

Article

A. L. Morton's English Utopia and the Critical Study of Apocalypticism and Millenarianism

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Abstract: A. L. Morton (1903–1987) was a popular, pioneering historian and literary critic in the British Marxist tradition. Morton was an influential figure in the historical study of religious radicalism, millenarianism, apocalypticism, and utopianism, yet his contribution is typically overlooked today in favour of his more illustrious counterparts who emerged from the Communist Party Historians' Group from 1946–1956. This article seeks to re-establish Morton's place in this scholarly tradition, using his work *The English Utopia* as a starting point for understanding the important critical developments taking place in the 1950s. Focusing especially on his analysis of seventeenth-century movements, we will then see how Morton shifted from an unsentimental historical materialist approach to religious radicalism to a rethinking of heroic failures and thinkers ahead of their time. As Norman Cohn famously brought liberal criticisms of millenarianism to the fore in the 1950s onward, Morton should likewise take his place as an influential thinker in Marxist understandings of such phenomena.

Keywords: A. L. Morton; millenarianism; apocalypticism; utopianism; Communist Party Historians' Group (1946–1956); English Revolution

1. Introduction

A. L. Morton (1903–1987) was a popular, pioneering historian and literary critic in the British Marxist tradition. He received his membership card for the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) on New Year's Day 1929 and, within a decade, published his popular *A People's History of England* (Morton 1938); at that point the first Marxist history of the nation (Cornforth 1978, p. 10). A revision of *A People's History of England* was a prompt for the formation of the famed Communist Party Historians' Group in 1946, an important venue for the development of some of the most significant historians of the twentieth century, such as Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, and Dorothy Thompson.¹ Along with Dona Torr, Morton's influence has typically been downplayed or given less space in the story of the British Marxist historians, probably because his publications had a more popularist bent. Nevertheless, Morton's work before and during the period of the most celebrated years of the British Marxist historians (1946–1956) would anticipate and influence his more recognised colleagues, particularly (but not exclusively) on issues of utopianism, radical religion, millenarianism, and apocalypticism—terms I use here interchangeably and simply to denote thinking about an alternative transformed world rather than overly precise definitions.

It is on these issues that this article focuses in order to establish (or re-establish) the place of Morton as a historian of religious radicalism and show the contextual issues that gave rise to the influential nuances in his analysis. It should be stated from the outset that this is not an assessment of the validity of Morton's arguments—that will have to wait for another time. Instead, this is an article that reads Morton's scholarship in its historical and social contexts and looks to map out his influence on thinking about radical millenarianism. Most significant among Morton's nuances was a shift from an unsentimental historical materialist approach to religious radicalism to an emphasis on an appreciation of heroic



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failures and thinkers ahead of their time, including among the millenarians and sects of the seventeenth century. The reasons for this will be shown with reference to, among other things, shifting political situations (e.g., disillusionment with the Labour Party, critiques of American imperialism); developments in Morton's and Communist Party research into English radicalism from the 1930s to the 1950s; the extent of Morton's influence on his colleagues; individual influences on Morton; and Morton's place in the legacy of research into millenarianism and utopianism. To get a sense of his overall agenda in this subject area, we begin first with his most fitting work—*The English Utopia* (Morton 1952)—published in a decade when the critical, cross-cultural study of apocalypticism and millenarianism was about to take off through the work of Hobsbawm and Norman Cohn (Cohn 1957; Morton 1958a; Hobsbawm 1959).

2. The English Utopia

The English Utopia is a thoroughgoing historical materialist account of an age-old desire for a better world, from serfs in feudal England through the rise of the bourgeoisie to the growth of the working class in capitalist England. In terms of definitions, Morton noted the Greek background to the English word "utopia", namely, meaning "no place", and how it had been adopted and developed by Thomas More for his imagined commonwealth. Morton preferred the uppercase "Utopia" when referring to the country imagined by a given writer and lowercase "utopia" with reference to a given book (I will retain this division for convenience). There were pragmatic reasons for choosing "English" rather than "British", namely because the utopias he happened to choose were invariably English rather than Welsh, Scottish, or Irish (with partial exceptions such as Jonathan Swift) and because of the early historical development of the bourgeoisie in England. Yet he also wanted to show that there was something beyond "odious smugness" in the English tradition, including generosity and openness to neighbours. Taken together, Utopia and England become a somewhat distorted mirror image of one another in this retelling and a history of class interests, social aspirations, hopes, and fears of what England might become (Morton 1952, pp. 9–10).

The English Utopia begins with the long, fourteenth-century poem, *The Land of Cokaygne*, which looks to a place of abundance, peace, justice, happiness, youth, and fellowship. The anticlerical poem has seeds of class consciousness, Morton argued, reflecting the medieval serf's desire to escape their labour. It is, he added, an example of the persistence of the ideas of primitive communism in human history. Looking backward, the poem is in the tradition of Jesus's saying about it being easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for the rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven; looking forward, the hopes of the poem would be transformed into socialist aspirations of a society beyond capitalism. However, there was a long time to go. After *The Land of Cokaygne*, Morton turned to Thomas More, who was writing when the process from a feudal economy to a capitalist economy was well underway. More, Morton suggested, was able to see the darker side of this transformation and the suffering of a disaffected class thrown off the land. For Morton, More had a grasp of more modern notions of equality, but he was still a man of his time with his own class interests; in this case (for instance), his utopianism involved sixteenth-century ideas of a strong monarchical state and accompanying religion, with humanists influencing princes (Morton 1952, pp. 35–59).

