



Serious Earth

Philip Larkin's American tape

(The Watershed recording)

James L. Orwin

On 12 February 2006, *The Telegraph* carried a short piece by Chris Hastings entitled 'Unknown Larkin tapes found in attic'. The article mistakenly suggested that John Weeks, the sound engineer who made the recordings, was one of Larkin's closest friends. The article also stated: "It had been thought that [Larkin] ... never recorded any of the works from [*The North Ship*]." A few lines further into the article, a clue was given about where this assumption originated, when Hastings quoted Andrew Motion: "I didn't realise he had made any recordings from *The North Ship*..." Later that evening, a message was posted on the Larkin Society website Forum pointing out that, as listed in Bloomfield, Larkin had recorded two poems (XXX and XIII) from *The North Ship* for inclusion on an LP record – *On Record* – issued in 1974 by the Yorkshire Arts Association.

Two days later, 14 February, *The Guardian* reported the same story. Martin Wainwright's piece was a tad more theatrically titled: 'From a garage studio in Yorkshire, Larkin speaks again'. Wainwright bumped up the number of poems included on the tape from the 25 reported by *The Telegraph*, to "nearly 30 poems". Wainwright a little more accurately reported the relationship between poet and recording engineer: "...a colleague, John Weeks ... managed the sound department at Hull University when the poet was the chief librarian there. The two occasionally had a drink in the staff bar..."

However, Wainwright confused the publishing history of *The North Ship* with that of *XX Poems* when he quoted the Larkin Society's Wendy Cole: "But the most interesting are three poems from *The North Ship*, which he published himself in 1945 - only about 100 copies altogether." Of course, Larkin did not self-publish *The North Ship*, it was published in 1945 by The Fortune Press; Larkin self-published *XX Poems* in an edition of approximately 100, in 1951.

Throughout the day (14 February), BSKYB News repeatedly broadcast a 16-minute video report of the story, in which was shown interviews with Molly Weeks (widow of John Weeks) and her son Peter. Peter Weeks, filmed speaking in his father's old

studio, explained that his mother had told the family “the story of Larkin coming here to make the tapes”, which inspired them to see if they could locate the recordings.

Also interviewed in the BSKYB report were the Larkin Society’s James Booth and Eddie Dawes. Booth was quick to point out that Larkin had often publicly deprecated *The North Ship*, but suggested – nevertheless – that Larkin’s inclusion in this recording of three poems from *The North Ship* might indicate that the Weeks recording was “Larkin’s own anthology...of what he means to be his distilled *oeuvre*”.

Meanwhile, Andrew Motion and Peter Weeks were being interviewed on BBC Radio 4. By this time, Motion had realized that earlier recordings of Larkin reading poems from *The North Ship* did exist. In the interview Motion commented that poem XXX (from *The North Ship*) “is in fact one that [Larkin] did record before, in a rather obscure and little known way. It was recorded for the Yorkshire Arts and put out on a record in 1974”. Peter Weeks admitted – to Motion’s relief – that he was not, as reported in the *Yorkshire Post*, considering offering the recording for sale on eBay, the Internet auction site.

Two years later, on 24 February 2008 (28 years to the day after the recordings were made) *The Sunday Times* reported that BBC Radio 4’s ‘The Archive Hour’ would [at last!] broadcast the readings. ‘The Larkin Tapes’ was to be broadcast on 1 March 2008. Presented by poet Paul Farley, an admirer of Larkin’s work, the programme would include interviews with, among others, Andrew Motion, John Banville, James Booth and Jean Hartley.

In the years since it came to light, the recording of Larkin made by John Weeks has generated a great deal of interest, and much has been speculated, assumed, inferred, supposed, misquoted, misremembered and reported about it. However, Philip Larkin – unsurprisingly – kept his own record of the affair: the ‘Watershed Foundation’ file, now held in the Larkin Archive at the Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull (DPL2/3/91). What follows is a summary of some of the information contained in that file.

