



Leslie Morton, 1983. Acknowledgements to the *Morning Star*.

A. L. Morton, 1903–1987

Arthur Leslie Morton was born on the fourth of July, 1903, son of a Yorkshire farmer who on his marriage with Mary Hannah Lampray the year before, had leased Stanchils Farm near Bury St. Edmunds. Leslie was the first child, followed by Kathleen and Max.

He went to the King Edward VIth Grammar School in Bury until in his sixteenth year he was sent to boarding school in Eastbourne; from there in 1921 he went up to Cambridge University, where he met as fellow students Allen Hutt, later a distinguished typographer, and Ivor Montagu, no less distinguished a film-maker. All three joined the University Labour Club.

After Cambridge, he taught at Steyning Grammar School in Sussex, where to the astonishment of the Governors, most of the staff supported the General Strike in 1926, fraternising with local railwaymen. Not, therefore, to *his* astonishment, he was out of work the next year. Moving back to Suffolk, he taught at A. S. Neill's famous Summerhill school, but after a year moved to London, to write, to keep a bookshop near Finsbury Circus; and now he joined the Communist Party, of whose later-founded History Group he was Chairman for over thirty years. Five years later, he joined the staff of the *Daily Worker*, reporting, reviewing, sub-editing, and he wrote from time to time for the paper until his death. But in 1937 he left to concentrate on what was published the next year by Victor Gollancz as *A People's History of England*, enormously influential at the popular level for which it was so exactly written.

Moving back to Leiston with his second wife Vivien, they became much involved in local politics, helping to write, illustrate and sell the lively monthly *Leiston Leader*. Leslie spent most of his war (1939-45) in the Royal Artillery; not blasting his way in triumph across Europe, but labouring on construction sites in the Isle of Sheppey, rising to the dizzy height of Lance-bombardier, and somehow never getting transferred, in the last months of the war, to the Army Education Corps.

Demobilised, in Leiston he became a member of the Urban District Council, taught once again at Summerhill, and took courses for the Workers' Educational Association, whose local Chairman he was. But now he began on a long-cherished project, *The English Utopia*. It was published in 1952 by Lawrence and Wishart who had taken over *A People's History* in 1964. To work on it, he and Vivien moved to the twelfth-century Old Chapel in Clare – where the countryside still looked much as it had done to Gainsborough and Constable.

Leslie was a foundation member of the William Morris Society, and took an important part in the re-examination of Morris that has gone on since the 1950s. In 1968 and 1972 appeared two volumes edited by him, *Three Works by William Morris*, and *Political Writings of William Morris*, both of which have been translated into many languages and more than once re-issued in English – a reminder that, great as has been his contribution to studies of our native history, deeply rooted as he was in his own particular native place as was his admired Morris, Leslie was also and always a true citizen of the world. He played a long-continuing part in Adult Education, both with his *People's History* and as writer and lecturer, especially for the WEA; but he had also a great influence on fellow historians, and many younger scholars have owed him a debt – Thompson, Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, and our President Asa Briggs. In this he has been a worthy heir of John

Richard Green, who worked with Morris in the EQA and was the first to conceive of our history as the history of ordinary people.

Most of this bald account has been culled from the volume of essays published in honour of his seventy-fifth birthday under the title, *Rebels and Their Causes*. What remains to say is what was richly experienced by all who met him – how generous and genial this modest man was: of nobody could it more justly be said, in round Victorian phrase, – to know him was to love him.

R.W.