The U/utopias of the following centuries could include reactionary alternatives to England, bourgeois heroes, Tory critiques of Whig exploitation as capitalism became embedded, and a society run on science and reason, though typically they lacked a serious explanation of how we get to the better world, according to Morton. Yet amidst the contradictions at play emerged a grasping towards socialism, such as through the radical apocalyptic poet and painter William Blake, around the turn of the eighteenth century. Ultimately, utopian writing reached a peak with William Morris in *News from Nowhere* at the end of the nineteenth century. Morris, thanks both to his genius and the historical epoch in which he was born, grasped the importance of capitalist exploitation and how it could

be overcome by a revolutionary working class. Morris represented a crucial moment as the liberatory idea of the land of Cokaygne was properly understood and transformed into socialist thinking. The realisation of this desire was beginning to happen through the Soviet Union, but in England, there were still problems. Aldous Huxley and especially George Orwell represented the decay of the bourgeoisie, now no longer a progressive force in history. Here, Morton was at his most scathing and polemical. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for instance, represented the anti-Utopia, an attempt to present all utopian dreams as leading to totalitarianism and oppression and a way of discrediting a potential socialist future (Morton 1952, pp. 202–13).

While this overview gives us a sense of Morton's most high-profile ideas on utopianism in the 1950s, and thus a basis upon which to analyse his critical study of such ideas, taken alone, we do not get a full appreciation of his influence on the more acclaimed British Marxist historians. To get a fuller picture of Morton's nuances in a defining era in the development of research into millenarianism and apocalypticism, a wider contextualisation of Morton's work is required. In this respect, we can turn to the post-War historical circumstances of *The English Utopia*.

3. A Post-War English Utopia

In *News from Nowhere*, the revolution that overthrew capitalism occurred in 1952—the year *The English Utopia* was published. The significance of the date was probably not lost on Morton (1952, p. 169), especially when writing at a time when British Communists were frustrated at the opportunity for socialist transformation following the War. The hopes brought about by a new Labour government in 1945, the development of the welfare state, and the building of the National Health Service soon gave way to disillusionment about the capitulation to the capitalist class and American foreign policy. This was accompanied or followed by the conservatism of the 1950s, the loss of Communist representation in Parliament, and a decline in Party membership since its wartime peak (Schwarz 1982, pp. 57–58, 64–67, 71, 73; Dworkin 1997, p. 16; Callaghan 2003, pp. 50–56).

This context helps us understand the prominence of Morton's own utopianism in *The English Utopia* and the importance of maintaining hope in the face of present fears, defeats, and anxieties. We can see such tendencies at play in Morton's discussion of Ernest Bramah's *What Might Have Been, The Story of a Social War* (1907, reprinted as *The Secret of the League* [1909]). Morton argued that the new government in Bramah's Utopia was not about significant social transformation but was rather about generating taxation for a welfare state in a capitalist system. Bramah's book, Morton suggested, is part of the story of the rise of the Labour Party. In a typical criticism levelled at the post-War Labour Party by the CPGB, Morton claimed Bramah's Utopia was a "quite unintended demonstration of the futility of trying to build a welfare state while still leaving the capitalist class in undisturbed possession of the power it draws from its ownership of the means of production" (Morton 1952, pp. 181–82).²

Morton's most extensive criticism of the post-War Labour government came in his detailed discussion of H. G. Wells. Morton argued that Wells dominated utopian writing in the twentieth century and criticised him for excessive inconsistency, imperialism, distrust of the working class, and presenting bourgeois ideas with a socialist or progressive gloss. He further stressed that the prolific Wells believed Utopia would not be fulfilled through the power of the working class, but rather it would be imposed on the masses through an enlightened elite, with assumptions that capitalism could be reformed and transformed through persuasion. This imagined future involved a mixed economy of private enterprise and public ownership of transport and services. Morton contextualised Wells' emphases against the backdrop of the advanced imperialism of the turn of the twentieth century, opportunism in the workers' movement, and the rise of the reformist and technocratic Fabian Society influence in and on the Labour Party (Morton 1952, pp. 182–94). Morton provided a number of anti-Fabian polemics in his section on Wells, including one no doubt designed to shame the post-War Fabian influencers in the Labour Party, by presenting the

dominant Fabian couple as supporters of the Russian Revolution: “The positive answer to Wells was given first in 1917 and, in a different way, some twenty years later, when the two greatest Fabians, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, repudiated their whole past by calling their study of the USSR, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation*” (Morton 1952, p. 194. Cf., e.g., pp. 169, 185–86, 193–94).

