as a 'hard time', noting that 'as an intellectual you kept a pretty low profile ... when I came in ... I had to spend a long time chalking in the streets and carrying the platform and doing all the menial tasks – not that I minded, I expected to do this'.²¹ He made new friends among the London left, including A.L. (Bert) Lloyd and Maurice Cornforth, while retaining his profile as a poet – publishing in *The Listener* for example, and in 1932 and 1933 he was involved in a debate with F.R. Leavis.²²

For Morton, amid the Great Depression and the growing menace of fascism in Europe, his activism in the CPGB however began to take centre stage now in his life. This was the period of the 'Third Period', when revolution was declared on the agenda, and the CPGB in this period certainly stood for the revolution. Now just over thirty years old, Morton took part in the Hunger Marches of 1934 and was the *Daily Worker* correspondent for the East Anglia contingent marching from Norwich and Norfolk, also serving on the editorial board of the paper in this period under Bill Rust and J.R. Campbell.²³ In 1934, Morton, having separated from his wife Gwen and her son Nicholas, began to work full time for the *Daily Worker* – indeed becoming its nominal Proprietor – at a time when personal liability applied in libel cases, which meant he risked being threatened with jail.²⁴ Morton now met his new partner – soon his wife – in the CPGB, Vivien, the youngest daughter of leading Communist T.A. Jackson, and they settled down in Kentish Town.²⁵

While working on the *Daily Worker*, Allen Hutt, a fellow Communist journalist and historian suggested Morton write the book that would become *A People's History of England* – a work which would fit with the new turn of the Communist movement towards building the 'People's

Front' or 'Popular Front' against fascism. In a sense then Morton was commanded to write this as a 'party duty', and as Samuel notes 'it was in line with those "March of History" pageants which the Communist Party was organising as part of its street demonstrations against fascism'.²⁶ As a writer, Morton already had a profile beyond the ranks of the CPGB, even beyond his poetry, and for example he would publish an article 'Communism and Morality' for the collection *Christianity and the Social Revolution*, edited by John Lewis and published in 1935 by Victor Gollancz.²⁷ From 1936 Morton began serious work on his book amid his other journalism and activism, travelling around England by himself to gather local colour. He went to Avebury and the Icknield Way to get a sense of the archaeology.²⁸ As Maurice Cornforth notes, 'before beginning to write, Leslie went on a solitary walking tour for several weeks, along the ancient Icknield Way, in winter [1936], to gather local colour and think things out'. Morton then began writing *A People's History of England* in early 1937, while living in Kentish Town in London where, encouraged by help from T.A. Jackson, 'he rather quickly wrote the opening chapters – whereupon he found himself "stuck" and unable to write any more':

The trouble, he decided, was living in London. The city no longer suited him, and there were too many distractions – particularly, demands of local party work. So he packed up a trunkful of books and other bare necessities of life and went to stay with his brother Max in the country. Their father had in the interim bought a large, mainly arable, farm – Paine's Manor, at Pentlow, a tiny straggling village on the Essex-Suffolk border, seven or eight miles from Sudbury in Suffolk. Max was now the farmer-in-chief, with the old man in part-time residence to give advice and help. So here Leslie enjoyed a spell of rural seclusion until the history was complete to the First World War ... the book was finished at the end of 1937, and published by the Left Book Club in mid-1938.²⁹

Some of the local colour, detail and history of East Anglia finds its way into the work, and so for example when describing the emergence of the textile industry in the fifteenth century, Morton wrote that 'this textile industry developed first in East Anglia, around Norwich and in the towns and villages of the Stour valley, where the tall Perpendicular churches and the many windowed houses of the rich clothiers remain as evidence of a peculiar and long departed prosperity'.³⁰

A People's History of England

A People's History of England was then written at speed, in about twelve months, and at a time of urgency and political crisis. But it is this sense of urgency and the underlying anti-fascist theme of the work – given the existence of the Nazi regime in Germany and the fascist regime in Italy, and with the Battle of Cable Street in Britain and the Spanish Civil War all underway – that gives it much of its power as a literary text. Morton writes in a clear accessible manner but also with a partisan flair, with a determination to win over a mass popular audience to the cause, and to taking sides in the struggle underway, in the understanding that there is a race for time on. Harvey Kaye quotes a typical passage from Morton's analysis of the Hundred Years War, where Morton wrote that 'It was a situation characteristic of an age on the edge of a great social transformation and can be paralleled by the equally blind and suicidal impulse driving the bourgeoisie today towards war and Fascism'.³¹ After noting the Spanish Civil War, which he described as 'the war of Germany and Italy upon the Spanish people', Morton, writing in October 1937, ended his work with a rallying cry for a Popular Front against the menace:

The world stands in the shadow of a war more terrible than that of 1914. If war comes the British Government must bear a heavy share of the responsibility. It is not even now too late for the danger to be averted if the British people, and above all the working people who form the overwhelming majority of the population and who are always the worst sufferers in any war, are able to unite in sufficient strength to force the Government to stop encouraging aggression and take their stand with France and the Soviet Union for world peace.³²

A common analysis of Morton's work therefore often sees it as merely a historical representation of the Communist International's policy of the Popular Front, which subjugated anti-imperialism and revolutionary politics to a cross-class collaborationist nationalism designed to rally British middle class liberals and even Tories to the cause of anti-fascism, and ultimately the British state towards a military alliance with the Soviet Union. Raphael Samuel for example suggests as much when he talks of 'Morton's almost Tory sense of lineage' and writes that

Originating in a directive of the Comintern, and the change of line in 1935 – from the politics of revolution to that of the 'broad democratic

alliance' – it took on a life of its own, feeding on 'Little Englandism' and cultural nationalism and drawing on older traditions of religious and political dissent.³³

Yet while Morton was clearly politically committed to this new-fangled project, his historical skills ensured that he was no mere propagandist, and personally I have yet to detect any 'Little Englandism' or 'cultural nationalism' within the work, let alone anything resembling 'Tory' style politics.³⁴ Harvey Kaye's choice of title for his chapter on Morton in his collection on various Communist historians, *The Education of Desire*, 'Our Island Story', implies that Morton perhaps simply told the story of England isolated from questions relating to the British Empire, just as the Communist Party of Great Britain side-lined anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism in order to prioritise unity against fascism. Yet Kaye himself in this chapter thought it 'significant' that 'Morton regularly situates English history in the English history in the European and international contexts in which its leaders and their followers played such central roles in the making of the modern world'.³⁵ More than this, Morton's own training as a Communist during the 'Third Period' when anti-imperialism was to the fore, and his close relationship to his father in law and leading Communist intellectual T.A. Jackson – author of various anti-imperialist works including *The British Empire* (1922) and later *Ireland Her Own* (1946) – while conceiving and writing the work, meant that the British Empire and its crimes were unlikely to be forgotten.³⁶ Indeed, not only did Morton mention for example the disastrous intervention of the British in the West Indies at the time of the Haitian Revolution, he devoted a whole chapter of the alleged 'island story' to 'Colonial Expansion' in India, Canada, Australia, Egypt and Tropical and South Africa.³⁷ Indeed, in many ways it stands as much as being 'A People's History of the World', as just of England, and it is telling that its anti-imperialist dynamic meant it was recognised as a valuable contribution by *International African Opinion*, the militant Pan-Africanist journal linked to the International African Service Bureau. As the reviewer William Harrison – a black American student at the LSE – put it, it was a 'history for the million'.

A.L. Morton's *A People's History of England* (Gollancz, 8/6) is the first popular survey of English history undertaken from the point of view of historical materialism. The author enters no claims about being an exact scholar, but his book contains no glaring inaccuracies; it is full of a vigorous spirit, re-interpreting history along the lines of

Marxism-Leninism. Perhaps the latter portion is inevitably less satisfactory than the parts which deal with more hoary and moss-covered historical phenomena, such as feudalism and mercantilism, though the treatment of imperialism is good. The book states succinctly the main features of imperialist expansion during the epoch of finance-capitalism, indicating the true role of buccaneers of British capital like Cecil Rhodes in their spoliation of the territories of Africans and peoples of African descent.³⁸

Morton's work is often held up as the pioneering Marxist overview of English history – arguably that honour belongs to Mark Starr's booklet *A Worker Looks At History* (1917) – and it is interesting in a sense to contrast the two titles, alongside other comparable works to Starr's such as Alf Barton's *A World History for the Workers: A story of man's doings from the dawn of time, from the standpoint of the disinherited* (1926), with Starr and Barton explicit that they were writing 'from the standpoint of the proletariat'. Yet Morton's title was also an allusion to, and a response to, a famous work of English history, John Richard Green's *Short History of the English People* (1874) – a work much respected by Morton's father. J.R. Green – who had worked alongside Morton's hero William Morris in the 1870s in the anti-imperialist Eastern Question Association – offered a radical liberal take on the nationalist rewriting of national histories that marked the nineteenth century in general. As Green noted in his preface, 'the aim of the following work is defined by its title; it is a history not of English Kings or English Conquests, but of the English People'. As Raphael Samuel has noted, Green

preached a kind of democratic evolutionary gospel, believing that great men counted for comparatively little in the story of the nation and that the 'real life' of the English lay in 'their ceaseless, sober, struggle with oppression, their steady, unwearied battle for self-government'.³⁹

