

ABOUT LARKIN

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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PHILIP LARKIN SOCIETY

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THE PHILIP LARKIN SOCIETY

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EDITORIAL

After four years under the able editorship of James Booth, this fifteenth issue of *About Larkin* is being jointly edited by Jean Hartley and Maeve Brennan. We hope it will be possible to maintain the high standard set by James but as neither of us has IT skills, we cannot pretend that communication is as easy as it would be if we had. Jean, of course, was editor of the first six issues of the Newsletter but it is Maeve's first editorial venture. We are grateful to have James Orwin's technical assistance and experience even though, regrettably, he is no longer on the committee. We are equally sorry to lose David Pattison, our Treasurer for the last three years, whose resignation came into effect after the AGM. We thank them both for their commitment and drive, and look forward to their continued support as members of the Society. We also wish James Booth a productive sabbatical leave and are happy that he remains on the committee as Literary Adviser.

We have been very fortunate to find replacements to fill these vacancies and welcome Paul Walker, a retired accountant, as Treasurer, Belinda Hakes as Membership Secretary and Elaine Sommerville as Minutes Secretary. John Osborne takes over as General Secretary from James Booth.

Public interest in Larkin will further be generated this spring by two TV programmes. BBC2 has commissioned *Love Again*, a film drama with a high profile cast, headed by Hugh Bonneville and Tara Fitzgerald, while Channel 4 has commissioned a documentary. Both programmes are expected to be shown in April. The Channel 4 team spent the best part of a month in Hull interviewing, amongst others, James Booth, Maeve Brennan and Jean Hartley. The team also filmed the committee at work on 16 January. Furthermore, Ben Brown's play, *Larkin with Women*, is being staged at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, from 19 to 31 May, and Sir Tom Courtenay's *Pretending to be Me*, after a successful première at Leeds, has been transferred to the Comedy Theatre in London from 12 February for 10 weeks.

Meanwhile publications continue to flourish. *Further Requirements*, Larkin's previously uncollected prose writings edited by Anthony Thwaite, came out in paperback in November; Maeve Brennan's *The Philip Larkin I Knew* was reprinted in January; *Incidents from Phippy's Schooldays*, edited by Brenda Allen and James Acheson was published in Canada in October and a new edition of the *Collected Poems*, edited by Anthony Thwaite came out in February. Terry Kelly's thorough review in this issue analyses the significance of this publication.

In Hull, the Philip Larkin Exhibition, mounted by Hull City Museums, opened at Wilberforce House on 9 November and was originally scheduled to run until 1 June. It has now been extended to 31 August. Paul Walker's comprehensive review should inspire members who have not already seen it to do so.

Lastly, Miriam Porter, who bought 105 Newland Park, very generously proposes to hold a midsummer garden party for members of the Society. For details, please see the enclosed flier.

It is with regret that we note the death of the poet D.J. Enright. An obituary will appear in our next issue.

Jean Hartley and Maeve Brennan

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**The Philip Larkin Society would like to thank St John’s College, Oxford,
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About Larkin is produced twice-yearly by The Philip Larkin Society. The articles in this newsletter reflect the personal opinions of the contributors and not those of the Society as a whole.

COVER ILLUSTRATION

A dramatic pose on Ferriby foreshore (October 1965)

Photograph © Maeve Brennan

LETTER TO A STRANGER

The following, previously unpublished, letter to Mark Cowley is a typical example of the kindness Larkin showed to a complete stranger, who, like him, suffered from an embarrassing stammer.

Mr. Cowley, an English teacher and long-standing admirer of Larkin's poetry, read Larkin's interview in *The Observer* in 1979 (q.v. *Required Writing*, 47-56) in which he talked about the stammer with

which he had been afflicted from childhood to adult life.

Mr. Cowley wrote to Larkin, explaining that he too had been a sufferer since childhood – "I shudder now at my temerity in writing at all", he explains, "and asked whether he had any advice as to how I might overcome my own extremely unpredictable impediment". The letter below is his reply.

The University of Hull

The Brynmor Jones Library

Librarian: P. A. Larkin, C.B.E., C.Lit., M.A., D.Lit., D.Litt., F.R.S.L.

21st January, 1980.

M. A. Cowley, Esq.,
5 Rulton Close,
off Cotton Lane,
Moseley,
BIRMINGHAM. B13 9SD

Dear Mr. Cowley,

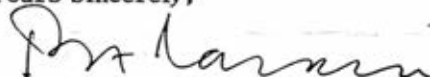
Thank you for your letter. I sympathise with you most sincerely over stammering: it is a dreadful handicap. I stammered fairly noticeably until about 1960, or when I was approaching forty. By that time I had been appointed to a university librarianship, and had begun to make something of a name as a writer, so I suppose I was gradually getting a little more self-confident, or a little less unself-confident. Despite all the talk of breathing and vibrating vocal cords, and so on, I think in my case this was the cause and the cure. Other people may be different.

I may have derived some help from Your Stammer And How To Correct It, a book by H. St John Rumsey (who was the speech man at Guy's Hospital in the Thirties), published by Frederick Muller in 1937. Like all books, its helpfulness is limited, but I remember the author made two points that seem to me excellent. One is that the stammerer speaks too fast and too softly. One shouldn't be afraid of speaking rather deliberately and in a firm tone. Secondly, since no one stammers when he sings, the nearer one's speech approximates to song the less one will stammer. I know this sounds rather absurd, but in fact one can do a good deal with emphasis and modulation, and it ties in with the first point about speaking slowly and deliberately.

Rumsey says in his introduction that many stammerers get better as they get older and by the age of fifty have very little trouble left, so don't despair. I am sure his book is long since out of print, but it might be findable through the inter-library loan service at your public library. I think it is very brave of you to be a teacher in such circumstances; I could never face that!

With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely,



THE GROUND-FLOOR TENANTS OF 32

Philip Larkin loved his home at Pearson Park; but what did the other tenants think of him?

Wendy Cole investigates



*David and Elizabeth Rex
Photograph © David Rex*

Tucked away at Frinton-on-Sea in Essex are two people who had a very close connection with Philip Larkin: for about two years they shared a house with him.

David Rex and his wife Elizabeth lived in the ground floor flat of number 32 Pearson Park when Philip was gazing through the high windows at the top. Apart from stumbling over him as Larkin came in and out of the front door, David Rex had one other interest in common with this famous librarian. David was from 1957 to 1962 an Administrator at Hull University.

How, then, did I discover the connection? Three years ago, I was fresh back from the hilarious and moving presentation, *An Enormous Yes*, given in Middleton Hall by Alan Bennett and Patrick Garland. I showed the photographs I had taken to colleagues at County Hall in Essex. David Rex had by this time been a Member of Essex County Council for 19 years. He looked through my pictures, and said: "I knew Philip Larkin many years ago." Coming to another picture, he suddenly exclaimed: "That's Maeve Brennan!"

So it was that, some time later, I telephoned David and Elizabeth, and asked to visit them in Frinton to talk about their memories of Philip. They were only too happy to comply, and subjected themselves to my barrage of questions.

Neither David nor Elizabeth could ever understand why Philip had been labelled gloomy. They found his sharp sense of humour very dry: but it could also be wonderfully childish. Philip had another attribute that appealed to them: a natural ability to mimic both voices and facial expressions.

Elizabeth enthused as the memories flooded back. "Shortly after we moved in Philip came down to see us – with a bottle of dry sherry. Since we all liked sherry it was the start of many social calls. And he loved a good gossip. One day when we were up in his flat the phone rang: he picked it up, looked straight at me and kept saying: 'Mm.' (Pause) 'Mm.' (Pause) 'Mm.' (Pause). Suddenly he held the receiver at arm's length, put his hand over the mouthpiece and said: 'It's Kingsley Amis. Going to Cambridge. Had all the women in Wales.'

"One day Philip came in laughing his head off. The Registrar's secretary, Dorothy Micklethwaite, was very prim and proper. He had just got on a tram in which Dorothy was sitting. As he alighted, she said to him: 'I saw you getting on and thought to myself, Mr. Larkin doesn't recognise me with my clothes on!' He chuckled for ages about that.

"Philip could be extremely noseey. When the post was delivered, he would gather all the letters and cards for the three flats – ours, the people in the first floor flat and his own. He would read any postcards that came, and open any letters where the envelopes were unsealed just to see what was inside. I remember him saying to us: 'Gosh – it's time you paid your gas bill!'"

I asked how Maeve had come into their lives. Elizabeth said: "I met Maeve when David invited her to my 25th birthday party. I believe it was then that she first met Philip socially, although she had worked for some time in the library with him. We would often go to a local

pub for drinks. On the way back, Philip and I would play a game of trying to walk along the edge of the kerb and not falling off. We would put one foot gingerly in front of the other, our arms stretched out to either side for balance. David thought this was rather childish."

The stories were flowing freely, and out came David's diaries from the early sixties. "Pages are littered with notes of where we went. Take this entry – 'Philip Larkin – dinner – drinks – bed 1.30.' That was pretty usual." David explained that he had done his National Service in the R.A.F. and had joined, as an honorary member, the University Air Squadron whose headquarters, and convivial bar, were a few doors away in Pearson Park. He introduced Philip, who not infrequently accompanied them there for a glass or two; its proximity to No 32 was very useful for the return journey, especially when a Hull pea-soup fog enveloped Pearson Park.

David got up, went out of the room and came back with a china bull. "That was what Philip gave us when we left Hull University in 1962," he said. "He told us that he thought our leaving was a load of b*****!"

"Once we moved away from Hull, we found his letters and envelopes sprinkled with amusing drawings," continued David. "I was doing an external law degree and the results normally arrived during the summer holidays. Philip used to forward them on and, recognising the contents, he would draw a small gallows with a hanged man on the envelopes." I told him that Philip seemed famed for illustrating letters with personal doodles, and that he identified his women friends with cuddly animals: Maeve a Mouse, Monica a Rabbit, Ruth Bowman a Cat and Patsy Strang Honey Bear.

I asked if they had ever met Monica Jones. "No – he kept very quiet about her," said David. "But we noticed that whenever we and the other tenants were away, Monica would come to stay."

Elizabeth remembered an extraordinary occasion when late one night in 1960 there was a knock on the door. It was a very frightened Philip, who said: "Elizabeth! Would you please come up and look at my kitchen to check everything is all right. And the cupboard. And the bathroom." Elizabeth, astonished, went up to the flat with him and entered first, with Philip still on edge. She checked the kitchen, the cupboard and finally the bathroom, and declared that everything was in its place as usual. He looked very relieved, and when she asked what was the matter, he replied: "I've just come back from watching the film *Psycho*."

The highlight of Philip's career in Hull was unquestionably the visit of H. M. Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother to open the University's new library. Dr. Brynmor Jones, then Vice-Chancellor of the University, introduced Larkin to Her Majesty as "our poet-librarian." According to Philip, the Queen Mother turned her face upwards to him and said: "Oh, Mr Larkin, what a lovely thing to be." Philip, ever the mimic, added her to his list for many future occasions.

With three different sets of tenants at 32 Pearson Park there was the problem of who would cut the grass. Philip did not use the garden; and Bill and Janet Duffin, who lived in the middle floor flat, had children who were frequently seen racing round outside. David and Elizabeth had a lawnmower, but were not keen on mowing the lawn. All the tenants met to discuss this one day, and it was clear that no-one wanted the task. Suddenly Philip said decisively: "I shall cut the grass." The others looked at him in surprise, and he added: "Yes, when it gets up to my bedroom I shall lean out of the window and clip it with my nail scissors!"

After they left Hull, the Rexes moved to Nottingham University. Philip made many visits, as they were not far away from where his mother lived. On one occasion they took Philip to an Italian restaurant in Loughborough, famed for its huge fishpond. Over the pond was a glass area where diners could walk and study the fish, or dance to the music. Elizabeth hated walking over the fish.

