A. L. Morton

Author: James Crossley
Published: 12th February 2025
Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Introduction

Arthur Leslie Morton (1903–1987) was a pioneer in the historical and critical study of apocalyptic and millenarian movements, particularly in England. Where his contemporary Norman Cohn represented an influential 'liberal' scholarly reading of millenarianism as having a malign political influence, Morton represented a competing tendency from a Marxist perspective which offered a more positive (though not uncritical) evaluation of its long-term influence. Morton's early work tended to criticise certain radical movements and individuals for making unrealistic demands ahead of their time. However, after the Second World War, he stressed both the progressive and reactionary elements in such movements and their longer-term influence on English political thought. Morton saw emancipatory potential in pre-modern millenarian movements, which was absorbed into and transformed by socialist and communist movements. Yet in certain circumstances, such as the English Revolution, Morton saw the turn to millenarianism as an indication of the failure of the revolution and a turn to fantastical solutions as a sign of desperation.

Underpinning almost everything Morton wrote was a Marxist understanding of history and the transformation of the dominant modes of production, particularly from feudalism to capitalism and the expected transformation to socialism. Morton sought to show how individuals, movements, and societies and their cultural outputs function in these contexts. Morton himself can be understood in secularised millenarian terms. As a conventional Communist of his time, Morton argued that when workers seized power and controlled the state, human nature and social relations would begin to be transformed. Through ongoing struggle, they would no longer be shaped by exploitation, greed, and competition typical under capitalism and would move towards being shaped by a society where everyone accessed whatever goods and services they may need. However, for human nature and social relations to get to this stage, workers first needed to control the state, consolidate power, and begin the transformation in the face of the powerful capitalist threat. Morton believed that this process was underway in the Soviet Union and socialist countries, while in Britain the new system was starting to grow out of the old but still required a moment or period of revolutionary transformation.

Downloaded: 28-02-2025

Biography

Morton was born in 1903 at Stanchils Farm near Bury St Edmunds, United Kingdom. After being tutored at home, he attended King Edward VI Grammar School at Bury St Edmunds, which had a typical royalist, Anglican, and imperial ambience, with an Officer Training Corps established in 1908. But there were also less orthodox influences on Morton. Morton recalled his excitement and familiarity with the translation of *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (the verse of the so-called 'Astronomer-Poet of Persia') by King Edward alumnus Edward Fitzgerald (1809–1883). He retained an interest in understanding unconventional religious beliefs throughout his life.

When he was 15, Morton was sent to Eastbourne College on the south coast of England. The First World War intensified the militaristic and imperialist interests of the college, and an interest in the role of warfare in English history became a recurring feature of Morton's scholarship. Morton's politics were also moving leftward around this time. Among the many books he was reading, Jack London's *The Iron Heel* was the one he viewed as life-changing for a seventeen-year-old coming to terms with socialist ideas. Soon after, he moved on to William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, followed by Marx and Lenin.

Morton then studied History and English at the University of Cambridge (1921–1924). His developing political ideas flourished in an environment where they could be discussed more openly (though still controversially) in light of the Russian Revolution and growing labour militancy. He joined the Cambridge University Labour Club and became involved in (what would become) influential socialist circles. While Morton was at Cambridge, T. S. Eliot published 'The Waste Land' (1922), an account of civilisational collapse that influenced Morton's socialism (and other socialists), despite Eliot moving in the opposite political direction. Morton increasingly saw the revolutionary transformation associated with the Soviet Union as the answer to the crisis of capitalism outlined by Eliot.

After Cambridge, Morton took up a teaching post in 1924 at the grammar school in Steyning, a conservative market town on the south coast. Despite disliking his time in Steyning, he befriended a former close follower of the occultist Aleister Crowley: the eccentric poet, publisher, and bohemian Victor Neuburg (aka 'Vickybird'). While Morton was not a believer in the world of magic, he discussed such issues with Neuburg and fostered a Marxist reading of the history of magic, witchcraft, and the evolution of religion in minor publications in the 1920s and 1930s (e.g., Morton 1927, 1930, 1935, 1938b). The pair also discussed English radical history, and it was through Neuburg that Morton developed his interest in the apocalyptically minded English radical William Blake (1757–1827).

