



MY PARTICULAR TALENTS

Philip Larkin's 42-year career as a Librarian

Richard Goodman

Richard Goodman *is the author of* French Dirt: The Story of a Garden in the South of France. *He has written on a variety of subjects for many publications, including* The New York Times, Creative Nonfiction, Commonweal, Vanity Fair, Garden Design, Grand Tour, The Writer's Chronicle, salon.com, Saveur, Ascent *and* The Michigan Quarterly Review. *He teaches creative nonfiction at Spalding University's brief residency MFA in writing program in Louisville, Kentucky.*

Philip Larkin was a librarian his entire professional life. Although his immortality rests on his poetry, as a mortal he spent his working days in libraries. When he died in 1985 at the age of sixty-three, he had not, in fact, written any poems to speak of for some years, but he was still working as a librarian. His accomplishments in librarianship were considerable, and his range was wide. As his biographer Andrew Motion wrote: "In all the libraries which employed him. Larkin combined the roles of scholar, technician and administrator" (Motion, 11:1). His colleague Brian Dyson goes so far as to call him "a great figure in post-war British librarianship" (Dyson in *TMAL*, ix). I believe a strong case can be made for this point of view. Every library Philip Larkin left, he left better off. He was continually trying to improve his skills as a librarian as well as improving the libraries in which he worked. Sir Brynmor Jones, Vice Chancellor at the University of Hull where Larkin worked for thirty years, said: "I think people who have written about him have made too much of his poems and not enough of him as a librarian" (Motion, 302). That gap described by Sir Brynmor has thankfully since been closed somewhat. The goal of this essay is to close it even more by presenting a detailed history of Larkin's career in librarianship.

As well as Motion's full-scale biography, several of Larkin's colleagues have written personal records. This allows us an unusually good look at a forty-two year career in librarianship in post-war England - and at a most exceptional librarian. "Librarianship became a profession through the examples set by notable librarians", fellow poet and colleague Douglas Dunn wrote. "Philip Larkin was such a librarian" (Dunn in *TMAL*, viii). He did not, however, set out to become one.

When Philip Larkin graduated from Oxford in 1943 with a first in English Language and Literature, he had no idea what he would do to earn a living. The war effort intervened to solve his dilemma. Having been ruled medically unfit for military service, Larkin

received a letter from the Ministry of Labour, whose job it was to see that all able-bodied people were doing something for their country, inquiring exactly what he was doing. As he later wrote:

I rightly judged the enquiry to be a warning that I had better start doing something. Picking up the day's, Birmingham Post ... I soon discovered an advertisement by a small urban district council for a Librarian. (RW, 31)

The library was in Wellington, a town in Shropshire about 150 miles north-west of London. Larkin applied and was subsequently asked for an interview. He later recalled: "It occurred to me I had better find out something about the operation of a lending library" (RW, 31). In fact he knew nothing about the operation of *any* kind of library. A librarian at his own local library was "kind enough to spend a morning showing me how books were ordered, accessioned and catalogued" (RW, 31). With this accelerated course in library science, he set out for Wellington and was given the job. "Thus, quite fortuitously," as his colleague and close friend Maeve Brennan wrote, "Larkin embarked on the career to which he had given no forethought" (Brennan in *TMAL*, 5). It was to last forty-two years.

Like many librarians of his generation, Larkin started his career in the Edwardian .. if not Victorian - tradition, and completed it in the computer age. That first small library where he began work "single-handed and untrained" in December 1943 at the age of twenty-one could have come out of a novel by Thackeray or Dickens. Built in 1902, it had had, up to Larkin's appointment, just one employee, the septuagenarian who turned over the keys to the young Oxford graduate. The library "was covered outside with grime-darkened rusticated stone, and filled inside with shelving of a heavy Edwardian type about eight foot high. The atmosphere was stuffy and faintly intimidating" (Motion, 113-14). Of the 4,000 books, 3000 were fiction, and they were "like the advertisement pages of late nineteenth and early twentieth century novels come to life" (RW, 33).