Morton also made some criticisms of American imperialism in *The English Utopia*, as the post-War Labour Party had thrown their support behind American foreign policy. Morton briefly mentioned Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* from 1907, which he regarded as a “classic” of the working-class movement. According to Morton, London’s Marxism allowed him to understand the brutality of the ruling class and what they would do to maintain their grip on power. But it also helped London foresee both the rise of fascism and “the new kind of fascism that is threatening to arise out of American imperialism”. For Morton and his fellow Communists, there was an understanding that fascism arose out of the conditions of capitalism in decay. To make things worse, American imperialism was also propped up by an unprecedented military threat, which Morton mentioned in passing in *The English Utopia* in a pithy saying: “as morally obtuse as an American politician brandishing an atom bomb” (Morton 1952, p. 112).

Yet American imperialism receives little attention in *The English Utopia*, and a similar point can be made for Morton’s other publications up to this point (though that was about to change, as we will see).³ There are some clear reasons for this. To some extent, the publication of *The English Utopia* was the product of the War years. He had written three chapters by the time he was called up for army service in 1941 (Cornforth 1978, p. 15), and utopianism (including overlaps with *The English Utopia*) features prominently in his short collection of essays, *Language of Men*, published in 1945. The War effort, of course, meant that America was an ally in the fight against fascism from the perspective of the Communist Party, and this explains why there are, comparatively speaking, minimal attacks on American imperialism in *The English Utopia*.

But it remains that Morton’s criticisms of American imperialism were sharp and unambiguous and that they turn up in the final editing of *The English Utopia* meant that Morton wanted them to be taken seriously. Indeed, we should see such criticisms as part of the heightening of CPGB criticisms of American imperialism and accompanying cultural dominance (e.g., through cinema, comics, books, philosophy) as Morton was finishing off the book.⁴ In April 1951, the National Cultural Committee of the CPGB ran a conference on the American threat to British culture, with the proceedings published in a special edition of *Arena*. As well as attacking the malign influence of American culture, an accompanying emphasis in this era was to promote English and British cultural traditions, radical or otherwise. The work of the Communist Party Historians’ Group was tied up with this agenda, not least with its sharp focus on English and British history. In his role as chair of the Historians’ Group, Rodney Hilton wrote in support of the Cultural Committee. He suggested that the culture of the ruling class was in “utter decay” and dependent on the “American imperialists”. He likewise embraced the task of exposing American bourgeois culture while promoting a progressive patriotism to oust the “bastard patriotism” of the ruling class (Hilton n.d.).⁵

Morton himself was an enthusiastic propagandist for the Party line on America and English cultural heritage, radical or otherwise. His most prominent contribution was a pamphlet for the East Anglia district of the CPGB published in 1953 under the title *Get Out!* Morton fired polemic after polemic at American influence in Britain. He denounced the building of American airbases in Britain and East Anglia, saw the presence of American soldiers as an “occupation”, criticised American soldiers for spreading sexually transmitted diseases and moral corruption, condemned the violence and racism in American culture, and slammed American love of the atom bomb. What was needed to counter this and help clear out the American soldiers was reopening of trade with socialist countries, British public opinion, and progressive patriotism (Morton 1953). Morton’s disdain for American

imperialism in *The English Utopia*, then, was more than incidental and something he was starting to develop.

The post-War historical and political context, then, helps explain some of the tendencies in Morton's presentation of utopianism in *The English Utopia*. We can now narrow this down further and look at more precise reactions to changing circumstances in CPGB circles and the Historians' Group in particular. Greater appreciation of this context will, in turn, help us understand Morton's importance and influence on the British Marxist historians and their contribution to the critical study of religious radicalism.

4. Rethinking Radicalism

Indeed, *The English Utopia* itself should be seen as part of the CPGB's promotion of homegrown radical and cultural traditions in the face of American cultural imperialism. This becomes clearer still when we locate Morton's work in light of what would follow among the Historians' Group in the 1950s. Morton was again a key figure in the development of an alternative national story. In the summer of 1953, the Historians' Group met at Netherwood guest house near Hastings and investigated the possibility of a history of the British labour movement (foreword to Morton and Tate 1956, pp. 7–8; Hobsbawm 1978, p. 29; Cornforth 1978, p. 17). The eventual result was *The British Labour Movement 1770–1920*, a book co-written by Morton and George Tait and published in 1956. Morton was responsible for the first three chapters, covering the period from the late eighteenth century to 1874.

When compared with Morton's earlier treatment of the period in *A People's History of England*, a notable feature of his contribution to *The British Labour Movement* was a heightened appreciation of heroic failures and their contribution to future developments in the advancement of socialism. One example is the case of Ernest Jones and his efforts to keep the mass working-class movement—Chartism—alive in the 1850s. Jones received little attention in the first edition of *A People's History of England*. There Morton noted Jones's socialism, advanced understanding of class struggle, and similarities with Marx, alongside his misjudgement and position on the "left wing" of Chartism, which involved a lack of support for insurrection as Chartism was in decline (Morton 1938, pp. 420–21, 425). In *The British Labour Movement*, Morton still noted Jones's failings, but now there was clear praise for Jones's important judgements, theoretical advancement, critical insights, and dedication in the face of heavy defeats, even to the point that Jones understood "the need for organisation and Chartism as a class force which was unique among Chartist leaders". Jones was now an "important recruit" to Chartism with "energy and courage", and, as Chartism declined, his "heroic efforts" (and those of others) were so important that without them, "it is very doubtful if the First International would have been possible in 1864" (Morton and Tate 1956, pp. 96–97, 103, 109).⁶