There is much in this democratic ethos which was embraced by Morton, who was clearly inspired by Green. Morton notes for example at one point how the secret diplomacy of the British state in the early twentieth century in the run up to the First World War was 'a striking example of the way in which a bureaucratic machine in a modern capitalist State becomes independent of the democratic institutions which are supposed to control it'.⁴⁰ Yet in contrast to Green, Morton's title, like Starr's and Barton's, rather alluded to a perspective on history written from the standpoint of the

oppressed and exploited themselves – a ‘People’s History’ – not a History of the People. Yet whether we have to thank the likes of Marx and Engels, Starr and Barton, the wider Communist turn to the ‘People’s Front’ or Morton’s individual genius for the title and term ‘People’s History’, it was a brilliant shift which played its part in the wider transformation of history underway towards a concern with ‘history from below’.

The poetics of ‘People’s History’

The shift in emphasis represented not only a kind of revolution in history – but also in the literary and theoretical aspects of the writing – and with respect to the wider ‘poetics’ of ‘People’s History’, there is a revolutionary democratic kernel at the very heart of the matter. Morton himself wrote about how as the Levellers emerged as a political force – indeed the world’s first modern political party – during the English Revolution, an event he placed centre stage in his narrative on English history, there also emerged what he would call ‘the Leveller style’. The relevant passage is worth quoting at length – and the gendered language notwithstanding – it still stands up extremely well today:

[The Levellers] were civilised in a new way. Whatever their limitations, they had reached a conception of man and his place in society, of the role of persuasion and the power of the written and spoken word, that was more accurate, more nearly a reflective of objective reality, than any other group of their time in any country. They wrote effectively not merely because they were exceptionally gifted or technically well equipped, though this can fairly be claimed at least for Overton and Walwyn, but because they wrote with a purpose clearly understood and deeply felt, and for an audience which they knew to be close and immediately responsive. These badly printed pamphlets, often printed illegally on little back-street presses, strike home today as they did three hundred years ago because they are warm, generous and candid, because their authors knew exactly what they wanted to say and went to their work without hesitation or doubt or any pretension to the grand style. They stand near the head of one of the great streams of English prose, the stream which later was to include such mighty figures as Bunyan, Defoe, Paine, Cobbett and Shaw. They can fairly claim to be the fathers of the tradition of plain English writing dedicated to the service of the plain man.⁴¹

The most successful works of 'People's History' after Morton's work – such as Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980) or Chris Harman's *A People's History of the World* (1999) – are all imbued with this spirit in that 'their authors knew exactly what they wanted to say and went to their work without hesitation or doubt or any pretension to the grand style'.⁴²

Sadly neither the Levellers themselves, nor Bunyan, Defoe, Paine, Cobbett and Shaw ever succeeded in writing a grand narrative of 'people's history', but I think when it comes to the 'poetics' of 'People's history' alongside the kernel of revolutionary democracy and 'plain English writing' it is critical to have a powerful imaginative element. There may not be any 'pretension to the grand style' with Morton's *A People's History of England*, but I think there is a style nonetheless – and one that goes beyond 'the Leveller style' and relates to Romanticism. The great Romantic writers and poets like Shelley (whose 'Mask of Anarchy' Morton referenced in *A People's History of England*) lived at a critical time of revolution, when democracy was struggling to be born.⁴³ David Scott notes 'the Romantics' (almost defining) preoccupation were concerned with the peculiar mimetic powers of the imagination, its expansive capacity to transcend time and distance and to open itself to a selfless and sympathetic connection with the suffering and struggles of others', and so the arising relation between 'imaginative identification and historical reconstruction' is surely a critical theoretical and literary element of what makes up the 'poetics' of the best forms of 'people's history'.⁴⁴ 'People's History' in a sense then represents a return to the kind of historical literature written in the Romantic period, before the rise of History as an academic discipline in the mid-nineteenth century.