Like his predecessor, Larkin was the sole employee. He soon found that aside from the expected traditional responsibilities, his duties included stoking the boiler (which produced little heat) and lighting the gas lights with wax tapers. His day was long, and it was full. It began at 9 am and ended at 8.30 pm with breaks in between. During that time, he issued and reshelved books, took inter-library loan requests and answered questions, not to mention buying, cataloguing and classifying new books. It could be difficult: "Quite early on I recorded a week when I issued 928 books in 20 hours, or I about every 77 seconds ... At first my hand was blistered from stamping books" (RW, 33). His salary for the year was £220.

Despite the difficulties, the reader of his memoir of those days looks upon this first job with a sense of wistful envy. Here was a twenty-one-year old with no experience - much less a degree in library science - given full charge of a library. He was young, stumbling, energetic, hardworking: free. He learned by doing. As long as the patrons were content, he was left alone. How much more can one ask of a first job? It might well be said that the freedom and responsibility given to Larkin so early in his career helped provide him with the extraordinary assurance he showed years later at the University of Hull where his management challenges were truly daunting. Not content, as his predecessor was, to let things remain as they were, the young Larkin began to change them:

He changed most of the systems used by his predecessor, and "very soon there was hardly a trace left" of Mr Bennett's forty-year reign. He lobbied at the bi-monthly Library Committee meetings of the Urban District Council; he improved stock and interlibrary-lending facilities; he did what he could to brighten the interior of the building. (Motion. 113-114)

Maeve Brennan records that he even persuaded the Urban District Council to raise the municipal rate by one penny in the pound to produce the necessary revenue for the purchase of new books - a daring proposal for a young man of 21 to make (Brennan in *TMAL*, 5-6). At the end of his time in Wellington, three years later, Larkin had accomplished much. As he himself took account: "Readership increased to about twice the original number. Issues did likewise, from 3,000 to 6,000 a month. My most dramatic increase was in inter-library loans, from 68 in the year I came to 499 in the year I left" (*RW*, 34). Just as important was the success he had with the people of Wellington who used the library. As one of them recalled: "Although the older generation ... took longer to accept him, they were won over by his diffident courtesy, his patience and his willingness to find them the books they would enjoy" (Siverns, quoted by Brennan in *TMAL*, 6). Not at all bad for a beginner, and for someone who rather stumbled into his profession.

Another newspaper advertisement was responsible for Larkin's next post as assistant librarian at University College, Leicester, a city not too far from Wellington. He applied, was interviewed, and appointed. He began work on 9 September 1946. With this change, Philip Larkin moved from a small, urban library to a small academic library. He did not completely escape the Dickensian atmosphere he had known at Wellington: Leicester University College had once been a lunatic asylum. He stayed four years. But this was a step upward, no doubt. "For a graduate returning to an academic environment after working in a public library in those days," Maeve Brennan noted, "was like a homecoming, and the chance of promotion in relation to one's qualifications was far greater" (Brennan in *TMAL*, 7).

Larkin enjoyed his time at Leicester. When he arrived, there were just two hundred students, and the entire college, including the library, was contained in one building. The college was intimate and friendly. Larkin had, in the head librarian, Rhoda Bennett, a most sympathetic boss: "I have always been grateful to the librarian, Miss Bennett, for taking a chance on what cannot have been a promising-looking candidate" (*RW*, 37). He was, in fact, most fortunate with his superiors throughout his career and unhesitatingly acknowledged his debt to them. They provided instruction and support, both financial and moral, and encouraged his growth and goals. Rhoda Bennett's one stipulation was that Larkin should obtain professional qualifications in librarianship through correspondence courses. (He had already embarked on a correspondence course in library classification while at Wellington.) He did and ultimately passed the Library Association examinations, becoming an associate member in 1949. It is interesting to speculate on this method of qualifying as an Associate of the Library Association - this route to legitimacy no longer possible in England - with a sense of vicarious nostalgia. Is there no room today for such an unorthodox route into the profession? Shouldn't there be? How many potential librarians, perhaps as enterprising as Larkin, have been denied a good career simply because circumstances prevented them from going to a library school? Perhaps computers and the Internet will change that.

