



LARKIN AT HULL

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At the first meeting of Hull University Senior Common Room in October or November 1962, a few weeks after I arrived from Cambridge, I complained bitterly about the Common Room Bar. This was, and remained for many years, a kind of jug-and-bottle hole-in-the-wall in the corner of the old Common Room, (now part of the Geography Department, and formerly part of the University Library). Afterwards, as I slumped frustrated in one of the NAAFI-type easy chairs which graced that singularly ungracious room, a tall, gangling man, a trifle awkward in speech and gait, came over to me, introduced himself as the University Librarian, and said, with one or two self-deprecatory coughs, how much he agreed with me.

Larkin and I soon found that we had other interests in common apart from beer -- jazz most notably, also cricket and cemeteries -- and we remained friends of a kind until I left Hull for good in 1981. After that I suppose I saw him a couple of times on my infrequent return visits to the University, and I received a handful of wonderfully atrabilious letters from him.

Of course, his self-protective reticence and his singularity are well known, and he was not a friend in any deep sense. During term we met almost daily in the Library or in the bar, where we both drank rather more than was good for us, (though it was noticeable that however much Philip drank he was never drunk in any serious sense). He came to my house several times, alone or with Maeve Brennan, and in fact it was there that he watched the screening of the BBC Monitor programme devoted to him in 1964, ice-cold with embarrassment and wriggling. (He resisted the purchase of a set of his own until he moved to Newland Park in the 1970s, I think, though he was sometimes to be seen watching snippets of Test Matches in shop windows.) He got on very well with my wife, and on one occasion we even penetrated his eyrie in Pearson Park, where he and she found they had a common interest in the works of Beatrix Potter. (Hoping to hear a few tracks of Jelly-Roll Morton, I had to listen instead to what I thought was a very arch recording of 'Peter Rabbit'. However, his uninterest in our family life or background was profound, and something we all took for granted; I felt that he accepted us, as we

accepted him, in a curiously ad hoc manner; in the here-and-now, with no past and no future.

He seemed, incidentally, to have no feeling for children at all; they simply embarrassed and irritated him, and it is noticeable that they feature scarcely at all in his writings. This feeling extended even to students, whom he almost invariably referred to with mild irritation and contempt. (Students as a class or a body of people, that is; I believe he was courteous and helpful to a few individuals who approached him as would-be writers.)

He was rather a hypochondriac, but not pathologically so. He watched his health rather anxiously, as many bachelors are prone to do, but he was not a hunter of doctors' surgeries; in fact he never mentioned having a GP. When he mysteriously collapsed one day (before I came to Hull), he had himself shipped down to the London Clinic. Perhaps he is best described as a philosophical or fatalistic hypochondriac. It was also clear that he was rather depressed at the thought of his ultimate death, but who in his forties or fifties is not? The point is, nothing prepared me for the abject misery and horror of 'Aubade' in 1977, though it set some of his other poems, like 'The Old Fools', in perspective. It brought me to the rather sad conclusion that after fifteen years of his company I did not really know him at all. Nor did I feel that his attitude to death was something I could decently raise with him of my own volition.

In fact, such glimpses as we had of his deeper feelings were occasional and largely incidental, and the same may be said of his family relationships. He always spoke of his mother with a proper respect and dutiful affection which disguised any contrary feelings he may have had -- probably none. His sister and his niece were objects of mild and not unkind disparagement from time to time; he affected to be horrified when his niece chose a career in librarianship, but I suspect he was secretly pleased. (It was one of his conversational gambits to portray librarianship as a refuge for social misfits or emotional cripples, particularly men. He once told me, 'when a young man comes to see me and says he wants to be a librarian, I always feel like saying, "Tell me, my boy, *what* is wrong?"' I can only remember one anecdote relating to his father, the City Treasurer of Coventry, but that was rather hair-raising. According to Philip he had been an ardent follower of the Nazis, and attended several Nuremberg rallies in the 1930s; he even had a statue of Hitler on the mantelpiece which at the touch of a button leaped into the Nazi salute. Then and on other occasions I urged him to write his memoirs for publication, which for one thing would re-channel some of his abilities into prose, the prose he had so tantalisingly abandoned after *A Girl in Winter*, but he always dismissed the idea with a shrug and a grin.