Indeed, if one is looking for the origins of 'People's History' it is arguably necessary to go back to the period in the aftermath of the Great French Revolution. The novelist Sir Walter Scott himself had experienced the tumult of the revolutionary wave of 1789-1815, and as the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács noted in *The Historical Novel* (1937), Scott's vision of history was therefore one of 'an uninterrupted series of such revolutionary crises'. As Lukács put it, 'The important thing' for Scott in his historical novels was 'to lay bare those vast, heroic, human potentialities which are always latently present in the people and which, on each big occasion, with every deep disturbance of the social or even the more personal life, emerge "suddenly", with colossal force, to the surface'.⁴⁵ Anyone, whether a revolutionary or a reactionary like Scott, who had experienced living through the period 1789-1815 as Scott had done, would

have found it difficult to imagine the history of humanity as an essentially unchanging process, conflict and crisis free.

Indeed, in a fundamental sense, the collective experience of the Great French Revolution gave birth to not just 'People's History' but the discipline of 'History' itself as a science out of literature, in what Engels called the 'triumph of realism'.⁴⁶ If the earthquake which had just shaken the *ancien régime* to its very foundations was to be explained and understood, then a new approach to explain change in society was necessary. In the 1820s, pioneering French liberal historians like Augustin Thierry (1795-1856), Adolphe Thiers (1797-1877), François Guizot (1787-1874) and François Mignet (1796-1884) brought some order to the inspired frenzy of revolution. To defend the legitimacy of the democratic gains of the French Revolution, they portrayed the rise to power of the 'Third Estate' in 1789 as the rational and inevitable triumph of the productive classes over the privileged and corrupt. In passionately championing the upheaval as a *bourgeois* revolution, these liberal historians put class, and class struggle, at the centre of historical analysis in a meaningful way for the very first time, and their new materialist analysis now suggested that the whole history of civilisation needed to be completely written afresh.⁴⁷ Thierry called for a 'new history' to replace the traditional dynastic focus on Kings and their courts, a popular history that was 'alive' instead of accounts of the past which were not only 'cold and monotonous' but also 'false and contrived'.⁴⁸ The French Revolution, Thierry noted, has 'taught us to understand the revolution of the Middle Ages; to discern the fundamental character of things beneath the letters of the chronicles', and declared that politically identifying with the collective struggles of the people 'suggests insights, divinations, sometimes even leaps of genius' to the historian, discoveries 'which disinterested scholarship and a purely zealous love of truth would not have led'.⁴⁹ After the 1830 Revolution in France, which saw the rise of Liberalism (and indeed liberals like Thiers and Guizot themselves) to power, it fell to more radical French historians like Jules Michelet (1798-1874) and Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869), and then the first socialist historians like Louis Blanc (1811-82), to now defend the spirit of the Great French Revolution.

No wonder that Engels noted that Marx had a 'particular predilection' for French history. Yet after the wave of revolution across Europe in 1848, and particularly the workers' uprising in Paris in June 1848, which baffled the likes of even the most radical historians like Michelet, it was increasingly left to the authors of *The Communist Manifesto* and then

socialist historians inspired by Marxism to defend the spirit of revolution in a partisan manner and the analysis of class and class struggle in history. In the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions, Marx wrote his *Class Struggles in France*, and the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* while Engels contributed *The Peasant War in Germany*. Marx's epic account of the Paris Commune of 1871, *The Civil War in France* was another outstanding demonstration of his view of history.

Morton's audacity was to apply Marx's framework to the whole of English history at a level of sophistication that had never before been attempted, but without his love of poetry and imaginative literature, it is difficult to imagine that he would have been able to either envisage or succeed in writing such a fine 'grand narrative', chronologically ranging over time from prehistoric times up to the post-First World War period and imbued with this Romantic 'selfless and sympathetic connection with the suffering and struggles of others'. As well as the tradition of the Levellers, Bunyan, Defoe, Paine, Cobbett and Shaw it also then stands in the tradition of something like Jules Michelet's epic *History of the French Revolution* as well as epic works of the Marxist tradition such as Leon Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*.⁵⁰ One obvious other inspiration for Morton among this trend of writing would be William Morris, who in E.P. Thompson's phrase made the transition from 'Romantic to Revolutionary', and whose historical imagination was very rich and profound. In 1934 Morton would declare William Morris 'the greatest English socialist', and it is telling that *A People's History of England* begins with an epigraph from Morris, 'Ill would Change be at Whiles, were it not for the Change beyond the Change'.⁵¹ It is then not surprising, as Raphael Samuel once noted, that Morton 'carried his writerly pre-occupations into history, and his best work in history is literary criticism of a high order'.⁵²