After supporting the General Strike of 1926, Morton was made redundant from Steyning Grammar School. He moved closer to home and soon began to work at A. S. Neill's progressive 'free school,' Summerhill, in Leiston. Morton was impressed by the school's resistance to teaching children prevailing capitalist values. Here, Morton met his first wife, Bronwen Jones, and after marrying in 1928, they moved to London as members of the Communist Party of Great Britain. By 1934, the couple split, and Morton settled down with (and later married) Vivien Jackson, daughter of the working-class autodidact and Communist intellectual T. A. Jackson.

In 1930s London, Morton was engaged in menial work for the Communist Party, which he saw as essential training for its intellectuals and was duly monitored by the secret services. He also published reviews and

Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Downloaded: 28-02-2025

articles on history, literature, and politics in the *Daily Worker* (the new national Communist newspaper for which he would soon work) and literary journals such as *The Criterion* (run by Eliot) and *Scrutiny*. In these articles, he developed Marxist understandings of English and European history, the transformation from capitalism to socialism, human relations in a post-revolutionary society, and an anthropology of religion. These interests culminated in 1938 when Morton published his most famous book and probably the first sustained Marxist history of the nation, *A People's History of England* (Morton 1938a). This book included the role of millenarian figures in Morton's discussion of historical change, notably during the seventeenth-century English Revolution (see below). It has been translated into different languages and was the quasi-official history of England in the Soviet Union.

By the start of the Second World War, Morton moved back to Leiston, where he was part of a small but thriving Communist culture led by the artist Paxton Chadwick and centred around the local newspaper, the *Leiston Leader*. Morton combined organising for the Communist Party with army service, mostly labouring on the Isle of Sheppey. All the while, he was spied on by the secret services. While he inevitably wrote less during this time, Morton developed ideas about utopianism and started re-evaluating his views on the value of future transformation in religious thinking and of historic millenarian sects. Some of these ideas were included in his short collection of essays, *The Language of Men* (Morton 1945).

After the War, Morton had a short stint as a local councillor (1947–1949) and was a key figure in founding the acclaimed Communist Party Historians' Group. The Historians' Group included figures who became major historians (including historians of millenarian movements), such as Christopher Hill (1912–2003), Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012), Rodney Hilton (1916–2002), Dorothy Thompson (1923–2011), and E. P. Thompson (1924–1993), all influenced by Morton. One of the reasons the group was founded was to revise *A People's History of England*, and a new edition was published in 1948.

The heyday of the Historians' Group (1946–1956)—which also drew the interest of the secret services—was marked by an intense concern for understanding national history in relation to the transformation of society from feudalism to capitalism and the rise of socialism, as well as the development of history 'from below' and the idea of an English radical tradition. Morton led the way in his study of seventeenth-century religious sects, the growth of the labour movement and its precursors in pre-modern radicalism, and the history of utopianism. His major publication in this era was *The English Utopia* (1952) which traced the history of utopian thinking and utopian literature in relation to peasant hopes, the rise of bourgeois thought, and the emergence of socialism (see below).

In 1950, the Mortons moved to The Old Chapel in Clare, Suffolk, where they lived for the rest of their days. While rural life, writing, and local party organising suited Morton, he was also involved in international political developments. The denunciation of Stalin by the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1956 was the most significant, and Morton was part of a Communist Party of Great Britain delegation sent to the Soviet Union to assess the state of socialism there. Along with the Soviet military intervention in Hungary and debates over inner-party democracy, the fallout from Khrushchev's speech contributed to a sharp loss in members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (though followed by a recovery), including members of the Communist Party Historians' Group (e.g., Hill, the Thompsons, Hilton).

Morton, however, stayed and continued to develop his thinking on apocalypticism and millenarianism, including a study of Blake (Morton 1958a). His research on seventeenth-century millenarian and political ideas associated with the Ranters and the Levellers took off in the 1950s, culminating in *The World of the*

Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Downloaded: 28-02-2025

Ranters (Morton 1970). In the 1960s, Morton continued to reassess the significance of utopianism and lost causes in his work on Chartism, Robert Owen, and the history of British socialism. While primarily a collection of essays providing a Marxist history of literature in relation to the growth of the nation, *The Matter of Britain* (Morton 1966) also included his work on Blake and a general essay on utopianism.