His wit, his effortless choice of the *bon mot*, the searching sarcasm, the offbeat phrase, is almost legendary. Unfortunately it is almost impossible to reproduce it now, even if one could remember it, though it peeps out now and again from his verse, of course, and his occasional writings. For instance, his weary remark that, 'Much of modern Marvell criticism has a curiously inhibiting effect on one's ability to read the poems, just as the description of a chair in terms of whizzing molecules would make me afraid to sit down on it', gives an inkling of his conversational style, but only an inkling -- so does his wry little foreword to the bibliography of his writings by B. C. Bloomfield, which I came across only recently. I am chagrined to find that after all those years I can only recollect with any accuracy one witticism of his. This was on a baking, shirt-sleeve day in May or June; we met up on our way to lunch, and strolled round the outside of the building over

the grass towards the French doors of the Common Room. On the way we came across the well-endowed wife of one of the younger members of staff (in sociology, I think) sprawled out on her back in an exiguous bikini. We ignored her, needless to say, and pressed on to the bar, where I ordered a couple of drinks and made some banal comment like, 'Funny how a bit of sun brings 'em out'. 'Yes', said Philip, polishing his glasses abstractedly, 'my eyes were crawling all over her like hot little snails.' Then he suddenly clapped his glasses back on his head, as if to hold his eyes in.

In informal conversation (men only) he would also now and then utter some excremental or lavatorial oath, followed by a huge bellow of laughter, which was disconcerting in its abruptness, and seemed out of character in a man otherwise distinguished by a certain old-world courtesy. (This comes through in some of his writings; in remarks like 'Books are a load of crap', or the vocabulary used in 'Sunny Prestatyn'.) I suspect that these traits in the Great Man made him that bit more intimidating, and tended to narrow the circle of his habitual acquaintance. So did his gift for mimicry. He could hit off a person's diction, gestures and facial expression with amazing exactness, without apparently changing his own very much. (I am told that his imitation of me was uncannily accurate.)

Physically he ought to have been imposing, but in a curious way he wasn't; perhaps because he stooped when he was talking to you, perhaps because we just don't think of balding men with glasses as being big. It was not until I first saw the 'Monitor' programme, and watched the shots of his back as he walked away from the camera, that I realised he must be well over six foot, with the shoulders of a wrestler. He was rather self-conscious about his size 12 or 13 shoes, which had to be specially made for him, but they were not particularly noticeable, being in proportion to the rest of him, but it is true that he never *rose* from an easy chair, rather he *uncoiled* himself, in the Wodehouse idiom. I understand that when he first came to Hull in 1955 his dress was noticeably bohemian, with corduroy trousers, pink shirts, blue spotted bow ties and the like, but I think he had lost all this by the time I arrived. I remember him in a tweed jacket and slacks much of the time, sometimes with a bow tie of unremarkable pattern; many of his academic colleagues dressed in much the same way, of course. Only his use of a pocket watch marked him out as unusual; old-fashioned, perhaps, or slightly the dandy. He never looked very healthy; he was never really fat, though he lugubriously announced from time to time that he was on a diet, but there was a suggestion of pastiness about him, and not just in the face, and the piranha-fish grin he affected, which drove the extremities of his wide mouth up towards his ears like a Smiley's, seemed intended to conceal a rather dubious set of front teeth, carious and chipped. (Latterly I think he overcame his terror of dentists and had his teeth seen to; I certainly ceased to be conscious of them in later years; though I would emphasise that petty defects like this were obliterated by his magnetic geniality and charm, which are even more difficult to immortalise than his wit.)

Our mutual interest in jazz was not the bond it might have been. The trouble is, our tastes were so similar as to make argument or discussion redundant, and we owned much the same records, so we rarely listened to music together. But I do remember an evening we spent at the house of a mutual friend, John White, in Cottingham. Larkin slumped rather tiredly in a corner until John casually put on Earl Bostic's 'Flamingo', at which he suddenly levered himself to his feet and began shuffling silently round the room roughly in time to the music, his bulk accentuated by a low ceiling, which caused him to stoop. John and I watched in stupefaction. (I remember thinking he must be drunk, and was afraid he was going to fall on us at any moment; but he wasn't and he didn't.)

'Flamingo' clearly woke in him, as it did in me, memories of the great bands of the 1940s, of searching across the radio dial for the distorted signal of Radio Munich, or playing and replaying scratched Basie 78s in back bedrooms; his musical preferences are set out in *All What Jazz*. But I must say that his book shocked me somewhat. It seemed hypocritical for him to pretend to a liking for the moderns which was the reverse of his true feelings, and to carry on this charade for years in a popular newspaper. I am still surprised that reviewers did not accuse him of patent dishonesty, and it adds to my uneasiness about the sincerity of some of his poems, or their basis in reality. For instance, how could a man who had (so he assured me) never been to a race meeting in his life, or had much to do with horses, write 'At Grass'? Had the man who wrote 'The Explosion' ever been at a pithead when an accident occurred, or indeed near a pithead at all? Perhaps, but I doubt it. Similarly, what is the meaning of 'Wedding Wind', from a man who was never married?

