

International Conference  
*under the auspices of The Philip Larkin Society*

at the Lawns Centre,  
UNIVERSITY OF HULL  
27-29 June 1997

## NEW LARKINS FOR OLD

### Plenary speakers:

Barbara Everett (Oxford)  
Edna Longley (Belfast)



### *Discussion*

Lisa Jardine  
Blake Morrison  
Anthony Thwaite

### *Poetry reading*

Carol Ann Duffy  
Andrew Motion  
Sean O'Brien

Among those presenting papers will be Hermione de Almeida and George Gilpin, James Booth, Alan Brownjohn, Steve Clark, Stephen Regan, Stan Smith, Trevor Tolley, J R Watson and Terry Whalen.

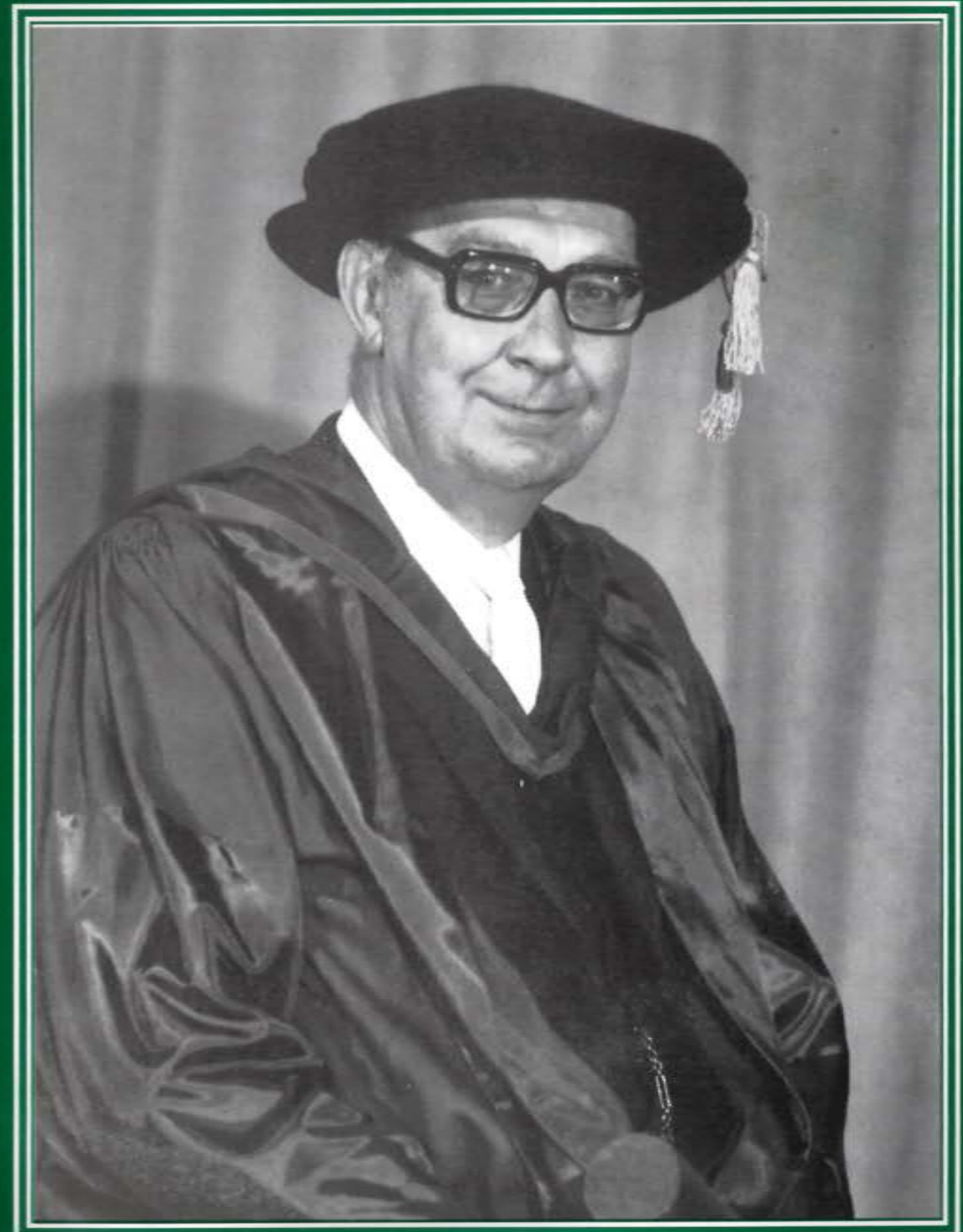
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# ABOUT LARKIN

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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PHILIP LARKIN SOCIETY

## THE PHILIP LARKIN SOCIETY

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## EDITORIAL

Several of the articles in this issue are by people who knew Larkin during his years in Belfast.

It was a time of social fulfilment and happiness although, characteristically, he could not admit to the latter until he was safely unhappy and elsewhere. In May 1955 he wrote from Hull to Norman Sharpe, a Leicester friend: 'Yes, I have this new job, rather to my dismay and alarm: my getting it is just one of those pieces of outrageous miscalculation any University is liable to commit. However, they can't stop paying me so they have properly bought it for the next 30 years or so. Ireland, let me tell you belatedly, was very good fun and I enjoyed it a great deal - none of this blasted keenness and efficient enthusiasm, and the pubs open 10 am to 10 pm every day except Sunday. England seems crude and cheap and ill-bred after the drab old-fashioned politeness of Ulster. I get the impression of living in a goon show or Workers' Playtime, and don't really care for it.'

The domestic scene in Belfast had also been ideal. His letter continues: 'I have no friends and not very good living conditions after my luxurious little University-subsidised flat at Queen's - still, it doesn't do anybody any harm to rough it, eh? Ha Ha. But the first year in any place is bound to be dull. Lucky if that's all it is.' For his first eighteen months in Hull he was condemned to student digs or landladies so it was not surprising that he harked back longingly to Belfast where he had lived a carefree bachelor life and had a job that gave him authority without too much responsibility.

Shortly after his arrival in Hull I remember telling him I was temperamentally more of a night owl than a morning bird. He gave his rueful look and said that not long before, he used to be up playing cards and drinking until the small hours but nowadays he couldn't keep up the pace. He implied that it was age rather than the responsibilities of work or friendlessness that sent him to bed early, but then he wouldn't have wanted to appear self-important and didn't know me well enough to be self-pitying.

Belfast was immensely liberating to him in many ways. Not least, it confirmed for him that he was not a novelist or playwright but a poet, a craft more compatible with the increasing demands of his day job. That, together with finding his own voice as a poet, produced the great flowering that began with *In the Grip of Light* then moved through *XX Poems* to the distinctive accomplishment of *The Less Deceived*.

Jean Hartley  
April 1997

*About Larkin* is produced bi-annually by The Philip Larkin Society. The articles in this newsletter reflect the personal opinions of the contributors and not necessarily those of the Society as a whole.

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### Cover Photograph

Philip Larkin receiving his Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the New University of Ulster, July 1983. We are grateful to the University of Ulster for permission to reproduce the photograph in this newsletter.

## THE LIBRARY I CAME TO

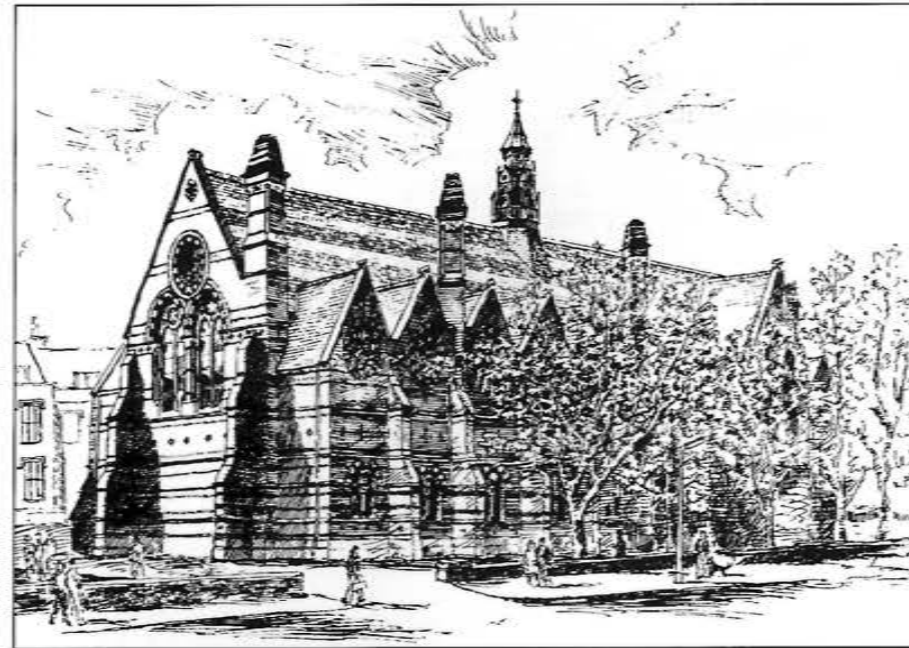
PHILIP LARKIN

*The following article, written by Philip Larkin, first appeared in the Gown Literary Supplement in 1984. It describes the library at The Queen's University of Belfast in which he worked from September 1950 to March 1955. We are grateful to Queen's University for permission to reproduce the article in this newsletter.*

The Library I came to at Queen's in 1950 was of course the old Library. The first part had been opened in 1865, and resembled a large church with no transepts; it had been designed by an ecclesiastical architect, and was simply a hall with rooms down either side and a gallery at clerestory level. In the early 1900s an open competition was held for an extension, and incredibly enough it was won by the original architect (anonymously, of course), so that in 1913 a second church was added on to the end of the first, doubling its length.

When I arrived, the first church had been filled by a vast free-standing metal stack of shelving. I forget how many floors there were, but it was possible to walk off it into the gallery at regular intervals. The second church was almost entirely reading room, but had two small galleries: 'Engineering students do their work in one,' wrote a contemporary wag. 'Law students sit in the other'. The public entrance opened directly into the reading area, and the issue desk was immediately to one side of it.

No one had much idea of what a library ought to be like in those days; I had just left one that had started life as a lunatic asylum, and the ecclesiastical atmosphere did not bother



OLD LIBRARY, QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY. Drawing by Marcus Patton.  
The library was built in 1864 to designs by W H Lynn, and extended in 1911 by the same architect. In 1983, the East gable was broached to provide a walkway to the new Library.

me. The light was dim and religious. The lofty pitched roof of the reading room magnified the clack of rulers and tapping of heels, but seemed to absorb conversation. The stack was claustrophobic and even creepy. The galleries had a reputation for romantic assignation.

I had no room, but was given a desk from which I could see most of what was happening at the issue desk and throughout most of the reading room. As I was in charge of what would now be called reader services, this was appropriate, but it had its drawbacks. One day I woke up at my desk to find myself surrounded by a group of students I was to show round the stack. They were not exactly giggling, but they were amused. In earlier days the stack had been closed to readers (my desk abutted on the long counter over which they were served), but now it was an 'honours privilege', and such

students were given stack tickets. Since these tickets were never asked for, admission was largely by inclination.

Queen's was very different from the small provincial university college where I had worked before. It was larger, it was older, it was somehow wilder, with stories of medical students making their new professors drunk and trundling them round the town on a handcart. But the chief difference was its local character and integration. Your doctor, your dentist, your minister, your solicitor would all be Queen's men, and would probably all know each other.

Queen's stood for something in the city and in the Province; until recently it had a member in the Westminster parliament. It was accepted for what it was, whereas my previous university college had

been regarded, if at all, as an accidental appurtenance.

For a year I lived in Queen's Chambers (facetiously called 'The Po's'), a range of tall Victorian houses opposite the front of the University that had been converted into a student residence. At first I was kept awake by the trams grinding up and down University Road, and by the other inhabitants. The maids habitually opened the window of my room after I had gone to work, so that when I came back at six o'clock it was freezing cold. I pinned up a notice: Please do not open this window until May. The Warden was amused, but I think a little shocked. Next year the University created some flatlets for staff in Elmwood Avenue; mine was number thirteen.

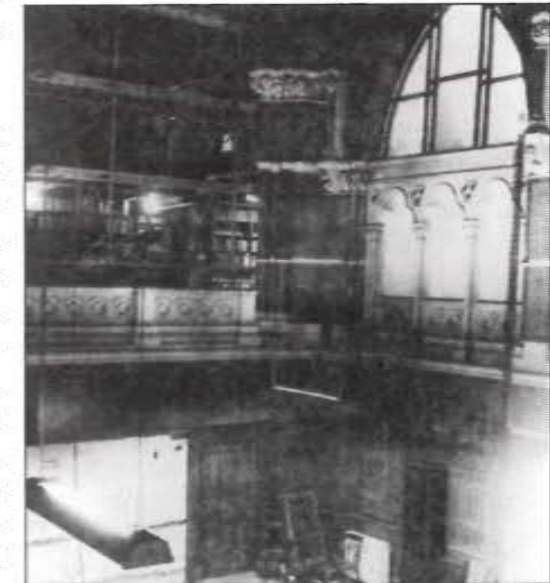
From it I could watch the Geology Building rising slowly on the other side of the road, for Queen's was expanding. There were even plans to remodel the Library; in 1951 I made a short tour of universities in the North of England and Scotland, studying issue desk layouts. (The private hotel I stayed at in Hull was unexpectedly good, but I threw away its card, knowing I should never go there again). Eventually the reading room was divided horizontally and its tables and chairs moved upstairs to the new room so created; there was still plenty of roof space. The ground floor held a new issue desk and catalogue hall, and a private stack. I got a room and a telephone for the first time, which in some indefinable way improved my status.