Morton was a critic of what he saw as the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and wrongful interference in another socialist country. While the fallout from events in Czechoslovakia—alongside the cultural, economic, and political shifts towards postmodern and neoliberal capitalism—fed into the sharp disputes which eventually brought an end to the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1991, Morton remained committed to the legacy of the Bolshevik revolution, unlike influential tendencies on the left and in the Communist Party of Great Britain.

Morton was a regular visitor to Eastern Europe, especially the German Democratic Republic, and he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Wilhelm Pieck University Rostock in 1975. He maintained these networks in his final years and gave his (not inconsiderable) library to the university. Morton also continued his writing, including on utopianism, as well as taking an interest in science fiction.

He died on 23 October 1987 at The Old Chapel while writing his final booklet on the fate of seventeenth-century radicalism and the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 (Morton with Hill, Thompson, and Morton 1988).

A full biography with references and bibliography is available in Crossley 2025.

Publications

Morton published widely and in various formats (e.g., essays, booklets, newspaper articles, books, edited volumes). In addition to his more overtly millenarian and utopian subject matter, Morton's interests were broad, including (among others) Arthurian legends, Shakespeare, the Brontë sisters, John Ruskin, Chartism, local history, folksongs, and aesthetics. However, I focus here on those publications of most direct relevance to the study of apocalypticism and millenarianism.

A People's History of England

A People's History of England (Morton 1938a) provided an account of the transformation from ancient forms of societies through the rise and fall of feudalism and on to capitalism, the rise of the working class, and the potential in-breaking of a new era of socialism up against the threat of fascism. For Morton, these transformations in England were the product of, for instance, competing class interests and technological advances. This framework meant the book stood in stark contrast to the standard histories of the nation framed around monarchs, leading politicians, and great individuals.

The mid-seventeenth-century English Revolution played a crucial role in this history, including the accompanying apocalypticism and millenarian movements, some of which he dismissed as making strategically naïve demands too ahead of their time to be realised (e.g., Morton 1938a, 249–50). Morton stressed the historical significance of the popular forces unleashed in the English Revolution and saw

Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Downloaded: 28-02-2025

Cromwell, for all his failures and flaws, as someone able to harness their potential for progressive purposes (e.g., Morton 1938a, 242–43, 250).

Morton's criticisms of naïve utopianism and his praise of popular coalitions in *A People's History of England* should be understood in the context of the late 1930s and the rise of fascism. The Popular Front line of the Communist Party at the time involved the promotion of broad alliances, even with non-socialists, to defeat the fascist threat to democracy and enable the development towards socialism. This Popular Front line also saw the need for showcasing homegrown progressive traditions to challenge fascist appropriations of national history and critique the national narratives of the ruling class (Dimitrov 1935). Communists were encouraged to connect progressive and revolutionary movements of the past with the struggles of the present. These connections between past and present run throughout *A People's History of England* as Morton saw longer-term historical significance in, and connections between, rebellious peasants and priests, heretical religious movements, uprisings, seventeenth-century militancy, Jacobins, Chartism, trade unionists, suffragism, and the emergence of the working class.

Popular Frontist ideas about broad, progressive coalitions run throughout *A People's History of England*. The "Peasants' Rising" of 1381 carried a threat to the ruling class and a challenge to reactionary forces because it was a well-organised, pragmatic, unified, non-sectarian, and largely disciplined protest. The rising may have had a background in "primitive Communism" and featured prominent "preachers of Communism" such as the apocalyptic priest John Ball, but such "Communism" was significantly downplayed in the demands made by the peasants. Instead, Morton argued, the rebels focused on "probably a minimum upon which all were agreed" to provide a powerful unified front (Morton 1938a, 119–20, 124).

The English Utopia **and Publications in the 1940s and 1950s**

Between 1946 and 1956, the Communist Party Historians' Group continued Morton's interests in understanding national history in relation to socioeconomic transformation. This included studying history 'from below' and analysing the role of the English radical politics and religion in progressive history. Morton was a leading figure in this period. He studied seventeenth-century religious sects, the growth of the labour movement and its precursors in pre-modern radical traditions and the history of utopianism. He published his main arguments in a book co-written with George Tate, *The British Labour Movement 1770–1920* (Morton and Tate 1956), and in chapters he wrote for the ailing Dona Torr (1883–1957) and her book, *Tom Mann and His Times: Volume One (1856–1890)* (Torr 1956).