Though the Weeks recording was made in early 1980, its troubled history begins on 13 February 1979, when Stephen Waldhorn, Director of Library Relations at the Poets’ Audio Center, Washington, wrote to Larkin suggesting that the Center produce a Watershed Tape of Larkin reading his own poetry. Waldhorn, as he mentioned in his letter to Larkin, was the son of Arthur Waldhorn (an American professor who had spent a year at Hull University, and with whom Larkin had become friendly).

Larkin’s letter of response, dated 13 March, states that he has no objections “in principle” to this suggestion, but points out that he has in fact made records of all his collections apart from *The North Ship*; and though these are copyright, he would, he thought, be able to record fresh readings.

Having made contact with and solicited a favourable response from Larkin, Waldhorn then handed over the responsibility of negotiations to Anne Becker, Associate

Director of the Watershed Foundation. Becker's first letter to Larkin, dated 22 March, included a copy of the Foundation's "usual agreement". In the letter, Becker also offers to reimburse Larkin for the cost of making the tape, which Larkin had indicated might be recorded using the facilities at the University of Hull.

It was 17 July before Larkin sent Becker his considered response to the Watershed Foundation's form of agreement, having requested guidance and advice from the Society of Authors. The agreement consisted of 21 clauses: in his letter Larkin challenges 12 of those. To give one example, Larkin's response to clause 1 was: "Suggest delete everything after 'non-exclusive'. Either the agreement is non-exclusive or it isn't." After some compromise on each side, agreement was seemingly reached (between Larkin and Becker) by 28 August.

Apart from the formal agreement, it is worth mentioning two further constraints that Larkin had to consider. Becker had stated that any tape produced by Larkin should cover the range of his work; and it would also have to conform to the Foundation's standard length tapes – 45 minutes (22½ minutes each side) or 60 minutes (30 minutes each side). Both constraints would necessarily have some impact on the choice and ordering of poems to be included. In addition, Becker made a point of requesting that Larkin send the Watershed Foundation the first generation master of the recording, in order to maximize the quality of duplication.

Larkin's hand-written list of poems under consideration for inclusion comprises 32 poems. His notes show candidate poems from each collection, with timings for each poem. Curiously, between each poem's title and its duration in minutes and seconds, are a series of numbers. These appear to be unrelated to the number of stanzas, lines or syllables in the poem concerned, or to the duration of the poem. And while there seems to be a clue as to what these numbers mean at the top of the page, where Larkin has written "ow-ow-ow", I have been unable to decipher the markings (See Fig. 1).

ow-ow-ow

North Ship		
Within the dream	7-29	0.22
I put my mouth	34-10	0.36
The bottle is drunk	36-24	0.48
So through that unripe day	37-23	0.53
Less Deceived		
Photograph album	31-31-12	2.41
wedding song	17-17-34	1.17
Comint	39-19	0.40
Next, please	26-26-45	1.19
Wrens	54-28	0.34
Church going	35-35-35-35-42	4.08
Loats	47-47-15	1.28
Shine	23-14	0.51
At Grass	19-19-55	1.36
Whitson Weddings		
An Evening	10-10-56	1.46
Nation to be saved	2-54	0.52

Fig. 1 Some of Larkin's timings for candidate poems.

In ordering the poems, Larkin reduced the number to 29, excluding from the initial 32 ‘The bottle is drunk out by one’, ‘Solar’ and ‘Nothing To Be Said’. The poems listed as candidate poems but not included in the final recording are: poem XVI (‘The bottle is drunk out by one’) from *The North Ship*, ‘Wedding-Wind’ and ‘Skin’ from *The Less Deceived*, ‘Nothing To Be Said’ from *The Whitsun Weddings* and ‘Solar’ and ‘Annus Mirabilis’ from *High Windows*.