By today's standards the students were well-dressed and well-behaved, the men wearing jackets and ties and the girls dresses or blouses and skirts. They were rumoured to sit apart, voluntarily, during lectures. Once, for the benefit of J. I. M. Stewart ('Michael

Innes'), they mixed themselves up. Stewart opened his mouth to say something, then abandoned the idea and began his lecture. There was no bar in the Union. Behaviour in the Library was not exactly good, but it was peaceable. Only once, and then after I had left, did I hear of some rowdyism, in consequence of which the Librarian closed the building before time one evening and there was a hostile demonstration that got into the papers.

The Librarian, Jacob Jack Graneek, was stimulating to work for. Regular staff meetings were held and ideas argued out. If you approached him to ask whether he didn't think something would be a good idea, he would say off-handedly, 'Do it then'. Unfailingly resilient and kind hearted, he hated upsetting people. One of his blackest weekends was when he had made up his mind to tell one of the staff that she would have to go. On the Monday morning the girl in question came to say that she was leaving to get married. Graneek's relief could be

most violent explosions of temperament, was 'So-and-so needs a holiday'. When in due course I left myself (to be Librarian of the University of Hull), I said I thought he should replace me with a 'good librarian'. 'But I don't want a good librarian'. Graneek explained. 'I want someone like you.'



Interior photographs of the Old Library at the time of installing a first floor in 1952. It is probable that these photographs were taken by Philip Larkin. They are reproduced by kind permission of Queen's University.



felt all over the building, like central heating. His strongest term of condemnation, in the face of the

I was sorry to be going, but I had been at Queen's nearly five years, and I could not see myself as an Anglo-Ulsterman with a cottage at Cushendall and an adopted accent. At the same time I had become greatly attached to the country and its people, and to the University. Turning over bound volumes of a nineteenth century magazine in the stack one day, I found a poem with the recurrent refrain of 'Queen's, Queen's, Queen's, Queen's / Only a Queensman can know what it means!' It was slightly absurd, but in so far as I could call myself a Queensman I thought I did know what it meant. And I approved.

## LARKIN ABOUT CHRYSANTHEMUMS

GRAHAM LANDON

*Graham Landon was a final year undergraduate in the Chemistry Department during Philip Larkin's first year in Belfast. In 1951 Landon joined the staff of the Chemistry Department and began to meet Philip in the Staff Common Room for a drink after work and, occasionally, a game of snooker. In this article he intersperses personal reminiscences with an account of how a review of John Betjeman's *A Few Late Chrysanthemums* came to be published in *Q*, the student literary magazine of Queen's University.*

In the gloom of a January day in 1955 Wesley Burrowes was looking for ideas. 'Do you think Philip Larkin would write something for us?' 'I'll ask him', I said. Wesley was the editor of *Q*, the student literary magazine of Queen's University. The editorial committee had to include a member of staff and I had been co-opted. I'd grumbled but was pleased really - it was nice to be asked.

Later I found Philip in the library and he said we could use two of the poems due to appear in *The Less Deceived*. Also, he said, he was writing a review of *A Few Late Chrysanthemums* by John Betjeman which he needed to place somewhere and offered it to us. Two weeks later without any prompting, Philip quietly gave me a large envelope and said he hoped it would be all right. Next day, having read the contents, I gave it to Wesley and the rest of the Committee. The poems - 'Arrivals, Departures' and 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album' - knocked us for six. (We had not seen the *Fantasy Pamphlets*.) But it was the review 'Beyond a Joke: The Poetry of John Betjeman' (*Q*, 1955, No. 11, 39-43) to which Wesley returned, re-

reading the pages with bright eyes. 'It really is very good of Philip to have given us this. I'm sure you thanked him profusely'. 'Of course,' I said, knowing that I hadn't. Not profusely anyway.

The three student members of the Committee - Wesley Burrowes, Joan Moore and Michael McKeown - worked very hard to make that issue of *Q* a success in spite of the fact that they were all in their final undergraduate year. They cajoled leading figures to contribute on the theme of regionalism in Northern Ireland and were also rewarded generously by Laurence Lerner who provided two poems. Looking back I am sure that Wesley saw the Betjeman review in its wider context. Sadly, within six months and with a poor degree, he would be selling insurance in Dublin. Joan Moore, a stunning girl with a bright stage career ahead of her, died of leukaemia a year later.

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I didn't see much of Philip during his first year in Belfast. He was lodging in Queen's Chambers, the hall of residence that faced the front of the University and which was facetiously referred to as 'The Po's'. I was in digs beyond the northern pale of the campus, swotting for chemistry finals and having trouble with girls. He was expanding into the academic world. I saw more of him after the summer of 1951 when I joined the staff of the Chemistry Department and had the best of both worlds - meeting with colleagues in the Staff Common Room (SCR) and finding new friends amongst the undergraduates who published *Q*. The Penguin Poets series was popular in those days; likewise the Penguin editions of novelists such as Evelyn Waugh. I remember Philip explaining why he preferred the

novels of Anthony Powell. Sure enough, when *Afternoon Men* was reprinted, Philip reviewed it for *Q* (1952, No.7, 35-36).

Sometimes I worked late in the Chemistry Department and would walk across to the SCR in University Square for a pint. If Philip happened to be there the bar talk would often be interspersed with bouts of laughter. If I found him alone we would sometimes compare notes, as chemist and poet. He was beginning to send work for publication or review. He told me that he wrote every day after dinner and described the slow emergence of a poetic style and his fading enthusiasm for unadorned, unexplained symbolism. One day I asked him to look at something I'd written and he readily agreed. His criticism was polite but firm. Then he asked me about the meaning of a particular word. I answered, acknowledging uncertainty. He chuckled, gave an exaggerated knowing look, and said very kindly: 'Congratulations, you've achieved an ambiguity!'

Sometimes we'd have a game of snooker. The snooker room at the back of the SCR was irregular in shape and the balk end of the left side-cushion only two feet from the wall. A short cue was provided in case the cue ball finished in this area. When forced to use it Philip would select a grimace from his repertoire, curl himself into the shape of a question mark, and wield the tiny cue with exaggerated precision.

Philip moved out of Queen's Chambers in the autumn of 1951 and I moved in a year later. The new Warden was Henry Mackle, a senior colleague in the Chemistry Department. Much respected as a scientist, Henry was a small

leprechaun of a man with a waspish - some said wicked - sense of humour. He was given to quoting Yeats. For breakfast and dinner we walked across University Road to the dining hall of the Students' Union where Henry presided over the staff table. On the first day I was surprised to see Philip there. Henry explained that the builders were working on Philip's flat in Elmwood Avenue and that he would be joining us for dinner for the next few weeks. This was good news for us but not for Philip who was going through a gloomy phase with multiple girl trouble aggravated by the loss of his kitchen. There were brief flashes of repartee between him and Henry, but more often Henry would puncture the silence by goading Evan John, the musician, who would respond by grinning sheepishly. When *Lucky Jim* was published we understood that the character, Evan John, had originated during one of Philip's visits to Kingsley Amis. We were concerned that Amis had not changed the name and wondered if the real Evan John had read the book. For this reason it was never mentioned at table.

Between 1952 and the summer of 1955 new residents in Queen's Chambers included Laurence Lerner, just back from Accra, who used to sit cross-legged in an armchair and bounce with enthusiasm; and Alec Dalgarno, who was appointed sub-Warden in 1954. Alec would later marry Barbara Kane who, one Students' Day, was on a float that had been decorated as a pirate ship, having volunteered to be lashed to the bowsprit as a figurehead. She survived a hailstorm before being released!

During 1954 I made occasional visits to the library to read the latest issue of *Chemical Abstracts*. One day Philip happened to pass by. 'It's not fair on either of us,' I said, waving at the reading matter. 'These abstracts get bigger every year. I've

got to read them and you've got to find somewhere to store the bloody things.' Philip pulled a face. 'The trouble, too, with technical periodicals is that new titles keep appearing...' He paused and blinked. 'I wait for the day they publish Concrete Abstracts.'

Another encounter I remember was probably in the autumn of that same year. I bumped into Philip outside Queen's Chambers and the first thing I saw was his tie - perhaps the one he bought in Dublin in October (*SL*, 299). It was new, and bright sky-blue in colour. It was not a bow tie and its area was considerable. In the low morning sunlight the luminous flux was high. He had just got back from somewhere and we talked. Then I praised the tie and he pulled a face and said something and we both laughed. I remember neither face nor words, only the message: 'I secretly like wearing it. One has to advertise. But we both know it's a load of crap.'

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In March 1955 on a brilliant spring morning *Q* No. 11 was published. During the day I listened for comments in both the SCR and the Students' Union. The words I heard most frequently were 'photograph album'. Larkin had by then left for Hull, and his absence seemed palpable. Affection for him seemed to be widespread among staff and students alike. Late in the afternoon I found Wesley Burrowes slumped over a cup of tea, eyes half closed, content. At a nearby table copies of *Q* were fluttering like fans and Joan Moore was babbling to fellow thespians. Wesley said something like: 'I think the girls are rehearsing the lost art of swooning.' Perhaps I said that even the men looked unfashionably consumptive.

In his review of *A Few Late Chrysanthemums* the poem singled out by Larkin as 'one of the best'

was 'The Metropolitan Railway'. I sent a copy of the magazine to John Betjeman, who wrote back:

*I am enchanted with Mr Larkin's words about me. Just what I hoped one day to hear even though it may not be true. And just the right quotations. It is odd that he should appreciate my own favourite about Baker Street Station. (Candida Lycett Green, John Betjeman Letters, Vol II, 1951 to 1984, Methuen 1995, 77).*

When I telephoned Philip in Hull to tell him about the letter he was keenly interested, and so I had a photographic copy made in the library and sent it to him straight away.

Forty years on I am grateful to those poets for their poems and required writing - that can be understood by chemists and the like - and to their reviewers and biographers and collators of letters. Their place in English poetry seems to be all about railways and avoiding loop-lines - Betjeman going to Baker Street, Larkin tampering with the points and arriving in Kings Cross with 'The Whitsun Weddings'. And I suppose the review that brought a gleam to Burrowes's eyes could have been a map of the track. It's been a wonderful journey. Thank you all.





## SNAPSHOTS FROM MY PARTICULAR COMPARTMENT

WIN DAWSON

*In 1950 Belfast was a bustling vigorous city, with its shipyards, linen mills and cigarette factories; the political and religious tensions which would lead to violence and tragedy 20 years later were well battened down; and Queen's, though inevitably beginning to change and expand after the war years, was still small and intimate, a delightful place to work in.*

*Philip Larkin's years in Belfast are well-documented, and each one of us who knew him during this period can add only a small piece to the jigsaw-puzzle of recollections which go to form the composite picture. He was already showing his talent for keeping his life in separate compartments: games of snooker, visits to pubs and jazz concerts with male friends, gossipy meetings in cafés with female friends, solitary exploratory bicycle rides. Visitors from England came and went, and were rarely introduced to local friends. The following is a record of some of the memories which come from my particular compartment.*

Philip and I began work in the library of Queen's University of Belfast within a few days of each other in September 1950, Philip as one of the sub-librarians, and myself as a humble cataloguer. Having just graduated from Queen's, I was carrying on my friendships and activities from my student days, but for him Belfast was a clean sheet, a 'milk-aired Eden'. Our face-to-face relationship lasted almost exactly three years, from our early days in the library until my final departure for England in the autumn of 1953. But *pace* Andrew Motion it was not a flirtation, a very old-fashioned and devalued concept, but a friendship that grew into a deepening relationship which finally and inevitably led to a cul-de-sac.

In fact, initially I regarded him with some awe. He seemed older than he was, already balding and hard of hearing, not as physically attractive as my student boyfriends. Would I be likely to flirt with him? We enjoyed each other's company because to begin with it was without any emotional overtones. Possibly because I was more English than the other girls and, perhaps regrettably, had never acquired an Ulster accent, Philip found me more easily approachable. He had just torn himself free from his other ties - Eva, Ruth, Monica - 'the past dries in a wind'. I myself was mourning

the loss of my first love and juggling three lesser relationships (all with local men, for again I must contradict Andrew Motion in stating that I did not meet the Englishman whom I was later to marry until November 1951.)

So we were particularly keen on discussing Life, Love and Marriage from an impersonal standpoint, and this we did endlessly. His opinions, declared I remember on the top deck of a tram going down Great Victoria Street, startled me: on love, 'nothing but deprivation and ignorance'; on children, 'people only have them so they'll be looked after in old age'. Coming as I did from what I regarded as a normal happy family, I had never met anyone who expressed such ideas. I was shocked, and said so. Perhaps I hoped to change his views. I was totally unaware of the poems inspired by my presence which he was even then beginning to write.

During the early stage of our friendship I had no idea what Philip did in the evenings or at the weekends. He was living in Queen's Chambers, a hostel for male students and staff, and took up with some enthusiasm the opportunities this offered for new friends and activities. But a glance at the poems he was writing during the period 1950-51 shows another side of the picture.

A man not yet thirty, he was living out 'his ablest time' in miserable self-doubt, seeking constantly to reconcile his need for 'uncontradicting solitude' with this fresh attraction to a woman, which might lead him once again towards thoughts of marriage, questioning the value of his work and writing, left 'holding wretched stalks of disappointment'. The man who in his working hours was all courtesy, efficiency and charm, the very man whose face his colleagues were delighted to see peering round their doors, spent many evenings alone 'in a bitter smoke of self-contempt, of boredom too'.