Morton's presentation of this sort of history marked a shift in emphasis. He was now moving away from criticisms of utopianism, millenarian dreamers, and lost causes as naïve to stressing how their progressive potential fed into the long-term development of democracy and socialism. For instance, in 1949, for the three-hundredth anniversary of regicide during the English Revolution, Morton published on the significance of the Levellers and radical movements in the longer term. Where they failed, he argued, the working class, war veterans, and the Communist Party could now succeed in transforming society and challenging colonialism (Morton 1949a).

Inspired by Iris Morley's writing on the lingering radicalism toward the end of the seventeenth century, Morton also wrote on the Monmouth rebellion and the Battle of Sedgemoor. This agitation represented, or included in its ranks, "the last defenders of Cokaygne, the Utopia of all jolly fellows, of the proud,

Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Downloaded: 28-02-2025

independent man, neither exploiting nor exploited, eating and drinking of his own abundance." Despite its failure, the rebellion included a "plebian element" who also played their role in the revolutionary transformation of England towards a bourgeois state and sowed the seeds for future socialist transformation (Morton 1952, 86). In arguing that we need to understand the aspirations of "thousands of obscure men and women" (Morton 1955a), Morton became a forerunner for the study of 'history from below' which would later take off in the universities (Hobsbawm 1978, 38).

While the writings of Morley were one prompt for Morton, we should see these interests in promoting centuries-long hopes of a better England as an attempt by Morton and the Communist Party Historians' Group to compensate for the political situation in postwar England which seemed to be heading in a different direction. The Labour government was not pushing for socialism and was supporting American imperialism, while the nation seemed to be taking a conservative turn by the 1950s (Morton 1953a; Schwarz 1982, 58, 67, 72; Thompson 1992, 86–88, 96–97; Callaghan 2003, 50–56, 85–105, 123–38; Harker 2021, 76–108).

Such issues come through explicitly in *The English Utopia* (Morton 1952), Morton's most important publication of this era, where criticisms of the Labour Party and their cultured counterparts, reactionary politics, and limitations of conservatism sit alongside warnings of American military and cultural influence (see also Morton 1953a). But *The English Utopia* is emphatically forward-looking in its account of the English past. The book is grounded in the story of Cokaygne, the medieval utopian land of plenty. Morton then traced the changing history of utopian dreams in English cultural history, particularly (but not exclusively) focusing on utopian literature, from what he saw as the idealistic concept of utopia in relation to medieval peasant hopes, the rise of bourgeois thought (particularly its progressive aspirations), and the emergence of socialism. William Morris's *News from Nowhere* was the "final synthesis" of the developments of the English utopia because Morris knew that the realisation of dreams about peace, leisure, and abundance required more than peasant desires or bourgeois reasoning—it required class struggle. For Morton, the Soviet Union had since rendered literary utopias obsolete because the transformation to a better world was now beginning to happen.

The Everlasting Gospel **and Theorising Millenarianism**

Major historians (e.g., Hill, Hilton, the Thompsons) left the Communist Party—and thus the Communist Party Historians' Group—after the crises of 1956–1957 (see above), while Hobsbawm (who remained) became more active in university life. Morton, though, continued as the flagbearer for Communist Party historians despite their now weakened position on the English left. He synthesised his work and the work of others into an article (Morton 1958b) outlining a general theory of millenarianism and historical development. Medieval peasant uprisings, he argued, had an "element of hysteria" only in the sense that they categorised victory "in the realm of fantasy" (Morton 1958b, 239). The fantastical understanding of victory was necessary because the material conditions for victory in the medieval present did not yet exist. These dreams were transformed with and by changing historical circumstances, such as the rise of capitalism and an organised working class. Some millenarian movements, Morton stressed, represent the contradictions during periods undergoing significant historic change. Morton gave the example of the Taiping Revolt in China, when a "mystical cult developed into an embryonic national movement" during a "transitional form of struggle" (Morton 1958b, 239). Using Peter Worsley's study of Melanesian "cargo cults," Morton theorised millenarian thinking further in relation to colonialism, arguing that with the rise of a "native bourgeoisie" and a working class among colonial peoples, the conditions are met for successful

Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Downloaded: 28-02-2025

national liberation. The flip side of this process was that “mystical and religious cults” declined, though their influence remained “to colour the new forms” (Morton 1958b, 239).