David took up the story. "As the meal progressed we were all very relaxed, and Philip said to Elizabeth: 'Would you like to dance?' This was totally out of character, for Philip disliked dancing immensely. Elizabeth was surprised, but accepted: and Philip very carefully danced her over the fishpond almost without her realising she was on top of them. Once she saw where they were she left him very quickly – and he stood laughing."

The Rexes later moved to Essex University and their first residence was in an apartment of the stately home belonging to R.A. Butler, Chancellor of the University, which he allowed the University to use. Philip visited Stanstead Hall on his way to visit the poet Donald Davie, who was Essex's first Professor of Literature.

The image of Larkin the brilliant poet is once more entwined with the fun-loving Larkin, the serious Larkin, the Larkin who suffered as do countless other people with everyday problems: this is the Larkin remembered and loved by ordinary folk.

Philip Larkin – a graduate trainee’s perspective

Robert Oldroyd (*graduate trainee, Hull University Library, 1965-66*)

This refreshing memoir by Robert Oldroyd, a graduate trainee at the University Library during the academic year 1965-66, sheds new light on Larkin who undertook the professional training of even temporary staff very seriously. This young man’s careful induction at the outset of his career led to its ultimate conclusion, thirty years later, as Director of Library Services at the University of Nottingham.

Given the considerable output of writings concerning Philip Larkin, published in the years since his death, it is perhaps surprising that such a small proportion of it relates to his life as a professional librarian. Lionel Madden’s article, which appeared in this publication, is an honourable exception¹. Most authors deal with his poetry, and aspects of his life. There are very many people better placed than me to write about Larkin’s qualities as a University Librarian. But for one glorious year I was Hull’s graduate trainee – a proud boast at the time and ever since.

During my third year of reading English at Hull, I wrote to Mr Larkin (as he then was) asking about the traineeship. I was pleasantly surprised to receive a prompt and courteous invitation to an interview, with him, in the late afternoon of a dark February day. I was not aware whether or not there were any other candidates. He interviewed me alone and safely ensconced behind ‘that desk’. After a few questions about my reading habits, he said “We’ve already got a Hull graduate trainee this year [John Ion]; why do we want another one?” He must have noticed that I looked rather crestfallen, because he went on “Well perhaps we ought to look after our own first!” Who would have argued? His letter offering me the post followed a day or two later.

But why was being Hull’s graduate trainee so special? To begin with, a meticulously worked-out timetable for the whole year had been prepared by Larkin himself, before the year began on 1 September. It showed that the schedule ranged across the whole of the Library’s activities, including substantial time to be spent in what were the central professional areas of activity, cataloguing, acquisitions and periodicals. So

it was clear at the outset exactly what would be expected.

From the other side, as it were, such a degree of interest from the Librarian had the effect of committing the permanent staff to taking the graduate trainee’s year seriously – an example of ‘corporate commitment’ not commonly articulated in management texts until the seventies. That commitment showed itself abundantly during the year, even though I know what a nuisance I was to some, and remain for ever grateful for their kindness, forbearance, patience and professionalism.

Some contemporaries at Sheffield University Library School, whom I encountered the following year, said that they had enjoyed their traineeship, but many had spent a fairly miserable time, stuck in a repetitive routine of some sort – treated as dogsbodies rather than future professionals. It was a surprise that not every trainee in every institution had had a programme similar to Hull’s, nor experienced the whole Library’s commitment to their training.

Graduate trainees at Hull were given a professional ‘flying start’ by distinguished and highly experienced people. Consider – initiated into the mysteries of cataloguing and classification by Brenda Moon (later Librarian of Edinburgh University), the Issue Desk by Pauline Dennison, Inter-library loans by Pat Hurst and Wendy Mann, Acquisitions by Lionel Madden (later Librarian of the National Library of Wales), and Periodicals by Maeve Brennan (who instilled a fascination with journals which proved invaluable through many an agonising cuts exercise!) There was also time, not on the programme, to spend with the Library porters, and the Photographic team under Alan Marshall (guardian of the Library’s then only photocopier).

There was an ‘added extra’, devised by ‘Sir’ himself – a project. (It seems this was a feature of other trainees’ years too – it would be fascinating to learn what they were.) This began with a series of small tests, in the form of reference enquiries, the answers to which he surely knew already, but which were presented as

¹ Madden, L *Larkin’s management style*. About Larkin 4, October 1997.

puzzles he had found insoluble. “No urgency ... when you have a moment to spare...” What a teacher!

In 1965, Larkin was greatly involved with the establishment of the National Manuscript Collection of Contemporary Poets. He offered me the opportunity to edit some manuscripts and typescripts of Vernon Watkins’ poetry. Having no clue what might be involved, I agreed readily. So one morning in December there was a minor stir on the Yorkshire Pullman, when I appeared clutching a large empty suitcase, and a heavily wrapped parcel (Philip’s Christmas present to John Betjeman – a painting of a churchyard, to be left for him at the Arts Council); and reappeared on the return journey that evening with a hefty bulging suitcase!

As well as sorting and listing the papers, the project involved an introduction to a range of bibliographic skills, such as tracing variant versions of the poems, and the publications in which they first appeared, and compiling a hand-list. One group of typescripts bore written annotations by Watkins’ friend Dylan Thomas, who had conducted readings of his poems in the early fifties. Larkin took a great interest in the project, and wrote to Watkins for scripts to fill in gaps. A few months later, the British Museum mounted an exhibition from the whole collection in the King’s Library². Philip thoughtfully sent me an invitation to the opening.

Throughout the year Larkin was immensely encouraging, and generous with his time, even (or perhaps especially) when I made mistakes. In fact he said that he always seemed to get stuck with telling me off. (I know through a third party that the worst error of all was, in an ungarded social moment, to address him as ‘Philip’ before being invited to do so!) He tended towards gentle irony rather than sarcasm, and while making clear the precise nature of the error, he helped to put it right in a good humoured way; an example I tried to follow in my own professional life, though I regret without quite the same charm.

Maeve Brennan makes the point in her book³ that Larkin was always keen for his staff to achieve professional or other library qualifications, spurred on by classes he himself conducted during lunch hours. Later, I too helped people studying for Library Association Part I and II examinations; played a part in steering the Framework for Continuing Professional Development through the Library Association Council; and was a member of the Information and Library Services Lead Body, that developed the first

nationally-recognised vocational qualifications for people who work in libraries. I am sure he would have given enthusiastic support to both initiatives.

In another area of professional life, there was the opportunity during the year to see the plans of Phase 2 of the Brynmor Jones Library (the foundations of which were being dug at the time), and to meet the architects; experience that laid the ground for a lifelong fascination with library planning. Inclusion in senior staff meetings provided many useful insights for the future, as did the management of the Photographic service.

Philip Larkin’s influence in many areas of my subsequent career has been profound, and I hope some of it has been transmitted to later generations of librarians. While giving immense encouragement, and a truly rounded graduate traineeship, he set high professional standards, long before such things had to be written down.

The last time I met Philip was at the 1975 Library Association University, College & Research Section conference at Hull. He greeted me warmly and bought me a large gin and tonic. It was, and remains, a delightful way to remember someone to whom many graduate trainees owe a great deal, for whom I have always held the highest regard and admiration both as librarian and poet, and who I remember with gratitude and affection.

Snooker at Scarborough

The Society’s 7th Birthday Walk takes place on Saturday, 9 August and centres on the Yorkshire seaside resort of Scarborough, a town virtually unknown for its Larkin connections. All this is about to change, following recent archive and personal research by Don Lee around which this walk will be structured. Included are locations situated in the town of Scarborough itself, and along the coast to Cayton Bay, three miles southwards by coastal footpath.

A flier is included in this issue of *About Larkin*, with early registration advised.

² *Poetry in the making*. An exhibition of poetry manuscripts in the British Museum, April-June 1967.

³ Brennan, MM *The Philip Larkin I knew*, Manchester UP, 2002, p.37.

READING LARKIN, WRITING HULL

Sean O'Brien

Transcript of a talk given to a joint meeting of the Literary and Philosophical Society, Newcastle, and the Philip Larkin Society, in the Loftus Room of the Literary and Philosophical Society Library on Saturday 26 October 2002.



Sean O'Brien
Photograph © Alain Sinner

This little talk is an odd mixture of criticism, speculation and reminiscence. Its mongrel nature probably disqualifies it on several fronts. What it amounts to, I hope, is a celebration of the poet Philip Larkin, the city he wrote and worked in as I knew it, and of some of the other poets who made their own way through that city

Which comes first, the poem or the place? To what degree is my sense of Hull shaped by my knowledge of Philip Larkin's poems? Or does the place at some level govern the poems? Perhaps the process is both reciprocal and continuous. Nowadays, like a good many people, I read Hull through the glass of Larkin's work; at the same time I'm struck repeatedly by how accurately he evokes the place – almost as if he were a native, when in fact he only lived there for about five thousand years.

This last point has something to do with basic accuracy of notation – Larkin was a supreme observer and then a brilliant orchestrator of impressions – but there is also

a spiritual affinity with the city's underlying mood, its unending (and curiously representative) melancholia. The remotest poet in the remotest part of England, he somehow speaks for the heart of that peculiar and contradictory nation. This amounts to a good deal more, incidentally, than some of his lines being quoted and misquoted by ignorant journalists looking for a cheap instance. It is, you might say, part of the matter of England.

I first read Philip Larkin's poems when I was fourteen. Mr Grayson, our English teacher, showed us 'Wild Oats' from *The Whitsun Weddings*. I remember thinking that it wasn't as interesting as the Ted Hughes poems he'd read with us a few lessons earlier. You knew where you were with dead pigs and roosting hawks and houses that had been far out at sea all night: girls, the subject of the poem 'Wild Oats', were an altogether trickier proposition – as Larkin himself might have acknowledged. Mr Grayson didn't mind offering his classes a challenge, but – and give him due credit in these days of endlessly lowered expectations in every aspect of our experience – he was probably expecting a more focused sensitivity than a class of fourteen year olds could easily manage. None the less, it wasn't very long before the school library edition of *The Whitsun Weddings* took up permanent residence in my bedroom. And I have to admit – here, in a library, of all places – that I've still got it, a book I value as much as the first book of poems I legitimately owned, which is Ted Hughes's *Wodwo* (1967). This act of criminal loyalty wouldn't have cut much ice with Dr Larkin the librarian, who was good at sending out fierce letters to tardy student readers. I once saw him address a hall full of incoming postgraduates on the use of the library, suddenly leaning like a hellfire preacher over the lectern to instruct us that 'One thing you don't do with books is put bacon sandwiches in them!'

What I am getting round to saying is that Larkin's work, imperfectly though I understood it when I first encountered it, made it seem that Hull was a place where poetry was possible. It might even be a place *worthy* of

poetry. The idea that up the road and round the corner Larkin was at work in the library (and, at times, elsewhere, on his poems) was a kind of faint imprimatur, despite the certainty that Larkin wouldn't have liked what was being done, as it were, in his name. A place, he once wrote, cannot cause poems; it can only fail to prevent them. As it happens, I think he was wrong about that.

In Pearson Park it is summer, a sudden implausibly large space of lawns and mature chestnuts and beeches, surrounded by Victorian houses so big that hardly anyone can live in them now except religious cults and other lunatic plutocrats. It was named for Zachariah Pearson, a local merchant who tried to run guns to the Confederacy during the American Civil War. Fortunately he left the legacy of this park. When I was young it was, by and large, safe for children to be out by themselves, so here you'd find vast twenty-a-side football matches lasting half the day, watched by bored, sensible girls keeping an eye on the youngest kids. In the nearby playground young mothers supervised the youngest at the swing and the sandpit. Whatever path you take will bring you to the pond, with its floating islets of white sliced bread, and walking round the pond will bring you across the boggy ground under the vast chestnut trees and out within sight of 32 Pearson Park, where the top flat was for many years occupied by Philip Larkin, the poet with whom Hull is most strongly identified by millions of people who've never been near the place.