In the spring of 1951 we began to spend more time together, often wandering down to a local café for a bowl of soup at lunchtime, or walking in the Botanic Gardens, 'two parallel walks of mist-loaded, flower-heaped, dew-drenched autumnal beauty'; or, in complete contrast, past the pickle factory and along the Lagan towpath, whose thick surface was oddly composed of rejects from a button-moulding workshop.

Philip was always fascinated by tales of life at my boarding-school, which had been evacuated to an old castle on the Ards Peninsula for four years during the war. Once he asked me what had been for me personally

the worst inconvenience of the war. For him it had been having to travel in crowded, irregular, blacked-out trains. I volunteered the ersatz quality of elastic, which resulted in navy-blue school knickers (which in those days had longish legs with elastic around the edge and a pocket for a hanky) that were always on the point of falling down, and sometimes did! He was much

amused. He later swapped a bottle of Blue Grass toilet water for my old school tuck-box, which he painted cream and old rose, and which is probably still in existence somewhere. Incidentally, I have only recently discovered that Ruth, Maeve and I were all Head Girls at our respective schools, though none of us, I would say, were typical head-girl material. Another example of assortative mating?

In fine weather Philip would sometimes bicycle along the Lagan path to Lisburn, about 7 miles from Belfast, where I lived very happily with my aunt's family, and where my 8-year old cousin, now in his fifties, can remember 'taking a scunner' to his heavy old-fashioned Phillips bike. Philip disapproved of my living with family and tried to persuade me to move out and 'camp in the sweet-smelling anonymous fields of strangers'. But on my tiny salary I could not have afforded anywhere to rival the comforts of home, though I did go so far as to

inspect one or two stark bed-sitting rooms displayed by grim-faced Ulster landladies, who would certainly have disapproved of Philip had they met him.

I spent the winter of 1951-52 in London studying at University College for a diploma in librarianship, which I remember as a mixture of extremely boring lectures

would have agreed with me that Philip contributed to that lively working atmosphere to a very large extent. Under our delightful librarian, J J Graneek, the staff were on the whole happy, and although the work was done efficiently there was always time for fun and gossip. I particularly remember Philip's readings of successive chapters of *Lucky Jim* sent by Kingsley Amis for

his friend's approval, delectation and envy. These readings delivered by Philip with the appropriate grimaces, which had been based on his amazing repertoire of faces in the first place, reduced us to helpless laughter.

By now Philip had moved into

the top flat of a house in Elmwood Avenue and had begun his affair with Patsy Strang, an affair of which I knew and suspected nothing. This flat lay on the route from Queen's to my bus stop and I often called in there. Here he tasted a little domesticity with both Patsy and myself in turns. Up

in this attic kingdom with his books, jazz records and much-prized Laptab (which enabled him to write whilst comfortably sitting in an armchair) he was probably happy enough to account for the fact that he seems to have written no poems in 1952. I remember bringing my photograph albums to his room, and in turn being shown his album with several pages taped together which I was not allowed to see, presumably



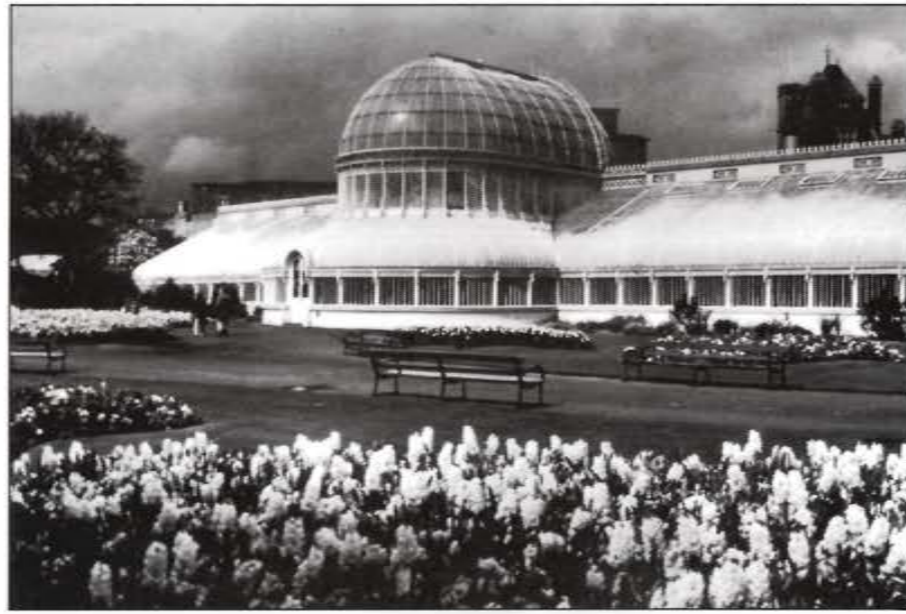
*Snapshots from a young lady's photograph album. Photographs of Winifred Arnott taken by Philip Larkin in his Elmwood Avenue flat in 1952-53.*



those with pictures of Ruth and possibly Monica. Where is it now, I wonder?

Social life also held many pleasures. We went, with the Strangs and other friends, to the Film Society, to parties at the Staff Club, and we began to be invited out together by young married friends, in whose style of decor and domestic arrangements Philip took a keen interest. Was this where we were heading? But we both knew, though we did not give voice to it, that this was only a passing idyll. Philip had made it plain that marriage to anyone was not for him; I knew I had to leave Queen's in the summer of 1953, when there would no longer be a job for me. I accepted a comparable post in Birkbeck College, London, and decided that I would marry my English boyfriend, with whom I shared deep musical interests, on which we imagined our future life together would be founded.

As usual with Philip, once a woman had slipped from his grasp he began to value her more, or perhaps he felt safe in the knowledge that he would not be called upon to make any commitment. For whatever reason, our relationship became more intense in the last few months of our working life together. But I eventually left for England, and Philip, as if to console himself, wrote some fairly harsh things about me to Patsy Strang. He ended, 'That's one life I haven't ruined — MINE!' But later, to me, he wrote, 'I have dozens of happy memories, which, like pressed flowers, I can spend all winter arranging'.



The Royal Botanic Gardens, Belfast. Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Belfast City Council.

## LETTERS FROM IRELAND

MAEVE BRENNAN

*Ireland could always be guaranteed to be a stimulating topic of conversation between Philip Larkin and Maeve Brennan. With his affection and nostalgia for the time he had spent in Belfast, and her Irish family background, they shared an appreciation of Irish culture and places of literary and legendary association.*

Philip had always spoken with affection and nostalgia about the time he spent in Belfast where he had been happier than anywhere else hitherto. On leaving, he wrote to a colleague: 'I'd only been at Queen's for four and a half years but it was extraordinary how at home I felt there and how much I disliked leaving ... Queen's is a perfect little paradise of a library and I'm profoundly grateful for the demonstration of how harmoniously a library can run.' (*The Modern Academic Library: Essays in memory of Philip Larkin*, 8, ed. Brian Dyson, London, The Library Association, 1989) The staff gave him a Parker fountain pen and pencil as a leaving present to which he remained sentimentally attached all his life. Rather than abandon the pen, he took it to Parker's in London for repair several times until eventually it consisted more of replacement than original, but he insisted it was still the gift with which he had been presented. Furthermore, he was particularly grateful to Belfast for re-awakening his poetic sensibilities: 'I wrote some poems ... and had that little pamphlet *XX Poems* privately printed. I felt for the first time I was speaking for myself' (*RW*, 68). Most of *The Less Deceived* was written in Belfast.

And of course he visited Dublin from there. As I had close relatives in the city and was familiar with it, we naturally compared notes on places we knew in common. Like all visitors to Dublin we were both fascinated by its literary and cultural tradition. Even though Philip's admiration for Yeats had waned somewhat, he was intrigued by my father's description of the poet and his muse, Maud Gonne, who were familiar figures in the city in my father's student days (1916 to 1921), as were many of the colourful figures who had taken part in the Easter Rising. Philip was impressed that in 1922, the year he was born and *Ulysses* was published, my father had had access to Joyce's controversial novel

even though it was banned by Church and State in both England and Ireland. It also struck both of us as a remarkable coincidence that while Philip was visiting friends in Dublin in 1951, I was at the same time studying at the National Library there - a rare concession to undergraduates at that time - in my last vacation before my finals. And as if to compound the tenuous association with Yeats, during the same visit I attended one of the last performances at the old Abbey Theatre which he and his patron, Lady Gregory, were instrumental in establishing. A few days later it was burnt to the ground. Later, as the political divisions in Northern Ireland polarized towards the end of the 1960s, not surprisingly, our views diverged sharply. Philip was a fervent Unionist supporter whereas my sympathies were strictly nationalist. In spite of occasional disagreements, however, we continued to share an interest in places of literary and legendary association in the Irish Republic.

On looking through my letters and postcards from Philip, I am surprised to find nothing from Ireland until March 1967 when he attended a SCONUL (Standing Conference of National and University Libraries) conference in Dublin. It was not a happy visit, the accommodation being at an inconvenient distance from the city centre (as is usually the case with academic conferences) and also 'far from pub, paper shop and post office.' There were, however, two extramural diversions. One was an interview with Radio Eireann; the other was an unplanned meeting with Patsy Murphy with whom he had had an affair in Belfast fifteen years previously. At that time she had been married to Colin Strang from whom she was divorced in 1955, when she married the poet Richard Murphy. By 1967 she was divorced from Murphy too and living in Dublin. Philip had not notified her of his visit - 'but of course the conference was in the paper and she sent me a note inviting me to ring up - So of course I felt I had to.' They met for dinner but he confessed that he found her 'almost as depressing as before' (she had spent a weekend in Hull the previous November) '... and slightly quarrelsome, and dull enough for me to have to make conversation at times.' (PAL to MMB 29/3/67) In spite of his ill humour, however, he brought me a handsome memento of this visit, a boxed set of hand-made coasters depicting a detail from an illuminated initial from the *Book of Kells* in gold and black on red baize.

Two years later, SCONUL held its spring conference in Belfast which went down much better than the Dublin meeting. 'This is a terrific conference', he wrote. 'Lunch ... up at Stormont where Parliament has been suspended, thanks to sit in activities by the opposition ...' He was delighted to see former colleagues and friends again at Queen's, and to re-visit familiar haunts. That evening the delegates were entertained to a reception at the City Hall which obviously went down very well with Philip: 'Oh dear, I do love Belfast!' he exclaimed, 'I'm sure it's terribly second-rate of me.' (26/3/69) This may have been his first return trip since April 1959 when he had represented the University of Hull at Queen's Centenary Celebrations, the ten year absence having intensified his enthusiasm. By contrast, his mood three and a half months later, when Queen's conferred on him an Honorary D Litt - the first university to do so -, was much less exuberant and his letter on this occasion was full of grumbles. 'The lunch and dinner were somewhat tedious and I don't know that I enjoyed the garden party a great deal ...' He complained that drinks were expensive and unpalatable so that 'the beer ... makes Hull brewery seem like nectar.' The principal cause of his malaise, however, stemmed from a polyp in his right nostril which was removed shortly after he returned to Hull: 'My dreary old nose is giving me gyp ... making it hard for me to get enough sleep, but that's no news' (10/7/69).

Six weeks later, and for the third time that year, he crossed the Irish Sea, this time

for a touring holiday in the Republic with Monica Jones. By the summer of 1969 political tension in the north was escalating. Earlier in August, anti-government riots had taken place, resulting in the deployment of British troops in Derry and Belfast. As the holiday drew near Philip feared he might encounter anti-English feeling in the south; he felt that his big Vanden Plas Princess, with its prominent GB plates, would be an obvious target for stoning or worse. It was with some relief that he wrote after leaving Dublin: 'No-one has bashed the car in with a brick, or shown any inclination to put me on top of a bonfire.' In order to keep abreast of events in the north, he read both the *Irish Times* and the *London Times*. 'The correspondence columns express every possible shade of opinion from ultra Protestant to fiery Republican. The song of Bernadette is heard in the land,' he added. (4/9/69) At the age of 21, Bernadette McAliskey (née Devlin), while still an undergraduate at Queen's University, had been elected to Westminster as MP for Mid Ulster in April 1969. She championed the nationalist cause and was much quoted and interviewed by the media at this time. Philip was furthermore surprised by the extent to which religious segregation was practised in the south and blamed 'This *Ne Temere* rule of the RC church [which] seems much resented & is always being referred to' (5/9/69).

From Dublin he and Monica drove west to Newport on the coast of Mayo where they stayed for a week, exploring the neighbouring counties. To the north they toured Sligo, a wild romantic landscape, rich in legend and folklore where, Philip noted, 'Queen Maeve is reputed to be buried in at least two places.' (30/8/69) It is also Yeats's country from where he sent me a postcard of the Lake Isle of Innisfree, one of several small islands set in Lough

Gill, a place of great natural beauty. In the nearby village churchyard of Drumcliff, Yeats is buried, his unpolished, granite headstone as bleak as Philip's own. Apart from its enigmatic epitaph, 'Cast a cold eye/ On life, on death/ Horseman, pass by!', there is no reference to his literary craft, or to his wife and children, simply his name and dates of birth and death. To the south they visited Richard Murphy at his home in Cleggan, a small fishing port on the coast of Galway. To their surprise, Charles Monteith, then a Director of Faber and Faber, was also there: he showed them an advance copy of Douglas Dunn's first collection, *Terry Street*. 'Home from home!' was Philip's rejoinder, as Douglas, whose work Philip had drawn to Monteith's attention, had recently been appointed to the library staff at Hull. Murphy entertained the visitors to a novel excursion by taking them in his boat to the island, complete with monastic ruin, which he had recently bought off the Galway coast. 'He didn't, however, offer to land us on it.' (4/9/69).