The praise of Jones is one example of Morton's reassessments, among others made in the 1950s (for a brief summary of his position in relation to historic millenarianism and utopianism, see Morton 1958a). Another important example was also associated with Netherwood, this time at a Historians' Group meeting in July 1954, where Morton gave what was at the time a celebrated paper on "The Role of the Common People in the History of British Capitalism" (Payne 1954). Despite the conference gaining something of a cult status, little emerged in the way of resulting publications. However, we get something of the sense of Morton's agenda in a short article in the Historians' Group bulletin, *Our History* (February 1955), where Morton reassessed the battle of Sedgemoor (6 July 1685). Morton argued against the idea that Sedgemoor was an isolated and senseless uprising and for the idea that it belonged to the English revolutionary struggle of the seventeenth century. This was a struggle that "always had an important left wing", which began with the Levellers, people who wanted to establish a "broad democratic republic based upon the small producers, the artisans and peasants". By 1685, the heirs of the Levellers were a collective force, a coalition ranging from Whig nobles to "thousands of obscure men and women". The nobles who led the coalition understood that they needed to build an

effective force with the support of the “common people” to promote a “programme of democratic rights and civil and religious liberty”. The rebellion may have failed, but it was “never the hopeless attempt”, as usually understood, but “a true people’s army, [which] came very close indeed to victory” (Morton 1955b; cf. Morton 1960).

Again, a comparison with *A People’s History of England* is instructive. While Morton always had an interest in the role of “the people”, in 1938, there was a recurring emphasis on the historic constraints on radical ideas taking hold in the pre-capitalist era, including a tendency to critique ultraleftism in English radical history. Sedgemoor itself, for instance, received little attention in *A People’s History of England*. While acknowledging that there was a “mass rising of the peasants and weavers more general than anything that had been seen since the days of Kett” (i.e., a famed mid-sixteenth-century uprising), it was “defeated without difficulty” and “hopeless from the start, as any such rebellion must have been so long as the Government maintained its hold on London” (Morton 1938, p. 275). Yet when Morton covered Sedgemoor in *The English Utopia*, the rebellion now heroically involved “the last defenders of Cokayne, the Utopia of all jolly fellows, of the proud, independent man, neither exploiting nor exploited, eating and drinking of his own abundance”. Morton made further arguments of their long-term relevance. The defeat of the “plebian element” in the revolution of the seventeenth century still helps us understand the victory of the bourgeois revolution and the rise of Whig dominance over “Catholic-feudal counter-revolution” (Morton 1952, p. 86). Morton also noted the potential power from below in the past, with the implication that such power could now reach its potential through the workers’ movement. Prior to the 1790s, so Morton argued in *The British Labour Movement*, the “great popular rising” at Sedgemoor was the last time the British ruling class “felt its position seriously threatened” (Morton and Tate 1956, pp. 25–26). The implication was that it could happen again, only this time more effectively and powerfully, a point he emphasised elsewhere (e.g., Morton 1958a, 1958b).

5. From Popular Front to Cold War

Put another way, the rhetoric of hope and praise of heroic failures was also an act of defiance or even overcompensation as the socialist future was failing to materialise in post-War Britain. The implicit message was that the 1950s might seem like a period of defeat, but unlike their historic precursors, working-class power had matured and was able to bring new victories on the road to socialism. The situation is also worth contrasting with the 1930s and the context in which *A People’s History of England* was written. The rise of fascism in the 1930s led to the Communist Party developing a broad, non-sectarian Popular Front line, incorporating, for instance, Communists, socialists, social democrats, and liberals to defeat the new enemy. Fascism, from the Popular Frontist perspective among Communists, was seen as a decaying, reactionary form of capitalism and an impediment to the transformation from capitalism to socialism. Communists were encouraged to defend democratic states against the threat of fascists and against ruling-class collaboration with fascists. This, too, involved the promotion of homegrown progressive movements in different countries, which Communists were prompted to place at the heart of national cultural life while connecting historic struggles with present ones.⁷

The Popular Front cultural agenda in Britain came through, for example, the popular and influential Left Book Club (LBC), set up in 1936 by Victor Gollancz, Stafford Cripps, and John Strachey, Labour members who had some Communist sympathies. *A People’s History of England* was published in the LBC series, and itself shows clear signs that it was a Popular Frontist work in its own right. For instance, Morton presented the English uprising of 1381 as a broad, disciplined, non-sectarian coalition against the ruling class. This “Great Society” was a “nation-wide body” that “prepared a programme of demands that gave a unified character to the rising”. The uprising may have emerged from a “background of primitive Communism, strongly Christian in character” and featured “preachers of Communism” such as the apocalyptic priest John Ball, but it was a movement grounded in compromise in order to make it a national movement. Thus, when the rebels made their

demands, they eventually made sure that there was “no trace of Communism” in them, and the circumstances ensured that they “were probably a minimum upon which all were agreed” (Morton 1938, pp. 119–20, p. 124).