Finally, I think one can also clearly see this Romantic element come through in Morton's own poetry – which often unsurprisingly had explicitly political themes (one was called simply 'Fascism', and declared 'death today is the jackboot and the broken face turning away' – and concluded by noting 'there is this gain: That fist and thought, growing together to an iron strength Must now tame death').⁵³ One theme that emerges from his poetry is a Romantic concern with nature, the countryside and the idea of what William Wordsworth in his 1802 sonnet 'To Toussaint Louverture' called the 'breathing of the common wind'. So in Morton's poem 'Brilliant Wind', he counterpoises reason to romance, and while quoting Marx and Engels also talks of 'the classless wind':

Remain romantic for some moments yet
Let reason
Wait for the sun.

We have a world to win
And chains to file,
But for this night
Our heels are feathered,
Are not pinioned. This night
We walk secure in a high, leaf-hung path
This night our feet
Are feathered by the abundant,
The classless wind.⁵⁴

In his poem 'Work', Morton again declared that 'Love and philosophy, anger and delight, these are weapons with which I fight' – so putting emotional qualities on a par with reason ('philosophy'). As the poem concludes 'Let no man hurry me, no man delay, I tunnel ceaselessly towards day' – one thinks here of Marx's metaphor of revolution as the 'mole of history' tunnelling away.⁵⁵ In a very personal poem 'So I became ...', Morton remembered a phrase told to him by his father 'travellers must share and share' while he said dividing apples and cake up on a long drive in a trap to buy a calf in a neighbouring village.

The word endured
Was overlaid with notions of other kinds
Making one's way and privilege of class
With self esteem and rights ...
But endured

The word grew strong and mated with other words.
Justice fair dealing
Grew tall in innocence
Over the world's wall.

The mills spun sunlight
Out of a fleecy sky.
I dreamed no other.

Yet after his dreamy rural idyll where everything was shared collectively

– the idea of ‘the commons’ – suddenly Morton has to come face to face with the harsh reality of the modern world, a world created by enclosure acts, industrialised and very far from his childhood imaginings.

Till I awoke. And a cold dry
 Wind and a smoke black
 World filled with bent backs
 And upright chimneys a world
 Where words meant
 Nothing and justice did not run
 Outside four walls*

Morton though holds fast to his image of the past, and adapts as best he can to defend the old collectivist ‘traveller’ values of sharing in this new harsh competitive degrading alienated environment.

Talk of justice in a new tongue
 Caught the low flame. A Traveller's
 Justice. Justice dividing. True
 Warfaring talk. My father's voice
 Dividing the whole world like the last apple
 On the Dalham road.

So I became
 What ever I now am.^{56*}

In tracing his own shift from his father's farm in rural Suffolk to Communist politics in the sprawling metropolis of London, in a sense Morton was exploring in miniature the great theme of his *A People's History of England*, and the wider shift towards urbanisation and industrialisation that followed the English Revolution.

This is not the place to assess Morton's later work, but a brief summary may suffice. After working full time as the Eastern Counties organiser for the CP during 1940, he served out the rest of the war from 1941 as a lance bombardier in the Royal Artillery, stationed on the Isle of Sheppey. For a period after the war, Morton was elected a Communist councillor back in Leiston, and then from 1950 A.L. Morton and Vivien settled in a quiet cottage originally built in 1190, the Old Chapel, Snow Hill, Clare, in Suffolk, maintaining their party commitments and activity locally from this unlikely outpost.⁵⁷ Raphael Samuel captures Morton the ‘Romantic’ here in this setting well:

Like Morris he practiced his own version of Simple Life-ism, biking everywhere and making do with minimal means. By force of necessity as well as choice (he was always hard up), he lived in some sort as an exile from the modern world. His home was a twelfth-century chapel, bought in 1950 with the help of a small annuity. It was famous among visiting comrades for its cold. Like William Morris at the Red House, he found nothing he could bear to put in it. 'For a long time Leslie refused to let the place be desecrated by such modern inventions as a ... water heater, refrigerator or telephone' ... One entered through a low Norman arch and found oneself entombed in wall upon wall of floor-to-ceiling books ...⁵⁸