In complete ignorance of the fact he'd lived next door, I occupied the equivalent room at number 31 for a time at the beginning of the 1980s. By then Larkin had moved to a house in rather posher Newland Park and – arguably – away from the setting that sustained the best of his poetic output. The view from those high windows is definitive urban pastoral – the chestnuts, the pond, railed-in ornamental buildings, a gravelled playground, the conservatory and the continuous traffic of people entering the park – losels and characters deep in the litter bins included – drawn under its green sway simply because it's there.

The 'high windows' of 32 Pearson Park (reproduced at no 31) are a set of three, made faintly ecclesiastical by the arch of the central panel. They occurred as a motif in the original production of Ben Brown's play *Larkin with Women* at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, suspended above the stage as evidence of where Larkin lived and did his imaginative work, but also like a sign that the imagination was open for business. The high windows have become a

universalizing symbol in and beyond Larkin's poems – universalizing not only because of their suggestion of a vocation but because of their very emptiness. Any aspiration or mood can be attributed to them. In the poem 'High Windows' (1967) Larkin is carefully unspecific:

...I wonder if
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,
And thought, *That'll be the life;*
No God any more, or sweating in the dark

About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds. And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high
windows:

The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

I'd like to use them as a means of entering the city and focusing on some of Larkin's poems as they illuminate his adopted city, and also to locate a handful of other poets who have written there.

What might we see first through them? Larkin is sometimes accused of misogyny, yet his poems often reveal a strong imaginative sympathy with women. Think of 'Broadcast', 'Faith Healing', 'Love Songs in Age'. Admittedly the women he writes about are not our contemporaries. They are citizens of the day before yesterday, before feminism. The high windows look towards the old park playground next to Princes Avenue – as good a place as any to situate his poem 'Afternoons'. This was written in 1959, the height of the Macmillan era, when, as the Prime Minister put it, the working man had never had it so good, but it speaks poignantly of the process by which for many women life was over almost as soon as it began. Like his younger friend Douglas Dunn, or like one of his heroes, Thomas Hardy, Larkin can see the tragedy of ordinary life and read it with a steady sympathy that carries the poem beyond what might at first seem its limitations.

Afternoons

Summer is fading:
The leaves fall in ones and twos
From trees bordering
The new recreation ground.
In the hollows of afternoons
Young mothers assemble

At swing and sandpit
Setting free their children.

Behind them, at intervals,
Stand husbands in skilled trades,
An estateful of washing,
And the albums, lettered
Our Wedding, lying
Near the television:
Before them, the wind
Is ruining their courting-places

That are still courting-places
(But the lovers are all in school),
And their children, so intent on
Finding more unripe acorns,
Expect to be taken home.
Their beauty has thickened.
Something is pushing them
To the side of their own lives.

The poet and critic Tom Paulin has read this poem, rather unsubtly, I think, as an elegy for empire – seeing the falling leaves as the colonies gradually given up by Britain in the post-war years of retrenchment. But the poem's power comes surely from its very particularity. As Theodor Adorno has argued in another context, its political force emerges from the intensity with which its attention is directed elsewhere. The very remoteness of the women from the counsels of power amplifies the poignancy of their condition. In this way they resemble the hero's father in Joseph Roth's novel of the decline of the Austro-Hungarian empire, *The Radetzky March* – he is a minor functionary of the state, whose 'place' in the scheme of things proves to be precisely nowhere. I mean, of course, that it is the women in the poem who are provincial, not Larkin

'Nowhere' is a term sometimes applied to Hull. According to those who never go there, or have been there tentatively once, years ago, nowhere is where Hull is in the middle of and where you would end up if you were so foolish as to go there. Going there, of course, as the same people say, is something you only do 'if you're going there.' Thus, as we know, 'swerving east from... traffic all night north' eventually 'gathers to the surprise of a large town' featuring the 'grim headscarved wives' into whom the young women of 'Afternoons' will in due course turn. Larkin's journey towards Hull in 'Here' (8th Oct 1961) doesn't in fact end among the cranes and spires or the 'stealing flat-faced' trolleybuses of the city. It goes on, past the 'mortgaged half-built edges' of East Hull in the 1950s and into the mysterious hinterland of rural East Yorkshire. This is a silent and

secretive country whose whole atmosphere whispers the word 'afterwards', whose aim is to be precisely nowhere. It stops at the North Sea. This empty country and equally empty coastline are, as it were, the unconscious of the city, the near-silence to which it is always on the brink of returning. 'Beneath it all,' Larkin wrote in 'Wants', 'desire of oblivion runs', and this place, or this no-place, represents a kind of *earthly* oblivion, driven neither by desire nor aspiration, waiting for the wave that Larkin once described as running behind us, eventually catching and swallowing us. The emptiness of East Yorkshire is the equivalent to the sour silence that Ted Hughes detected in the west and south of the county, and its source is the same. In a sense the whole county is an empty graveyard, with its past, and its youth, poured into a few miles of the Western Front during the Great War.

[Extract from **Here**]

...Here silence stands
Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,
Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,
Luminously-peopled air ascends;
And past the poppies bluish neutral distance
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

Unimaginative people are sometimes inclined to call such considerations 'morbid', as if sensibility were a choice, a matter of instructed consumer taste, like curtains or tableware. But all the poet can do is tell the truth of a given sensibility to the best of his or her ability. This is frequently forgotten nowadays, when it is, more than ever, the biographer's habit to discredit the artist's life in order to 'explain' the imagination, as though the imagination were merely the sum of its parts and not, as we know it to be, a surplus of being, a form of transcendence.

Transcendence, even if all the signs appear to be negative. The sonnet 'Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel' (1966) – this is the building you face on leaving the platform in Hull station – unifies the city of Hull and its hinterland by the steady contemplation of 'mere facts' until they yield themselves to meaning.

Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel

Light spreads darkly downwards from the high
Clusters of lights over empty chairs
That face each other, coloured differently.
Through open doors, the dining-room declares
A larger loneliness of knives and glass

And silence laid like carpet. A porter reads
An unsold evening paper. Hours pass,
And all the salesmen have gone back to Leeds,
Leaving full ashtrays in the Conference Room.

In shoeless corridors, the lights burn. How
Isolated, like a fort, it is –
The headed paper, made for writing home
(If home existed) letters of exile: *Now*
Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages.

Whether Larkin read Proust I don't know, but the contained alertness of these lines recalls the famous opening of *A la Recherche*. The result here is a kind of earthly uncanniness, a further wakening of a mind which is already conscious, into a state which seems like the cousin of the 'secret, bestial peace' celebrated in 1970's 'The Card Players'.

Let's leave the station and walk westwards along Anlaby Road, as far as the new infirmary made famous in Larkin's poem 'The Building' – that 'great sigh out of the nineteenth century' as he put it – turning into Argyle Street, past the old redbrick infirmary where my grandfather worked, past the carpark where my grandmother's house and the rest of Argyle Terrace stood. Go over Argyle Street railway bridge (a landmark in a city whose highest aspiration is normally the horizontal), cross run-down Spring Bank with its temporary shops and we find ourselves in the remains of another old working class district – strangely deserted streets of redbrick terraces, much given over to students now, what Douglas Dunn called 'backwaters, silent places,/ The cheapest rooms of the cheapest towns.'

As a student himself, Dunn lived in Terry Street, which is long gone. Larkin encouraged him in his early work and even helped him decide on the order of contents for his first book, *Terry Street* (1970). Reading that collection many times over the years, I recognize continually the brilliant and entirely individual way in which, from a perspective quite different from Larkin's and yet clearly inspired by it, Dunn shows the city arriving at a remote provincialism so extreme as to become exotic. This is the place that lies on the other side of boredom, the far side of the rained-on Sunday afternoon window of the second-hand bookshop where the National Front used to meet and rev up their second-hand jeeps and go off on their retarded manoeuvres in the back country lanes of secret East Yorkshire. Fascism apart, these streets were so bare of illusions as to seem like the centre of the universe. Today the Teddy-boys oil their threadbare quiffs and put on their suits to go and draw their pensions, while Gene Vincent's 'Be-Bop-A-

Lula' uncoils sullenly from an upstairs window. Douglas Dunn, in 'Men of Terry Street' testifies to the obdurate heroism of this way of life.

Men of Terry Street

They come in at night, leave in the early morning.
I hear their footsteps, the ticking of bicycle chains,
Sudden blasts of motorcycles, whimpering of vans.
Somehow I am either in bed, or the curtains are
drawn.

This masculine invisibility makes gods of them,
A pantheon of boots and overalls.
But when you see them, home early from work
Or at their Sunday leisure, they are too tired

And bored to look long at comfortably.
It hurts to see their faces, too sad or too jovial.
They quicken their step at the smell of cooking,
They hold up their children and sing to them.

It is only half a mile from here to the Avenues, a set of four parallel streets a mile long, part of the same project as the park and built to similar dimensions. The larger buildings look nowadays like the mausolea of a vanished civilization, one conducted on some unimaginably vaster yet steam-driven scale, financed by shipping, whaling, fishing, chemicals and animal feeds. It is the kind of district to which, in its slowly accelerating decline, teachers, students, bohemians and other lunatics naturally gravitate. The late George Kendrick – who died much too young – was a college lecturer and lived in Westbourne Avenue. He published only one book of poems in his lifetime and it's to be hoped that eventually a posthumous selection will appear. Like his neighbour Douglas Dunn, he was a great encourager of young poets. Such generosity is one of many good things about the city. Kendrick's only published collection, *Bicycle Tyre in a Tall Tree*, appeared in 1974. It contains a very fine poem about the park, but the title poem is one of his best, finely managing that exact, insouciant seizing of imaginative opportunities at which more than one generation of post-Larkin poets has unsuccessfully aimed.

Bicycle Tyre in a Tall Tree

Don't sling that up.
A toy parachute weighed with a stone
tenacious, purposeless,
endures all seasons
but looks best on a telephone wire.

A tree is a good place to throw
a tag of rope or the seat of an old chair.
What is ordinary but habit and circumstance?
The sky draws attention to them
and they to the sky.

Aloft in a stark winter's rigging,
at rest like birds of passage, they
beseech no crumb.
Nor as the inexorable sky sails on
is such loneliness to be despised.

Like mundane tins and baskets thrown
in the tide's lap they are
remarkable, solitary, seen afresh
in the slow waves of change that wash them over:
a bully find for the beachcombing eye.

But I would say
a bicycle tyre in a tall tree
has real poise, for there the birds will sing
and all the buds break into geometry.
What a good throw that was.

I think, incidentally, that the bicycle tyre can still be seen, up a tree on Queen's Road near the St John's pub. Thinking of Kendrick's work leads naturally to another near-neighbour, a friend of both Dunn and Kendrick, the late Frank Redpath, another under-published but gifted poet who across the dinner table once called Larkin, quite accurately, 'a political ignoramus' without liking his poems a whit the less. Larkin's influence can certainly be traced in Redpath's work, but the combination of vernacular wit and elaborate formality is also distinctively his own. I'm aware of the critical and scholarly impatience which wants to suggest that there are only a half-dozen or so poets worth reading at any given time, all of them called Geoffrey Hill. That is not, I would suggest, the view of those interested in *poetry*, as distinct from...something else. Readers are often interested in poems, or handfuls of poems, that stick in the imagination. Redpath wrote a number of poems that stick, among them 'Unstressed Areas'. This is a poem with particular meanings for those who lived in Hull during the post-war period, watching its seemingly immutable bombsites and wild gardens finally brought to book; but it also speaks, I think, for the radical, generous and much-betrayed generation whose youth was defined by the war and the years immediately after.