However, over these years his fame grew prodigiously, of course. In 1962, coming from Cambridge, I had just about heard of Philip Larkin, as an up-and-coming poet on the literary fringe. I bought a copy of *The Less Deceived* more as an act of piety than anything, but I was at once enraptured. The publication of *The Whitsun Weddings* in 1964 made him a national figure, but in retrospect I feel it distanced him from us, and it is a matter of sorrow to me now that I never told him to his face how wonderful I thought his poetry was. I am sure others feel the same. I am rather disconcerted to find now that I only got him to autograph one volume of his poems -- and in fact he volunteered to do this. I was always wary of cultivating his company too much, or pressing for any extension of our rather casual relationship, lest he or others think I was just cultivating him because he was a celebrity. However, I cannot think of any of his colleagues, with the exception of Maeve Brennan, who could be called a close friend of his in the 1960s and 1970s; but few of us make friends of this kind in middle age, and always assumed that if he confided in anyone it was in people he had known in his youth, like Kingsley Amis, perhaps Bruce Montgomery.

Meanwhile the growth of the University in the 1960s, the rise of a new million-pound library over which he presided in glory, also distanced him from the generality. In 1962 -- even more so when he first arrived seven years before -- the University was a tiny place. In fact, it had only recently been raised to full University status, and some of my older staff in History never got out of the habit of referring to it as 'College'. I suppose the academic staff numbered less than five hundred, all working together on a rather cramped site of a few acres; everyone knew everybody else, including Larkin, if only to say 'hello' in passing. There was a tendency to cast him, affectionately and indulgently, as the village eccentric, and indeed it was a kind of academic village.

An enormous growth in the mid-1960s, and the expansion of the site to the north and east, soon destroyed this intimacy of contact; for us all, I suppose, but for Larkin especially. With the onset of late middle age he became more remote and Augustan, and I doubt if very many of the newly appointed staff in that period got to know him at all, though he did strike up new and lasting friendships with a few, such as Mike Bowen and Eddie Dawes. (His fellow poets, Douglas Dunn and Andrew Motion, were in a special category.) Moreover, with the increasing financial pressure of the seventies his role as Librarian, at the hub of the University's teaching and research, became more controversial, and some of his policies were the subject of unwelcome contestation and dispute. I myself, as head of the History department, had one volcanic row with him, at the height of which I demanded that Library Committee suspend him. This led to a

certain passing *froideur* in our professional dealings, but not our social relationships 'off limits'.

I have the impression that with rare exceptions, as above, he now moved within a quite narrow circle consisting of those he had known for some years and was comfortable with. His acerbic view of the married life of his colleagues, expressed in poems like 'Self's the Man' and 'Vers de Societé', must have restricted the casual invitations he received anyway; we all pondered the identity of 'Arnold', and a few subscriptions to *Which?* were abruptly cancelled. But he was rather upset when my wife taxed him with this, and when I casually remarked to him once that Mrs So-and-so was 'the archetypal staff wife' he told me with unusual asperity, 'Don't talk nonsense, John; all women are different . . . Hrrmph . . . very different.' In fact, though it seems he could never cope with women individually, in relation to himself, and he was eminently unmarriageable, he was in no sense misogynistic. Despite his poetic strictures on married life, I am sure that he liked our wives just as much as he did us, (perhaps more), and not just because they were 'safe'. He was scrupulous in his choice of library staff, but other things being equal, or almost equal, he was clearly in favour of the prettiest candidate. He took a proprietorial interest in 'his girls', and I well remember how irritated he was when he found that the staff of the university computer, which had been installed in the basement, were taking their tea and coffee breaks in the Library common room, and were no doubt 'chatting up' his assistants. I told him that if he tried to do anything about it he would look a perfect ass, perhaps worse. It is easy to forget that his working life was peopled with women, and to the best of my knowledge his relations with his staff, particularly with section heads like Brenda Moon and Maeve Brennan, and with his secretary, Betty Mackereth, were excellent. He commanded their loyalty and devotion absolutely.