Elsewhere, Morton provided his own close reading of millenarian and apocalyptic subjects. He wrote further on the development of resistance to capitalism from the late eighteenth century onward with reference to apocalyptic thinking, most notably in his book, *The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake* (Morton 1958a). Anticipating E. P. Thompson’s famous study (Thompson 1993), Morton saw Blake’s fantastical mythology, apocalyptic language, and use of the book of Revelation as integral to his political radicalism, antinomian instincts, and understanding of the industrialising new world. Morton argued that Blake was an innovative utopian thinker, such as Blake’s understanding that the New Jerusalem is to be built, a proactive move which stood in contrast to that typical of utopian literature—the island waiting to be discovered. But Morton also argued that Blake had his limitations because he was active before the advent of an organised working class and the development of socialist thinking. As industrialisation was only just developing, Morton argued that Blake was not in a position to find a solution to the accompanying misery and destruction.

Morton was also interested in influences on Blake, notably from religious sects. Morton saw direct influences from Blake’s upbringing, such as the Swedenborgians. But Morton also argued that the influences on Blake were widespread and had deep historical roots. He saw long-lasting antinomian influences coming (if indirectly) from seventeenth-century revolutionary England (e.g., Ranters, Quakers, Muggletonians), arguing that their legacy remained in a range of ideas and shared language in Blake’s social circles. Morton traced fantastical revolutionary traditions back further. Morton tracked the concept of the Everlasting Gospel—a period where God and the Bible would illuminate hearts and inaugurate a new era of love and spiritual liberty, rendering older ceremonies and legal codes obsolete— from the twelfth-century Italian peninsula to Blake’s England by way of central European radical religion and millenarianism. Blake inherited and adapted this language, Morton argued, but it was language becoming obsolete in nineteenth-century resistance to capitalism. Morton thus claimed Blake was “the greatest English Antinomian, but also the last” (Morton 1958a, 98–104).

Morton’s explanation of how historic and influential millenarian and utopian thinking (e.g., Everlasting Gospel, Cokaygne) was rendered obsolete with the rise of capitalism or transformed and secularised into socialist thinking was taken up in one of the most influential Marxist arguments concerning apocalypticism and millenarianism: Eric Hobsbawm’s *Primitive Rebels* (Hobsbawm 1959). Morton reviewed Hobsbawm’s work favourably in the *Daily Worker* (30 April 1959) and continued to develop his own thinking on the evolution of millenarianism. Indeed, the end of the 1950s marked a critical moment in British scholarship on millenarianism and was tied up with Cold War anxieties. Whereas Morton and Hobsbawm offered a Marxist understanding of millenarianism, Norman Cohn published the first edition of his influential book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (Cohn 1957). Cohn argued that the militant millenarianism of medieval Europe connected with “modern totalitarian movements,” among which the “structure of the basic phantasies seems to have changed scarcely at all.” And for Cohn, the main totalitarian heirs were Communism and Nazism (Cohn 1957, xiv–xv).

The political ramifications of Cohn’s work were not lost on Morton and his colleagues. Christopher Hill wrote to Morton asking whether he had seen *The Pursuit of the Millenium*, calling it a “black reactionary book, but full of fascinating material” (Hill to Morton, 26 November 1957, Morton archive, Marx Memorial Library). Morton made essentially the same point in reviewing Cohn’s work, praising the collection of data

Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Downloaded: 28-02-2025

and criticising the ahistorical anti-Communism (Morton 1958b). While emphases have changed, the legacy of the split between liberal and Marxist assessments of millenarianism continues to resonate in scholarship today (for discussion see Crossley 2021, 2023).

Levellers, Antinomians, and *The World of the Ranters*

Morton continued to develop his analysis of the historic transformation of millenarianism and utopianism, including a collection of the works of the utopian socialist Robert Owen, for which Morton wrote a substantial introduction (Morton 1962a). *Socialism in Britain* (Morton 1963) brought together his updated readings of heroic failures and utopianism and incorporated various apocalyptically minded individuals and groups into his history of the development of English radical thought. Precursors to modern-day socialism included Cokaygne, John Ball, Abiezer Coppe, Gerrard Winstanley, Diggers, Levellers, Ranters, and Sedgemoor rebels.