From Galway Philip drove south to Bantry in County Cork. By contrast he found the more tourist-conscious south-west alert and prosperous, 'completely unlike the Ireland of legend.' Besides good, wide roads 'they actually have things like public lavatories, a distressing lack in Mayo.' He also praised both the Newport and Bantry hotels as being 'in many ways ... the two best holiday hotels I have ever stayed at.' (5/9/69) Not surprisingly he commented on finding 'Maeves and Brennans galore and even one Maeve Brennan', which, with still a week of the holiday to go, turned his thoughts homeward. 'I'm rather tired of being away from Hull, even though the thought of work makes me shudder' (4/9/69).

A year later I myself retraced

Philip's route in reverse through Galway, Mayo and Sligo. I had previously been to Sligo town (my sister and I almost went to school there during the war) but only on day visits from Dublin which did not allow time to explore the surrounding countryside. I was enchanted by the scenery, the folklore and the literary and historical associations of this north-west county. Most of all I was fascinated by the colourful history of the Gore-Booth family and their home at Lissadell near Sligo. Philip had urged me to visit the house, now sadly dilapidated, drawing my attention to Yeats's celebration of its most famous daughter and her sister. He included the poem, 'In memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz', in the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*:

*The light of evening, Lissadell,  
Great windows open to the south,  
Two girls in silk kimonos, both  
Beautiful, one a gazelle.*

Constance Gore-Booth was the gazelle, her sister, Eva, a poet. Born into a wealthy Anglo-Irish Ascendancy family, Constance married a Polish count but later rejected her aristocratic connections. A militant feminist, she took a prominent part in the Easter Rising of 1916 and continued the struggle to throw off British rule until her death. Once a débutante and society beauty, she later devoted her life to the Dublin poor. When she died in 1927 she was buried in the Republican plot in a Dublin cemetery and De Valera delivered her funeral oration. Philip and I both read her biography (*The Rebel Countess: the life and times of Constance Markiewicz* by Anne Marreco, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967) with interest although naturally he frowned on her political activities.

By the time I returned home from

holiday, Philip had already departed to Oxford for two terms sabbatical leave, so we were not immediately able to pool our experiences. In the meantime, 'Dublinesque', which he had written in the early summer, was published in the October issue of *Encounter*. A moving, if whimsical description of a funeral in downtown Dublin, it sensitively captures the sights, sounds and customs of a city alien to Anglo-Saxon tradition. Philip said it was a dream - 'I just woke up and described it.' (16/10/70) Although not intended as such, 'Dublinesque' strikes me as a valediction to a city which, in the Belfast days, had held happy memories for him. Dublin itself had then had '... an air of great friendliness' but the passage of time had subsequently endowed it with '... great sadness also.' (CP, 178) I don't think he ever went to Dublin again.

As opinion polarized north and south of the border he became increasingly intolerant of Nationalist aspirations and identified completely with the Unionist viewpoint. In fact, I recall only one subsequent visit to the North, when in July 1983, he received an honorary degree from the New University of Ulster. By this time, health worries - he had begun to experience vertigo in unfamiliar surroundings which made him apprehensive of travelling and of formal occasions - together with the volatile political situation in Northern Ireland, greatly diminished the pleasure of this last visit. I remember how relieved he was to be back home; he spoke as if he could not possibly undertake the journey again. With two and a half years yet to live, it was as if the separate components of his life were gradually coming to an end and the '... struggle to transcend/The thought of dying' (CP, 192-3), indeed the very process of dying, was already overwhelming him.

## PHILIP LARKIN, BELFAST AND THE POETIC MUSE

N F LOWE AND LAURA LUGG

*In this article, which focuses on Philip Larkin's intellectual development, Fred Lowe and Laura Lugg argue that it was in Belfast that Larkin found his distinctive voice.*

Philip Larkin arrived in Belfast to take up his post as sub-librarian on 17 September 1950, and three weeks later he wrote to J B Sutton, 'I suppose I'm reasonably contented here. Coming to a new place always cheers me up for a while, though Queen's is pretty keen and sombre'. Characteristically, the rest of his comments were deprecating. He described the building as 'an unspeakably-hideous ecclesiastical style library', and said he found his colleagues 'friendly enough, but pretty ghastly on the whole'. Of the citizens of Belfast he wrote, 'the mad Irish aren't so mad: they can be very nice indeed'. However, he found their accents 'incomprehensible most of the time - a Glaswegian, after a short stay in the USA, whining for mercy'. (*Selected Letters*, 167-8).

There is no hint in this early letter of the creative inspiration that Larkin was to find in the city. Looking back on this period in later life, he remarked, 'The best writing conditions I ever had were in Belfast, when I was working at the University there ... I wrote between eight and ten in the evenings, then went to the University bar till eleven, then played cards or talked with friends till one or two. The first part of the evening had the second part to look forward to, and I could enjoy the second part with a clear conscience because I'd done my two hours. I can't seem to organise that now' (*Required Writing*, 58). It was not just this routine, however, that freed his ability to write. As Andrew

Motion has pointed out in his biography of Larkin, in his first nine weeks at Queen's, before he could have had a set routine, he had completed seven poems, three of which were included in *The Less Deceived*.

In the unpublished interview on the South Bank Show, Larkin stated that he formed some of his central ideas about poetry while living in Belfast, when he started to write his own 'more vernacular kind of poem' (Interview reported in *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, 215). In Jacobson's 'Philip Larkin - a profile', Larkin is reported as saying, 'It was ... in Belfast ... that he abandoned the "Yeatsian properties" of *The North Ship* and began to find a voice of his own.' This process, which he described as 'the unhappiest part of my life, creatively', (D Jacobson, 'Philip Larkin - a profile', *The New Review* 1, 3, June 1974, 27), began in Leicester when he started to read Hardy, and when he decided he had to abandon many of his earlier beliefs and writings. He realised that he had not only to shape a new kind of poetry, but also a new theory about the nature of the poetic process.

It was between 1943 and 1947 that Larkin was most heavily influenced by Yeats. During this period, Larkin claimed that he 'wrote the shaming pages about poetry' in *The Moving Toyshop*, a detective novel published in 1946 by Edmund Crispin, the pseudonym of Larkin's friend, Bruce Montgomery. The section Larkin wrote is spoken by a character called Richard Cadogan, described as 'one of the three most eminent living poets'. In a rare serious moment towards the end of an eccentric and action packed novel, Cadogan

begins to discuss poetry. 'There isn't such a thing as a poet type,' he says. 'Poetry isn't the outcome of personality. I mean by that it exists independently of your mind, your habits, your feelings, and everything that goes to make up your personality. The poetic emotion's impersonal: the Greeks were quite right when they called it inspiration. Therefore, what you're like personally doesn't matter a twopenny damn: all that matters is whether you've a good receiving set for the poetic waves. Poetry's a visitation, coming and going at its own sweet will.' When Cadogan is asked to describe this visitation he describes it as something mystical. 'I can't explain it properly, and I hope I never shall. But it certainly isn't a question of oh-look-at-the-pretty-roses or oh-how-miserable-I-feel today. If it were, there'd be forty million poets in England at present. It's a curious passive sensation. Some people say it's as if you've noticed something for the first time, but I think it's more as if the thing in question had noticed *you* for the first time. You feel as if the rose or whatever it is were shining at you. Invariably after the first moment the phrase occurs to you to describe it; and when that's happened, you snap out of it; all your personality comes rushing back, and you write *The Canterbury Tales* or *King Lear* according to the kind of person you happen to be'. When asked if the visitation happens often, Cadogan makes his most Larkinesque statement. 'Every day. Every year. There's no telling if each time, whenever it is, may be the last ... In the meantime, of course, one gets dull and middle-aged' (*The Moving Toyshop*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1946, 173-74).



This short discourse on poetry is not intended to be satirical. Otherwise, Larkin would not have described it later as 'shaming'. It appears to be the expression of a genuine belief in the nature of the poetic process. Inspiration, we are told, strikes the poet in spite of himself. The poet experiences 'a passive sensation', the outside world notices him, and then the poetic phrase occurs to him. The poet, in short, is little more than a conduit for the poetic muse. This romantic notion of poetry contrasts with Larkin's later beliefs. By the time he was writing poetry in Belfast, both his poetic style and his concept of poetry had changed.

Larkin has written about this transition. In his essay on the poetry of Hardy, he explains how, in about 1947, he began to read Hardy's poems and 'was struck by their tunefulness and feeling, and the sense that there was somebody writing about things I was beginning to feel myself'. Hardy led him back to his own experiences, while Yeats made him 'try and jack [himself] up to a concept of poetry that lay outside of my own life'. Larkin lists the poets he believes were influenced by Hardy, ending with the statement, 'the Poet Laureate, Cecil Day Lewis, clearly [loves him]' (RW, 175).

Cecil Day Lewis is first mentioned by Larkin in a letter to Sutton in April 1941. Larkin had been typing out his own poems for a book to be called *Chosen Poems*, and he became depressed by them 'because they were just like any other shit by Day Lewis'. In 1951, *The Penguin Poets* brought out a personal selection of Day Lewis's poems. He wrote a preface to them which expresses views on poetry very like those that Larkin was later to utter. 'As we accumulate experience', Day Lewis wrote, 'we begin to perceive, sooner or later, that every poem is an attempt to compose our memories and to interpret this experience to our own satisfaction. We write in

order to understand, not in order to be understood; though, the more successfully a poem has interpreted to its writer the meaning of his own experience, the more widely it will be understood in the long run'. He adds, 'the reader ... wants the poem which will accord with his own kind of fantasies about life or support his fragmentary knowledge of it'. He sees poetic truth as the 're-ordering, re-creating and interpreting of human experience through poetry'. Both poet and reader 'must believe that life holds certain kinds of truth which can best, or only, be conveyed through the medium of [poetry]'. (Cecil Day Lewis, *Selected Poems*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951, 9-10).

This is very similar to Larkin's later views on poetry. In *The Pleasure Principle* he wrote, 'Take, for instance, the writing of a poem. It consists of three stages: the first is when a man becomes obsessed with an emotional concept to such a degree that he is compelled to do something about it. What he does is the second stage, namely construct a verbal device that will reproduce this emotional concept in anyone who cares to read it, anywhere, anytime. The third stage is the recurrent situation of people in different times and places setting off the device and re-creating in themselves what the poet felt when he wrote it.'

Day Lewis's Clark lectures, given at Cambridge in 1946 and published as *The Poetic Image* in 1947 is a fuller discussion of these ideas, all similar to Larkin's later thinking on poetry. The opening lecture begins with the statement, [The poet] 'writes a poem; then he moves on to the new experience, the next poem ... No poem ever contradicts another poem, any more than one experience can be contradicted by another' (Cecil Day Lewis, *The Poetic Image*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1947, 15). This is echoed in Larkin's belief that 'every poem must be its own sole freshly

created universe' (RW, 79). Day Lewis writes, 'One may ... assume a common factor in the responses to a poem of all the individual readers for whom the poem has some meaning. That common factor [is] pleasure. Larkin said in his *Paris Review* interview, 'I think a young poet, or an old poet, for that matter, should try to produce something that pleases himself personally, not only when he's written it but a couple of weeks later. Then he should see if it pleases anyone else ... First and foremost, writing poems should be a pleasure. So should reading them, by God' (RW, 68). In *The Pleasure Principle*, Larkin wrote, 'But at bottom, poetry, like all art, is inextricably bound up with giving pleasure, and if a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience, he has lost the only audience worth having'.

Day Lewis also wrote, quoting first Housman, 'It is the function of poetry to harmonise the sadness of the world'. In the word 'harmonise', continues Day Lewis, 'we have a link between the classical and the modern views of poetry - the classical which thought of it as making horrible things pleasing, the modern which sees in it the acceptance of the horrible as part of a pattern' (*The Poetic Image*, 33).

This is not unlike Larkin's description of how the poet makes the unpalatable beautiful. 'Making [an experience] seem beautiful', he said, 'is a little more than just prettying it up. In fact it is something much more than that. It's trying to make it acceptable ... [and] most truths are unpalatable. You know what a boa constrictor does if it has something to eat that's unpalatable? It sort of covers it with the boa constrictor equivalent of saliva until it can slide down easily. Well, I think that's really what I mean by beautifying. If you have a truth like 'life is first boredom then fear', you've got to somehow bring the reader's mind round to the point where that is the only possible exit

from this particular situation. That is what I mean by making it beautiful. It is like Shakespeare making King Lear beautiful. King Lear is beautiful but it is very painful' (*Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, 214-5).

Day Lewis and Larkin did not meet until 1962, when Larkin announced, 'he isn't as big a shit as I expected', which for Larkin was almost a compliment (SL, 341). Larkin had enough regard for Day Lewis to accord him six poems in his *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse*. Moreover, Day Lewis in 1960 wrote, 'Even such a friendly critic as Philip Larkin found [his autobiography] ... a dull and somewhat arch book' (quoted in Sean Day Lewis, *C D Lewis: an English Literary Life*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980, 242). Larkin clearly had some regard for Day Lewis's poems. It is, moreover, very likely that two poems by Larkin were suggested by poems by him. As John Whitehead has argued, Day Lewis's 'Sex-Crime' and 'The Album' invite

comparison with Larkin's 'Deceptions' and 'Lines in a Young Lady's Photograph Album', (John Whitehead, *Seven English Poets*, Munstow: Hearthstown, 1955, 217-220). Larkin was aware of the comparison. He wrote to Winifred Arnott on 18 February 1959 with delight when an American college boy had written to him to say 'how much better my album was than C Day Lewis's: aren't you lucky to have known me rather than him!' Much later in 1973, Larkin commented that his poem, 'Show Saturday' was a case of 'C Day Lewis rides again'.