It is also easy to forget, especially for those outside academic life, how much hard work was involved in running a major university library like the Brynmor Jones. I suppose once he had acquired a national reputation it would have been easy for Larkin to sink back on the role of a dilettante figurehead, but that was not his way. In particular the job involved him in a heavy round of committee work. Naturally he was permanent Secretary of the Library Committee; and while it is true that the composition of this committee, which always included the Vice Chancellor and the three Deans, with a chairman chosen from the senior professoriate with a view to his commitment to library matters, enabled it to get things done, and Senate very rarely queried its recommendations, this did not necessarily make it a bed of roses for him; what a group of self-confident and dogmatic senior professors and administrators wanted was not necessarily in the best interests of the Library as he saw it. When I sat on that committee as Dean of Arts, 1965-67, I admired the skill with which he led us, as it were, from behind; not pushing himself forward, rarely venturing an opinion unless he was asked, but solid as a rock, his silences as pregnant as other men's speeches. Above all, he never allowed himself to be treated, as he easily might have been, as a mere technical adviser.

It was the same when I sat with him on the Library Stage II Project Committee, 1965-69 or thereabouts. There he established an easy, deferential but possessive influence over the chairman, Basil Reckitt, a rather formidable millionaire businessman, and a more chummy relationship with the various components of the firm of Castle, Park, Dean and Hook. He was also Chairman of the Publications Committee throughout, and of the Bookshop Committee from 1959. In fact, for five years he virtually *was* the Bookshop Committee, which was an *ad hoc* channel for complaint, without any statutory existence.

In 1964, at Senate's behest, he made a tour of other university bookshops up and down the land which resulted in a masterly report; urbane, judicious and unsparing; which ought to be in the published bibliography of his works but is not. (Here at least he managed to evade the vigilance of Mr Bloomfield.)¹ His recommendations -- particularly the elevation of the Bookshop Committee into an official Senate committee -- were accepted, and I subsequently sat on the new Bookshop Committee for three years or so, admiring the diplomatic skill with which he dealt on the one hand with the rather obdurate and old-fashioned local firm which then ran the bookshop and on the other hand with impatient students and unrealistic staff who expected a small provincial firm to match the resources and the expertise of a Blackwells or a Heffers. He never ceased to press for a larger, more efficient bookshop in extended premises, and it is owing to him that Hull University now enjoys such a fine bookshop, offering general as well as academic service, in the new Union Building.

As for his actual running of the Library, I have sometimes wondered, rather heretically, whether he was such a good librarian as he was generally reputed to be, or whether he acquired that reputation as a kind of compliment to his literary gifts. Some aspects of his rule, and it was a very firm rule, were profoundly irritating; for instance, his stand against the establishment of departmental libraries, which I suppose was understandable in general terms, though it was contrary to the practice of many, if not most other universities, was pressed to absurd lengths, so that a department's possession of a standard reference work like the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* was regarded with dark suspicion. Of course, from the moment Philip arrived in 1955 he was engaged in planning a new library (Stage I), and within twelve months of its opening in 1959 planning began for the much larger and more innovative Stage II, completed in 1969. By then he was in his mid-fifties, he was still faced by a multitude of 'running-in' problems, and he was probably somewhat drained. Thereafter he was certainly all for the quiet life and a minimum of change, arguably not the right attitude during a period of rapid advance in the techniques of information storage and retrieval; departmental heads who pressed him on such matters became distinctly *persona non grata*, and for some of the more persistent he conceived a pathological hatred which seemed foreign to his nature. Thus the computerisation of the Library, a process he always affected not to understand, was belatedly carried through by his Deputy, Brenda Moon. He relied on her a great deal, as he was always ready to admit, and her departure to Edinburgh in 1980 was a severe blow at a difficult time.

His attitude to fame was a trifle ambivalent; he dismissed its grosser manifestations with genial contempt, and he positively winced when the Vice-Chancellor referred to him, as he sometimes did, as 'Our Poet-Librarian'. He affected a great contempt for the London literary world -- 'Layabouts', he said, 'parasites', 'poufters the lot of them' -- and he cherished his image as a solitary recluse holed up on the edge of nowhere in one of England's least fashionable cities. But to those who knew him well it was clear that he took a quiet, gloating satisfaction in his soaring national fame, accepting it as no more than his due. (Though he was the last to parade his own genius in any way, he would have been the last to deny it.) He grumbled prodigiously, but he rather liked being feted; for instance, he relished the fact that London-based luminaries like Miriam Gross were willing to commit themselves to the unknown horrors of Inter-City British Rail in order to interview him. He would complain now and again that whenever the professor of (say) Urdu was entertaining visiting firemen he would be called on to join the party, and paraded as one of the local sights. I pointed out that it was very easy to say 'no', especially

since such invitations were usually extended at the last moment, but he would shrug and say, 'Oh well, everyone knows I'm available most evenings'. It was a rather endearing, though unexpected, foible in him that as honorary degree succeeded honorary degree the D.Litts, D.Univs, Litt.Ds and D.Phils marched remorselessly across the top of his official notepaper, which as a result had to be amended almost every year, and he was rather miffed -- unusually for him -- when I told him that he ought to be addressed as 'The Doctors Larkin', not 'Dr Larkin'. (This was before Hull gave him a professorship.)