The readings were recorded on 24 February 1980, but it is not clear if Larkin recorded 32, 29 or 26 poems. What is clear is that the first-generation copy contains 26 poems: 14 poems chosen and ordered for side 1 of the proposed Watershed Tape, and 12 poems for side 2. A full list of the poems selected for each side of the tape is shown in Table 1.

SIDE 1	SIDE 2
Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album	The Whitsun Weddings
MCMXIV	Cut Grass
Toads	Vers de Société
The Explosion	‘I put my mouth’
A Study of Reading Habits	At Grass
Home is so Sad	Mr Bleaney
‘Within the dream you said’	Coming
Afternoons	Toads Revisited
The Old Fools	The Building
For Sidney Bechet	Days
‘So through that unripe day you bore your head’	Wires
Next, Please	An Arundel Tomb
The Trees	
Church Going	

Table 1. The final selection and ordering of poems for Larkin’s American tape

In a letter to Becker dated 3 March 1980, Larkin points out that “side 1 of the tape is 28 seconds longer than you stipulated”, but suggests that if that length is unacceptable ‘A Study of Reading Habits’ should be deleted. The letter’s next paragraph contains a list of the publishers of the four collections with “a statement of the address to which your request for permissions should be addressed.”

Two days later Larkin wrote another letter to Becker, informing her that he had posted the tape “air mail”, at a cost of £11.04, and that he “should like to add this to the expenses of making the tape.”

In the same letter, Larkin states: “The recording was made on 24 February 1980 in my room in the Brynmor Jones Library, the University of Hull, England.” Between these two pieces of information, in a separate paragraph, Larkin casually mentions “*American* publishers who presumably should be placated.”

The mention of “publishers” and “permissions” at this stage came as a surprise to Becker, who had somehow convinced herself, based on her understanding of previous correspondence, that no publishers would need to be consulted. However, in her reply Becker says she will send all Larkin’s publishers “standard waiver forms”. She also takes the opportunity to broach the issue of a title for Larkin’s recording, herself suggesting two: *Serious Earth* and *Bone Riddles*.

Larkin’s response includes an apology to Becker (“if you feel I have misled you”) over the position regarding publishers’ claims to his work, but he makes the pertinent point that “Publishers’ agreements relating to collections of poems always in my experience include a clause claiming subsidiary rights including recordings, and I assumed this would be known to you.” At the same time, Larkin expresses his approval of one of Becker’s suggested titles: “I think *Serious Earth* is an excellent title and should be happy for you to use it.”

On March 31, Becker wrote letters (the same letter) to both Faber & Faber and George Hartley of the Marvell Press, enclosing a “publisher’s release form”. By the beginning of May, there had been no reply from either, so (on 12 May) Becker again wrote to Hartley saying – at Larkin’s suggestion – that if she did not hear from him within 45 days, she would assume his agreement to the inclusion of the poems in the tape. Hartley replied to Becker on 24 May, but at that time clearly had not received her letter of 12 May. By 1 June, Hartley had received the letter. He responded speedily and made his position perfectly clear: he would not be willing to give permission for the Watershed Foundation to use “in any way” any of the poems from *The Less Deceived*; and stated his determination to take any action necessary to prevent infringement of copyright.

The wranglings and discussions were to continue for another nine months, mainly at Larkin’s insistence as he persuaded Becker, Hartley and Faber & Faber on several occasions to resume negotiations with each other. However, by 20 January 1981, Larkin could foresee what the final outcome was likely to be, and, in a letter to Faber & Faber, asked if there was any likelihood of them being able to “unload the tape on some other American company that would pay fees you consider reasonable”. This particular letter is perhaps more interesting for what Larkin relates in its penultimate sentence: “The tape was made with America in mind (that is, no four-letter words or peculiarly English subjects)” – further (self-imposed) constraints that may have forced the exclusion of some poems that otherwise would have been included in an ultimate personal selection by Larkin (‘Dockery and Son’, ‘To The Sea’, ‘Show Saturday’, ‘High Windows’, ‘Going, Going’ etc., etc.).