Larkin was one of four librarians at Leicester. His duties included "issuing books to

readers and answering their questions, reshelving returned books, cataloguing books and writing out catalogue cards by hand" (Bloomfield in *Larkin at 60*, 49). But expected to take on many jobs. Larkin certainly learned here what it meant to be an *employee*, rather than a boss, as he had been at Wellington. He was not deterred, however. As one of his colleagues later wrote: "My own memories of Philip are very pleasant ones ... We were a very small staff then, working in conditions which would make the staff of larger libraries blanch ... Relations with one's colleagues were therefore important. Philip was always fun to work with. He would lighten tasks with a keen sense of humour" (Motion, 152).

It appears that Larkin left Leicester for his next job more out of a desire to escape family responsibilities and a romantic entanglement than any great dissatisfaction with this job. In any case, when, in May 1950, he heard of a job as sub-librarian at Queen's University, Belfast, he applied. Soon after, he took the ferry for Northern Ireland for interview. Once he had secured the job, he looked back on his years at Leicester with pride. The college had grown as had the library: "new Library staff posts, both senior and junior to us, were advertised and filled" (*RW*, 39). The number of students had more than tripled. What's more, Larkin could say, in the fullest sense of the word, that he was a librarian now.

Philip Larkin began work at Queen's University, Belfast on 1 October 1950 and stayed four and a half years. If he had enjoyed his time at Leicester, he liked Belfast even more: "It was extraordinary how at home I felt ... and how much I disliked leaving ... Queen's is a perfect little paradise of a library" (Brennan in *TMAL*, 8). Well, perhaps in many ways, but the building itself was old and rather dingy. As Larkin himself admitted: "The light was dim and religious ... The Stack was claustrophobic and even creepy" (Motion, 200). His experience of three libraries in which the atmosphere was somewhat gloomy must have influenced his response to the plans for the new library at Hull University. It is surely no coincidence that the Brynmor Jones Library at Hull has "high windows".

Larkin's duties at Queen's were "the issue desk, the supervision of the reading room and stacks, and the inhouse book bindery and photographic department: (Motion, 200). And for the first time, he had supervisory responsibilities. Arthur Terry, a colleague at Queen's, wrote of the dozen and a half employees under his guidance: "He had managed to assemble a team of marvellous women library assistants, with all of whom he maintained the best possible relations" (Arthur Terry in *PL 1922-1985*, 97-98). Though that is somewhat awkwardly put, the reader understands Terry's meaning. Just as importantly, he "played a significant role in the reorganisation of the book stock in 1952 following the addition of a new floor to the Victorian building which then housed the library" (Brennan in *TMAL*, 7). This experience would serve him well, as we shall see.

One of Larkin's greatest pleasures at Queen's was working for his boss, JJ Graneek, a scholarly, professional and efficient librarian from whom "Larkin learnt a great deal about librarianship ... despite the differences in their temperaments. 'I get powerful sick of work sometimes,' Larkin would say later, "but never of Graneek.'" (Motion, 201). That Graneek appreciated Larkin's work is most evident in the recommendation he gave when Larkin applied for his next, and most significant job, that of librarian at the University of Hull. Graneek actually placed the advertisement for the job on Larkin's desk. He told Hull that he had:

come increasingly to rely on Larkin's judgement ... / have delegated to him

rather larger areas of responsibility than normally falls to the lot of a sub-librarian ... He has the ability to assess a problem, arrive at a decision and act upon it without delay, which is not too common among academic administrators. (Motion, 245)

Graneek also told the committee that Larkin "was very good in dealing with people, both readers and library staff" (Brett in *PL, 1922-1985*, 101). He applied for the job and got it.