By the same Popular Frontist rationale, Morton was also critical of the excesses of ultraleftism, utopianism, and pacifism in *A People's History of England*. As radical agitation declined after 1652, its “essential weakness” was still seen in Quaker pacifism and a “naïve Utopian Communism”. Indeed, Morton was forthright in his words about the radical religious groups of the English Revolution, foreshadowing the mistakes of the political sects of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The “primitive Communism” of Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers was a “backward turning face” of the Leveller movement and hampered by their pacifism, which caused “hesitation and inactivity in moments of crisis” (Morton 1938, pp. 249–50). By way of contrast (and with failings duly acknowledged), Oliver Cromwell was able to lead the English Revolution by navigating competing religious and material interests. In the face of Levellers and their demands for radical democratic reform, Cromwell knew that in such a Parliament, “the revolutionaries would be in a small minority”. Unlike the Levellers, Cromwell recognised that “abstract principles were infinitely less important than the practical necessity of maintaining power”. And thus, for all his errors and dubious loyalties, Cromwell and the Commonwealth were able to bring some “solid gains to the working classes” and, in the long run, pave the way for progressive development and the decisive overthrow of the old feudal order (Morton 1938, pp. 242–43, p. 250).

Morton's shift in emphasis by the 1950s then involved rethinking such religious radicalism in English history. Indeed, Morton had already published, if somewhat obscurely, some of his reassessment of possible ultraleftism of the English past in a CPGB pamphlet, *The Story of the English Revolution* (Morton 1949). This pamphlet was a commemoration of the three-hundredth anniversary of the execution of Charles I (1649), but in terms of rethinking radical religion, it also anticipated his arguments in *The English Utopia*.

Here, Morton explained in a familiar way the importance of Cromwell, the destruction of the feudal order, and the development of capitalism, with one eye on how contemporary capitalism could no longer be seen as a progressive force. But there was some updating in light of post-War developments. In the aftermath of the People's War against the Nazis, *The Story of the English Revolution* foregrounded the importance of soldiers and democratic change and the opposition they faced. Moreover, the Levellers were now “a new political party of the left. . .standing for the exploited small producers”, pushing for changes in democracy, taxation, tithes, and religious toleration, which would help improve the conditions of “the masses”. However, the defeat of the Levellers in the Army and a lack of support for them outside London dashed the chances of their “ultimate success”. Again, with clear implications for the end of the 1940s, this struggle for democracy and military energies was redirected into “a colonial war” (Morton 1949, pp. 8–11).

Certainly, the fundamental arguments are the same as in *A People's History of England*, but equally clear is the changing emphasis. Thus, Cromwell was “probably correct” in thinking that too much democracy would result in counter-revolution, but the “tragedy” of the Levellers and the Revolution as a whole was that they provided a glimpse of the future while their class base among small independent producers belonged to the past. There was no developed working class “which alone could have afforded a firm basis for a fully democratic revolution such as they desired” (Morton 1949, pp. 11–13). But in 1949, there was. This change in emphasis meant greater focus on the far-reaching (if unintended) consequences of the Revolution and what could not be achieved then could be achieved now. In the long run, then, the English Revolution “opened the path” to socialism. Despite the English Revolution ultimately being a bourgeois revolution, the primitive Communists (note again the capital “C” here, for Morton) around Winstanley and the Diggers were “remarkably foresighted” in anticipating modern socialist understandings. The English Revolution inaugurated the masses into national politics, and the Levellers began a “glorious succession”, namely in bringing about a radical tradition that continued

to the present. The Levellers were defeated, but what they stood for was not and “is today visibly approaching victory”, led in these “new conditions” by the Communist Party representing the working class (Morton 1949, pp. 13–16).

6. English Radical Tradition and the Norman Yoke

The tension between a Cromwellian-style dedication to discipline and victory, on the one hand, and sympathies with the ambitious aspirations of the Levellers and Diggers, on the other, was felt elsewhere among the Historians’ Group and set the scene for further developments in the 1950s of the English radical tradition which was typically understood to have ranged from John Ball and the 1381 uprising, through the seventeenth-century revolution, and onward to its maturation in the working-class movement (see Schwarz 1982). One such development came from Dona Torr, an influential mentor in the Historians’ Group. Torr could not finish her biography of the socialist and trade unionist Tom Mann (1856–1941) and enlisted the help of Morton and Christopher Hill, with chapters 6 and 7 written by Hill and chapters 8 and 9 by Morton “at her request and from her own voluminous notes” (foreword to Torr 1956). The book was published in 1956, shortly before Torr’s death.

The chapters written by Morton and Hill form an interlude to the biographical character of the rest of the book. In this interlude, Mann is placed in a long, historic tradition of homegrown revolutionaries. John Ball and the uprising of 1381 function as the starting point for this tradition, with the English Revolution functioning as a turning point in the transformation of “the popular traditions”. This transformation marked the beginning of the shift from backward-looking myths (e.g., Garden of Eden, Anglo-Saxon golden age) to a forward-looking determination to build a better society in the future (Torr 1956, p. 110). Morton’s writing covered the late seventeenth century through to Chartism. While familiar territory for those with knowledge of *A People’s History of England*, there was now a greater emphasis on the legacy of this tradition and its relevance for the present. The story highlighted peasants and artisans, Levellers pleading their cause, the significance of Sedgemoor, the shift from “the people” to “the mob”, and “the labouring poor” of the eighteenth century. A new progressive class was to emerge from this background “to make good *its* claim” (italics original) to be called “the people” (Torr 1956, pp. 132–33).