Remarking on how he came to his ideas on poetry, Day Lewis wrote that 'Yeats, Wordsworth, Robert Frost, Virgil, Valéry, W H Auden, and Hardy ... suggested to me ways of saying what I had to say', (*The Penguin Poets*, 8). Larkin, a very different poet, followed the same route, and, we would argue, found in Day Lewis's writings on poetry, the very concepts which he was struggling to formulate. He now had a

'working definition [of poetry] that satisfied [him] sufficiently to enable individual poems to be written'. With this concept of poetry combined with his experiences and lifestyle in Belfast, he found that he was at last able to say the kind of things which he had to say. He had found what we now know to be the distinctive voice of Larkin.

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*Fred Lowe and Laura Lugg will both be presenting papers at the NEW LARKINS FOR OLD conference in Hull from 27-29 June 1997.*

## THE SMALL SOUNDS OF HISTORY

REBECCA JOHNSON

*In the Larkin/Sutton letters and workbooks numbers two and three we have important manuscript material which inform us about Larkin's experience of Belfast from the time he arrived in 1950 until the time he left in 1955. In the following article Rebecca Johnson examines this material in order to assess the importance of Ireland to Philip Larkin's creative development.*

When Philip Larkin left Leicester for Belfast in 1950 it was a highly significant act. He had just broken off his engagement to Ruth Bowman and had decided that he could no longer live in the same house as his widowed mother. It is clear that Larkin felt he had been living in a pseudo *Sons and Lovers* drama. Correspondence between Larkin and his friend James Sutton at this time is filled with reference to D H Lawrence and the Lawrence critic John Middleton Murry in an attempt to make sense of life, family and women. Additionally, in 1954 Larkin was to write the poem 'I Remember, I Remember' inspired by the journey to Liverpool to catch the Belfast boat. Beginning as a satire on the 'artist's childhood' sort of novel (such as *Sons and Lovers*) Larkin admitted in a BBC Radio broadcast that the poem ended 'by expressing something I realised I felt deeply'.

When Philip Larkin arrived in Belfast he was a man preoccupied by his treatment

of his fiancée and certain that his mentor D H Lawrence would not be at all impressed. He imitated Lawrence's scorn:

*meanwhile Philip gnawed his fingers being a willy wet leg, and tried to decide whether A woman was more to him than his Art. His most fundamental feeling was one of surprise that any woman should be prepared to marry him at all ... (3 July 1950).*

It is important to identify the authors who were uppermost in Larkin's mind at different stages of his life because as a young writer he was unashamedly imitative and susceptible to examples of 'great' artists. A writer so susceptible to others might be expected to embrace Ireland and

its writers with experimental fervour.

Initially, the longer he stayed in Belfast the more he seemed inclined to absorb the city:

*one gets a bit sick of feeling a foreigner all the time, & of the really- quite-excusable local patriotism that continually recurs, even in Queen's itself. Still, the mind its own place is ... (5 November 1950).*

Yet what is striking about Larkin's correspondence from Queen's University Belfast is the way in which his version of Ireland (there is no clear distinction in his mind between the North and the South) never gets beyond the clichéd and the stereotypical. From the beginning he keeps a look out for 'goblins in Belfast', records a 'begorra begorra' lingo and discusses the 'mad Irish'. He seems mentally incapable of absorbing his environment and imbibing 'Irish' writing, even educated to resist it. This is perhaps not surprising when we consider that the diet of English literature (Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare and the Romantics) and English history fed to Larkin at King Henry VIII School is repeated at Oxford. Indeed, the statute for the 'Honour School of English Language and Literature' at Oxford University makes it perfectly clear that receipt of a degree depended upon the study of English Language and English Literature. Consequently, there is little mention of 'Irish' writing in Larkin's letters to Sutton. When he does walk to a symbolically charged site of beauty, Giant's Ring, he can only make sense of it by citing English equivalents: 'it was a place one might have stumbled on among Stivechale Common along the Kennilworth Road' (Letter to Sutton, March 1951). A few months later a weak attempt to pastiche Joyce and imbibe him like Guinness only serves to

stress that Guinness is the national drink of the 'Irish' and will not work on Englishmen:

*my meals at present are tall glasses of black porter - I am full of it at present - taken nightly, to drive away all thoughts of good or bad. Whack! Huroo! Your trotters shake! Isn't it all the truth I'm telling you, Lots of fun at Finnigan's Wake? (pause for a skirl of Irish laughter several gallons of porter upset, a dozen Guinness bottles broken, etc) (8 May 1951).*

Evidently Larkin cannot find or does not know where to begin looking for an 'Irish' mentor. For once in his creative life there is no 'genius' he can latch on to, no writer who has lived through what he is living through and has explored in words his feelings of alienation and displacement.

Larkin's poetic response to this unusual situation ranges from bullish nationalism to tentative experimentation with versions of Irishness. In workbook number two he jots down a provocative ditty, probably with Kingsley Amis in mind:

*I am in Ireland, you in Wales  
let us, among the Celts and Gaels  
Grow more Saxon.*

Yet in the drafts of the poem 'Tenth Day' he tries to come to terms with an 'Irish' notion of time by engaging with the Catholic calendar with its proliferation of name days and festivals. In the early drafts of this poem the simile which Larkin invents to represent the weightiness of 'certain days' draws on the 'Celtic' environment he is inhabiting:

*Certain days certain dates  
White in the natural future  
Like cairns of expectancy  
Are such slow travellers.*

The sheer mental effort of trying to commune with different notions of

time and different weights of words becomes clear when in desperation the poet erases the word 'cairns' and compares the approach of special days to a 'sparkling armada of promises'. The language of English renaissance glory triumphs in the end!

However, one of the intriguing things about the poems in the workbooks is that one can never be sure of reading the final version. All draft poems are fragments which can be amended and changed at any moment. Additionally, the nature of a draft notebook encourages one to read continuously as if perusing a journal of creative thought. Cartoons, quotations, and personal notes adorn the pages. Titles of poems are often added after the poem is finished and many are given roman numerals as if they are part of a greater scheme of things. Draft fragments which eventually disperse to different poems frequent the same pages. Workbooks two and three are filled with such fragments. Late in workbook three we reach a section where the poet actually attempts to start a poetic journal in epic metre. The fragments reiterate Larkin's confusion, the idea that in Ireland there are alternatives to his own certainties about literature and history. In an early fragment the 'small sounds of history' are easily linked with momentous events symbolic of British Empire and national glory:

*The journal ends, leaving the silence  
shaking  
Then the small sounds of history  
reappear  
sounds of  
- O distant waves, Derby and Jubilee.*

But in the second fragment those small historical sounds echo with something more sinister and complex:

*A journal ends. The silence is left  
shaking  
Then creeping back those small*

*historical sounds  
and ministries and murders  
Once more assemble in our empty  
ears  
As noises will of soft and far  
haymaking.*

What is disturbing here is that Larkin seems to feel that he cannot hear these alternative histories, they assemble in 'our empty ears'.

As a highly sentient writer who gained strength from identifying emotionally with other writers, the sense of alienation from Irish literary heritage which Larkin discovered in himself clearly disturbed him. The sense of difference it awoke in him lingered for a long time. Reviewing *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* he groups 'the Ulstermen' (Heaney, Paulin, Longley) together. Larkin explains that they are 'linked to some extent by ancestry, temperament and what might be called the 'Matter of Ireland', things which of course his experience of Ireland had made him realise he could never share. It is these Northern Irish poets who have been the most critical of Larkin. Tom Paulin has called him a 'stubborn English Protestant and Royalist whose nationalism was intensified by his experience of Ireland' (*Minotaur*). Seamus Heaney suggests something similar when he writes that during Larkin's 'sojourn in Belfast in the late fifties, he gave thanks, by implication, for the nurture he received by living among his own' (*Preoccupations*). Although true, I hope that I have shown that Larkin was uneducated for and psychologically and emotionally unprepared for the experience of Ireland. Of course, Yeats had proved a poetic mentor for a brief period. However, Larkin had 'discovered' him at Oxford, away from the context of Ireland and there is much evidence to suggest that he thought Yeats a bad influence. Once in Ireland, for example, Larkin's

references to Yeats are anecdotal of shame. In a letter to Sutton dated 8 May 1951 Larkin tells the tale of how he stole a book by Llewellyn Powys: 'I put it under my coat and left the building with the air of W B Yeats leaving the Irish senate'. Then there is the famous reference to Yeats in the preface to *The North Ship* where Larkin assures the reader that 'the Celtic fever' has abated 'and the patient [is] sleeping soundly'.

I would like to finish by looking at the baggage of 'small sounds' which Philip Larkin carried like a salesman from Belfast to Hull and used in his poetry. Workbooks two and three show that in his years at Queen's University he rarely took local events or scenes as subjects for poetry. However, one Belfast scene which he does return to again and again is the docks. 'Single to Belfast' is a poem which Larkin drafts on the MV Royal Ulsterman. Intriguingly, when one reads draft workbooks two and three one can see that he is unsure of whether to write about leaving Liverpool or arriving in Belfast. In *A Writer's Life* Andrew Motion quotes an early draft of 'Single to Belfast' where it is clear that the poet is leaving Liverpool: 'over the bone-dry quays/Liverpool sky signs douse and rebuild themselves'. Later in the same workbook Larkin adds the title 'Single to Belfast' to a different poem. This poem, which becomes 'Arrivals' is about arriving in Belfast:

*Landing to stay here  
From the scrubbed boards of sea-  
water  
My attention scatters briskly  
Over the rope scattered quay.*

There is little to distinguish the docks of the two cities, they merge into one. Later, returning to Britain and settling in Hull, Larkin invokes smells and sensations in the poem 'Here' which remind us of the other

two. The glass door which flashed the 'gold names' of the city whose 'white shelves and domes travel the slow sky all day' in 'Arrivals' becomes the 'plate-glass swing doors' in 'Here'. The staleness which Larkin smelt in the air in 'Single to Belfast' transmutes to that 'fishy-smelling pastoral' in 'Here'. Read like this, 'Single to Belfast' and 'Arrivals' can be regarded as drafts for 'Here'. In all three we see the journeyman poet learning to respond to the mediocre and venal, finding the spiritual in the insignificant and ordinary. The city of 'Arrivals' is good enough to eat with buildings like bread and streets like wine. Fish are the food of miracles.

In conclusion, Belfast proved to be a crucial period for Philip Larkin's development as a poet. I would argue that his time at Queen's University was most valuable to him because it forced him to choose his own words carefully. None of the writers he had read at school or university had equipped him for his experience of Ireland and none of the writers he tried to pastiche in his letters of this time could do the job for him. The draft workbooks show unfinished experiments with the power of language to record different human histories, memories and attachments. However, travelling backwards and forwards regularly from England to Belfast, he could only absorb the edges of what it was to be 'Irish' — hence the focus on the Belfast docks. When Larkin finally sailed from Belfast for Hull in 1955 he took with him the wealth of the 'salt carrion water' and left the rest behind.

*Access to the manuscript materials described is strictly controlled. Visits to the archives are possible by prior appointment only. In the first instance, please write to the University Archivist, Brynmor Jones Library, The University of Hull, HU6 7RX*

# SOCIETY NEWS

## REPORT ON THE FIRST ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE PHILIP LARKIN SOCIETY SATURDAY 30 NOVEMBER 1996 AT 2.00 pm IN THE MIDDLETON HALL, UNIVERSITY OF HULL



*The Committee-elect.  
Photograph taken before the  
Annual General Meeting  
on Saturday 30 November.  
Back row, left to right  
James Booth,  
John White,  
John Chapple,  
Colin Johnson,  
John Osborne  
Front row, left to right  
Rebecca Johnson,  
Jean Hartley,  
Edwin Dawes,  
Maeve Brennan,  
Janet Whitehead  
(Secretarial Assistant)*

The Society's Chairman, Edwin Dawes, welcomed members to the first Annual General Meeting of the Society. 49 members were present. Apologies had been received from 9 Honorary Vice-Presidents and 11 Society members. (A list of names is attached to the file copy of the Minutes of the meeting.) The Chairman then asked for the Constitution of the Society (a copy of which had been circulated to all members in advance of the meeting) to be adopted. Miss Betty Mackereth put forward the motion that there should be a change of nomenclature: for 'Chairperson' and 'Deputy Chairperson', the words 'Chairman' and 'Deputy Chairman' should be substituted throughout the document, as more in keeping with the terminology Philip would have preferred. No further amendments were put forward, and the Constitution, incorporating the above amendment, was formally adopted by the meeting.

John Osborne, Secretary of the Society, presented the Annual Report. He began by explaining the historical context to the formation of the Society and continued with a brief overview of the Society's programme of events for 1995/96 which had begun appropriately with the inaugural meeting, held in the Brynmor Jones Library, on Saturday 2 December 1995, marking to the very day the 10th anniversary of Larkin's death.