Morton's interest in and presentation of antinomian millenarian figures chimed with the cultural upheavals and student radicalism of the 1960s (Davis 1986, 4–12, 129–36; Crossley 2025). But Morton constantly qualified his sympathetic treatment. Those Morton deemed more admirable were shown to have avoided moving too close to anarchistic thinking or the like by his emphasis on their (Communist-style) cultured interests, self-discipline, or bureaucratic realism (e.g., Morton 1970, 147–48, 159, 163, 165–66, 173–74, 176, 179, 181–82, 192; 1975b, 23). Morton, like others among the ageing Marxist historical establishment, could not ignore developments in 1960s radicalism; equally, they could not fully embrace developments that were often anarchistic, individualistic, and hostile to Communism traditionally understood. Others like Morton responded similarly by producing works of radical English history that had one eye on the radicalism of the present (e.g., Hill 1972; Hilton 1973).

Indeed, Morton's most sustained work in the 1960s and 1970s, at least relating to millenarianism, was on seventeenth-century radicals, particularly the Levellers and the Ranters. Morton had been tracing such individuals in local East Anglian history from the 1950s (e.g., Morton 1954; 1955b; 1958a; 1958d; 1958e; 1962b; 1963, 20–21; 1968a; 1975b), which formed the basis for his book, *The World of the Ranters*, published in 1970. Morton argued that as the English Revolution developed in the 1640s, so did a steady secularisation of ideas around religious toleration, democracy, civil liberties, and a free press—ideas most associated with the Levellers. However, Morton suggested that the defeat of the Levellers in 1649 arrested this development as it now seemed that human reason and power could not bring about the desired change. For Morton, this meant that fantastical religious convictions again began to dominate revolutionary thinking, and victory could only be understood in terms of millenarian hopes for divine intervention. In this context, new apocalyptic sects and movements emerged, including the Ranters. Ranter egalitarianism and ideas about God punishing the rich had a plebian appeal, but this phenomenon was also indicative of a time of defeat, and such millenarianism was symptomatic of a failed revolution.

Delay in the Transformation

As a younger man, Morton believed the transformation to socialism was at hand. As an older man, Morton increasingly recognised that revolutionary transformation was not coming to fruition in the twentieth century. In 1932, for instance, Morton argued that E. M. Forster wrote about the importance of human

Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Downloaded: 28-02-2025

relationships in a way so ahead of its time that it was effectively for an audience that did not then exist but "will come into being even though it may have to wait for a hundred years" and one "that will grow up on the far side of the Revolution" (Morton 1945, 80). By the 1970s it was clear that the revolutionary moment had not happened or was slowing down in socialist countries and so Morton provided an extension of the timeframes for transformation, home and abroad. To explain this delay, Morton turned again to Morris, advocating the argument that (before Lenin) Morris developed Marx by outlining a two-stage evolution of socialist society, from socialism to communism with an implied transitional period and all the difficulties this entailed in the transformation towards a communist society. Morton argued that Morris knew these transitions might take over a century because they involved the transformation of the economy and human behaviour. This process, Morton observed of the twentieth century, was taking longer than many once expected (Morton 1973a; 1975a, 138–41; 1975b).

Sources

The only book-length biography of Morton is *A. L. Morton and the Radical Tradition* (Crossley 2025). Shorter biographical accounts and discussions of his work include Cornforth 1978; Höhne and Nathan 1983; Hill 1990; Samuel 1990; Kaye 1992, 116–24; Paananen 2000, 101–44; Harker 2018; Høgsbjerg 2020; Crossley 2023.

The main archival resource for Morton's life and the Communist Party of Great Britain generally is at the Marx Memorial Library, London. Further important material on the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Communist Party Historians' Group is housed in the Labour History Archive & Study Centre at the People's History Museum, Manchester. The Working-Class Movement Library in Salford contains various materials relating to Morton's life, notably his newspaper columns and an extensive collection of the *Leiston Leader*. Since 2017, secret service files on Morton have now been made available in The National Archives in Kew.

Select Publications by Morton

What follows is a selection of Morton's publications where they relate to religion, utopianism, apocalypticism, and millenarian movements. For a full bibliography, see Crossley 2025. Paananen (2000, 101–44) also provides an extensive annotated bibliography.

Morton, A. L. 1927. "Review of Montague Summers' *The Geography of Witchcraft*." *The Criterion* 6 (5): 463–65.

Morton, A. L. 1930. "Review of J. G. Frazer's *Myths of the Origin of Fire*." *The Criterion* 9 (37): 753–55.