Unstressed Areas

Fallen, largely, into disuse, still falling
As new importances arrange themselves about
Such stubborn ghosts as live in dereliction,
My city offers new and transient delights.
There are such corners here among the rusting
And here proliferate much-needed fictions.

Take, for example, that new-founded
Empire of the willow-herb and celandine
Along two foundry walls, still in their places:
The rest has gone. Now you can see, between
Old furnace-beds and over them, unbounded
Spaces that once were working privacies.

Not fanciful to think of something waiting
For this short time to be. New walls are planned,
And builders' pegs are planted: some will cross
Old roads where few would want to walk now, and
Vistas will soon give way to making a living.
But not for me. From now on I shall please

Myself, and chart these unattended stations:
Corners where old could-have-been-othernesses
Amble, unthreatening, into the now-and-seen
To wear embarrassed grins and tattered dresses
And offer, as on dancing-floors, joined

celebrations

Of all that was with all that might have been.

A mile or so further on at the far end of Westbourne Avenue is where a younger poet, Peter Didsbury grew up. Like me he was a beneficiary of the help and advice of Douglas Dunn, who included our work in his 1982 anthology *A Rumoured City: New Poets from Hull*, to which Philip Larkin contributed a Foreword – though I suspect that Larkin had not gone so far as to read the entire contents. What he would have made of Didsbury is hard to say, for while Larkin was a good deal more attuned to poetic modernism than either he or his critics were usually prepared to acknowledge, postmodernism might well have been a different matter. Didsbury is catholic in his tastes, but particularly interested by the English avant-gardists Christopher Middleton and Roy Fisher, and by the American John Ashbery – this was long before Ashbery's elevation to his current semi-divine status. Middleton once spoke of seeking a 'mineral, frisky' quality in language, and we can trace this inheritance in Didsbury's work, where much effort goes into an effort to square the circle of signs and their objects, to remove language from the realm of conventional assumptions and – and here I think he's original – restore it to a clarity and force best described as religious. Didsbury has a mythmaking cast of mind, and Hull's very isolation and idiosyncrasy tend to

promote and assist such a view. His poem 'The Drainage', for example, sets a kind of Biblical ordeal among the low-lying Hull landscape, among its streams and drainage ditches. Ideally I would read you half a dozen of his poems, but given the constraints of time I'll confine myself to a single modest example, a poem called 'The Shore', which directs us to the vast River Humber in winter.

The Shore

A minute past noon,
and deeply cold on the shore.
The sun with its rare but un-marvellous halo
starts climbing back down the sky.
The air stills. Wind lies over field
like a razor held above a leather strop.
The beach is locked and hard.
Its uncut gems, and small round leaves
like patinated coins,
it keeps beneath plate glass.
How empty things are.
The cliff behind us acts from some notion of
presence,
but very faintly, like a host of spirits
crowding to sip at a pool.
The world of phenomena gathers at the surface
of a system stem of unity powered by emptiness.
Hills. River. Line of winter farms.
A barge coming down the navigable channel
from somewhere inland, with nothing in its hold.

Water, water, everywhere. When I was six we moved to a ground floor flat on Salisbury Street, halfway down Westbourne Avenue in one of half a dozen Dutch-fronted detached houses. This one, number three, was at one time the home of a lord mayor of the city. He had awarded himself a coat of arms and gone barony, so I remember being told. There was certainly evidence to support such an idea. The front door, which we rarely used, was about eight feet wide and gave on to a stone-floored hall, beyond which lay what was immediately christened The History Room. This was, I guess, the Lord Mayor's study, with its vast glass-fronted bookcase full of the popular novels of earlier times – Warwick Deeping, Marie Corelli, Michael Arlen, Rafael Sabatini – plus a catalogue of a mysterious event called The Festival of Britain, which I was unable to give a convincing date to since none of the adults mentioned it. The windows were full of stained glass allegations of rank and status. There were panelled walls and a walk-in fireplace. This was surmounted by carved heads I now recognize as belonging to Silenus the satyr. They leered promisingly down when I sat there reading by the fire,

feeling like an exile or some kind of impostor. It was the setting of a children's story done in three dimensions. Only the next stage of the plot was missing, and has remained so. I tapped the walls listening for the hollow sound of secret passageways. I fiddled with the decorative wooden roses on the wall-panels, hoping to find a way to make the fireplace swing open and reveal the steps which ought to descend into the watery depths of the cellars. I was a lucky child to live like that. The actual cellars were reached by a door in the hall. It led down to a mouldy chamber thick with damp and revealing a few bricked-off passages which I was later to recognize when I read Edgar Allan Poe's THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO. – Since I first mentioned this flat in a talk for BBC Radio 3, it has been robbed and stripped of all its fittings, including the glass. I was informed of this by Larkin's great friend Jean Hartley. As Jean remarked, 'Bastards.' But bastards who listen to Radio 3? I hope not.

The pleasant unease of the flat's interior was nothing compared with the immense garden at the back, to



3 Salisbury Street
Photograph © James L. Orwin

which I seemed to have exclusive access. I see now that it consisted of the ruins of a formal garden, organized around a lawn and a huge mulberry tree. Beyond this lay a raised terrace with two walnut trees and a broken fountain choked with leaves. And beyond that lay an orchard – pears of various kinds, apples both eating and cooking, a cherry tree and vast thickets of gooseberry and loganberry bushes. The challenge at first was to go

down to the far end, a hundred yards or so, without looking back or running for the cover of the house. The terror of the place was its sheer PRESENCE, though this in turn became its delight, on endless grey-green afternoons beneath the familiar white skies of Hull. Perhaps all of us think we've been shown Eden and then excluded from it. But I was there. I can prove it.

One of the tasks that used to fall to small boys – it no longer seems to be the case – was digging holes. It was, equally, the job of your mother largely to prevent you doing this, on the grounds of mess, danger and other, more abstract adult considerations which were never convincingly explained. When I asked my mother recently why digging holes was frowned on, she came up with the usual excuses – but I think for the adult residents of Hull there was an instinctive anxiety about these excavations at least as powerful as their appeal to children: dig a hole and very soon you'll see water. It's what the founders, the monks of Wyke and Myton, built on, that and faith. Yessss, says the small boy. Fill that in and wash your hands, says his mother.

I came back to these thoughts recently when collaborating on a book of poems about rivers. I realized that while my home rivers are the Humber and its tributary the Hull, the very ground I grew up on was several parts water, and that water had become synonymous with the imagination, and with the powers under the earth.

Water-Gardens

Water looked up through the lawn
Like a half-buried mirror
Left out by the people before.

There were faces in there
We had seen in the hallways
Of octogenarian specialists,

Mortality-vendors consulted
On bronchial matters
In rot-smelling Boulevard mansions.

We stood on their lino
And breathed, and below us
The dark, peopled water

Was leaning and listening.
There on the steps of the cellar,
Black-clad Victorians
Were feeding the river with souls.
They left us their things,

Reefs of blue ware

In the elder-clumps,
Tins full of rust in the shed,
And on the bookshelves

English poets, all gone damp
With good intentions, never read.
Their miles of flooded graves
Were traffic jams of stone
Where patient amphibian angels
Rode them under, slowly.

The voices came back
From sinks and gratings,
The treasure seekers

Gone downstairs, while all the time
In King Death's rainy garden
We were playing out.

Sooner or later in Hull you have to go to the river. It's a good town for idle wandering, and if you retrace your steps around the park you can follow the course of one of the old open drains which have been filled in the last forty years. The merest shower fetches the water up from the earth to seek the light. A mile or so would bring you down Sculcoates Lane to Air Street, past the Golden Ball pub and the blinding stench of the tannery, to the banks of the Hull, a narrow but muscular tidal river that divides the city in half as decisively as the Tyne splits Newcastle and Gateshead. Flowing down off the Yorkshire Wolds, by the time the River Hull reaches this point it's a yellow-brown urbanite, like something with a skin. It used to flood the town regularly before a barrage was built, and I prefer to think that the water still keeps the power in reserve in case the point needs making. If you follow it to its confluence with the Humber, you find yourself among the warehouses and pubs of the Old Town, where even now some licensed premises successfully resist gentrification. The ghosts of sailors and prostitutes need somewhere to go in the afterlife, the same as anyone else. The pub I have in mind – let's call it The Proteus, though its name and location change from time to time – is round the corner, round the back, a place you wouldn't go to by accident. It's where I used to go when I'd signed on during the university holidays. Read the paper, listen to the conversation, make a couple of pints of mild last the afternoon. In the back of my mind was the river, two rivers, their meeting, the cellar under my feet:

River-doors

River-doors are not sea-doors. They open
Through mirrors and library shelves,
Through glasshouse sweat and damp attic walls.

They are the isomers of boredom.
Fleeing through a river-door the adult world's
You will hear the foul yawn of low tide caught critique

Au naturel in its khaki-tripe skin
Between the dented ironclad revetments
Of Drypool and Scott Street:

Barges, drowned dogs, drowned tarts, all are
Subdued to its element, worked
Into the khaki, with ropes and old staithes,

Estuarine polyps and leathery excrescences
No one has thought of a name for.
So much for childhood. Later you sit

From the long afternoon to the full moon's evening,
Blowing your dole on the landlord's voice:
At high tide, he says, in that intimate gurgling tone,

The river revisits his cellar,
Caressing the chains of the exciseman's ghost
Where he swings between this world and water's;
but
no,

It is never convenient to go down and see for yourself
How the river might stand at the foot of the steps.
The problem's the safety. The wife. It's the council,

He says, giving off the warm odour of bullshit.
However, you seem to be drinking the river in mild
And be eating its fruits from the pickled-egg jar

And as the product of refreshment hear
The river-door quietly open downstairs
Under the weight of the waters.

Walk down to the pier now and imagine you might see
the welder from Peter Didsbury's prose poem 'The
Pierhead', dismantling the roof of the ferry landing. As
Didsbury puts it,

A white flame springs from his wrists, and makes
him look relaxed and critical, as if one more thing
had been done in his honour. He sits on the throat
that used to swallow cars and cyclists, rolls of
lino, the wives and dogs of estuarial farms. Now

it's just a frame to isolate some river with...

And, as Didsbury might have added, to propose the
oceanic distances implied by the river's breadth, the
sense of far-flung possibility. He and Douglas Dunn and
I and other ne'er-do-wells used to like to board the ferry
– THE WAVERLEY – and spend the afternoon cruising
back and forwards between Hull and New Holland,
dodging the ticket man while the bar stayed open. Hull
was where we sailed from and where we sailed back to
with the incoming tide. The world – Tennyson's arch of
endlessly receding and promising experience – was just
around the immense bend of the river. Hull, as Dunn
put it, may have been 'the backstreets of the universe'.
Clearly, though, it was close to the centre. Why else
would Philip Larkin have lived in a place which so
clearly reflected the nearest he ever came to belief?

Water

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.

Going to church
Would entail a fording
To dry, different clothes;

My liturgy would employ
Images of sousing,
A furious devout drench,

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

Amen to that.

Poems taken from:

Anthony Thwaite (Ed), *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems*,
Faber and Faber, 1988.

Douglas Dunn, *New Selected Poems 1964-2000*, Faber
and Faber, 2003

George Kendrick, *Bicycle Tyre in a Tall Tree*, Carcanet,
1974

John Wakeman (Ed), *How it Turned Out: Selected
Poems of Frank Redpath*, The Rialto, 1996

Peter Didsbury, *That Old Time Religion*, Bloodaxe, 1994

The Library Assistant's Tale...