When Philip Larkin left Queen's Library, he was thirty-two years old and had twelve years' experience as a librarian under his belt. All of this was but a prelude, artistically and professionally. There is no doubt that when Larkin came to the University of Hull in 1955, his public career as a poet and librarian both came into their own. It was at Hull, a large port on the Humber estuary in north-eastern England, and the birthplace of Andrew Marvell, that Larkin wrote both *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*, his most celebrated books - works that brought him first national, then international, acclaim. (It was to be a remarkable coincidence that the Marvell Press, publisher of his first significant collection, *The Less Deceived*, was also located at Hull.) But it would have been, I think, impossible to predict from Larkin's credentials just how much he was to contribute to Hull and, in fact, to the English library community as a whole. A member of the appointing committee at Hull who interviewed Larkin for the job later wrote: "On paper Philip Larkin was not a strong candidate" (RL Brett in *PL, 1922-1985*, 101). Yet the committee had no doubt when it came to make a decision. It was the interview that won them over:

There was a quiet authority in the way he described. (of all things) the work of the issue-desk in the library there (Queen's)]. One could hardly imagine a less promising subject to impress the committee, but he made it intensely interesting "" At the end of the interview we had no doubt that this was our man. (RL Brett in *PL 1922-1985* 101).

At the time of Philip Larkin's appointment in March 1955, the University of Hull had just 727 students. The library had 124,000 items, a staff of twelve and an annual budget of only £4,500 for buying new books and periodicals and binding (Bloomfield in *Larkin at 60*, 50). All this would increase dramatically under Larkin's tenure. However, the most urgent task facing Larkin on arrival in Hull was to familiarise himself with the plans "already at an advanced stage" - for a new library building, one of the first to be built in post-war Britain. Since the plans had to be submitted to the University Grants Committee (the funding body) by December, the matter was pressing. Larkin had no experience of the building of new libraries, nor had anyone else, not even architects, since no university libraries had been built in the United Kingdom since before the war. Since he realized this new library would have a strong influence on nearly every aspect of his work, he felt he had no alternative but to study the plans in depth and grapple with them alone. Consequently, as Maeve Brennan recalls: "Far removed from library staff ... he spread out the plans for the new building and worked on them most afternoons. We had strict instructions that his whereabouts were not to be revealed nor was he to be interrupted except on matters of urgency" (Brennan, in *PL*, 30).

What Larkin found was a two-part plan for the building of the library. The first part (Stage I) was to consist of a three-storey administrative building with stacks and reading rooms. Stage II, to be built some years later, was planned as a tall stacks building to be

connected to the first. He quickly saw that "when the two stages were complete, readers and books would be separated from each other by the central administrative block" (Motion, 253). He took the rather bold step of recommending to the University that this be altered. They were impressed with his presentation and reasoning. A colleague later said he was astonished "by the amount of expert knowledge he [Larkin] quickly acquired" (Motion, 253). The University, in the end, accepted his recommendations and should be glad they did. The changes were both large and small: "Much of the attention to detail, the modern lighting, the introduction of bright colours in the stacks ... were Larkin's innovations" (Brennan in *ALS-S*, 38). Larkin followed the actual construction Stage I, 1958/9; Stage II, 1966/9 - closely, photographing the building as it progressed and speaking to the architect when something displeased him.

In considering this huge, complex project, one cannot help but think that, despite how troubling and arduous it must have been, the completion of it must have done wonderful things for Larkin's confidence, not only at the professional, but also at the creative level. After all, what task could seem as daunting after this? What decision could not now be made? What plea to the administration would be too bold to make? In 1960 he published a detailed report on the new library in the *Library Association Record* (*LAR* 42, no. 6, 185-189). It is a meticulous presentation of the plan and workings of a major new university library and shows Larkin's complete familiarity with every function of the new building. It is also objective; it does not hesitate to point out flaws or shortcomings: an entrance door letting in too much cool air, for example; and a bad decision "not to include a supervised cloakroom for the deposit of bags and other personal property." Just a glance at the plans, with the accompanying table identifying the various areas and departments, leaves an indelible impression of the complexity of a library of this size. Larkin's pride and modesty in the accomplishment are to be seen in his account of the history of the construction of the new library (part of an overall history of the library he wrote on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary) and in his report of the Queen Mother's dedication of Stage I in June 1960 (*ALS-S*, 5-9). In fact, all the documents relating to the library's construction still make worthy reading and could well be assembled to create a casebook.