Morton, A. L. 1932. "Poetry and Property in a Communist Society." *The Criterion* 12 (46): 45–53.

Morton, A. L. 1933. "Culture and Leisure." *Scrutiny* I (4): 324–26.

Morton, A. L. 1935. "Communism and Morality." In *Christianity and the Social Revolution,* edited by John

Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Downloaded: 28-02-2025

Lewis, Karl Polanyi, and Donald K. Kitchin, 329–55. London: Gollancz.

Morton, A. L. 1937a. “Satan’s Brood.” *The Listener* (28 April).

Morton, A. L. 1937b. “Review of J. G. Frazer’s *Aftermath: A Supplement to the Golden Bough*.” *The Criterion* 16 (64): 543–45

Morton, A. L. 1938a. *A People’s History of England.* London: Gollancz; new edition, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1948.

Morton, A. L. 1938b. “Review of J. G. Frazer’s A Supplement to *Totemism and Exogamy*.” *The Criterion* 17 (68): 580–83.

Morton, A. L. 1939. “French Revolutionaries and English Democrats.” *Labour Monthly* 21 (9): 532–38.

Morton, A. L. 1944. “William Morris: Architect of the Future.” *Our Time* 3 (7): 8.

Morton, A. L. 1941. “Promise of Victory: A Note on the Negro Spiritual.” *Our Time* 1 (6): 19–21.

Morton, A. L. 1945. *Language of Men*. London: Cobbett Press.

Morton, A. L. 1947. “The First in Line: The Levellers as Revolutionary Democrats.” *Our Time* April: 200–201.

Morton, A. L. 1949a. *The Story of the English Revolution*. London: Communist Party.

Morton, A. L. 1949b. “How the Bourgeoisie Won Power.” *Modern Quarterly* 5 (2): 99–109.

Morton, A. L. 1949c. “James Harrington: Revolutionary Theorist.” *Communist Review* March: 457–62.

Morton, A. L. 1949d. “The Norfolk Rising.” *Communist Review* July: 602–8.

Morton, A. L. 1952. *The English Utopia*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Morton, A. L. 1953a. *Get Out!* Ipswich: Communist Party of East Anglia.

Morton, A. L. 1953b. “Utopias Yesterday and Today.” *Science & Society* 17 (3): 258–63.

Morton, A. L. 1954. “Laurence Clarkson.” *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology* 26 (3): 163–87.

Morton, A. L. 1955a. “Sedgemoor—Myth and Reality.” *Our History* 16 (February); updated in *Our History: The Common People 1688–1800* 20 (Winter 1960): 6–8.

Morton, A. L. 1955b. “Frances Clarkson.” *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology* 27 (1): 55.

Morton, A. L. 1958a. *The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Downloaded: 28-02-2025

Morton, A. L. 1958b. “Millennium and Utopia.” *Marxism Today* 2 (8): 237–40.

Morton, A. L. [Anonymous]. 1958c. “Cromwell in the English Revolution.” *Our History* 9 (Spring): 1–23.

Morton, A. L. 1958d. “John Lanseter of Bury.” *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology* 28 (1): 29–53.

Morton, A. L. 1958e. “The Place of Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn in the Tradition of English Prose.” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 6 (1): 5–13.

Morton, A. L. 1960. “Religion and Politics in the English Revolution.” *Marxism Today* 4 (12): 367–72.

Morton, A. L. 1962a. *The Life and Ideas of Robert Owen*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Morton, A. L. 1962b. “Small Finds.” *The Amateur Historian* 5 (5): 141–44, 150.

Morton, A. L. 1962c. “The People in History.” *Marxism Today* 6 (6): 179–82.

Morton, A. L. 1962d. “Utopia as a Reflection of Social Ideas.” *Marxism Today* 6 (11): 336–42.

Morton, A. L. 1963. *Socialism in Britain*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Morton, A. L. 1966. *The Matter of Britain: Essays in a Living Culture*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Morton, A. L. 1968a. “Leveller Democracy—Fact or Myth?” *Our History* 51: 1–22.

Morton, A. L. 1968b. *Three Works by William Morris: A Dream of John Ball, The Pilgrims of Hope, and News from Nowhere*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Morton, A. L. 1970. *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Morton, A. L. 1973a. “A French View of William Morris.” *Marxism Today* 17: 148–52.