To what extent did Morton share such overt views about England’s radical past? Certainly, there are typical Morton concerns in the chapters for which he took responsibility, though ones obviously shared by others in the Historians’ Group. There is also a similar reassessment of the Chartist Ernest Jones (Torr 1956, pp. 160–61) to that which Morton published in *The British Labour Movement*. But it is also clear that Morton took seriously that he was writing up the research of another. As he put it in a letter to Edwin Payne (17 June 1955), “Meanwhile I have just had the vast mass of Dona Torr stuff on which I rashly promised to work. God help me” (Morton 1955a). In general terms, however, Morton shared these views on the radical tradition, even if he might otherwise have framed things differently. That they were shared by Morton is not only implied by *The English Utopia* and *The Story of the English Revolution* but is further supported by his review in the *Daily Worker* of the festschrift for Torr. Not only did Morton lavish praise on Torr and her influence (“there is no one living in England to whom Marxist historical studies owe more”), but he chose to focus on an especially influential essay by Hill on the history of the myth of the Norman Yoke. Hill argued that the once popular stories of a past Golden Age, and specifically the myth of an ideal world of Anglo-Saxon liberties destroyed by the Norman invasion of 1066, were absorbed by the working-class movement and transformed into socialist hopes for the future (Hill 1954). Such “anti-Normanism”, Morton commented, was part of the struggle against feudalism and had “an important influence on radical and revolutionary thought for at least 200 years”. Morton also highlighted Hill’s argument about a sense of Englishness among the common people and the maturation of centuries of struggle into “our Socialism”, which is “truly national” (*Daily Worker* [30 December 1954]).

That Morton accepted such views in the 1950s about the importance of a homegrown progressive tradition is implied elsewhere, too. Chronological constraints meant that he was unable to develop them in detail under his own name and analogous history in *The British Labour Movement*. Nevertheless, there are indications that Morton himself held such views. For example, Morton claimed that “there had been popular movements of various kinds” and the eighteenth century already had an established tradition of “profound popular dissatisfaction” which “express[ed] itself in riot or arson, or in the fervours of Methodism” or in the revival of older Leveller traditions of mass pamphleteering and mass petitions. And “in a sense, socialist ideas in England had a long and splendid history”, from John Ball through Thomas More to Gerrard Winstanley and hopes for a commonwealth where all things were shared in common. These traditions may have been backward-looking, but they still contained the “seeds of the future”. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century, when wage-earners began to emerge as a mass movement, that the half-forgotten ideas from the seventeenth century took on a different form in the “new socialism” (Morton and Tate 1956, pp. 8, 11–13). Indeed, the case becomes stronger when we look at the longer trajectory of Morton’s career and his work on the progressivism and influence of the seventeenth-century Ranters which he was developing in the 1950s but came to fruition in his book on the subject in 1970 (Morton 1970).

7. Questions of Influence

As all this implies, Morton’s influence on the British Marxist tradition and its understanding of religious radicalism also has to be brought forward from his more obscure publications and his activity among the Historians’ Group. We might note, for instance, the agenda-setting paper Morton gave at Netherwood in 1954 on “The Role of the Common People in the History of British Capitalism”, which paved the way for the development of the much-vaunted phenomenon of ‘history from below.’ As Hobsbawm (1978, p. 38) put it of Morton’s paper, “We could hardly suspect that ‘history from below’ would, some twenty years later, be one of the most flourishing fields of study”.⁸ We might also note that the most celebrated works among twentieth-century British historians were histories of religious radicalism, millenarianism, and progressive political thought produced by Hill, Hilton, Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, and Dorothy Thompson (e.g., Hobsbawm 1959, 1969; Thompson 1963, [1955] 1977, 1984; Hill 1972; Hilton 1973). As the above discussion shows, these influential historians were all anticipated by the now lesser-known Morton.

For instance, Morton’s argument about the transformation into the cause of the socialism of a fantastical vision of Cokayne and the history of English utopianism and millenarianism was soon echoed by Hobsbawm in an influential publication on the study of millenarianism and apocalypticism. In 1959, Hobsbawm published *Primitive Rebels*, where he developed his argument that pre-modern forms of social agitation associated with millenarians and bandits in southern Europe adapted, modified, or died in the face of capitalism (Hobsbawm 1959, 1969). The fantastical alternative to a world of injustice and exploitation offered by millenarians fed into or was rendered obsolete by revolutionary politics and bureaucratized resistance to capitalism. Morton reviewed Hobsbawm’s book favourably, focusing on the uneven development of historical epochs much in line with Morton’s presentation of societal evolution in *A People’s History of England* and his statements elsewhere on how millenarian groups survive and fade away (e.g., Morton 1958a, 1958b). This was to highlight how, in areas where capitalism was “weakly developed”, peasant struggles linger even in very recent history and can become “Communist strongholds” and contribute to modern socialism. Morton observed Communist precursors, including the survival of the “revolutionary teachings” of the “mystic” Joachim of Fiore and the nineteenth-century “prophet” David Lazzaretti, who was shot while proclaiming that the Republic of God inspired Communists (*Daily Worker* [30 April 1959]—see also Morton 1958a).