Beryl Barrett



Beryl Barrett
Photograph © Beryl Barrett

It was in East Africa back in the Sixties that I first discovered the poems of Philip Larkin. We were living and working in Uganda only a few miles from the Equator in a most beautiful fertile valley. There were wonderful opportunities for watching wild life and indulging in sports of all kinds but sadly, from my point of view, it was rather a cultural desert.

Finding the British Council library in Fort Portal was an oasis indeed. There were only six shelves of books, a gloriously motley collection donated by expatriates returning to England but it was well worth the fifty mile drive into Fort Portal for the serendipity of my weekly rummage. Novels by Graham Greene and John Updike were cheek by jowl with gardening manuals and books on the Railways of East Africa, Saki and Somerset Maugham with 'Teach Yourself Swahili'.

I can still remember the day I found *The North Ship* and opened it at

This is the first thing
I have understood:
Time is the echo of an axe
Within a wood.

I felt such a thrill of recognition and sheer excitement as I took *The North Ship* out on loan and then renewed it week after week until all the poems were firmly lodged in my mind.

Returning to England in 1970, I soon acquired my very own copy of *The North Ship* followed by *The Whitsun Weddings* and could not believe my good fortune when my application for a post as Library Assistant at the Brynmor Jones Library was successful. At my interview I remember Brenda Moon asking me if I knew that Philip Larkin, the renowned poet, was Librarian of the B. J. L. Didn't I just!

When I was first introduced to 'Sir' I was almost catatonic with nervous excitement and paralysing shyness.

'So what's he like?' queried my husband that evening. 'Well – a slightly taller version of Eric Morecambe,' I said lightly, feeling that it would take years to know what Philip Larkin was really like.

One early encounter which is etched in my memory occurred when all the stacks were being newly labelled and I was detailed to work on lettering the colour-coded cards with Letra-set. This was a very pleasant assignment and a welcome respite from the Issue Desk. Being so much older than many of my fellow Library Assistants, I was painfully aware that I was a much slower worker. This had been apparent on the lettering task which I had been enjoying, together with a young 'whiz kid' who had just departed for an early lunch leaving behind her a bigger pile of completed cards than I had achieved. The door opened and 'Sir' drifted in. Picking up the larger pile of cards he murmured approvingly, 'You're getting on well – good.' To my eternal shame I merely smiled and did not acknowledge that these were not all my own work. Nemesis lurked, however, when to my horror 'Sir' extracted one card with a spelling mistake and held it out to me. I could have wept with mortification. Slower worker I may be but I could jolly well spell correctly! Having heard how much he deplored slipshod carelessness, I waited miserably to be blasted but, to my astonishment, he smiled wryly. 'Homer nods,' he observed as he ambled out.

I was left with the firm impression that he had been fully aware of the whole situation and in my subsequent years at the library I always felt that behind

those thick-lensed spectacles there was a laser-like perception tempered by an innate kindness.

Staff meetings chaired by him were always enlivened by his dry wit and humour and were occasions to which I, who normally hated such meetings, actually looked forward. When I worked in Inter-Library Loans my desk in the little ‘goldfish bowl’ office commanded a splendid view of the main staircase and I often smiled as I watched ‘Sir’s’ arrival each morning – Zeus ascending Mount Olympus in yellow/pink/claret coloured socks.

Sadly poor health led to my resignation from the B.J.L. but Philip Larkin’s kindness to me at that time has stayed with me. In our last meeting he said he had valued my work at the library and particularly appreciated my ‘amiable influence’ with colleagues. I’d come a long way since first opening *The North Ship* in the British Council library at Fort Portal and I look back on the ‘library chapter’ of my life as one which was hugely enriching. A privilege indeed ...

A LETTER FROM LOUGHBOROUGH

Oliver Marshall

Oliver Marshall lives in Bray, Co. Wicklow, and edits the magazine Wildeside published by the Oscar Wilde Summer School

I first encountered the poetry of Philip Larkin at University College Dublin in 1966. Kenneth Allott had included three Larkin poems in his Penguin *Anthology of Contemporary Verse*. Allott described Larkin as “the best of the post-war generation of poets and the most exciting new poetic voice – with the possible exception of Dylan Thomas – since Auden.” At that time there was no sign of the collection that was eventually to become *High Windows*.

My friend Eamonn Mullins – who came from a scientific background, but who shared my interest in Larkin – and I, unaware of the imminent publication of *High Windows*, photocopied and assembled into a small bound volume all the uncollected poems by Larkin that we were aware of since *The Whitsun Weddings* and which we would have come across in periodicals. We arranged the poems in a particular sequence, and as I have said, unaware of the forthcoming publication of *High Windows*, gave our volume the title *Living*, from the poem of that title. We gave it this title because our sense of the poetry was that it seemed to be more about other people than it was about Larkin: people going to the sea, cardplayers, miners. The poems seemed like pictures of a world outside Larkin’s head, like lyrical episodes from a novel. Each poem was like a lyrical social narrative.

By way of gratitude we sent our private volume to Philip Larkin, explaining our interest and purpose. We thought he would like our effort. He replied quite

quickly in a letter of great charm. There was no address on the letter which was written on pink-edged notepaper. The envelope was postmarked Loughborough, May 1974. It read as follows:

Dear Mr Marshall,

Please excuse this unusual paper. I am far away from Hull and must take what I can find. I am touched to think of you hunting up my oddments. As for your title, *Living* is good, but when *High Windows* comes along in June, you will see that that is the title I have given it, so your collection will be valuable. The title I really wanted was *Living for Others*, only I could never write the title-poem.

Perhaps one day I shall.

Kind regards to Mullins also.

Yours sincerely,

Philip Larkin

It was a very affecting letter to have received.

It is difficult to know what Larkin meant by the title he had in mind, *Living for Others*, as an alternative to *High Windows*. *High Windows* is, as I have said above, a very other-focused book. Larkin observes human life with the detached eye of a novelist. He did, as we all now know, want to be a novelist. *High Windows* is in many ways his last novel. The first-class poetry it contains is also a kind of fiction. Larkin is not very much present in the book. The poems are not,

superficially at least, about him. They are more about other people. In a review of *Trouble at Willow Gables* John Carey states that Larkin's poems succeed by keeping other people at a distance. This is not really true. The poems succeed by keeping Larkin himself at a distance. Larkin stands back from the poems allowing the reader to attain to the full vision of the poems. Larkin thrives on images of distance and makes beauty of our distance and unattainability.

And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high
 windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

It is the *thought* of high windows that he is interested in, not the words that convey the vision. The vision is presented through the medium of words, but ultimately transcends them. The vision contains the beauty. Is this what Larkin means by 'Living for Others'? – that the price of the Romantic vision was a dedicated adherence to writing that gave some pleasure to others but which was at some cost to himself? A cost to his own happiness? It is a point he made as far back as 'Waiting for breakfast', where the speaker has to choose between happiness with the girl and the world represented by his vision. Or did he mean that the choices we all have to make between our own individual happiness and the claims made on us by other people: family, friends, society in general, – that these competing claims were a burden to him?

PHILIP LARKIN – AN EXHIBITION

Wilberforce House, Hull

9 November 2002 - 31 August 2003

Paul Walker



Photograph © James L. Orwin

The modern reader is often accused of having a greater appetite for the biography (particularly the salacious elements) and correspondence of writers than for their work. The balance of recent publications would support at least *prima facie* evidence of this. But how can one gain a real understanding of the solitude and cynicism of the author of 'Vers de Société', the tenderness of 'Broadcast', or the despair of 'Aubade' (a poem I have only ever been able to bring myself to read twice), without at least some understanding of the man?

The first corner of the life of Larkin the man was peeled back with the 1992 exhibition 'Philip Larkin – Letter Writer', which accompanied Anthony Thwaite's superb

Selected Letters. Here we saw writ large Larkin's wit, love of literature, passion for jazz, and the knockabout relationship he enjoyed with his close friends, particularly Jim Sutton. The pleasure was greatly enhanced by the thrill of seeing the original documents, in Larkin's mellifluous hand.

The current exhibition in Wilberforce House, Hull, of artefacts recovered from 105 Newland Park following Monica Jones' death in 2001 lifts another corner, giving us a more personal, domestic, and frequently mundane reflection of Larkin the man. This is no tasteless intrusion into his personal life; rather, it is a sensitive insight into a sensitive man, but also a further and important step in redressing the balance following the hysterical over-reaction to Larkin's alleged racism and sexism.

Indeed, the worst that can be found in this exhibition is a piece of jolly political incorrectness *circa* 1977 in a letter to John Norton Smith, former lecturer in English at Hull who had recently moved to Dundee:

Can you get the wireless up there? or is it all Jimmy Shand and recipes for porridge? and comedians saying things like ‘Och, ye’re so mean ye wudna give a bluidhound a (s)cent?’

Ho, Ho! Nevertheless, the Museum Service sees fit to protect our sensitivities by warning us that '*These letters help to give an insight into Larkin, the man, and do not represent the views of the Museum Service in any way*' (my italics). Well, useful to get that learnt...

Notwithstanding this warning, the exhibition was overwhelmingly positive. Its principal interest, lies, of course, in what further it tells us of Larkin the man. Although nearly all the exhibits were removed from 105 Newland Park, many of them date back to his Pearson Park days (1956-1974). As we now know only too well, however, he left his muse behind when he vacated Pearson Park for Newland Park, and so the picture we see of Larkin's domesticity in the last 11 years of his life needs to be seen in this context.



Photograph © James L. Orwin

Probably the first thing that strikes the visitor visually is the evidence of Larkin's physical stature (he stood 6'3"). His heavy brown overcoat towers over us from its display case, and his suit, shoes and slippers add to the sense of the 'High and Mighty' shopper. The magnificent fawn duffle coat and (unidentified) college scarf, *circa* 1950s, must have made Larkin indistinguishable, other than by age, from his students!

Over 120 ties were recovered from the house, of which a small selection is on display here. Interestingly, they each represent something: a Library Association tie, a National Trust tie, a tie commemorating the centenary in 1979 of BR dining cars, and one with repeated rows of Union Jacks. In Larkin's day, the tie was a symbol of

authority, sobriety and rectitude. How often do you see Larkin photographed without one?

The three plaques of religious tracts are particularly fascinating. These read:

GOD IS LOVE

PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD

and from Job 14.10:

For man dieth, and wasteth away yea, man giveth up the Ghost, and where is he.

Are these simply the tongue-in-cheek humour of an atheist? Or are they perhaps the backstop insurance policy of the agnostic, 'in case I was wrong all the



Photograph © James L. Orwin

time'?

There are of course the inevitable jazz records. And a 'faint hint of the absurd' is provided by the collection of champagne corks, each carefully labelled to record the occasion, viz:

CBE	14 June 1975
Lipoma	20 Dec 77



Photograph © James L. Orwin

Monica 7 May 1984

And then there are the glasses. The different pairs reflect not only the styles of the day, but the styles of the day that Larkin chose to wear, usually reflecting seriousness and sobriety. But what is it about glasses that takes such a grip on the emotions? Is it that they are the framework that remains after the face has faded away – the only tangible residue? Who can forget the moving scene in “Coronation Street”, when Hilda Ogden brings Stan’s belongings home from the hospital following Stan’s death? She takes out his glasses case from the bag, opens it, and slowly dissolves into quiet sobbing.



Photograph © James L. Orwin

Glasses can do that.

Then, finally, there are the furniture and ornaments from Newland Park: old fashioned display units and tables, pieces of Mason’s Ironstone, a jar of Gentleman’s Relish – many of them gifts; and a toasting fork, which performed sterling service in Pearson Park. Here is no flaunting of wealth or material possessions; rather, the conservative tastes and comforts of a serious, conservative man. One could readily believe that, had Larkin been alive today, he would have been witheringly contemptuous of the consumerist society!