Once the new library situation had been more or less brought under control - though Stage II was not completed until 1970 and so the 'situation' occupied Larkin's time on and off for fifteen years - he could get on with the normal duties of his office. They were considerable. Philip Larkin was in charge of a now rapidly expanding University Library, and his responsibilities as administrator, spokesman, fund raiser, academic and writer increased proportionately. What becomes apparent, as one looks at Larkin's thirty years at Hull, is how propitious a choice he "made" back in 1943 to become a librarian. When asked in an interview why he had chosen - or, should we say, remained in - librarianship as a profession, he answered: "Librarianship suits me ... it has just the right blend of academic interest and administration that seems to match my particular talents" (*RW*, 51).

Indeed, it is as an administrator boss, committee man and arbitrator that Larkin revealed one of his strongest suits as a librarian. He treated his staff decently, and he motivated them. He did this with a combination of efficiency, high standards, humour and compassion. Those who have left written accounts of their time at Hull have said he was an excellent librarian and a very caring boss. One of his former staff wrote: "He always showed a particular concern for newcomers ... Likewise, he made a point of speaking to any member of staff whom he knew to be in personal difficulties" (Brennan, in *PL*, 32). At one point he volunteered to tutor his staff for the Library Association examinations to

enable them to obtain professional qualifications. At a professional level Larkin was also fair and considerate. This included direct personal contact with staff as well as the monthly library staff meetings which he inaugurated in the Library long in advance of other University heads of departments, and at which everything was discussed "from major library matters to the provision of soap in the lavatories" (Motion, 254). Maeve Brennan remembered: "His intellectual ability was outstanding and his talents were many-faceted. Not least of these were his ability to lead, to organise, to administer, to foster talent and loyalty amongst his staff, who in turn supported him" (Brennan in *ALS-S*, 40).

If there was a flaw in his administrative role, it would have to be in his personal relationships with his female staff. Motion's biography reveals that Larkin had not only one, but two affairs with female staff members. One of these affairs was well known at the time. We have come too far to pass judgment on the sexual affairs of two consenting adults; however, Larkin's choices must have caused confusion and perhaps consternation among some of his staff.

Larkin enjoyed his work on the University committees of which he was a member. The most important of these were Senate, the Library Committee, the Publications Committee and the Bookshop Committee. Whatever his capacity, be it chairman, secretary or ex-officio member, he excelled at it. Edwin Dawes, Chairman of the Library Committee from 1974 to 1987 observed:

Anyone who might have held the notion that Philip was a fey, otherworldly poet would have had such ideas ruthlessly dispelled on first contact at one of these briefing sessions. His mastery of all aspects of library operation ... was striking, and his sense of political timing for committees astute. (Dawes in *PL*, 20)

As Secretary to the Library Committee, Larkin wrote up the minutes. As Dawes again noted: "The Library Committee minutes that he wrote were models of style and clarity... characteristically rich in detail" (*ibid*). Of course, it is not often that the person writing the minutes is a world-class poet, as well as a distinguished novelist and essayist.

He also made the Library Committee a strong instrument of policy, thus enabling him to secure adequate funds, not only for recurrent purchases but also for research materials. Consequently, he "established the Reserve Fund for the purchase of expensive items, and from 1968 funded six research collections to facilitate in-depth expansion in specialised fields" (Brennan in *TMAL*, 10). Furthermore, in order to give teaching departments a voice in the expenditure of this money, Larkin asked each department to nominate a Library representative. Thus, those well-earned funds were put to good use, and between 1961 and 1974 a complete metamorphosis of the Library had taken place, both physically and quintessentially. "Staff increased from 20 to 91, the book stack more than trebled to 494,500 volumes" (Brennan in *TMAL*, 10).

None of this would have been achieved without the good will of the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Brynmor Jones. Throughout his sixteen year tenure of that office, Jones was an unstinting and sympathetic supporter of Larkin. They both believed in a strong library. Equally important, they got on well. Larkin was also fortunate in his timing: at least until the mid-seventies, there was money available to spend. As Jones later said:

He used to come to me and say, "Do you think you could raise another £20,000" and I'd pretend to complain, and tell him I gave him a librarian's salary to write poems. We got on very well. (Motion, 302)

Not only did they get on well, but they both agreed on particulars. For example, they were in accord that the library should be "rich in specific collections, as well as generally well stocked" (Motion, 254). His good relationship with Jones, paired with his "enterprising and well defined acquisitions policies," resulted in obtaining funds for the library which were above the national average. Later, Larkin paid homage to Jones by formally suggesting that the completed library be named after the Vice-Chancellor who had done so much to ensure its prestige. This suggestion was adopted, so that Hull's University Library is today known as the Brynmor Jones Library. And in 1983, to mark the occasion of Sir Brynmor Jones's eightieth birthday, Larkin presented him with the following quatrain:

By day, a lifted ,study-storehouse; night
Converts it to a flattened cube of light.
Whichever's shown, the symbol is the same:
Knowledge; a University; a name.