We can hardly give Morton full credit for the works of his one-time Historians’ Group comrades, of course, or downplay other influences on the younger British Marxist historians.

Hill, for instance, was an early leader among the Historians' Group and already a recognised Party authority on the seventeenth century who also provided feedback for the new edition of *A People's History of England* published in 1948 (Hill n.d.). E. P. Thompson had already undertaken work on William Morris, and Rodney Hilton had published (with H. Fagan) a detailed study of the 1381 uprising (Fagan and Hilton 1950). Such work was, as we have seen, a collaborative project in the peak years of the Historians' Group before the international Communist crises of 1956–1957. Indeed, the very nature of the Historians' Group meant intensive collaboration, including, of course, revisions to *A People's History of England* and Morton's work on Torr's extensive notes. As Morton put it in the foreword to *The British Labour Movement*, the development of the book "continued at all stages by written and verbal criticisms and suggestions from a very large number of people" (Morton and Tate 1956, p. 8). Nevertheless, that Morton's work on English history was a prompt for the formation of the Historians' Group and that he was tasked with developing key projects tell us how important a figure he was and how his work was a marker of the development of their ideas.

We have already noted the CPGB's response to a changing post-War world as integral for understanding the shifting emphases in Morton's publications and why Morton was suited to the task of being a leading propagandist. While always a disciplined advocate of the Party line, Morton had friendships conducive to an appreciation of apocalyptic or millenarian ideas in human history. For example, during his time as a teacher in Steyning (1924–1927), Morton struck up a friendship with the poet and publisher Victor Neuburg, with whom he remained close until Neuburg's death in 1940. Neuburg had been a disciple and lover of the occultist and magician Aleister Crowley, and Neuburg's home was the place to discuss radical history and William Blake (a figure to whom Morton would repeatedly return and locate in the history of progressive English millenarianism, e.g., Morton 1958b) in an otherwise sleepy, conservative Steyning (see, e.g., Calder-Marshall 1951, pp. 13–15, 42–43; Fuller [1965] 2005, pp. 263–70; McNeff 2005). Another slightly less maverick influence in Morton's life to whom Morton was close was his father-in-law, T. A. Jackson, the working-class autodidact, founder member of the CPGB, and advocate of promoting the importance of John Ball, as well as William Morris.⁹

Another notable moment in the development of Morton's ideas was when he moved to Leiston, Suffolk. Morton frequented the nearby Eel's Foot Inn, where local fishermen and agricultural workers would sing, dance, and perform music, with Morton himself joining in. Morton and his friend, the folksong collector A. L. Lloyd, managed to get the BBC to record an evening of frivolities on 13 May 1939, which was later broadcast on 29 July 1939 and repeated on 13 May 1940 (see, e.g., Arthur 2012, pp. 186–91, 195; Morton 1984; Howson 2022). One performance was of the relatively recent American song, "Poor Man's Heaven", which looks to a land of plenty and an overthrowing of the rich and would be taken up in *The English Utopia*—indeed, "Poor Man's Heaven" is the name of the crucial opening chapter on Cokaygne and its history of influence. It was around this time that Morton's interest in utopianism and the potential of radical religion clearly intensified.¹⁰ For instance, in 1941 (Morton [1941] 1945), he wrote "Promise of Victory: A Note on the Negro Spiritual", which looked at the widespread appeal of these songs, which Morton admired greatly, and their hopes for a better world. This sort of understanding of the emancipatory potential of the oppressed would, of course, later take off in theological and biblical studies circles through hugely influential Liberation Theology, which sometimes complemented, and was sometimes in tension with, the 'scientific' emphases of the British Marxist historians less interested in theological advocacy.¹¹

8. Looking Forward

The late 1940s and 1950s were crucial years in the framing of religious radicalism among British Marxist historians, particularly through the famed Communist Party Historians' Group. While we cannot 'measure' precise influence, there is little doubt that Morton was an integral figure in the development of British Marxist history generally and their

understanding of religious radicalism and utopianism specifically. At the very least, the development in Morton's work from *A People's History of England* to *The English Utopia* and other publications of the 1950s is indicative of an influential period in the development of English Marxist thinking and the shift from qualified criticisms of anti-leftist tendencies to seeing such ideas as precursors to and influences on socialist and Communist thinking. The arguments that millenarianism, apocalypticism, and utopianism could be seen as, on the one hand, indicative of historical constraints and material interests of their day and, on the other, holding emancipatory insight is part of an intellectual and scholarly tradition that remains strong to this day. The question of which hand is presented or raised highest will depend on the scholar and intellectual tradition, of course, as well as the extent of (liberation-) theological interests of the interpreter. It is also, of course, a tension that goes back to Marx and Engels and, no doubt, earlier still.