Morton, A. L.1973b. *Political Writings of William Morris*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Morton, A. L. 1975a. “The Centenary of the ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’.” *Marxism Today* 19: 134–42.

Morton, A. L. 1975b. *Freedom in Arms: A Selection of Leveller Writings*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Morton, A. L. 1978. “Pilgrim’s Progress.” *History Workshop Journal* 5: 3–8.

Morton, A. L. 1981a. *When the People Arose: The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*. London: CPGB.

Morton, A. L. 1981b. “Introduction.” In *The City of the Sun*, by Thomas Campanella. Translated by A. M. Elliott and R. Miller; London: Journeyman Press.

Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Downloaded: 28-02-2025

Morton, A. L. 1985a. “The 1930s.” *Bulletin of the Marx Memorial Library* 106 (Spring): 20–26.

Morton, A. L. 1985b. “Morris, Marx and Engels.” *Zeitschrift fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 33 (2): 145–52.

Morton, A. L., with Christopher Hill, Willie Thompson, and Vivien Morton. 1988. *1688: How Glorious Was the Revolution?* London: Our History.

Morton, A. L., and George Tate. 1956. *The British Labour Movement 1770–1920*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Further References

Callaghan, John. 2003. *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict: The CPGB 1951–1968*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Cohn, Norman.1957. *The Pursuit of the Millenium*. First edition; London: Secker & Warburg.

Cornforth, Maurice. 1978. “A. L. Morton—Portrait of a Marxist Historian.” In *Rebels and Their Causes: Essays in Honour of A. L. Morton*, edited by Maurice Cornforth, 7–19. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Crossley, James. 2021. “The End of Apocalypticism: From Burton Mack’s Jesus to North American Liberalism.” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 19 (2): 1–20.

Crossley, James. 2023. “A. L. Morton’s English Utopia and the Critical Study of Apocalypticism and Millenarianism.” *Religions* 14 (11): 1–14.

Crossley, James. 2025. *A. L. Morton and the Radical Tradition*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Davis, J. C. 1986. *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dimitrov, Georgi. 1935. *The Working Class against Fascism*. London: Martin Lawrence.

Harker, Ben. 2018. “Morton, (Arthur) Leslie (1903–1987).” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 11 October.

Harker, Ben. 2021. *The Chronology of Revolution: Communism, Culture, and Civil Society in Twentieth-Century Britain*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Hill, Christopher. 1972. *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution*. London: Maurice Temple Smith.

Hill, Christopher. 1990. “The People’s Historian.” In *History and the Imagination: Selected Writings of A. L. Morton*, edited by Margot Heinemann and Willie Thompson, 11–17. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Hilton, Rodney H. 1973. *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of*

Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Downloaded: 28-02-2025

1381. London: Methuen.

Hobsbawm, Eric J. 1959. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Hobsbawm, Eric J. 1978. "Communist Party Historians' Group 1946–56." In *Rebels and their Causes: Essays in Honour of A. L. Morton*, edited by Maurice Cornforth, 21–48. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Höhne, Horst, and Sabine Nathan. 1983. "Reflections on the Work in Literature of Dr h. c. Arthur Leslie Morton, Poet, Critic, Historian, Communist, in Honour of His 80th Birthday." *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 31 (3): 197–210.

Høgsbjerg, Christian. 2020. "A. L. Morton and the Poetics of People's History." *Socialist History* 58: 1–17.

Kaye, Harvey J. 1992. *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History*. London: Routledge.

Paananen, Victor N. 2000. *British Marxist Criticism*. New York: Routledge.

Samuel, Raphael. 1990. "A Rebel and His Lineage." In *History and the Imagination: Selected Writings of A. L. Morton*, 19–24. Edited by Margot Heinemann and Willie Thompson. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Schwarz, Bill. 1982. "'The People' in History: The Communist Party Historians Group 1946–56." In *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics*, edited by Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz, and David Sutton, 44–95. London: Hutchinson.

Thompson, E. P. 1993. *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thompson, Willie. 1992. *The Good Old Cause: British Communism, 1920–1991*. London: Pluto.

Torr, Dona. 1956. *Tom Mann and His Times: Volume One (1856–1890)*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Article information

Crossley, James. 2025. "A. L. Morton." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 12 February 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/a-l-morton

Downloaded: 2025-02-28

Provided under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0