On 9 April 1981, Becker, angered and annoyed, finally gave up on the project and offered to return Larkin’s tape – once she had received \$10 from him for postage. Larkin’s response was characteristically courteous: sorry that she had had so much trouble – and for nothing. However, he writes precisely what Becker does not want to hear: “It is my fault for being so co-operative in the first place”. He asked Becker if she would mind keeping the tape a little longer: “I have always thought of it as my American tape, and should really like it to remain in America somehow”. He went on to say he would “write to one or two American libraries” about the tape. But Becker

was having none of this, replying that as far as she was concerned it was she who had been co-operative and not Larkin, who she thought had “not been cooperative at all.” She concluded by saying that if she did not receive the sum of \$13.25 in American currency within 30 days, she would consider he no longer wanted the tape and would erase it “to protect your copyright.”

It would be easy after reading the negotiations between Becker, Hartley and Faber & Faber to lay the blame for the collapse of negotiations with Hartley. His manner was combative and stubborn and, at times, founded on a misunderstanding of which rights to Larkin’s work he actually controlled. However, in one of their last letters to Larkin on the matter Faber & Faber admit that their revised terms “do not differ a great deal from those suggested by George Hartley”. It seems clear that Hartley could see the wider consequences of agreeing to the Foundation’s terms, including (of course), but not by any means limited to, the competition his own recordings of Larkin (should he ever decide to make them available in the US) would face from a recorded Selected Larkin. As Larkin pointed out to Faber & Faber (20 January 1981): “Hartley takes the view that...no other [American] record company is likely to consider publishing another reading if Watershed are still selling theirs.”

Now resigned to the fact that the original master tape would inevitably be erased, Larkin was keen to recoup his expenses for the production of the tape and recover postage costs incurred in sending the tape to the Watershed Foundation. John Weeks’ original invoice for his services in recording Larkin shows that the readings were recorded over 3 hours, @ £5.00 per hour; mastering, editing and materials brought the total cost to Larkin up to £31.75. (A contemporary technical note provided by Weeks states that the recording was made on a “half track Revox A77” reel-to-reel tape recorder (See Figure. 2), a high-quality, but also very portable machine, weighing approximately 33 pounds, that can be carried comfortably with one hand, using its foldaway carrying handle.)



Figure 2. ReVox A77 reel-to-reel tape recorder.

By 28 April 1981, Larkin had written to Stratis Haviaras, Curator at Harvard University’s Poetry Room, offering him the tape for £50.00 plus postage. In his letter, Larkin informs Haviaras that “in February 1980 I made a studio recording...of my poems”, clearly contradicting the statement he made in his letter of 5 March 1980 to Anne Becker: “The recording was made on 24 February 1980 in my room in the

Brynmor Jones Library...” However, writing to Haviaras on 22 June, Larkin backtracks somewhat, saying simply that the recording “was made under studio conditions”, removing little of the confusion about where the recordings were made.

Understandably, Haviaras is delighted at the prospect of acquiring for the Harvard Poetry Room the tape of Larkin reading his poetry, and he gladly accepts Larkin’s terms. Acknowledging receipt of the tape, Haviaras – giving further credence to George Hartley’s resistance to the project – comments that he is disappointed with the letter Larkin had received from the Watershed Foundation (which Larkin had included with the tape he sent to Haviaras) and that he has had similar experiences with them.

On 24 August 1981, Larkin wrote to his bibliographer, BC Bloomfield:

For your bibliographic notes: a tape of poems I made for Watershed Foundation has ultimately been sold to Harvard Poetry Library. Watershed are supposed to have destroyed the master. Harvard has the ONLY first-generation copy; I have the ONLY copy from that. It’s a long, sad story w^{ch} I’ll tell you some time.