After the Secretary had been thanked for his comprehensive report, the Treasurer, Colin Johnson, presented the Society's accounts for the financial year to 30 September 1996. It was agreed that there should be no increase in the existing scale of membership fees for 1997, and Mr Graeme Reid was appointed as the Society's auditor. (Copies of both the Annual Report and the Treasurer's Report can be obtained from Mrs Janet Whitehead on receipt of a stamped self-addressed envelope.)

### Election of Committee

In advance of the meeting a paper had been circulated to all members indicating that a proposal would be put to the meeting 'that the existing Philip Larkin Society Foundation Committee should be duly elected as the Philip Larkin Society Committee unless other written nominations had been received by Friday 22 November 1996'. As no new nominations had been forthcoming, the Committee was duly elected as follows:

Chairman:	Professor Edwin A Dawes	Deputy Chairman:	Miss Maeve Brennan
Secretary:	Dr John Osborne	Treasurer:	Colin Johnson
General Members:	Dr James Booth		Professor John Chapple
	Mrs Jean Hartley		Dr Rebecca Johnson
	Dr John White (co-opted)		

There being no other business, the Chairman called on the President, Dr Anthony Thwaite, to welcome and introduce the guest speaker, Professor Malcolm Bradbury, to give the first Distinguished Guest Lecture. The President sketched Professor Bradbury's career as novelist, short story writer, writer and adaptor for television, and most recently, stage playwright. He drew attention to Professor Bradbury's place not only as a pioneer in American studies in Britain but as co-founder with Angus Wilson of the first and most influential creative writing department in a British university, at the University of East Anglia.

### LOOKING AT THE LITERATURE OF THE 1950s

*A Review by Anthony Thwaite*

In his wide-ranging, witty, amusing and provocative talk, Malcolm Bradbury traced the beginnings of Modernism to an afternoon in November 1876 when the young Henry James was invited to tea by George Eliot and George Henry Lewes but was given no tea: 'Henry James knew he had to do something different'. Not long afterwards, Modernism and 'Bloomsbury' followed.

When Bradbury arrived at the University College of Leicester in 1950, he found Monica Jones as his tutor and Philip Larkin often returning to see her. Reading English for an external degree of London University, Bradbury was a scholarship boy, one of the new 'meritocrats'. The syllabus ended in 1895, which marked the end of English literature: Leavis had said so.

But in retrospect ('I didn't notice something had happened till it had happened') Bradbury saw something else had arrived. The provinciality of the 1950s, and of Leicester in particular, was a new force. Before Larkin had established himself as a poet, he had set his two novels in the provinces. Amis's *Lucky Jim* drew on Leicester. Most importantly, William Cooper's *Scenes from Provincial Life* (1950) saw that day-to-day matters mattered most - even in Leicester.

Bradbury's awareness of this was soon followed by his discovery of fresh cultural heroes in the United States (Salinger, Bellow), with their own 'vernacular voice'. The move from avant-garde experimentalism to realism was

accompanied by a critical revolution that understood it. Bradbury began writing his first novel, *Eating People is Wrong*, at this time: it is 'about' Leicester and 'about' the Fifties.

When Bradbury returned from a stay in America, married, and came to Hull University in 1959, Hull too was part of the new dispensation: Larkin, now well-known as a poet, was University Librarian, and Hull was the home of *Listen*, the Marvell Press, and the *Critical Quarterly*.

Perhaps 'the 1950s' was not simply a decade but part of an era - 1945 to 1989, with the coming down of the Berlin Wall marking its end. The novel called 'dead' in the early Fifties by old 'Bloomsbury', was alive and well.



*Professor Bradbury during his lecture to members of The Philip Larkin Society.  
© University of Hull, Photographic & Copy Service.*

*A cassette recording of the above talk is available at price £4 (including postage & packing). Cheques should be made payable to 'The Philip Larkin Society' and sent for the attention of Mrs Janet Whitehead.*

## PHILIP LARKIN: AN AMERICAN VIEW

A Review by John White



Dr John White, Reader in American History in the Department of American Studies at the University of Hull, reviews the talk given by Dr Dale Salwak to members of the Philip Larkin Society at its meeting in Hull on 25 February 1997. Dr White would like to thank his colleague, John Mowat, Lecturer in American Literature, for his assistance in composing this review.

In an engaging and entertaining lecture, Dale Salwak, Professor of English at Citrus College, Southern California, editor of *Philip Larkin: The Man and His Work* (1989), and an Honorary Vice-President of the Philip Larkin Society, offered some reflections on American perceptions of Larkin's poetry. As an undergraduate at Purdue University, Dale Salwak first encountered Larkin's name in the dedication to *Lucky Jim*. Intrigued, he read Larkin's novels and poems (sometimes needing the help of an *English* dictionary) and found him 'direct and amusing.' But it was 'Church Going' (*The Less Deceived*), which aroused a desire to meet the poet in person. Subsequently, Edwin Dawes, the Society's current Chairman, arranged for Dr Salwak - a fellow magician - to have dinner with Philip at the Dawes's household in 1982, followed by an evening of conjuring and conversation.

Their second meeting came in 1985, at 105 Newland Park, during Philip's last illness, when he expressed a 'grandfatherly' interest in the young and attractive Mrs Salwak. As they left, Philip presented his visitors with a copy of *All What Jazz*, with the inscription: 'From Philip Larkin in the shade to Dale and Patti in the sun (temporarily and permanently, respectively, we hope)'. In his last letter to Dale, Philip expressed a 'crisis of confidence' in his health and reflected: 'To go through the ice of daily life means you can never forget how thin that ice is - you are always listening for the next cracking.'

In addition to these affectionately sad memories, Professor Salwak attempted to convey something of the shifting American reactions to Larkin. Valued in America for many of the traits that recommended him at home, Larkin was seen to possess the ability, in Clive James's phrase, to 'make misery beautiful', and to make loss bearable by alleviating the reader's pain by way of alleviating his own. But Larkin remained very much a minority interest in America, reflecting the declining influence of British, as distinct from *European* poetry, and the general displacement of 'Western' literature from the syllabus by such *de rigueur* concerns as ethnicity, gender and 'Afrocentrism.'

Yet even before the imposition of the new orthodoxy, American PhD students were discouraged from writing about any '1950s' British novelists and poets. Larkin, one feels, would have applauded this embargo. After his death, Larkin began to receive more consideration from the American literary establishment - and the number of Larkin theses multiplied rapidly. But, following the 'revelations' of Andrew Motion's *A Writer's Life* and Anthony Thwaite's *Selected Letters*, 'The Grouch from Hull' (*Time Magazine*) became decidedly non-PC in American intellectual circles. As a 'white Englishman' with an involved love life, an enthusiasm for pornography and 'rude' words, he is not 'required reading' for high school students, but his *name* has acquired a new resonance.

William H. Pritchard, in various places, argued that people with no interest in poetry could now relish an excuse not to have one - while devouring the more sensational details of Larkin's pursuit of happiness. An astute John Updike believed that *any* biography becomes the account of 'the long, wordly corruption of a life' with only artistic achievement, in its innocence, springing free from the mess. Professor Salwak detected a parallel with Robert Frost - whose stature has

also been reduced by the intimate details of recent biographies.

Meanwhile, postgraduate mills across the United States continue to grind out such (increasingly gloomy) titles as: 'Philip Larkin: Tender Poet of Human Failure'; 'The Existential Concepts of Time, Death, and Choice in the Poetry of Philip Larkin' and 'Philip Larkin: The Void and the Vision.'

Members took comfort from the news that Professor Salwak aims to increase North American membership in the Philip Larkin Society - numbering at present only thirteen unreconstructed teachers of English Literature.

Questioned about American reactions to Larkin's novels and jazz criticism, Professor Salwak could report little current interest in either. Again, Larkin had no American imitators, and never admitted to finding inspiration from America's poets - only from its jazz musicians. Professor John Chapple recalled Robert Lowell, on a visit to Hull, hurrying over to Philip to praise 'Aubade'. The recipient of this encomium affected to be covered in modest embarrassment - without, however, returning the compliment.

Despite this signal failure of Anglo-American relations, members of the Society warmed to Dale Salwak's reminiscences of Larkin enraptured by the deceptions of the three-card trick, and other magical feats performed by its Chairman and a distinguished Vice-President in possibly simpler and certainly less politically-correct times.

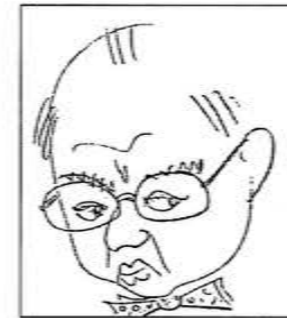
*An audio-cassette of Dale Salwak's talk is available price £4.00. Cheques, payable to 'The Philip Larkin Society', should be sent with orders to the Society's address for general correspondence at the front of this newsletter.*

## FUTURE SOCIETY EVENTS

### NEW LARKINS FOR OLD

#### International Conference

27-29 June 1997  
The Lawns Centre  
University of Hull



See full page advertisement on the back page of this newsletter.

Closing date for conference registration: 30 May 1997

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### Sunday 29 June 1997

#### Poetry Reading

On the final evening of the conference, poets Carol Ann Duffy, Andrew Motion and Sean O'Brien will reflect on Larkin's influence on their own work and read their own poetry.

This event will be open to members of the Society who may not wish to attend the whole conference, and also to members of the general public.

Tickets can be purchased in advance by completing the enclosed booking form. It will also be possible to pay on the door on the night of the event.

Ticket prices are £5 and £2.50 concessionary rate.

### Saturday 9 August 1997

'Philip Larkin's Coventry:  
A 75th anniversary Tribute walk'

To coincide with the date on which Philip Larkin would have celebrated his 75th birthday, Society member, Donald Lee, has kindly agreed to lead an anniversary tribute walk which will visit specific Larkin-related locations in and around Coventry. The morning walk (approximately 2 miles) will cover the city centre and its southern approaches. In the afternoon it is planned to cover Radford Garden Village (3-4 miles) where Larkin lived from 1922-1927.

Meeting place: Coventry Railway Station (booking concourse) at 10.00am. Comfortable footwear is essential. A picnic lunch is planned -- weather permitting! -- in an extremely pleasant oasis in the newly-restored Coventry canal basin (members should bring their own picnic lunch).

The charge for the day is £4 for Society members and £5 for guests. Anyone wishing to book a place should complete and return the enclosed booking form by 15 July.

On the evening of Saturday 9 August, as part of its 'Coventry Connections' series, Coventry City Libraries are hosting their own Philip Larkin event at the Coventry Central Library in Smithford Way from 7-9.30 pm. Society President, Anthony Thwaite, and Committee member, Dr Rebecca Johnson will each give a short talk. It is hoped that members who take part in the walk may be able to stay for the evening event.

### Saturday 4 October at 10 am

Dr Rebecca Johnson will lead a visit to the Philip Larkin Suite in the Brynmor Jones Library. There will be no charge for this visit but numbers will be limited.

Please indicate on the enclosed booking form whether or not you would be interested in attending.

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### Hull Literature Festival

#### 12 to 23 November 1997

The City's literary connections are celebrated in readings, talks, exhibitions and events in the grand surroundings of historic buildings and bookshops. Poets, writers and celebrities from all over the world flock to Hull which now boasts the largest audiences for a literary event anywhere in the country.

Further details of the 1997 programme of events will be available later in the year from the Tourist Information Centre on telephone (01482) 223559.

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### Saturday 29 November 1997

The second Annual General Meeting and Distinguished Guest Lecture will take place on Saturday 29 November 1997 in The Middleton Hall at the University of Hull commencing at 2 pm.

It is hoped that it will be possible to arrange visits to the Philip Larkin Suite in the Brynmor Jones Library on the morning of the meeting. Further details will be circulated to all members in due course.

In the October 1996 issue of *About Larkin*, John Osborne wondered what Larkin would think of his work being studied by a Belgian whose home address was named after the surrealist painter René Magritte. What Larkin thought of his work being studied at all is a matter on which an instinct for academic self-preservation forbids me to expatiate here. But why, of all people, should a 25-year-old Belgian, progressive and European-minded to boot, choose Larkin's poetry as his main speciality? I guess this could be seen as a confirmation of Larkin's universal appeal. And yet, my research is concerned with the ways in which Larkin and some of his contemporaries re-imagined England after the Second World War. This rather confused situation calls for some explanation.

Larkin's work has often been charged with narrow-minded Little Englandism. Things grew worse after the outraged reaction to the *Selected Letters* and the biography. Other critics have mounted a strong defence of Larkin's universality, arguing that the poetry has very little to do with the jingoistic prejudices which Larkin flaunted elsewhere. Interestingly, some commentators manage to say, often in the same breath, that Larkin is 'universal' and 'very English.' Some of them, I suspect, think that what is English is by definition universal. But although I obviously do not share that view, I too see no contradiction between those two aspects of Larkin's poetry.

What strikes me most about Larkin's England is that, even though it is recognisable, it is never very specific. There are, of course, certain cultural references that aren't readily understood by foreigners (e.g. the 'Odeon' and the 'Pullmans' in 'The Whitsun Weddings'), but that never prevented me from entering the poems. For such details are far from crucial in Larkin's poetry. His landscapes may be English, his towns may have English names (rarely mentioned, though), but it is important to remember that they are only a backdrop to what happens. And what happens, whether it is something or nothing, happens anywhere. When reading Betjeman, one has a strong sense that 'it could only happen in England,' because what happens and England are one and the same thing. Betjeman was at

## A UNIVERSAL TRUTH

Raphaël Ingelbien



Raphaël Ingelbien is the current holder of the Philip Larkin Memorial Research Scholarship. In this article he explores Larkin's 'universal' appeal.

ease in his Englishness; he still took it for granted. Larkin, on the other hand, always feels like an outsider. In 'The Importance of Elsewhere,' he recognises that English 'customs and establishments' are supposed to be his own, and that he cannot cast them off. But if they occupy such an important place in his poetry, it is because he is constantly trying to make sense of his alienation from them.

