

H. V. MORTON, 1892-1979

Henry Volla Morton was one of the most successful travel writers of this century. He had the ability to transform his readers into armchair travellers, who, once started on one of his books, found it difficult to put it down before the end.

Although born at Ashton-under-Lyne he spent his childhood and youth in Moseley, and attended King Edward's High School in New Street. His father J. V. Morton was editor-in-chief of the Pearson Group of newspapers. He came to Birmingham to take up the Job of Editor of the Birmingham Mail, and the family settled down at 'Capri', a large house (number 126) at the top of Church Road.

Henry ignored his parents' advice and entered the precarious world of journalism, and his first Job was with the Birmingham Gazette and Express. Here he learned the business of newspaper production; by 1912 he had become an assistant editor, but his ambitions led him to London, where he worked for the Empire Magazine, and later for the Evening Standard and the Daily Mail, but the onset of war led him to a commission in the Warwickshire Yeomanry.

In 1918 Morton returned to journalism at the Standard. In 1923 he was working on the Daily Express, and was lucky enough to be sent out with the archaeological expedition to Egypt led by Lord Caernarvon. They had located the lost tomb of Tutankhamun at Luxor, and were about to begin excavations when Morton arrived on the scene, one of only three reporters present at the opening. His brilliant description of the event was circulated to over a hundred newspapers, and his name became known throughout the world.

When Morton returned home, he was asked to write a series of articles on London. The resulting colourful pieces were reminiscent of Dickens, and they were issued in book form by Methuen in 1925 under the title "The Heart of London", and this was reprinted many times. Three other volumes on London followed, and eventually they were all brought together as "H. V. Morton's London" in 1940. Morton was taken seriously ill in the Middle East during the 1920's while on a newspaper assignment, and he decided that if he recovered he would make a personal Journey of discovery throughout his homeland. "I would go home in search of England", he wrote; "I would go through the lanes of England, and the little thatched villages, and I would lean over English bridges and lie on English grass watching an English sky." The result of this was a book - "In Search of England" - which sold over a million copies in England alone. Now regarded as one of the classic English tours, it is still in print in paperback form. Morton's mastery of narrative, coupled with his ability to get on with everyone he met, and to draw a story out of them, led to a succession of similar books, notably "In Search of Scotland" and "In Search of Wales".

Morton was now so successful that many other commissions came his way, And he had several other books published in the thirties and forties. He received an advance of £10,000 on a book about the Holy Land, resulting In the best selling book of 1935, "In the Steps of the Hunter", the first edition selling over 100,000 copies. He later returned to this theme with "In the Steps of St Paul" and "In the Lands of the Bible". During the last war, Morton was sent to cover the Churchill-Roosevelt meetings which resulted in the Atlantic Charter, and his book on the subject is called "Atlantic Meeting". After the war, Morton accepted an invitation from General Smuts to go to South Africa. He and his wife were so taken with that country that they bought a farm and built a house thirty miles from Capetown. This was his home for the rest of his life, and resulted in the book "In Search of South Africa". He died in 1979 at the age of 86, and his ashes were scattered in the grounds of his beloved South African home. In all Morton wrote thirty-nine books, most of them on travel.

Fred Price