In the winter of 1954/55, Morton along with other leading members of the CP Historians' Group Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm and Robert Browning were invited to Moscow to discuss with academics based at the Soviet Academy of Sciences.⁵⁹ Amid the crisis of 1956, unlike most members of the CP Historians' Group, Morton stayed loyal to the Communist Party (perhaps for similar reasons that Eric Hobsbawm, who had also joined the party in the heady 'Third Period', did). As a prolific independent historian and writer he steadily established a reputation for his work on the Levellers, 'the world of the Ranters', Robert Owen, William Blake and William Morris and his 1952 study *The English Utopia*, while he was also associated with Workers Educational Association locally and Suffolk Institute for Archaeology. In 1975 he was awarded an honorary doctorate from University of Rostock in East Germany, which now has his papers. Perhaps my favourite story about Morton relates to the time in 1950 he tried to make Communist propaganda to the farm workers in the little village on the Essex-Suffolk border in which I grew up, Belchamp Walter. I will end with this quote from the *Suffolk and Essex Free Press*, which shows Morton's heroic dedication in the face of adversity to trying to spread socialist ideas to even the most obscure rural backwater of his beloved England.

Rotten eggs were still floating in the pond at Belchamp Walter, in Essex, after attempts to break up a Communist Party meeting broke on the last Sunday evening in August. Morton was thrown from the platform onto the road and the local paper claimed that it was only police action in stopping the meeting that prevented serious violence emerging.

The assailant, one Mr F. Pearson, found a leaflet advertising the meeting, which had been slipped under the door of his house at North

Waver. Pearson showed the paper to his friend Archie Cameron of Crows Farm who declared it has got to be stopped, so with Mick and Jim Butler they rallied 20 supporters and went to the pond where the meeting was held. When Morton and his comrades arrived, the speaker stood on the lowered boot of a car. Archie Cameron walked up to him and grabbed him by the hand and laid him out with a punch so that he fell on his back in the road. Max Morton, A.L. Morton's brother (of Paines Manor, Pentlow) rushed up to help but was stopped by Fred Pearson. A.L. Morton gamely resumed his place on his 'platform' and tried to begin again when the police advised them to end the meeting.⁶⁰

I would like to thank Lucy Munby and June Cohen, as well as the organisers and participants of the 'People's History?' conference in Norwich, February 2020, where this paper was first presented.

Notes

1. Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/ch04.htm>.
2. Quotes from the dustcover of the first American edition of A.L. Morton, *A People's History of England*, New York, 1938.
3. Eric Hobsbawm, 'A.L. Morton', *The Guardian*, 24 October 1987.
4. Christopher Hill, 'Foreword', in Harvey J. Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the writing of history*, New York, 1992, px. As Hill continued, 'Since Morton's *People's History* there has been much innovative work on history from below, on women's history, and on the history of empire. It will be a big job to synthesize this material into a new narrative than non-professionals will read. But ... it must be done', Hill, 'Foreword', pxi.
5. Harvey J. Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the writing of history*, New York, 1992, pp118, 120.
6. Quote from the cover of the 1989 Lawrence and Wishart edition of *A People's History of England*.
7. See David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* Durham, NC, 2004.
8. He had two younger siblings, Kathleen and Max Maurice Cornforth, 'A.L. Morton – Portrait of a Marxist historian', in Maurice Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and Their Causes: Essays in Honour of A.L. Morton*, London, 1978, p7; Raphael Samuel, 'A Rebel and his lineage', in Margot Heinemann and Willie Thompson (eds), *History and the Imagination: Selected Writings of A.L. Morton*, London, 1990; Graham Stevenson, 'A.L. Morton', 2008, online at <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2008/09/19/a-l-morton/>; Stevenson's

piece draws on biographical information in the *Morning Star*, 24 October 1987 and 26 October 1987. I am also grateful for biographical details in this essay to June Cohen, and to a talk given by Willie Thompson on Morton at the Socialist History Society conference to celebrate Bill Moore, held at the Working Class Movement Library, Salford on 8 October 2005. As Thompson noted, Morton's father Arthur Spence Morton, a Yorkshire man, was a 'working' tenant farmer who rented the farm in 1902, after marrying Mary Hannah Lampray. But though conservative, his father was influenced by J.R. Green's, *Short History of the English People*, and encouraged the writing of Leslie Morton's, *A People's History of England*. A.L. Morton describes how 'a family legend' whom his mother had known, and who he had become fascinated by as a boy, was General G.H. de M. Plantagenet-Harrison (the pseudonym of genealogist James Phillippe), who Morton described as 'a remarkable adventurer, a great Victorian eccentric, the author of *The History of Yorkshire* and a scholar'. See A.L. Morton, 'The Hero as Genealogist: General Plantagenet-Harrison', *The Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, XL (1961), pp351-370.