For such a celebrated literary figure he took surprisingly little part in the cultural life of the University -- in fact, so far as I know, none at all. His personal relations with senior members of the Department of English, such as John Norton Smith, Ray Brett and John Chapple, were excellent, but he steadfastly refused to give lectures or seminars or even a reading of his own poems, though it seems that he relaxed this last embargo after I left in 1981. He had no room for formal literary criticism, an attitude which comes through here and there in *Required Writing*.

Apart from those dictated by the growth of the University, this period saw other significant changes in his life style. For instance, in 1964 he learned to drive, which he did with great solemnity and determination, traits enhanced by his choice of car, an elegant but rather funereal Van Den Plas Princess, one of those irritating vehicles which are much larger outside than in, so that riding with him you were uncomfortably conscious of his sheer width. Initially at least he was an apprehensive driver, with a notice fixed to the fascia in front of him exhorting him to 'THINK!'. I remember one summer evening -- in 1965 or 1966, I suppose -- he and Maeve drove us out for a dinner at 'The Trout' at Wansford, inadvisably by the back roads. He flinched and cursed at the sight of the farm tractors, which were particularly numerous that night: 'They bring those bloody things out as soon as they hear I'm coming', he groaned, steering vertiginously over the ditch, 'especially those great whirring things with spikes'. Naturally the car broadened his social life, and when his poems died off to a trickle I wondered, with 'The Whitsun Weddings' and 'Dockery and Son' in mind, whether he was not some kind of railway poet, perhaps even a bicycle poet. *High Windows* in 1974 proved me wrong, of course, though his output certainly declined in the 1970s. (With the bicycle he also abandoned just about his only form of physical exercise.)

More serious was his move in 1974 from Pearson Park, Hull, to Newland Park, only a mile or so away as the crow flies, but a world away in spirit. Pearson Park is a rather seedy but impressive relic of ambitious Victorian town planning; comfortably classless now, it lies between the westward spokes of 'The Avenues', lower middle class with a whiff of the bohemian, and a rather sordid working-class area abutting onto the lower end of Beverley Road. It is preserved from further decline by a number of small private hotels catering for commercial travellers. It was not a 'good address', but his small self-contained flat in the attics of a huge Victorian mansion, at tree-top level, suited him admirably. It was a trifle cramped, but comfortable; it was light and airy, the rent was low, and it established no irritating ties to bricks and mortar. The park below him was a thoroughfare and a place of resort for local people of all ages, it had a children's playground and some welcome public loos, as well as a couple of statues of Victoria and Albert; and his observations from on high obviously inspired such fine poems as 'Afternoons' and 'Sad Steps'; perhaps others. Lined with his books and records, the flat itself had something of the atmosphere, if not the spaciousness, of a set of rooms at Oxford or Cambridge; or more accurately, the apartments in similar houses in North

Oxford in which J. I. M. Stewart places some of his elderly dons.

In contrast Newland Park is an exclusive, rather 'posh', entirely middle-class backwater. (Not a 'park' at all, of course, just a figure-eight shaped cul-de-sac off the main Cottingham Road.) It attracts no idling pensioners or pram-pushing mothers; no 'lob-lolly men' scavenge in its litter baskets, (it has no such thing, anyway); only the occasional sibilance of a limousine, or the clatter of a delivery van, disturb its rather sterile tranquillity. It is stifflingly bourgeois, a favourite refuge for professors from the University just across the main road, and local lawyers, stockbrokers and company directors who can't quite afford to lord it as the local squire in some village on the Wolds. There Philip dwelt rather uneasily, I felt, in a solid 1950s house which was much too big for him, with a garden which worried him, and even involved him in a bizarre dispute with some nuns who backed onto it, and with a mortgage round his neck and all that this implies -- though I assume he had no money worries, especially after the publication of *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse*.