He continues: “ I’ve also recorded endless poems for the South Bank Show – for this 1982 programme. God help me.” (Brynmor Jones Library Archive document ref. DX/213)

After two years of protracted and often bitter negotiations, Larkin is at last content, the tape having found a home in the Harvard Poetry Room; his American tape is now residing in America. He concludes his correspondence with Haviaras by saying: “I hope one day I shall be commercially recorded in America...”

For almost 27 years, visitors to the Harvard Poetry Room have had the opportunity and the privilege – though they may not have known – to listen to a set of Larkin readings (Hollis Catalog No. 002348249) unavailable to the rest of the world. Larkin’s *American* tape has been exclusively available to a very small section of Americans. The discovery of the Weeks recordings *should* change that situation. But will it?

In fact, the 1 March broadcast of ‘The Larkin Tapes’ on BBC Radio 4 was a disappointment. The programme seemed poorly researched and carelessly written (repeating at least three times that the poems from *The North Ship* that feature on the tape had never been recorded before, and giving Larkin’s age at the time the tapes were recorded as 58: he would not have been 58 until 9 August 1980); it gave the wrong date for when the tapes were discovered (I was invited to a meeting that took place in London in November 2004 to discuss the tapes); aired only a third of the poems on the tape in their entirety; and focussed more on Larkin’s supposed dislike of recording his own voice (despite the number of recordings he made, both in studios and at home for his own pleasure), and his preference not to give public readings of his work, than on the readings of the poems the tapes contained, which were

purported to be the subject of the programme. It was easy at times to forget that the programme was called ‘The Larkin Tapes’.

However, the quality of both the readings and the recordings was evident for all to hear. Moreover, the information reported by *The Sunday Times* of 24 February, that Faber & Faber intend at some point to release the recordings on CD, was restated at the end of the programme. I await that event with great anticipation. I wonder if Faber & Faber will take into consideration Larkin’s own view that “... *Serious Earth* is an excellent title...” when they name the recording.

Since the discovery of the Larkin tapes by Peter Weeks in his father’s archives, Larkin’s own copy of the recording has been found (somewhat predictably) in the Larkin archive at Hull, along with the substantial file Larkin kept on the affair, which made this article possible. Clearly the recordings are a testament to the technical skills of the sound engineer who recorded the tapes, John Weeks. But the discovery of the recordings leaves us with many questions still unanswered:

How many poems did Larkin *actually* record on 24 February 1980, before editing took place? : 26? 29? 32? More?

Did Larkin record any introductions to those poems that, because of time constraints, did not make the final edit? And if so, do poems or introductions still exist somewhere among the hundreds of tapes in John Weeks’ archive yet to be listened to?

Where was the recording made on 24 February 1980?: In John Weeks’ studio at Hornsea, East Yorkshire? Or in Larkin’s room at the Brynmor Jones Library (which might best account for Larkin apparent lack of discomfort with the recording process), and then edited at the Hornsea studio (perhaps the following weekend)?

Who do the tapes (which are the standby master recording) discovered in John Weeks’ archive actually belong to? : The Weeks family? Or the Larkin Estate, since Larkin settled John Weeks’ invoice for “Dubbing of a standby master...” on 12 March 1980?

Is it wise to make *any* assumptions about Larkin’s selection of poems that made the final edit, bearing in mind the constraints imposed on him by the Watershed Foundation and those self-imposed constraints designed to make the tape *American*?

Given Faber & Faber’s cavalier attitude to the bibliographic integrity of Larkin’s *Collected Poems*, their own previously criticised and questionable editorial integrity, and Andrew Motion’s comment about the list of poems featured on the tapes: “To have what looks like a contents page is extremely valuable” – will they have the audacity to use Larkin’s selection of poems for this recording as the basis and justification for a textual (or otherwise) Larkin *Selected Poems*? And would Larkin’s literary executors support such an idea?

Perhaps there is only one thing from the whole affair that can be predicted with any degree of certainty: sooner or later – in some form or other – Larkin's *American* recording *will* be offered for sale on eBay.