9. A.L. Morton, *When the People Arose: The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, London, 1981, p26; For a recent account, see Martin Empson, *'Kill all the Gentlemen' Class struggle and change in the English countryside*, London, 2018, pp54-56.
10. Cornforth, 'A.L. Morton', p8.
11. *Ibid.*, p8; Stevenson, 'A.L. Morton', Thompson, 'A.L. Morton'.
12. Cornforth, 'A.L. Morton', p8.
13. The writer Edward Upward (1903-2009), was from Essex in East Anglia, was sent to public school, studied History and English at Cambridge, became a teacher in the 1920s and joined the Communist Party in 1934 after several years of being a 'fellow traveller'. Many autobiographical aspects of Upward's literary trilogy, *The Spiral Ascent*, therefore help illuminate Morton's life, though Upward was to break with the CPGB in 1948. For a later piece by Morton on Shakespeare, see A.L. Morton, 'Shakespeare's Idea of History', *Our History*, 33 (1964).
14. Cornforth, 'A.L. Morton', p8.
15. A.L. Morton, 'T.S. Eliot – A Personal View', in Margot Heinemann and Willie Thompson (eds), *History and the Imagination: Selected Writings of A.L. Morton*, London, 1990, pp183-185.
16. Morton, 'T.S. Eliot', p190. As an aside, the Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James too captured something of the contradictions of Eliot, in his comment that 'he is of special value to me in that in him I find more often than elsewhere, and beautifully and precisely stated, things to which I am completely opposed', C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, London, 1969, p65.
17. Cornforth, 'A.L. Morton', p9.
18. Thompson, 'A.L. Morton'.
19. John Saville, 'People's Historian', *Marxism Today*, December, 1987.

20. A.L. Morton, Letter to *History Workshop*, Autumn 1980; Stevenson 'A.L. Morton', Cornforth, 'A.L. Morton', pp9-10.
21. Morton cited in Steve Parsons, 'Communism in the professions: the organisation of the British Communist Party among professional workers 1933-1956', PhD, University of Warwick, 1990, p81, quoted in Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society, 1920-1991*, London, 2007, p80.
22. Stevenson, 'A.L. Morton'. On his poems in *The Listener*, see for example, A.L. Morton, 'Listen in the Dark', *Listener*, 25 January 1933 and 'The Pond My Mind', *Listener*, 21 June 1933.
23. Stevenson, 'A.L. Morton'.
24. Cornforth, 'A.L. Morton', p10. See for example Morton's review of a book on Edward VII, *Daily Worker*, 9 August 1933 and his review of Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Spartacus* in *Daily Worker*, 27 September 1933.
25. Cornforth, 'A.L. Morton', p12. On Jackson, see T.A. Jackson, *Solo Trumpet; Some Memories of Socialist Agitation and Propaganda*, London, 1953. Vivien Morton and Stuart Macintyre, 'T.A. Jackson: a centenary appreciation', *Our History*, 73 (1979), and A.L. Morton's appreciation, republished in *History and the Imagination*.
26. Raphael Samuel, 'A Rebel and his lineage', in Heinemann and Thompson (eds), *History and the Imagination*, p20.
27. Cornforth, 'A.L. Morton', p12. A.L. Morton would also review for *The Listener*, see for example his (damning) review of *A Popular History of Witchcraft* by Montague Summers, A.L. Morton, 'Satan's Brood', *The Listener*, 28 April 1937.
28. Samuel, 'A Rebel and his lineage', p20.
29. Cornforth, 'A.L. Morton', p13. *A People's History of England* was dedicated 'to my father who has helped more than he imagines'.
30. A.L. Morton, *A People's History of England*, London, 1938, p148.
31. Kaye, *The Education of Desire*, p121.
32. Morton, *A People's History of England*, pp526-527.
33. Samuel, 'A Rebel and His Lineage', p23.
34. Some of Morton's later writings are certainly open to these charges though, from his unqualified defence of Charlotte Brontë to perhaps the most egregious example of Morton's 'Little Englandism', his 1953 pamphlet *Get Out!*, published by Ipswich Communist Party. Here Morton did not simply attack the new American bases springing up around East Anglia on the grounds of anti-imperialism but decried how 'the so-called American way of life breeds evil', claiming that US bases were 'plague centres' that 'spread corruption and moral degradation among our young people', A.L. Morton, *Get Out! An attack on the American bases*, Colchester, 1953, pp3-4, 7-11.
35. Kaye, *The Education of Desire*, p118.