(*Collected Poems*, 1988, 220)

Larkin's influence as a librarian extended beyond the boundaries of Hull. As a member of the Standing Committee of National and University Libraries (SCONUL), he attended its conferences, and served on its committees. One of his most passionate pleas to the British library establishment was to keep contemporary British writers' manuscripts and papers in England. Indeed, we have only to think of the papers of British writers in Texas alone to see that he had cause for alarm. He knew that England could not compete with American money, but he felt something could be done. The world may know how much Larkin did, privately and publicly, for the writer Barbara Pym. Many readers today are grateful. But one wonders if the public is aware of how strongly Larkin felt about the preservation of British literary heritage with his insistent and intelligent crusading. As Brennan noted:

As early as 1961 he alerted SCONUL to the indifference of British libraries to the loss of manuscripts of contemporary British writers to foreign bidders, usually American libraries. Stimulated by this warning, the Arts Council initiated a National Manuscript Collection of Contemporary Poets (later Writers) ... and from 1972 to 1979 Larkin was its Chairman. (Brennan in ALS-S. 40)

At a SCONUL conference on the subject in March 1979, Larkin gave a talk which was subsequently published in *Encounter* and then later in his collection of miscellaneous pieces, *Required Writing*. Even today, this essay, 'A Neglected Responsibility: Contemporary Literary MSS,' (*RW*, 33-41) makes powerful reading. It is a measured, lucid and ultimately very convincing case for keeping manuscripts in England. Larkin also provides suggestions on how to do this, reminding his audience that only a few years earlier many writers would have gladly given their manuscripts to a British library if only someone had bothered to ask them!

Needless to say, at Hull Larkin practised what he preached and obtained funds, presumably from the ever generous Sir Brynmor. He acquired, among other gems, the

manuscript of Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* and the manuscript drafts of some of the early work of Andrew Motion and Anthony Thwaite. For the most part, however, his pleas fell on deaf ears and other British libraries were slow to follow suit. Nonetheless, as Larkin's bibliographer, BC Bloomfield, concludes: "The fact that we still have any contemporary literary manuscripts in this country and that public opinion was roused, if ever so slightly, to this problem is in large part owing to his efforts" (Bloomfield in *Larkin at 60*, 52).

Reading the essay on England's neglected responsibility makes one wish Larkin had written *more* for library publications. (But he was not prolific as a poet, either.) He wrote numerous reports and discussion papers for circulation within the University, as well as library guides and bibliographies, but these are not generally available. In the public domain we have his two short memoirs of his early library days, his history of the Brynmor Jones Library, a handful of articles he wrote for the *Library Association Record*, and the essay 'A Neglected Responsibility' and that's about it. Especially in the context of the generally prosaic style of most writing on librarianship, Larkin's prose is a breath of fresh air. (For all Larkin's library-related publications, whether intended for Hull alone or for the profession at large, consult BC Bloomfield's *Philip Larkin: a bibliography / 1933/1976*, Faber and Faber, 1979.)