In summary, the exhibition tells us an enormous amount about Larkin: that he was very private, sensitive, patriotic, and even sentimental (a word not often heard applied to Larkin). He (loosely) observed William Morris’s dictum by keeping everyday items which had a deeper meaning for him. Virtually everything in the exhibition has a personal association with some person, place or event, and serves to emphasise Larkin’s sensitive side.

There is also, interestingly, a brief insight into facets of Sydney Larkin, Philip’s father. His personal notepaper somewhat pompously proclaims his full collection of letters: his OBE and 3 qualifications. And then there is the infamous statue of Hitler: barely 3" high, and not actually on display in Newland Park but wrapped up at

the back of a drawer, but enough to attract another disclaimer: ‘The museum does not condone these views, but is displaying the object and other material to help explain Larkin and his life’.

Gripes about captions apart, however, this is a beautifully and lovingly mounted exhibition for which Jayne Tyler and the Hull Museum Service deserve the highest praise and gratitude, not least for the courageous duration of the exhibition which runs until 31 August. Open Mon-Sat 10.00-5.00, Sun. 1.00-4.30.

The captions and notes to the exhibits are clearly and informatively written, and rightly aimed at the casual visitor. Unfortunately, casual visitors have been little in evidence, due in no small measure to the fact that there is no indication outside Wilberforce House that the exhibition is on; and to reach it the visitor has to ascend the main staircase, cross to the other side of the house, and descend back to the ground floor, without any directions. A few simple signs saying “Philip Larkin Exhibition this way” would not go amiss. [On going to press we understand the Museum has now simplified this procedure and access to the exhibition is much more direct.]

Another admirable feature of the mounting of the exhibition is the links which it draws between some of the exhibits and Larkin’s poems. We see his collection of Famous Cricketers cigarette cards, for which he searched the sand in ‘To the Sea’. There is a spinning top – the inspiration for ‘Tops’?, “that vase” (‘Home Is So Sad’), various toads; and for some, the centrepiece of the exhibition – The Mower, with which Larkin so regretfully sliced up a Newland Park hedgehog with which he had earlier been on speaking terms.

The exhibition was formally opened on 14 November 2002 by James Booth and Maeve Brennan, as part of The Humber Mouth literary festival, at an evening reception



Photograph © James L. Orwin

attended by some 30 visitors.

James developed the twin themes of the ordinary, everyday and yet evocative nature of so many of the exhibits; and the constant discovery during the clearing of 105 Newland Park of little hidden significances, and reminders of familiar perspectives from Larkin's poetry and his letters. He also drew attention to the recurring element of Larkin's humour, for example the china box-top inscribed 'Within you see / what pleases me', with nothing under it. And the 'PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD' plaque actually was in view of the seated user of the downstairs toilet of 105 Newland Park, a reminder of the frequency with which people end their lives sitting on the toilet!

Maeve described her impressions on entering 105 Newland Park for the first time since Monica's death (she had, of, course visited it several times after Larkin first moved in: *vide* 'Morning at last: there in the snow'). She focused on the personal significance of a number of the items: a box containing Culpepper toiletries given to Larkin as a Christmas present 20 years earlier; a ceramic Scandinavian coffee jar which she had given him 42 years ago as a 'thank-you' for coaching her for a Library Association exam, and still in use; and arguably the strangest of all, Christmas wrapping paper with gift tags attached, written by



Photograph © James L. Orwin

Maeve and given to Philip 20 or more years before. What will survive...

To the casual visitor, the exhibition will be of casual interest. To the dedicated Larkin enthusiast, however, it

is a treasure trove of memorabilia comparable to a Brontë enthusiast's thrill at seeing Charlotte's dresses, or an Elgar fan's awe at seeing the composer's piano. It



Photograph © James L. Orwin

is a must for Larkin Society members, and I urge anyone who has not yet seen it to get down to Wilberforce House without delay. But you will need to ask directions...

Shoes

These were his shoes. His intimates
that kept his unseen feet from rain,
that went with him
down Toad Road to the bookstack,
knew his office carpet; like a skin
inseparable from all his goings out
and comings in;
kin to and dressing of each change of posture,
mood, aside and quirk of nature,
along with mac,
red scarf, green paisley handkerchief
he'd made into a knotted cap –
(a witness told he'd mowed the lawn in that).
And these, his spectacles, through whose transparency
I see high windows, curtained after dark,

Paraffin Joe and his Nitelites

[or Larkin's Jazz Scene]

at the National Jazz Archive, (Loughton
Library)

Traps Hill, Loughton, Essex, IG10 1HD

Saturday, 24 May 2003

2.00 – 4.00 pm

£3 members, £4 non-members

JOHN KELLY: YOUNG PHILIP LARKIN

Belinda Hakes reviews Professor John Kelly's lecture at the Society's 2002 Annual General Meeting



Professor John Kelly
Photograph © James L. Orwin

Late November, Hull University. The room bedecked with Christmas tinsel. As the gathered participants in this year's AGM awaited the start of Professor John Kelly's lecture I let my mind wander to the idea that the decorations were actually there in celebration of the fact that Philip Larkin had been here, had brought us all together and that he would continue to do so.

Young Philip Larkin is an interesting title, for those of us who never met the writer. Was he, in fact, ever young? Was he not born a little middle-aged, a little cautious, a little doleful? I ask this as a teacher of A Level students who assume that Shakespeare was born with a receding hairline and Larkin with glasses already perched on his tiny baby button nose.

But, of course, Larkin was not only young; he was as young as any of us have ever been; as unsure of who he was and as intent on – and far better than most at – rehearsing different versions of himself until he found one with which he was, if not comfortable, at least resigned to.

John Kelly's academic CV is formidable in its breadth and depth. His achievements are well known, I'm sure, to readers of this journal. His mixture of erudition and charm took us through a vividly realised Larkin at St John's, to the extent that I felt that I was discovering anew someone I had thought I had had the measure of.

We all have our own version of Larkin. The Larkin of John Kelly's lecture was clever, funny and mischievous; experimenting with identities and leaving gems of wit in the "dialogue of doggerel" found in the JCR suggestion book. This Larkin, undergoing the ticking off referred to in 'Dockery and Son', maintains that instead of being hauled up to explain 'these incidents last night', he "should have got a medal", for managing to get hold of a bottle of sherry. This Larkin is described as at once "terrified", "flamboyant", "opinionated" and "a dandy" (his red trousers being particularly singled out by Professor Kelly). Anecdotes poured forth, and I was reminded of a recent visit to the Parker Library at Corpus Christi, Cambridge, reading the buttery book entries recording one Christopher Marlowe's rather profligate consumption of comestibles and his apparent tardiness in paying for the same. Somehow this made Marlowe very real!

Professor Kelly made us laugh at Larkin's wit, and his own, but we kept returning to the poet's erudition, his earnestness and his need to try different versions of himself, as is evident in the personae of his poetry.

When asked how this was reconcilable with his career as a librarian, Professor Kelly reminded us that Larkin was passionate and knowledgeable about books and that the creative writer lived very comfortably wearing the mask of librarian, rather as, I feel, he was able to explore multiple possibilities within the self-imposed discipline of verse form.

We were reminded of Yeats' "...out of the quarrel with other people we make rhetoric; but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry" and Professor Kelly observed that much depended on who that "self" happened to be. University gave Larkin the opportunity to explore and rehearse many selves, freed from both the security and the constraints of family life. Not surprisingly, this experience was both exhilarating and frightening.

Professor Kelly discovered Larkin while an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin, through a copy of *The Less Deceived*. How, he wondered could

anybody called *Larkin* possibly be a poet? He opened the book “looking to scorn” but immediately fell in love with the brilliance he found, the realism which led the reader into larger issues, while holding back, always holding back from the grand statement of certainty. This, he felt, was a poet of true compassion.

Spending a year at University College Leicester, Professor Kelly learnt more about Larkin the man from those who had known him. Alerted to Larkin’s tendency to switch off his hearing aid when bored in company, Professor Kelly was a little anxious about their meeting a few years later at a St John’s dinner. He needn’t have worried. It seems, in fact, that the two had a lot of fun, albeit at the expense of a fellow diner convinced that their discussion about DH was in fact about TE Lawrence. Larkin’s mischievous wit kept both possibilities open, just, throughout the ensuing conversation!

Their talk went back to Larkin’s time at St John’s, the experience which, if not moulding him, “helped define

those irreconcilable parts of his nature”. Larkin’s Oxford was, of course, a wartime Oxford; he felt himself ““at the end of an epoch””. The undergraduate population was continually shifting, and the bombing of Coventry reinforced a sense of the fragility of life, which permeates and gives power and poignancy to so much of Larkin’s poetry.

Larkin was excluded from *Eight Oxford Poets*, but had ‘Ultimatum’ published in *The Listener* in his first term.

But we must build our walls, for what we are
Necessitates it, and we must construct
The ship to navigate behind them, there....

This emerging poet, writer of vulgar doggerel in the JCR suggestions book and the author of *Jill* were all brought to us with great wit and charm on that late November day as dusk fell and the decorations shimmered. Philip Larkin: cause for celebration indeed.

Larkin with Women

Helene Morgan reviews Ben Brown’s play - new production staged at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds, 27th September to 26th October 2002.
Published by Faber and Faber 1999 £4.50, ISBN - 0-571-20472-4.

Andrew Motion’s biography was the inspiration for Ben Brown’s original production of *Larkin with Women* produced at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough in November 1999. It won the *Daily Express* Play of the Year and Best New Play at Barclay’s Theatre Management Association (TMA) Awards.

The play opens in 1955 when Philip Larkin arrived in Hull to take up his new post as Librarian at the University of Hull. Three women would predominantly feature in the poet’s life in Hull: Monica Jones, lecturer at Leicester University where Larkin worked from 1946 to 1950; Maeve Brennan, who was in charge of Periodical Acquisitions at the University Library; and Betty Mackereth, his secretary.

Monica, Maeve and Betty were women from different backgrounds, with completely different personalities and beliefs: Monica intellectual and flamboyant; Maeve romantic and naive, a practising Roman Catholic with strong principles about pre-marital sex; and Betty practical and down-to-earth.



Monica Jones (Sally George)
Photograph © Keith Pattison

Monica had been a close friend and confidante of Larkin's for 8 years and their relationship proved to be the most intimate and enduring.

Maeve had arrived at the Library two years before Larkin but only came to know him well in 1960 when he gave her tuition for her Library Association examination. They subsequently fell in love. Their emotional attachment lasted for the next 18 years alongside Larkin's continuing relationship with Monica. Betty became Larkin's secretary in 1957 but their close relationship did not become intimate until 1975.



*Larkin (Christopher McHallem)
and Maeve Brennan (Gilly Tompkins)
Photograph © Keith Pattison*

Thus from 1975 to 1978, when Maeve dropped out of the equation (knowing nothing of Betty's involvement) Philip Larkin was emotionally – though not sexually, as the play indicates – involved with all three women.

The play features excerpts from some of Larkin's most memorable poetry, personal jazz favourites and an abundance of his most memorable sayings.

Larkin with Women gives an affectionate and unforgettable look at Larkin's complex and often misunderstood character.

The opening scene presents a typical 1950's setting, with some of the poet's 78 rpm jazz records leaning against a coffee table. The first act begins with Larkin moving around the stage in a pensive manner listening to his jazz favourites, thereby preparing the audience for the atmosphere, manner and pace of the drama to follow. During the play we see a period of thirty years condensed into two acts of approximately fifty minutes each, the consequence of which is that detail and natural development are, necessarily, sacrificed.

Philip Larkin is credibly portrayed by Christopher McHallem whose characterisation explores the reticence and mild mannered nature of the poet. The voice, however, seems too harsh, shrill and forceful. This fault emerges frequently throughout the play.