At the same time he was afflicted by increasing deafness, which pained and worried him. For one thing it must have sabotaged his work in committees, previously one of his strengths; with his hearing aid he could cope perfectly well *tête à tête*, but discussions amongst a group of people came through to him as a confused uproar. It also hampered him cruelly in the kind of cynical, semi-roistering conversazione in the Common Room bar which he had previously dominated in his quiet way. His wit was aborted, having less and less that was audible to work on, and from the centre of such groups he tended to move out to the fringes. When I sighted him there once, grinning tentatively and arching his neck forward in an effort to catch what was being said, I was poignantly reminded of his own lines in 'Afternoons' -- 'Something is pushing them/ To the side of their own lives.'

Meanwhile his personal life seemed to have collapsed into a deep rut leading straight to a rather gloomy horizon, and though some of us were uneasily aware of this he evaded any attempt at consolation or discussion. The pessimism we had previously dismissed as something of an affectation -- as I still think it was in the 1960s -- now became a settled aspect of his character. I was astonished when he joined the Cottingham Memorial Club, whose main functions were drinking and playing snooker. There was a sprinkling of university staff -- it was through one of them that he joined -- but he can have had little in common with the shopkeepers and small businessmen, many of them retired, who comprised its main clientele, though he was always treated with friendliness and guarded respect. Looking back, I think it offered him an easy remedy for loneliness without risking the rather anonymous hurly-burly of the local pub. It was reasonably quiet as a rule, and whenever he dropped in he would usually find a few people ready to have a couple of pints with him and chat about things indifferent -- the weather, the latest excesses of the local council, England's test prospects, and so on. It made no demands on him, but it gave him a certain minimum social life beyond Newland Park. (He may also have been renewing his roots in the area; he stayed in digs at Cottingham when he first came to Hull in 1955. But perhaps this is fanciful; so far as I can tell the only poem inspired by his Cottingham experience is 'Mr Bleaney', which is scarcely auspicious.)

After I left in 1981 his occasional letters to me or my wife were increasingly gloomy, though still punctuated now and then by a burst of the old hilarity, and the steady collapse of the University and its Library under relentless government pressure formed a dark

backdrop to his own personal difficulties and increasing anxieties. In March 1983 he wrote:

My professional life is odd here: I have quite lost touch with the Library, . . . which is all computerized anyway. I can't even issue myself a book on Sunday afternoons . . . My almost complete deafness and drunkenness means that I learn nothing from Senate, (asleep till 3.30, incommunicado thereafter), and so am repeatedly caught in ignorance of the most elementary circumstances. Nobody pays any attention to what I say.

'There are three professors of geology', he added, 'and only one barman'.

When I came down to Hull later that year I was shocked at his evident decline. He had something wrong with his leg. I'm not sure what, and he moved painfully and awkwardly with the aid of a stick; he had the demeanour and gestures of a man in his 70s. An old friend from Leicester days, Monica Jones, had recently retired, and her passing post-retiral visit to Newland Park had been prolonged indefinitely by a severe illness which seemed likely, he feared, to end in blindness, (though fortunately this danger was later averted).

Even so, in qualities of mind he was ageless, and he was patently glad to see me, though largely, I think, because I brought back memories of happier days. We sat together in the bar in the comparative quiet of the evening while he entertained me with excoriating word-pictures of various new members of staff, especially the Administration, and I reciprocated as best I could by retailing to him some of the quainter lunacies of Scots higher education. (I was then at St Andrews.) When I clasped his arm in parting it did not occur to me that this was for the last time -- though what I would have said or done if I had realised it I don't know; probably nothing. After that just a few scribbled notes through the post, and a last painful letter from the nursing home, dictated to his secretary and suffused with an awkward and obviously insincere optimism; it was the only letter I have of his without a hint of levity.

This has been one man's view of Philip Larkin. It is far from being a complete picture, nor is it necessarily a true one, but it may make some slight contribution to the historical record. My relations with him were tentative, and, I now realise, lamentably incomplete. It was easy to be impatient with him, and I often was. Though I had the greatest affection and respect for him I was not an uncritical admirer; he was not really a strong character, and he allowed himself to be hag-ridden by problems which a less sensitive man, (or possibly a man from a different background), would have shrugged off. What remains now is a sense of love and loss, a sense of omission and incompleteness. I shall remember him always.

¹ I am grateful to Maeve Brennan, Betty Mackereth and the current Librarian's secretary for unearthing a copy of this report for me. I now see that, though admirable in many respects, it is too unsparing for early publication or citation.