

A. L. Morton: a tribute

Paul Meier

He died in his eighties, but his youthful spirit was such that his death came as a grievous surprise. What characterised him was his clarity, his exact analyses, the logical structure of all his work.

I first knew him in 1961. I had just published a critical edition, in French, of *News from Nowhere*, and he had been struck by the interpretation which, in my Introduction, I had given to Morris's mediaevalism. He invited me to visit him in the remarkable old house in Clare, in Suffolk, where he and Vivien were living. This was the beginning of a long friendship, sustained by many visits which we paid to Clare and the Mortons paid to us in the Vendée, as well as by our letters. More than all our other affinities, it was the common admiration for William Morris that was the cement of this friendship.

Leslie had from the beginning influenced my research by the important chapter he had given to Morris in his book *The English Utopia*, and I had taken from it the striking saying: "Morris's is the first Utopia which is not Utopian." I may say that all my own research is the development of this profound and fundamental thought. This book, which will remain a classic, studies the long course of utopian thought in England, and the economic and social background which at every stage has determined its form and its content.

Utopia was always a central interest of Leslie Morton's, and his critical edition of selected texts of Robert Owen, of which I had the great pleasure to publish a French edition, was an important stage in his studies in the subject.

Many, many times he has popularised Morris's ideological message, in articles, in lectures and seminars, and members of the William Morris Society will have in mind the lecture in the GDR which was published not long ago in our *Journal* for Autumn 1986.

Leslie was above all a great historian and, in this respect, a true pioneer. Already before the Second World War he had become well-known with his *People's History of England* which was the first marxist move into this territory and went through many editions, each carefully revised. With all its firm ideology, this book is free from dogmatism and, even though one might not always agree with him, it contains profound intuitions which will always have to be taken into account. Not less useful is his book, written in collaboration

with George Tate, on *The British Labour Movement*. He was also a specialist in the ideology of Puritanism, and his book *The World of the Ranters* is full of interest. And lastly, let me bring to mind his collection of essays under the title *The Matter of Britain*, in which there is a remarkable study of William Blake.

It would be wrong to close this very incomplete account without adding that he was a sensitive, graceful poet, and the *Collected Poems* through which blows the wind of his native Suffolk are to be read with pleasure.

And all this leads us to William Morris, who also felt his local roots. Leslie Morton was no more than Morris a “simple lifer”, but like him he detested the clutter of luxury and the civilisation of gadgetry. At Clare, in The Old Chapel, he tended his own garden, and I have never tasted better apples than those from his trees. He was also a quiet militant who did not think himself above the humblest of tasks. I recall having gone out with him, one freezing morning in a Christmas vacation, when he took his turn at selling the *Morning Star*. He walked with great strides, and sometimes I had hard work to keep up with him. At each stop I listened to him talking very simply with the farm workers who bought the paper and heard him with respect. This, too, was Leslie Morton. I recall his saying to me that he would have loved to sell *Commonweal* in the same way.