*Larkin (Christopher McHallem)
and Betty Mackereth (Carolyn Pickles)
Photograph © Keith Pattison*

Monica is convincingly portrayed by Sally George, as is Betty by Carolyn Pickles, but Gilly Tompkins' portrayal of Maeve – especially in the opening scene – is not so accurate. The flat Hull accent is not typical of Maeve and is a major contributing factor to the lack of dignity with which she is portrayed. At the time of the première in November 1999 all three women were alive but Monica died in February 2001.

Ben Brown examines the poet's attitudes towards women, marriage, commitment and sex. The play demonstrates clearly Larkin's need for women but very much on his own terms. When, for instance, Monica wants to apply for a vacancy at Hull University he discourages her with the comment: "Well, we're swimming along quite nicely as we are, aren't we?" and then, "I just see life more as an affair of solitude diversified by company rather than the other way round."

The dialogue skilfully blends a mixture of Ben Brown's own lines with phrases and sentences from Larkin's interviews, letters or other sources, which are often stated word for word, thus lending the play an air of authenticity, with its fast pace and ready humour. The playwright skilfully uses quotations from the poems to introduce a more serious mood. So, a romantic scene with Maeve closes with the first verse of 'When first we faced and touching showed'; and a conversation with Monica regarding the possible outcome of Larkin's cancer operation is followed by a stanza from 'Aubade'.

By the time of the lawnmower incident in which he accidentally kills a hedgehog he has been regularly feeding, Larkin has moved to Newland Park, with its large garden. This incident, which inspired 'The Mower', reinforces the poet's compassionate side. Ironically, his poetic decline is generally attributed to this move: "I feel like a tortoise taken out of one shell and put into another." As the play clearly shows,

throughout his life Larkin was terrified of death. This is reflected in many of his poems but achieves its most awesome and profound expression in 'Aubade'.

The West Yorkshire Playhouse produced a very informative and beautifully illustrated programme to accompany this production.

Pretending To Be Me

Elaine Sommerville reviews Tom Courtenay's one-man show



Sir Tom Courtenay
Photograph © by Keith Pattison

Sir Tom Courtenay's solo show, *Pretending To Be Me*, the actor's own compilation of Philip Larkin's poetry and prose, is a resounding hit. The West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds (22 November - 21 December 2002) was a sellout and attracted rave reviews. The Comedy Theatre, London (12 February - 26 April 2003) continues to play to packed houses.

Philip Larkin, one imagines, would have been astonished but delighted. The writer who hoped his poems might be enjoyed in pubs, has achieved, thanks to Tom Courtenay, a major theatrical success. Audiences give joyful recognition to the human and universal spirit of Larkin's work embodied with such rightness by a consummate and much loved actor.

The idea for the show occurred when an actor friend, Michael Godley, gave Tom Courtenay the script of a Larkin poetry evening he devised. But Courtenay felt

he wanted to use prose as well as poetry. A great deal of research followed; Larkin's Letters, Andrew Motion's biography, *Required Writing* and *Further Requirements*, among others, were trawled. The result is an extremely skilful mix of Larkin's world-weary, self-denigrating, hilarious prose and the powerful yet lyrical beauty of his poetry. Larkin's ability to be funny as well as serious, convinced Tom Courtenay to try him out in the theatre. There is, he believes, a special quality, something particularly English in our ability to combine laughter with tragedy in the theatre.

Larkin could have no finer interpreter than Tom Courtenay. Much was made, initially, of the physical dissimilarity between Larkin and Courtenay. There were suggestions that he shave a bald patch in his hair in order to replicate Larkin's dome. The very idea is ludicrous. Resemblance can lie at a deeper level than simply physical. Theatre, rather than film or television, is the perfect medium in which to explore the mysterious resonance between Larkin and Courtenay. The actor's great gifts, his emotional honesty, the ability to convey human pain and weakness without sentimentality, his gift for the lyrical as well as the humorous, are the perfect embodiment of the spirit one feels in Larkin's writing. Courtenay says he was attracted by what he describes as the soulfulness of Larkin as well as his candour and humour.

Certain similarities exist in other ways. In spite of achieving great acclaim and appearing in the public eye, both actor and poet had a need for privacy which seemed to run counter to the requirements of fame. They share, also, a belonging and attachment to Hull. Courtenay was born in the city and writes most

movingly of it in his autobiography, *Dear Tom, Letters From Home*. Tom Courtenay says that, at first, he thought it was coincidence that he and Larkin belonged to the city. Now he thinks, it may be, they were both moved by the “spirit of place.” Courtenay left the city in 1955, the year Philip Larkin arrived.

Pretending To Be Me, the reflections of Larkin’s life, takes place in the course of one day, ideal for suggesting a life time. Courtenay performs amid a towering pile of brown boxes, this is his moving day from one home to another. An unnerving time for most of us, when life lies disassembled around us. The boxes are contained within walls of gauze which reflect an underwater light. Courtenay has said more than once that he likes to believe *his* Larkin is dead and doesn’t know it. The haunting set by Tim Hatley might certainly convey that idea. Interestingly, both set designer Hatley and director Ian Brown worked with Tom Courtenay on his former solo show, *Moscow Stations*, for which he won the Evening Standard Award and the Critics’ Circle Award in 1994. The same powerful focus of these theatrical skills is evident in *Pretending To Be Me*. The brown boxes are claustrophobic and confine Larkin and yet he seems to find refuge here. Washed up like wreckage on a beach are the record player for his beloved jazz records, the teapot and mug which feature in the first “daytime” half of the show, and the whisky bottle to cheer the second half’s evening reveries.

In the first half Tom Courtenay wears a dark suit and, later, a cardigan. In a chatty, intimate manner, very much in keeping with the conversational, poetic tones of Larkin, he takes the audience into his confidence. He shares stories of his youth, unhappily married parents, his stammer, Oxford. The vulnerability and candour shine forth. Such an Eeyore view of life, told with comedic self-denigration and elegancies of phrase is infinitely endearing. He is hilarious in his distrust of holidays, “a feminine conception”, and marriage, “like standing on one leg for the rest of your life”, he tells us to hoots of largely female laughter.

Tom Courtenay’s comic timing is superb. In the story of a poetry reading in Oxford where he was asked, “How do you explain your small use of imagery, Mr. Larkin?”, he comments “As Randolph Turpin said when they asked him why he didn’t get off the ropes when Sugar Ray was hitting him, ‘Search me’ ” (letter to Judy Egerton, 14 December, 1974), the little pause before the final phrase and quiet downward inflected dismissiveness was the perfect dispatch to an aggressively stupid question. The audience roared

appreciatively. Tom Courtenay says he has been surprised at just how much audiences have laughed at Larkin’s wit.

Yet he can change the mood in a moment. The shift from prose to poetry is effortless. The laughter seems to prepare the audience for the poems’ beauty and seriousness. The tenderness of poems such as those to Larkin’s father and mother, ‘An April Sunday brings the snow’ and ‘Mother, Summer, I’ was particularly well done. Courtenay’s voice is both lyrical and yet firmly anchored in the inflections of ordinary speech. It is the perfect instrument for the movement of a Larkin poem, from the specific and conversational to the profound. This fine actor has a powerful capacity to suggest spiritual possibility in circumstances which appear bleak and unpromising. In ‘First Sight’ he conveyed movingly the bond between ewe and lamb and the invisible but powerful presence of “Earth’s immeasurable surprise” of spring.

Aspects of well known poems took on an almost visionary clearness, such as the moment in ‘Dockery and Son’, “..to see the ranged / Joining and parting lines reflect a strong / Unhindered moon.” Also, in ‘High Windows’, “..the deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.” Tom Courtenay suggests a going beyond the self in a performance which feels both utterly focused and effortless.

The choice of poems and certain interpretations may vary from show to show. Courtenay says he likes to change things if he gets better ideas. This aspect certainly keeps the piece fresh and alive.

The movement from humour to poetry is theatrically vital. Larkin’s frustrations with modern life, motor cars that break down and soak up money, soulless modern houses and the awful responsibilities of their ownership, the boredoms of television, had a gleeful response from the audience. His description of a motoring mishap when he drove into a flood under a bridge “and was becalmed” (letter to Judy Egerton, 4 August, 1978) became, in Courtenay’s hands, a comic masterpiece.

But the unchanging, powerful centre of *Pretending To Be Me* is the performance of ‘Aubade’. Actor, poet and audience come together in their feelings of terror, rage and despair at the certainty of our own death. Tom Courtenay’s power and grief are breathtaking. It is a moment I cannot forget. Great acting like great writing is something that stays with you.

Philip Larkin: *Collected Poems*, edited by Anthony Thwaite, The Marvell Press and Faber and Faber, 2003. Paperback, 218 pp. £10.99 ISBN 0 571 21654 4

Terry Kelly

Terry Kelly is a journalist who lives and works in Jarrow, South Tyneside

Larkin assembled his three mature collections with an almost architectural concern for internal structure. Once the reader has absorbed the ordering of each book, it's hard to appreciate the poems fully without experiencing the sensation of each knitting into its rightful place, as though all three collections were poetic echo chambers. For example, try to imagine the opening poem of *The Whitsun Weddings* to be anything but 'Here', its panoramic, open-ended vistas, cut-priced citizens and clarifying loneliness setting up thematic and tonal patterns explored in the rest of the collection. There's a similar, scene-setting grandeur to be found in 'To the Sea', the first poem in *High Windows*, its concern with the unreachable past and fading human and cultural traditions defining much of the book's content and tone. The whole business of providing a collected Larkin, therefore, and attempting to incorporate those poems falling outside the precision-made context of three chiselled collections Clive James called 'as thin as blades,' does seem inherently problematic. Essentially, the famous poetic triad doesn't need anything added to it or taken away. Larkin was economic with poetic truth. But the best of the uncollected or unpublished poems still deserve a home.

However, there's also a danger of Larkin's *Collected Poems* turning into the literary equivalent of Rubik's Cube. As the poems are shuffled, chronologically reordered or simply omitted, some readers will feel a vital piece of the Larkin canon is still missing or that a fully rounded sense of his poetic achievement remains elusive. I doubt such fears will be allayed by this latest, slimmed-down edition, again edited by Anthony Thwaite. The book appears both to replace and supplement the original 1988 edition, which added a large number of uncollected poems to the previously modest Larkin oeuvre. (A later paperback edition, with revisions, appeared in 1990). But while some critics argued that the landmark first edition disturbed the poet's almost Garboesque sense of poetic parsimony, by simply giving us too much, this latest volume will surely be accused of the opposite.

Much of the uncollected work is jettisoned in favour of respecting and reinstating the intricate structures of Larkin's original collections. This basic editorial decision is to be applauded. We can now read a *Collected Poems* in which the three mature collections are presented as Larkin intended. While the 1988 book's large quota of poetic false starts and dry runs allowed us to follow the growth of a poet's mind and the gradual emergence of Larkin's mature style, what was lost was the sense in which he ordered the poems in his three mature collections with a symphonic feel for balance. Larkin's typically deadpan comments on his distinctive poetic engineering are quoted by Thwaite in his introduction: 'I treat them like a music-hall bill: you know, contrast, difference in length, the comic, the Irish tenor, bring on the girls.' Larkin was a master of pace, colour and timing and his poems benefit from being read within the context of *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*. But instead of opening the new edition with 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', the reader is faced with the dubious Yeatsian harvest of *The North Ship*, the 1945 collection Larkin only allowed Faber to reissue in 1966 'with considerable hesitation.' While the early book has its moments, displaying a skill for confident poetic pastiche, even the volume's most Larkinesque moment, the closing 'Waiting for breakfast', has its fair share of tonal wobbles. And even the fulsome 1988 edition began with 'Going' and some of the poems signalling the beginning of Larkin's mature poetic phase. But the 2003 version requires us to persevere with almost 40 pages of the more exalted earlier work, which casual readers may find difficult to associate with the poet of 'This Be the Verse', 'Mr Bleaney' or 'The Old Fools'. I also find it hard to believe that the poetically meticulous Larkin would have chosen to head up his collected works with such early and unrepresentative work. If respect for Larkin's original literary intentions was the main criterion, why not simply reprint the three mature collections in a single volume and accommodate all the uncollected material in a separate, variorum edition?