Alienation has been a commonplace of English poetry since the Romantics. But Larkin's contribution can take strikingly modern forms. Moreover, it constitutes a challenge to established notions of England and Englishness. Indeed, Larkin has seen through them. He has glimpsed what runs 'beneath it all,' 'the solving emptiness that lies just under all we do.' Or he loses himself in the contemplation of 'the deep blue air, that shows/ nothing.' This, of course, has nothing to do with the true blue of his politics. Neither is it the result of purely empirical observation, as I can confirm after my first months in Hull. It simply suggests 'nothing.'

Larkin, of course, was a contemporary of Beckett. The difference is that Beckett dispenses with cultural references altogether: his 'nothings' happen in a no-man's-land. Larkin, by contrast, leads us from a landscape which

Englishmen recognise as their own to an intimation of something else, indefinite, and sometimes threatening. And that 'something' may be more authentic than England itself. If he had arrived at that disturbing insight in his poetry, it is little wonder that he tried to counter it so vehemently in other contexts, with the results that one knows. There is indeed a relationship between the poems and the letters, but it is largely a negative one.

The parallel with Beckett helps explain Larkin's 'universal' appeal. Other, even wilder comparisons are perhaps possible. I am thinking here of another artist who managed to 'defamiliarise' the ordinary world around him without resorting to the extravagant devices of Martian poetry or Dali's surrealism. I am thinking of that most untypical surrealist René Magritte. Like Larkin, Magritte cultivated a scrupulously middle-class image, with only a slight odd touch betraying the artist in him. He often revelled in the conformity which he saw as a source of boredom. His streets, his houses, his countryside are safely and recognisably Belgian. His seascapes and beaches are those of the Belgian coastline. His interiors are those of a Belgian bourgeois household - his own, down to the 'specially chosen junk' on the mantelpiece. Only they are somehow simplified, made curiously abstract.

And in the end, they only serve as a background for a revelation which alienates them, which makes them look 'strange' (not a rare word in Larkin, as is too little noticed). And that makes Magritte 'universal.' Of course, the surrealist painter wanted to suggest a deeper mystery, whereas the English poet was haunted by absence and personal failure. My comparison remains as provocative as Larkin and Magritte eventually were. But it shows that Larkin needn't always be considered within narrowly defined English traditions. I also hope it will have gone some way towards explaining how Larkin gave a universal dimension to the poetry of English ordinariness. Paradoxically, it was his troubled exploration of England and of his Englishness that made him rise above the parochialism with which he is so often wrongly associated.

Raphaël Ingelbien  
February 1997

## ONE-DAY LARKIN CONFERENCE IN OXFORD

JEM POSTER

*Jem Poster is a Lecturer in Literature in the Department for Continuing Education at Oxford University. This article reviews a one-day course on Larkin organised by his department on 30 November 1996.*

Oxford University's Department for Continuing Education has a thriving literature programme with a strong emphasis on twentieth-century poetry. Recent day schools and residential weekends have focused on T S Eliot, Sylvia Plath, twentieth-century war poetry, and on 30 November last, the poetry of Philip Larkin.

The course provided ample evidence of Larkin's remarkable popularity, attracting 85 delegates, significantly more than any other poetry day school put on by the department in recent years. As is usual with such courses, the audience was well-informed and responsive to the opportunity to debate issues at the end of each lecture and during the panel session.

The lectures themselves tended collectively to insist upon the importance of close examination of the poems, demonstrating the complexities which underlie their lucid surfaces. Jem Poster addressed the question of Larkin's notorious equivocations, analysing the oscillation between affirmation and negation in Larkin's work and suggesting that it is in the interplay between the two that the poems' energies are to be found. Stephen Regan, author of *The Critics Debate: Philip Larkin*, and editor of the Macmillan New Casebook on Larkin, skilfully located the poet in his social and national context in a lecture entitled 'Larkin's England';

while Andrew Swarbrick, author of *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin*, depicted a Larkin reaching sensitively towards the 'otherness' of alternative places and identities through the medium of his poetry.

In the final session the three lecturers were joined by Blake Morrison and Tom Paulin for a panel discussion which proved highly illuminating, if rather less controversial than might have been anticipated. There was actually substantial agreement among the panellists on all major questions; and although the familiar issues of Larkin's apparent misogyny and callousness were raised, there was a clear recognition among the audience and panellists alike that these were complex and ambiguous matters which, while inevitably colouring contemporary readings of the poetry, should not be allowed to obscure its considerable importance.

The department will be putting on another poetry day school in the summer: a celebration of Tony Harrison's work, timed to coincide - more or less - with the poet's sixtieth birthday. The speakers will be Sandie Byrne, Jem Poster, Rick Rylance and Oliver Taplin, and the event will take place on Sunday 15 June 1997. A day school devoted to the work of Seamus Heaney is also planned for the reasonably near future. Anyone interested in receiving information about these or other literature day schools run by the department should contact:

The Literature Course Secretary  
Oxford University Department for  
Continuing Education  
Rewley House  
1 Wellington Square  
Oxford OX1 2JA  
Tel: (01865) 270308

## Society Membership

### Aims of the Society

To promote awareness of the life and work of Philip Larkin (1922-1985) and his literary contemporaries

To bring together all those who admire Larkin's work as a poet, writer and librarian

To bring about publications on all things Larkinesque

### Annual Subscription Fees

£12 (full fee)  
£ 9 (unwaged or senior citizen)  
£ 5 (student rate)

Membership of the Society runs from 1 January to 31 December of any given year.

Overseas members are invited to pay their subscription by a cheque in £s sterling drawn on a London bank or by international money order. Cheques should be made payable to 'The Philip Larkin Society'.

We can also accept payment by US and Can \$ cheques (25 and 30 dollars respectively.)

### Membership Benefits

Exhibitions

*About Larkin*, newsletter of the Society published bi-annually in April and October

Talks on all aspects of Larkin's life and work

Pre-arranged visits to the Larkin Archives

Certain workshops and day conferences

## THE SON DOESN'T REACH HER

Plot 3713A is a narrow patch of turned earth  
 Without a tomb or epitaph - a memorial of sorts,  
 Perhaps better than the council's illuminated script  
 Which now I pay for and wait by the gate.  
 For my cavity's empty, the heart's not there;  
 My head's intact, eyes, teeth, brain but not the hair:  
 The one entrusted with its development and care  
 Is scattered in dusty filaments of light  
 In some garden of remembrance, unvisited, unloved;  
 She's nowhere but everywhere, still grasping my heart  
 She ripped unknowing from my childish breast  
 Then coveted in bloodless fashion.  
 Now I wait by the crematorium gate  
 Hoping for a better adult fate,  
 Waiting close by the sun-warmed soil  
 My bruised heart back beneath  
 My fire-damaged ribs, so black.

Vic Lovett  
 March 1994

## Biographical Details

Victor Lovett was born and brought up in Middlesbrough. He qualified as a teacher in 1970 and worked mainly in Special Education, latterly as a Deputy Headteacher in Cleveland Special Schools.

Since taking early retirement he has been pursuing his interests in Art and Literature. In February 1997 his first exhibition of art entitled 'At Least the Framers are Happy' was shown at University House in Middlesbrough.

Thirty works were exhibited including paintings, drawings, photographs and the adjacent poem 'The Son doesn't Reach Her' which forms part of an ongoing autobiographical series.

## OBITUARY

## RAYMOND LAURENCE BRETT

10 January 1917 to 6 December 1996

The death of Professor Raymond Brett, a Vice-President of the Philip Larkin Society, shortly before Christmas, and just a few weeks before his eightieth birthday, is a heavy loss to his colleagues and friends and also to East Yorkshire where he lived and worked for the last 44 years of his life. In addition, his death deprives us of yet another of Philip Larkin's close friends. Indeed, of one who was largely responsible for Philip being in Hull in the first place since Ray Brett was Chairman of the Library Committee at the time of Philip's appointment.

Born on 10 January 1917 in Bristol, Ray Brett was educated at Bristol Cathedral School before entering Bristol University where he gained a first-class degree in English and Philosophy, after which he undertook postgraduate studies at University College, Oxford, where he was awarded a B Litt in 1940. Having been called up for the navy, he spent the war in the Admiralty on the staff of the

First Lord working in the Cabinet section. After six years as a lecturer in the English Department of Bristol University, in 1952 he was appointed to the G F Grant Chair of English at Hull University. His numerous publications include *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury*, *George Crabbe*, *Reason and Imagination*, *The Lyrical Ballads* - in which he edited the poems of S T Coleridge - *An Introduction to English Studies*, *Poems of Faith and Doubt*, *Fancy and Imagination*, *Barclay Fox's Journal* and *Andrew Marvell*. He retired in 1982 and the following

year the university recognised the distinction he had brought to Hull by conferring on him the honorary degree of D Litt.

Philip Larkin did not think much of lecturers - particularly lecturers in English Literature. On the whole he regarded them as little different from snake-oil vendors and condemned them to the company of lispers, losels, loblolly men and louts, which is not really surprising since both his friends, Kingsley Amis and John Wain, were lecturers and he harboured a strong suspicion that they had found a far easier way to make a living than working in a library. Yet he made a notable exception for Ray Brett whom he welcomed first as a colleague and then as a firm friend. Ray Brett described their association

in the elegant article he wrote for *Philip Larkin - A Tribute* published in 1988 by The Marvell Press. Philip Larkin's long friendship with Ray Brett was based on a solid assessment of his worth, his kindness, his honesty, and his downright common-sense. Philip came to rely on Ray's judgement and opinion, to value his advice and to enlist his help both in the university and outside of it, in small matters and in large; Ray stood surety for him when Philip bought stair carpet for 32 Pearson Park - notwithstanding its garish yellow colour - and he showed Philip how to assemble the necessary support on the necessary university committees in order to further the cause of the library in the face of the many strongly competing claims. Ray supported Philip throughout the building of the new library - a period fraught with anxiety for Philip who feared that posterity would blame him for lumbering it with a monstrosity - and he continued to support him in his public and private life. Above all Ray listened, he was always a sensitive and sympathetic listener, when he was needed to share a particular trouble or lift a troubling depression. I know that it was a source of great satisfaction to Ray Brett that shortly before Philip died they were both able in their reserved ways to express their deep regard and affection for each other.

Ray Brett inherited a strong respect for tradition that he combined with a radical sense of individualism which is, perhaps, why he felt at home in Yorkshire. He was held in high regard by all who were privileged to know him for his warmth and generosity of spirit, his ready humour, his modesty and his integrity. Though



Photograph of Ray Brett taken at his desk, 29 May 1970.  
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he achieved distinction, he remained utterly free of self-importance. Thus, he inspired both admiration and affection. He died, as he had lived, in 'the honourable style of a Christian.' He is survived by his wife and dearest friend Kitty to whom he was married for almost fifty years. For my part, I owe him an inestimable debt for his many kindnesses and I am deeply grateful for the good fortune of having been his colleague, his collaborator and his friend: I look back with pleasure and nostalgia to the ten years between 1956 and 1966 when I was a lecturer in his department.

Professor Alun R Jones

## Acknowledgements

We should like to thank the following institutions and individuals for their help in the production of this issue: Kitty Brett, Marcus Patton, Michael Smallman, Ann Schultz, Jennifer Stewart, Anthony Thwaite; Belfast City Council, The Larkin Estate, The Queen's University of Belfast, The University of Hull Design Office, The University of Hull Printing Service, The University of Hull Photographic and Copy Service, The University of Ulster.

## THE LARKIN CONCORDANCE

R J C WATT

Right, you Larkin fans, your starter for ten. Name five words which Larkin uses a lot in his early poetry but seldom in his later. Too easy? Of course you immediately thought of words such as *dream*, *hair*, *hands*, *heart*, and *image*. What about words (expletives apart) which he never used in the 1940s but grow more frequent from the late 1950s onwards? Try *money* and *women* for a start.

This is just one of the kinds of evidence about the poet's language which my Larkin Concordance, published in 1995, makes it easy to gather. One unique feature of the Concordance is that each usage of each word in Larkin's poetry is given its date. So for the first time it becomes possible, for example, to trace with precision the Yeatsian fever leaving Larkin, and evaluate for oneself the truth of the claim he made in the preface to the Faber edition of *The North Ship*, where, he tells us, his reaction against Yeats took place in 'early 1946' and was 'undramatic, complete and permanent'. 'If hands could free you, heart ...', he wrote in 1943 — to which one is tempted to add '... you wouldn't be talking like that much longer!'

The Concordance can also reveal the secrets of the genesis of poetic ideas, images, and even whole poems. The fact that 'Best Society' is an early version of the idea re-worked twenty years later as 'Vers de Société' emerges — assuming one hasn't seen it already — from a look at the citations for *gas* and *gas-fire*, or *social*, or *virtue* and *virtues*. Or again, a glance at the entries under *leather* will show something of what 'Livings' owes to the unfinished poem 'Negative Indicative'. And

the citations under *castles* or *unresting* reveal how an image from an unpublished poem of 1954 was re-worked to become the splendid concluding stanza of 'The Trees' in 1967.