Philip Larkin's library career was not without its disputes and controversies, as no forty-year career is. The most public occurred in 1973. In May of that year, the Publishers Association revoked the Library Licence which it had granted Hull in 1930, following a dispute about public access. The Publishers Association wanted - at least to Larkin's mind - to force Hull to open its doors to anyone in the area "wishing to do further research in specialised fields" (Larkin, *LAR* 74, no. 11,224). Larkin refused to abrogate the Library's ability to make discriminations. As he wrote of the episode in the history of the Brynmor Jones Library: "While the Library has always been pleased to admit members of the public needing to consult its resources, it could not accept that it was compelled to do so" (*ALS-S*, 21-22). His administration backed him as he "defended its [the Library's] integrity." (Bloomfield in *Larkin at 60*, 51) Larkin informed the Publishers Association in a letter "that my University cannot accept this new definition of public access, and that it is prepared for the Revised Library Licence issued on our behalf to be revoked" (Larkin, *LAR* 74, no. 11, 225). It was. With this censure the Library lost the 10% discount to which it was entitled on new British books bought from booksellers recognised by the Association. Larkin was undeterred. Quite coolly, if not sardonically, he later wrote about this penalty:

The Library's relations with its booksellers became more cordial in consequence. All the same, the implication that it was slow to make available its resources outside the University contrasted ironically with its national reputation in the field of inter-library loans. Since 1955 the Library had an annual lending rate considerably above that of much larger and older libraries. (*ALS-S*, 22)

During the seventies and particularly the eighties, Larkin was thrown dramatically into the modern age. He faced what have come to be probably the two most pressing issues in librarianship in recent years: computers and cutbacks. The first he met, after some delay, with surprising ingenuity and innovativeness surprising, perhaps for a man whose poetry hearkens in a Hardy-esque way to an earlier, more traditional England, and who

harboured a deep mistrust of computers. But in fact, that is what he did. In 1979, the library decided to purchase a GEAC system - made by a Canadian company which today continues to provide systems for libraries - and to put the library's collection on-line. With this step, Hull became the first library in Europe to install a GEAC system. Thus, having directed between 1955 and 1969 the construction of the new Library at Hull, a decade later Larkin presided over its second major transformation, namely the conversion of the entire stock to machine readable form. Once this decision had been taken, he was anxious that the on-line catalogue should be as accurate and as easy to use as the card version, as well as being more versatile. For a very good, meticulous account of the entire process, see Lynne Wallace's essay, 'From circulation control to information provision: automation in the Brynmor Jones Library, 1987,' in *The Modern Academic Library*.

Anyone who has been involved with the establishment of an automated system - or with just the updating of such a system - will know how enormous and daunting an undertaking it is. In this case:

It was the imminent collapse of the Library's manual issue system, due to the rapidly increasing number of loans and incipient staff cuts, which finally convinced the librarian that the introduction of an automated circulation system was a priority. (Wallace in *TMAL*, 82)

Once the decision was made to convert, Larkin made several concomitant decisions which proved to be of lasting value. One was "to create a database of fairly full catalogue records, even though brief citations would have been adequate for circulation-related activities" (Wallace in *TMAL*, 82). (Remember, we are speaking of 640,000 records. *This* is a librarian working here.) By April 1982, the transfer of the entries was complete, and the system was operating fully. To have done this with a staff "almost entirely without experience of automation" (Brennan in *ALS-S*, 26) all the while providing much the same services expected of a university library, was no small feat.

Automation even today always brings with it error and confusion, and this process was certainly no exception. "Every type of fault and failure with both hardware and the software, was experienced" (Wallace in *TMAL*, 84). Nevertheless, advances continued to be made as time passed, including "probably the first attempt in the United Kingdom to provide keyword access to bibliographic records with Boolean operators" (Wallace in *TMAL*, 85). Philip Larkin had come a long way from the days at Wellington when he was lighting gas lights with wax tapers and getting blisters on his hand from stamping books. To him it must have seemed a bit like a Jules Verne novel as he compared the old fashioned methods of his early days with the speed and versatility of the new on-line system.

The second major issue of contemporary librarianship - cutbacks Larkin met in much the same way as other librarians did, and still do: disconsolately but obediently. The last ten years of his time at Hull were not good ones in terms of funding. In the mid-seventies, prices of books and periodicals began climbing dramatically "by anything," Larkin wrote, "from 15 per cent to 30 per cent annually" (*ALS-S*, 23). However, the library grant increased just 17 per cent. The result of this imbalance was that during the same period subscriptions to 800 periodicals were cancelled and 13 full-time library jobs were eliminated, to single out two particularly hard-hit areas. The cuts resulted in not only less material being available but in reduced opening hours as well. Larkin's closing lines of

the Library's history covering these years is a melancholy but somewhat powerless plea for the welfare of the library for which he had done so much. In conclusion, he added:

It was no the University Grants Committee that decided there should be a good library at Hull, but the University itself; the future of the Library will therefore to this degree depend on the tenacity with which the University adheres to its original resolve. (*ALS-S*, 25)

But as Brennan records, things got worse and by 1981: "The Library was asked to indicate the effects of a 20 per cent reduction in both staffing and financial resources by 1984" (Brennan in *ALS-S*, 28). Then came the reality: "The Library grant for 1981/2 received no increase, a phenomenon not experienced since the forties" (*ibid*). The list of cutbacks and shortages Brennan enumerates makes sad reading as does her evaluation of their effect on Larkin who: "thus ... participated in the rise of the University, and in his last years witnessed its contraction" (Brennan in *ALS-S*, 38). His reaction to this prolonged strangulation was one of gloom: "Larkin's mood had become increasingly "recessive". Now cuts threatened more damage than ever... He had never felt so strongly that the injuries to the library were injuries to himself" (Motion, 505-506).

And well he might. In 1985, the year of his thirtieth anniversary at Hull, the Library had altered beyond all recognition from the one he took over in 1955. It was now thoroughly modern and recognised as one of the best University libraries in the United Kingdom. The stock had increased from the 1955 number of 124,000 to 750,000 volumes. The budget had increased from £4,500 to £448,500 (Brennan in *ALS-S*, 39). Larkin was in large measure responsible for this. He had also, as Bloomfield notes, "pioneered new techniques and introduced methods which have been copied in other academic libraries in the United Kingdom" (Bloomfield in *Larkin at 60*, 50).

Larkin was responsible for numerous other innovations, including the implementation of the University Photographic Service and the creation of a poetry room and collection within the Library. For twenty-two years, he was Secretary to the Publications Committee of the Hull University Press and: "During that time steered more than a hundred books, lectures and articles through publication" (Motion, 254). He also founded the Bookshop Committee and was its Chairman for many years. For these achievements and for his contributions to the profession as a whole, the Library Association awarded him its Honorary Fellowship in 1980. But, as Maeve Brennan said: "The Library, above all else, remains Philip Larkin's creation, his most tangible professional accomplishment, and a worthy monument to him" (Brennan, *ALS-S*, 40).

Though the continued cutbacks made Larkin contemplate retiring, he did not. He died in office. In the summer of 1985 he became ill with cancer. By November he was too sick to attend Maeve Brennan's retirement party. On 2 December he died. *The New York Times*'s obituary on 3 December began: "Philip Larkin, a reclusive librarian ...". Even *The New York Times*, although perhaps inadvertently, paid homage to a career little-known by the general reading public.

Indeed, Philip Larkin's long and distinguished career as a librarian has been overshadowed by his career as a poet. Now that reputation as a poet has been marred - one might say tarred and feathered - by revelations of his prejudices which have emerged into the full glare of daylight with the publication of his *Selected Letters* in 1992, (edited

by Anthony Thwaite) and Motion's biography in 1993. It has not been the purpose of this paper to rehabilitate Larkin's reputation as a poet. Those who believe - as I strongly do - that Larkin was, and still is, a very fine poet, will have to wait until the public deems it time to forgive him his human flaws. In the end, the poetry speaks eloquently for itself. We will not have to wait for such an absolution to acknowledge Philip Larkin's achievements as a librarian. These are beyond dispute.

References

Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* – Motion + page number

The Modern Academic Library: Essays in memory of Philip Larkin, ed. Brian Dyson, London: Library Association, 1989 – TMAL + page number

Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces, 1955-1982, by Philip Larkin RW + page no

Larkin at Sixty, ed. Anthony Thwaite, London: Faber & Faber 1982 – contributor name in Larkin at 60 + page no

Philip Larkin: The Man and his Work, ed Dale Salwak, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989, PL + page number

A Lifted Study-Storehouse: The Brynmor Jones Library, 1929-1979 by Philip Larkin: updated to 1985 by Maeve Brennan, Hull, Hull University Press – contributor name in ALS-S + page no

The Library Association Record – LAR