



Jane Exall - "A Bosomy English Rose"

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Jane Exall used to frequent the Library where Larkin worked in Wellington, with her friend, Ruth Bowman. In the Philip Larkin Archive at the Brynmor Jones Library (where Larkin was Librarian from 1955 until his death in 1985) survive 13 letters which she wrote to Larkin 50 years ago. They are well preserved and the ink is still very clear. Larkin's letters to her have been lost but the main points of interest which emerge from her correspondence indicate that he acted as a referee when she applied for a new job; that he invited her to his work place in Leicester; that he took her out for a meal on his way home from Belfast and that he sent her photographs. All except one envelope survive; on some of them Larkin has made pencil drawings and scribbled notes.

In her first letter of January 1950, Jane, described in 'Wild Oats' as "bosomy rose with fur gloves on", writes from Birmingham where she has applied for a teaching post. She asks Larkin if he will act as her referee, and her second letter shows that he agreed. Her next communication is a postcard in which she accepts his invitation to have lunch with him in Leicester, confirming the date and advising him of her time of arrival. All are addressed to his mother's house at Dixon Drive in Leicester.

1950 was a year of change for Larkin. In the summer he broke off his engagement to Ruth Bowman and on the other hand he developed his relationship with Monica Jones. He was living with his mother and was desperate to break away. Partly to distance himself from these problems, he moved to the library of Queen's University in Belfast in the autumn.

According to Jane's next letter, Larkin arranged to meet her for lunch in Shrewsbury on his way home from Belfast for Christmas 1950. She declined subsequent invitations in May and September 1951, pleading the demands of her time-table. By January 1954, the letters were of a less personal nature and touched on more general topics such as the books of Larkin's friend, Bruce Montgomery, education, and details about the school where she taught. It is clear from her letter of December 1953 that Larkin was suffering from depression – probably on account of Winifred Arnott's forthcoming marriage.

It would seem from these letters that the substantiation for his claim, "I met beautiful twice" was based on the lunch dates in Leicester and Shrewsbury in February and December 1950. There is no evidence of further meetings although Jane suggests that

they might meet when Larkin visited Charles Madge, who admired his poetry, in Birmingham.

However, the letters do not suggest an intimate friendship; their mood is more that of old friends sharing memories. She obviously felt doubtful about developing the friendship with Larkin on account of his relationship with Ruth Bowman, although her name is never mentioned. Occasionally she uses loss of his address for not maintaining the correspondence. The truth is she probably lost interest since, beauty as she was, she was no doubt much in demand.

As for Larkin, by meeting Jane he was no doubt able to obtain information about Ruth who refused to have anything to do with him after the engagement was broken off. Jane also provided a measure of equilibrium in the wake of other emotional entanglements which threatened to de-stabilise him, in particular his developing relationship with Patsy, the wife of his colleague, Colin Strang, and the loss of Winifred Arnott who was about to marry.

Kingsley Amis, who was inclined to be critical of Larkin's women friends, approved of Jane, which in turn made Larkin boast about her to his friend. After Larkin's death, Amis, writing to Bob Conquest, referred cynically to a letter he had had from Jane Exall, saying she regretted "the episode" with Larkin, meaning that she was sorry she had dated her friend [Ruth]'s lover and that she and Larkin had never been all that close.

Larkin apparently took a considerable number of photographs of Jane which, her letters suggest, he kept in an album exclusively devoted to her. At his request, she once sent him a photograph taken on holiday with a friend in Scotland, in which she claimed they looked "like an advertisement for baked beans"!

Considering the effect of her beauty on Larkin, it is possible that, in addition to 'Wild Oats' which we know was inspired by two snaps of Jane, 'Essential Beauty' and 'Sunny Prestatyn' were also prompted by thoughts of her. Both poems are about failure and resignation in the face of unattainable beauty. All three poems were written in 1962. The mutilation of the girl on the poster 'Sunny Prestatyn' makes me wonder if Larkin defaced Jane's photograph.