But the most fascinating aspect of all, as I was compiling the Concordance, was to see the extraordinary range and variety of Larkin's negations — his *un-*words — brought together for the first time. We all know he lavished his linguistic inventiveness and imaginative energy on a range of negations which have a richness that belies or negates their formal negativity. Yet to appreciate fully their range and power there is no substitute for seeing them lying 'side by side' (as he might have put it, in a phrase which links two very different married couples in two of his best-known poems) in the pages of the Concordance. Many of the words in this sequence, indeed, are remarkably positive negatives, expressing energy (*unresting*) or freedom (*unbarred*, *unhindered*, *unfenced*) or opportunity ('potential' is *unlimited*). Larkin's fascination with the negative prefix also engendered some of his most memorable adjectives: 'Snow fell, *undated*'. Other such words, more equivocally, explore what might have been: 'the *unraised* hand calm, / The apple *unbitten* in the palm'; 'love *unused*, in *unsaid* words'; '*unshared* friends and *unwalked* ways'. Others remind us of Larkin's power to express a sense of something missed, as when he wrote of the place 'where my childhood was *unspent*', or called himself '*unchilded* and *unwifed*'. Then there is the wry conclusion to 'Talking in Bed' where he writes of the difficulty of finding 'Words at once true and kind, / Or not untrue

and not unkind', a rueful diminution of expectation indeed, where the double negatives leave the slimmest of gaps in which something positive might survive. But just as often his *un-* words invoke a sense of wholeness, or imagine a life purged of troubles: 'the soul *unjustled*, / The pocket *unpicked*'; 'an *unriven* tongue'. A remarkable series of words expresses — at least ostensibly — not defeat but tranquillity and the absence of distress: *undisturbed*, *undriven*, *unhurried*, *unforced*, *untired*, *untroubled*. But we are only scratching the surface: there are around one hundred and fifty different *un-* words in all. And then there is another, almost equally remarkable, series of words — nearly fifty of them — with the suffix *-less*.

*A Concordance to the Poetry of Philip Larkin* is published by Olms-Weidmann (Hildesheim, 1995; ISBN 3 487 09801 6). It is based on Anthony Thwaite's revised (1990) edition of the *Collected Poems*. I hope I have suggested some of the ways in which it can open up explorations of Larkin's language, that deeply rewarding topic. A concordance won't ask the right questions for you, but if used with imagination, it can help answer the questions as no other tool can.



Rob Watt is a Senior Lecturer in the English Department at the University of Dundee.

## A GOOD COMPANION

MURIEL CRANE

*From 1946 to 1982 Muriel Crane was a lecturer in literature and drama in the former Department of Adult Education at the University of Hull. In this article she recalls the first time she ever spoke to Philip Larkin, and how, over a period of some twenty years, they enjoyed an 'ordinary' friendship.*

The first time I ever spoke to him was a chance encounter in the Cottingham Duke of Cumberland public house. A sunny autumn day and thirty minutes to spare encouraged me to take a half, enjoy a cigarette and try the *Guardian* crossword. In those days in the early 1960s this was a blokish pursuit acquired in extra mural teaching with its waits for trains, buses or cars to and from the next class (a woman on her own buying a drink in a public house was virtually unheard of). Philip Larkin was sitting alone with a pint and a paperback. This was in the days before the Duke had been updated: there was a small bar closed off at the front with smoky walls and ceiling, basic seating and no food provided. He acknowledged me, which was nice as I didn't expect him to know me, and I was nervous of him. He had the reputation for being shy and aloof. I liked his poetry but had not got round to giving it the attention it evidently deserved. I got my drink and wondered where I could sit in this small room that would give us each our own corner, without seeming unfriendly. He took the initiative by closing his book and saying something about the weather. I had sat across from him but we were at an easy speaking distance and there wasn't anyone else in the bar at that time. When I had

arranged my drink and crossword he finished his pint and got up asking if I'd like another. I pointed to my nearly full glass. When he'd got his drink he came over and admitted to sharing the crossword habit, though he was used to the *Telegraph*. I offered him a seat and he sat on my right side which was, of course, his 'good' ear, although I didn't then know of his hearing problem.

He brought over his book and a box with a sandwich lunch. The book was an Agatha Christie, which surprised me. We chatted about the merits and demerits of various crime writers and he offered me a sandwich from his lunch box. But I was due at the Memorial Club on Finkle Street for lunch. Larkin said he went there sometimes because the beer was cheap and they (this was said with a brief grin) banned women except for two days a week. On those days he chose to come to the Duke. So I left him sitting alone munching his sandwiches and taking up his Agatha Christie again.

There wasn't anything exceptional in this encounter. But he had turned out to be courteous, easy to talk to and completely unassuming. I felt that reports of his misanthropy had been exaggerated. He seemed to have a talent for enjoying ordinary pleasures and company unselfconsciously. It was hard for me to associate him with poems such as 'Mr Bleaney', 'Toads' or 'Here', for example.

After this first meeting we often met on a Friday lunch time when Virginia Peace and I used to rendezvous. He would join us and share his news and views. He told us how

he would have to get what he called a 'terminal' suit for the poetry prize in Germany. He complained of the public exposure inseparable from being Poet Laureate. He was amazed at my, to him, excessive number of trips abroad. He even greeted me once with 'Ah, back from foreign parts again!' after I'd been at a weekend drama school in Whitby. On another occasion he looked aghast at the assembled complement of youngish staff, exclaiming: 'My God, they're letting the bloody students in now!', and his outrage was genuine. I once tried to persuade him to see my production of *An American Dream*. He said he only went to a play if there was a strip tease in it. There was a scene in the play when one of the cast appeared in her lingerie but this did not seem enough to tempt him.

In the seventies I suffered from a spell of depression and spent three months in hospital. It was an ordeal for me to rejoin the lunchtimers. Out of the press of familiar faces it was Larkin who stepped forward, put an arm round my shoulders, and said quietly, 'Welcome back, Muriel.' A spontaneous gesture from someone who knew the nature of the illness and guessed my nervousness? I don't know but it heartened me. We were at a 'Vers de Société' style do where, in a crowded dining room, we nibbled and sipped, our backs to the wall and me on his right hand side. By now I was used to the need to take his deafness into account when speaking to him. Because of the throng and consequent background noise I had to speak directly into his good ear. I told him how one of my

classes had been won over to his 'Dockery and Son' in spite of what they had at first said about its gloom. They had also been deeply moved by 'An Arundel Tomb' and we had argued about those clasped hands. We wondered whether he wrote the ending (sometimes misinterpreted as an affirmative) before the resculpting was known about or afterwards? One student said that for her knowing that the hands were joined at a later date gave added irony to the seeming perpetuity of the stone effigy. Behind the memorial lay a reality we would never know:

*Time has transfigured them into  
Untruth. The stone fidelity  
They hardly meant has come to  
be  
Their final blazon, and to prove  
Our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love.*  
(CP, 111)

Larkin was silent. I wondered if he had heard me. At last he just said, 'I wrote it *before* I learned about the restoration.'

In 1986, a year after Larkin's death, I became stone deaf in my right ear. It was then that I realised something of what he must have been facing, and, how such an apparently minor disability can change all one's social interactions. You have to see that people sit on your good side, cutting out any exchange with people on the deaf side. You negotiate a position in a group that angles the sound waves into as wide an arc as possible, but if there is background noise or the group becomes too lively, you are cut off from what is going on. You learn to avoid any occasion or place, such as parties or pubs, where speech deteriorates into chaotic noise. You learn inately to say 'Oh, yes', and wonder if you should perhaps have said 'Oh, no'! It is very tiring having to concentrate on faces, mouths, facial expressions

and then try to improvise an appropriate reaction. If you do admit to having difficulty in hearing people are very kind, but mostly speak loudly for a while and then forget, which doesn't help. I've seen a joke badge with the slogan 'I'm not deaf. I'm ignoring you', which I think Larkin would have liked. Anyway, from personal experience I appreciate how one gets that 'cut-off-and-out' feeling.

When he was very ill I offered him some light reading, proposing *A Short Walk in the Hindhu Kush* and the latest Dick Francis novel. He took the trouble to write back saying that the first was one of his favourite books of which he had a copy, but that he didn't like Dick Francis detective novels after 1965 when Francis had retired from being a jockey.

I realise how ordinary these impressions must seem. I record them as my memories of his talent for being a good companion. I am glad that he never became an 'Old Fool', nor did he suffer 'the wear and tear of taken breath' for as long as some. I am glad he left so many great poems that transmute pain and loneliness, transience and fear by the power of the 'gay science' (a term used by Gongoro in 16th century Spain for the art of poetry - 'el gai saber'). Both writer and reader can rejoice in the miracle of human imagination defying our mortality with such grace and strength.

*Muriel Crane also acted for brief spells at Bristol Old Vic, Windsor Rep, and Bradford Civic Theatre, and in 1969 and 1975 spent 4 months as a Polish Government scholar studying theatre in Poland.*

### Coventry connections ...

#### WRITE NOW!

april to june 1997

An in-depth look into the lives and works of literary locals who have penned their way to success organised by the City of Coventry Leisure Services.

In the first part of the 'Coventry Connections' series of talks, contemporary writers and poets with Coventry links, talk about their lives and works.

free admission

*Rosalind Miles: Superwoman!*

Saturday 17 May  
Coventry Central Library - 1.30 to 4 pm

*Graham Phillips: The Heretic Historian*

Tuesday 20 May  
Stoke Library, Walsgrave Road  
7.30 to 9.30 pm

*The Works of Amryl Johnson*

Thursday 5 June  
Foleshill Library, Broad Street  
7.30 to 9pm

*Ann Coburn:  
The Power of Storytelling*

Saturday 21 June  
Central Library - 1.30 to 4 pm

#### 'Kindred Spirits'

august to november 1997

The Coventry Connections' series of talks continues from August to November and will be taking a look at literary locals who are no longer with us, including:

*George Eliot  
Philip Larkin  
Angela Brazil  
Tom Mann  
John Hewitt*

For more details on any of the events listed ring Coventry 832328 or 832311.

## NOTICEBOARD

### Submissions to the Newsletter

We welcome contributions from all Society members. If you have memories of Philip Larkin or any anecdotes or wish to submit a poem for possible publication, please send them for consideration to the Newsletter Editor.

### Guidelines for Contributors

Text should be typewritten wherever possible, on one side of A4 paper and in double-line spacing.

As a rough guide we suggest 1500-2500 words for main articles (all footnotes should be incorporated into the body of the text) or up to 750 words for short articles or news items.

### Deadline for October 1997 issue

The copy deadline for the October 1997 issue is 15 August 1997.

### PHILIP LARKIN, THE MARVELL PRESS AND ME

Signed copies of Jean Hartley's autobiography are available in paperback from The Philip Larkin Society at price £7.99 (plus postage & packing. Please add £1 for UK orders and £2.50 for overseas airmail).

This book, which received much critical acclaim when it was first published in 1989, describes the author's thirty year relationship with the poet as his publisher and friend.

£1 from each copy sold will be donated to the Larkin Society.

### Membership News

In a circular sent to all members at the end of January we put forward the idea of publishing a list of Society members names and addresses. Many members have indicated that they would not be happy for their details to be included in such a list. The Committee has therefore decided not to proceed with this option. However, we are happy to publish details in this newsletter on behalf of any member who wishes to contact other members in his or her locality or who wishes to contact other members with a view to sharing journeys to Hull.

*Mr RA Camp of Sidmouth in Devon would like to contact other members in the south west. His telephone number is: 01395 512122.*

*Mrs P Oddey of Chelmsford in Essex would be interested in sharing lifts to Hull. Her telephone number is: 01245 609129.*

The Committee would like to express its thanks to Mrs Wendy Cole, also of Chelmsford in Essex, who volunteered to write to all local newspapers in her area with details of the Society. An abridged version of her letter was subsequently published in the *Essex Chronicle*:

'Sir, On 2 December 1995, over 100 people gathered in Hull for the inaugural meeting of The Philip Larkin Society. The date was significant: it was the tenth anniversary of the death of Larkin. Having read Larkin's work and been greatly influenced by him, I became a member. If any of your readers would like details of the Society they should contact ...'

Perhaps other members might feel inspired to do likewise.

### LARKIN QUIZ ANSWERS

Many thanks to those members who took the time and trouble to enter our Philip Larkin quiz which appeared in the October 1996 issue. The winner was Mr Colin Wiles of Cambridge. Congratulations!

1. Mr Bleaney's Room;
2. The Faith Healer (Faith Healing);
3. Home (Home is so sad);
4. Cemetery road (Toads Revisited);
5. Smut (Whitsun Weddings);
6. London's postal districts (Whitsun Weddings);
7. Arnold's (Self's the Man);
8. Getting my nose in a book (A Study of Reading Habits);
9. Ambulances;
10. Dockery;
11. Ten Guineas (Wild Oats);
12. A huge and birdless silence (Next Please);
13. The earl and countess (An Arundel Tomb);
14. This one of you bathing (lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album);
15. A thrush (Coming);
16. Churchgoing;
17. Fulfilment's desolate attic (Deceptions);
18. Coventry (I remember, I remember);
19. Killing a rabbit (Myxomatosis);
20. Liberty (No Road).

The LEDBURY POETRY FESTIVAL has announced its inaugural programme for 4 - 13 July 1997. The Festival aims to promote poetry on a broad base and its approach will be populist, specialist and educational, reflected by music and paintings. For further details, please contact the Ledbury Poetry Festival Office, Town Council Offices, Church Street, Ledbury, Herefordshire HR8 1DH. Tel & Fax: 01531 634156