36. T.A. Jackson, *The British Empire*, 1922, online at <https://www.britishempire.co.uk/library/britishempirejackson.pdf>
37. Morton, *A People's History of England*, 1938, pp344, 467.
38. See the review of Morton's *A People's History of England* in *International African Opinion*, 1, 3 (September 1938).
39. Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980: Part One', *New Left Review*, I/120 (1980), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/I120/articles/raphael-samuel-british-marxist-historians-1880-1980-part-I>; Samuel notes Green's radical-democratic work inspired many English Marxists.
40. Morton, *A People's History of England*, pp486-487.
41. A.L. Morton, 'The Leveller Style', in Heinemann and Thompson (eds), *History and the Imagination*, pp103-104. For more on Morton on the Levellers, see A.L. Morton, 'Leveller democracy – fact or myth?', *Our History*, 51 (1968) and A.L. Morton (ed.), *Freedom in Arms: A Selection of Leveller Writings*, London, 1975.
42. Harman's title was explicitly inspired by Morton's work.
43. Morton, *A People's History of England*, p349.
44. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, p24.
45. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, Harmondsworth, 1969, pp56-57, 70.
46. *Ibid.*, p59.
47. Marx praised Thierry as 'the father of the "class struggle" in French historiography'. See Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature*, London, 1990, p102.
48. Ann Rigney, *The rhetoric of historical representation*, Cambridge, 1990, p1.
49. Gossman, *Between History and Literature*, p96.
50. Morton quotes at one point the French Romantic historian Jules Michelet, author of the epic *History of the French Revolution*, noting that witchcraft 'existed through the Middle Ages as a secret religion of the exploited masses', and 'the French historian Michelet [sic] declares that "the medieval peasant would have burst but for his hope in the Devil"'. Morton, *A People's History of England*, p141.
51. Thompson, 'A.L. Morton'. Morton would become a founder member of the William Morris Society and publish *Three Works by William Morris* (1968) and *Political Writings of William Morris* (1972), both of which were widely translated.
52. Samuel, 'A Rebel and his lineage', p20.
53. A.L. Morton, *Collected Poems*, London, 1976, p48.
54. Morton, *Collected Poems*, p16. See also 'The Wind in the Clouds', (p20).
55. Morton, *Collected Poems*, p49.
56. *Ibid.*, p50.
57. For the history of Leiston Communist Party, see Alasdair Ross, 'Leiston – "Suffolk's Little Moscow"', <http://alasdairross.blogspot.com/2010/08/leiston-suffolks-little-moscow.html>

58. Samuel, 'A Rebel and His Lineage', p23. June Cohen confirmed to me how A.L. Morton used to cycle around the local area with a knapsack with ham in it. She also noted Samuel's 'poetic licence' about the Old Chapel, for 'the front door was quite ordinary, but the back door, into the garden and the outhouse /extension bathroom, was a Norman doorway surmounted by a Gothic arch. The Old Chapel once featured in a glossy magazine as the oldest inhabited house in Suffolk. Leslie and Vivien were always so welcoming and hospitable. For probably twenty years they happily hosted our East Anglia Communist Party Summer Day School and Picnic, guest speakers often staying for the weekend. Additionally at Party meetings one often met visiting writers or comrades from abroad. We'd sit in Leslie's good library, usually by a roaring fire in the inglenook'. June Cohen, personal communication, 3 May 2020.
59. See the account of this trip in Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, London, 2019.
60. *Suffolk & Essex Free Press*, 29 August 1950. Cutting spotted by Michael Walker and republished in Graham Stevenson, 'A.L. Morton'. My father bought Crows Farm off Archie Cameron, and this was the home in which I grew up. Max Morton was elected as a Communist councillor to Pentlow parish Council in the early 1960s. He wrote regularly for the Communist journal the *Country Standard* (edited by Wilf Page). Others in the network of Communists in East Anglia in the 1960s included Jack Lindsay (at Castle Hedingham), Margot Heinemann, A.L. (Bert) Lloyd and Ivor Montagu. Interview with June Cohen, 20 October 2006.