As the more sympathetic scholarly readings of religious radicalism were being crystallised in the 1950s, so too were the more hostile scholarly readings of religious excess, fanaticism, utopianism, apocalypticism, millenarianism, and radicalism, particularly through the influence of Norman Cohn (Cohn 1957) and his *Pursuit of the Millennium*. I have argued elsewhere that the Cohn tradition is a dominant legacy framing historical and contemporary understandings of religious radicalism in liberal scholarship, now updated in light of post-Cold War politics and class interests, particularly in North America (Crossley 2021). British Marxist historians represent a competing intellectual legacy, which Morton and others recognised (Hill 1957; Morton 1958a), and Morton's place in the nascent academic tradition should be regarded as being as significant as Cohn's in the liberal wing of scholarship. Morton, too, belongs to a tradition that has been updated, particularly in light of post-1968 developments on the left and questions of race, postcolonialism, gender, and sexuality, sometimes influenced by the direct intellectual lineage of the British Marxist historians (e.g., Rowbotham 1972).

Yet while tendencies in the thinking of Morton and the British Marxist historians in sympathetic scholarly readings of utopianism, apocalypticism, and millenarianism clearly remain (e.g., critiques of American imperialism, egalitarian hopes), what has largely been lost is their hard historical materialist approach grounded in class struggle. In religious studies and related fields, this can be explained by the fragmentation of the post-1968 left, Cold War hostilities towards the Soviet Union, and the historic suspicion in theology and biblical studies of supposed atheistic Marxism (see Crossley 2019). The much-vaunted anti-imperialist readings of Christian origins in the 1990s and 2000s typically have a softened Marxism at most and are more a product of a genteel liberal-theological vision based on values of justice, love, humility, and 'subversiveness' (cf. Myles 2016) rather than theorising about, or agitating for, the roles of Christians in relation to the mode of production or an inspiration for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Yet the work of Morton and the British Marxist historians has not been fully debunked in the critical study of utopian, millenarian, and apocalyptic movements, individuals, and texts. Instead, it is a legacy that has had its hard Marxist sting removed to suit the interests and anxieties of liberal academia.

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Notes

- ¹ For discussion of the British Marxist historians and their influence, see, e.g., (Hobsbawm 1978; Schwarz 1982; Kaye 1984; Parker 1997, 2008; Ashman 1998; Perry 2002, pp. 88–94; Renton 2005; King 2015; Thompson 2017; White 2021, pp. 103–11).

- ² As Morton put it elsewhere of early twentieth-century history: “We see the Welfare State in embryo used as a weapon to reconcile the workers to a situation in which prices and profits were soaring and wages tailing behind”. See *Daily Worker* (11 September 1952).
- ³ Exceptions include, e.g., *Daily Worker* (4 November 1948); *World News and Views* (5 June 1948). In 1950, Morton was also physically attacked (and physically defended) in a lively argument over American wars at Belchamp Walter village pond—see, e.g., *Bury Free Press* (1 September 1950).
- ⁴ For an overview of the CPGB on American imperialism, culture, and context, see, e.g., (Callaghan and Harker 2011, pp. 164–85; Callaghan 2003, pp. 85–138; Harker 2021, pp. 76–108).
- ⁵ We should also note that what was effectively the manifesto of the CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism* (Communist Party of Great Britain 1951), took up issues of an American threat to world peace and the importance of developing a distinctly British route towards socialism.
- ⁶ Morton claimed that the arguments of John Saville changed his mind: *World News and Views* (5 April 1952).
- ⁷ The key speech and text at the time is (Dimitrov 1935). For discussion of Popular Frontism, see, e.g., (Samuel 1980, pp. 41–42; Branson 1985, pp. 110–264; Morgan 1989, pp. 33–68; Beckett [1995] 1998, pp. 60–70; Woodhams 2001, pp. 23–34; Linehan 2010, pp. 31–51; Harker 2011, 2021, pp. 28–37; Crossley 2022, pp. 348–60).
- ⁸ See also, e.g., (Hobsbawm 1978, pp. 37–38), “his pioneer paper. . . it was much admired”; (Schwarz 1982, p. 73), “The defining, central and much admired paper”. Morton would give the paper again. See, e.g., (Payne 1954); *Daily Worker* (1 January 1955).
- ⁹ See, e.g., *Daily Worker* (28 June 1950); *Daily Worker* (31 July 1950); *Daily Worker* (9 November 1950); *Daily Worker* (3 March 1953).
- ¹⁰ See, e.g., *Daily Worker* (28 June 1939); *Daily Worker* (9 August 1939).
- ¹¹ Hill even has an appendix on Liberation Theology in *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (Hill 1993, pp. 447–51). Overlapping concerns raised by the British Marxist historians and Liberation Theology can be seen, to lesser or greater degree, in the work of biblical scholars such as Norman Gottwald, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Richard Horsley, and Christopher Rowland, for instance. In theology today, Katherine Keller is arguably the most prominent advocate of this tradition updated in light of the pandemic. Quite the extent to which the aforementioned share or shared the type of Marxism associated with Morton and the Historians’ Group is another issue, but the overlaps and similarities in this developing tradition are clear enough.

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