Granted, like saloon bar pundits, most of us could devise our own solutions to the task of selecting or collecting the very best of Larkin. But question marks hang over this latest edition before we even reach the title page. The jacket blurb asserts 'this new *Collected Poems* returns the reader to the book Larkin might have intended: it is, for the first time, Larkin's 'own' collected poems.' But such assertions spark more questions than answers. Given that Larkin apparently left no specific instructions about how his work should be published after his death, how can anyone claim to second-guess the literary intentions of a late author? While it's fair to assume Larkin would have chosen to collect those fully achieved poems published after *High Windows* – 'Aubade' being an obvious example – the new book's inclusion of lighter, occasional pieces, while omitting some of his most compelling and utterly distinctive poems, simply on the grounds that Larkin chose not to publish them during his lifetime, is the most frustrating aspect of this latest edition. Some of these omissions arguably serve to undermine the legitimacy of the book, particularly since even Anthony Thwaite, in his introduction, calls some of these same poems 'among Larkin's most striking and memorable.' So: out go 'Love Again' (which Blake Morrison considered 'Larkin's last great poem'), 'The Dance', 'An April Sunday brings the snow', 'I have started to say', 'When first we faced, and touching showed', 'Morning at last: there in the snow', 'The Winter Palace', 'Mother, Summer, I', 'The little lives of earth and form', 'The View' – to name just the obvious examples. But given the editorial decision only to reprint poems Larkin himself chose to publish, this means space is instead found for Larkin's infamous Black Paper couplet, the rather earnest four-liner for the Queen's Silver Jubilee (which Larkin, in fact, asked Charles Monteith NOT to print), a lightweight birthday poem for Cornish poet Charles Causley and the overly plangent dedicatory poem for the opening of the Humber Bridge, with which Larkin remained unhappy.

Some may justifiably argue that no single volume edition can possibly satisfy all of Larkin's admirers. Accordingly, I believe the best solution was that suggested by Ian Hamilton in his review of the original *Collected Poems* in the *London Review of Books* of October 13, 1988:

Was there not a case, in Larkin's case, for two Collected volumes: the first a one-volume reprint of the three grown-up, finished books plus the handful of poems he completed after publishing *High Windows* (these, of course,

would include the marvellous 'Aubade'); the second, a mop-up of juvenilia, fragments, occasional light verse, even limericks and squibs?

This two-tier arrangement would also provide a home for such tantalising unpublished fragments as 'The Duration' from 1969 and the late and long 'Letters to my Mind' from 1979, plus other archive poems from the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull, including 'Single to Belfast' from 1950 and 'Hotter, shorter days arrive, like happiness', and 'Clouds merge. The coast darkens', the latter two poems being from the early 1960s and both unpublished until their appearance in *Metre* (autumn 2001). Space could also be found for the 1976 poem to Betty Mackereth, 'We met at the end of the party', first published in *About Larkin* 14 (October 2002). While the 1988 edition allowed the reader to observe the poetic drama of Larkin filtering out the Audenesque and later Yeatsian elements in his work, the latest version ultimately gives the impression of short-changing the reader by omitting so many fine poems from the canon. Both casual and serious students will now need to acquire both editions – confusingly, each bearing the same title – to get a fully rounded picture of Larkin's work.

Apart from the latest edition causing confusion for potential book buyers, there's the larger question about the availability of Larkin's poems for academic study. While I was writing this review, a story about Larkin's tangled love life and fraught relationship with his father appeared in the *Sunday Times*. The article described a forthcoming TV dramatisation about the poet's life called 'Love Again'. But any students moved to seek out the poem which provides the programme's title will not find it in the latest collected edition. Apart from its intrinsic literary value, the omission of 'Love Again' means readers can no longer read a poem affording an illuminating if desolate insight into Larkin's emotional make-up and a possible reason for his later poetic aridity. Future critical books and articles about Larkin will have to direct readers to both the 1988 and 2003 editions. While assiduous Larkin fans will surely weather the two-edition collected confusion, casual, non-academic readers – surely, the very people Larkin sought to reach with his poetry – will find the situation puzzling. For aficionados, the best of the uncollected work is as highly regarded as the cherished poems in the established canon. Apart from obvious examples like 'The Dance' or 'Love Again', there are those minor poems which still earn their keep in readers' affections by embodying the more tender or even feminine

aspects of Larkin's lyricism, which tend to be drowned out by the recent loud accusations of racism, reactionary Toryism or misogyny directed at the poet. 'Morning at last: there in the snow', for example, written in February 1976, recalls 'Talking In Bed' from 16 years before in its exploration of the universally fraught ties of love and relationships, the poet imbuing ordinary domestic details with an almost numinous quality:

Not the candle, half-drunk wine,
Or touching joy; only this sign
Of your life walking into mine.

Although such late truncated lyrics betray signs of Larkin's poetic vision closing in on itself, like the poet's mind at the close of 'The Winter Palace', their literary interest alone should win them a place in any collected edition.

While it seems churlish to complain about any book which contains three of the finest collections in contemporary poetry in their entirety, this edition feels like a missed opportunity. As it stands, Larkin's admirers must wait even longer for a single or double edition fully representing and doing justice to the best of his unforgettable poetry.

Printed below is a letter from Professor James Booth to Faber's Stephen Page, expressing his concerns about their new edition of Larkin's Collected Poems and the confusion it will surely cause. The letter is followed by Faber's response.

Dear Stephen Page

19.xiii.02

Philip Larkin: *Collected Poems*

I am writing to raise my concern, shared by others to whom I have spoken, about the forthcoming new edition of Larkin's *Collected Poems*. A couple of years ago Paul Keegan told me of his dissatisfaction with Thwaite's 1988 volume, and his desire to restore the order of original volumes, and poems, as published by Larkin himself. This seemed to me very reasonable. But it never crossed my mind that the new edition would put out of print all the poems which did not appear during Larkin's lifetime, whatever their quality or importance.

If one were asked for the quintessential Larkin, one might cite something from *The Whitsun Weddings* or *High Windows*. But equally one might think of his fiftieth birthday poem 'The View':

Where has it gone, the lifetime?
Search me. (*CP*, 195)

Or one might call to mind his only true mourning elegy, 'An April Sunday brings the snow', with its description of the jam his father made before his death:

Behind the glass, under the cellophane,
Remains your final summer – sweet
And meaningless, and not to come again. (*CP*, 21)

Or one might remember his anguished 'Love Again':
say why it never worked for me.

Something to do with violence
A long way back, and wrong rewards,
And arrogant eternity. (*CP*, 215)

Or perhaps other lines might echo in the mind: 'At thirty-one, when some are rich / And others dead, / I,

being neither, have a job instead' (*CP*, 69); 'The gas-fire breathes. The wind outside / Ushers in evening rain. Once more / Uncontradicting solitude / Supports me on its giant palm' (*CP*, 56); 'Then there will be nothing I know. / My mind will fold into itself, like fields, like snow,' (*CP*, 211). All these are from much-loved poems, in two cases familiar classics. All are omitted from the new *Collected Poems*, on the grounds that Larkin – for whatever reason – did not publish them during his lifetime.

All over the English-speaking world unsuspecting purchasers of the new *Collected Poems* will search its pages for such well-known poems as 'Poem about Oxford', 'To Failure', 'Letter to a Friend about Girls', 'When first we faced and touching showed', and 'The little lives of earth and form'. In critical books students will see page references to '*Collected Poems* edited by Anthony Thwaite', only to be baffled when the poem appears on a different page, or fails to appear at all.

For the last two years I have taught a third-year undergraduate module on Philip Larkin (c. 20 students). I will not be able to teach this module using the new *Collected Poems*. If the old edition is put out of print I shall be reluctantly forced to abandon it. I have also secured a study leave in order to write a book on Larkin and Twentieth-Century Poetry. It now looks as though I shall be in the unhappy position of having to refer to an out-of-print edition, which confusingly has exactly the same title and editor as an available volume which excludes many of the poems I shall discuss.

This year the Larkin Society's annual birthday walk was in Warwick. We visited his family home, 73 Coten

End (see enclosed *About Larkin*). Everyone was enchanted to find one of the plum trees mentioned in 'An April Sunday' still standing in the garden. As far as these readers were concerned this poem is in no way a dispensable part of Larkin's *oeuvre*. A dramatisation of Larkin's life, starring Hugh Bonneville, is currently being produced by World Productions, and will be broadcast by the BBC in 2003. It is called 'Love Again'. Anyone stimulated by this programme to buy Larkin's *Collected Poems*, will search in vain for the poem which gave it its title.

Could I respectfully suggest that Faber should not withdraw these poems from print? Either you could keep the original 1988 *Collected Poems* available, alongside the new reduced version. This will cause confusion, but is certainly better than rendering the poems inaccessible. Alternatively, at the earliest opportunity you could add to the new volume, an appendix of 'Poems Not Published during Larkin's Lifetime', restoring the omitted works (in small print if you need to save space). This will allow the serious student access to them, while the purist can (if s/he wishes), confine him or herself to an 'authorised' Larkin who didn't write 'Far Out' or 'Love Again'.

Yours sincerely,

James Booth

Dear Professor Booth

Thank you for your letter raising your concerns about the availability of poems we have removed from the new edition of *The Collected Poems* by Philip Larkin. We understand the concerns you raise and I hope you will be pleased that we are actively investigating ways in which we can make these unpublished poems available. We are in discussions with the Larkin estate at present and I would ask you just to be a little patient while we make a decision on how it is best to achieve our aim of continuing to make these poems available. No doubt Paul Keegan will be in touch with you to let you know what our plans are. I hope that this puts your mind at rest and that your teaching will be unimpeded by our strategy.

With kind regards
Yours sincerely

Stephen Page
Chief Executive
Faber & Faber Ltd.

10.i.03

Maeve Brennan:

The Philip Larkin I Knew

The best Philip Larkin there was

Terry Whalen

Terry Whalen is a past editor of *Atlantic Provinces Book Review*. His books include *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*.

Since significant numbers of people, both members and non-members, have contacted the Society expressing their surprise at the dearth of reviews in the national broadsheets and literary press of Maeve Brennan's The Philip Larkin I Knew, we reprint below Professor Terry Whalen's review which was first published in The Globe and Mail, Canada's largest selling daily paper, on August 17, 2002.

The lack of reviews seems to have had little effect on the popularity of The Philip Larkin I Knew: the first print run was exhausted by the autumn. Consequently the book was reprinted in January. Copies are available from Manchester University Press, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9NR. Alternatively they may be ordered through your local bookseller, ISBN 0 7190 6276 4 – £14.99

Anthony Thwaite edited *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems* in 1988, a selection of Larkin's letters in 1992 and a selection of Larkin's reviews, commentaries, broadcasts and interviews, titled *Further Requirements* in 2001. Andrew Motion published a biography of Larkin in 1993, and the estate sanctioned the release in May, 2002, of an edition of some of Larkin's previously unpublished fiction, *Trouble at Willow Gables*, edited by James Booth. Much of the biographical material in all of this has generated a view of Larkin as someone who had a pornographic mind and who was often cynical in his attitudes toward others.

The Philip Larkin I Knew gives us an unconventionally positive view of Larkin, but it is not a work of hagiography. Maeve Brennan had a romantic relationship with Larkin from approximately

1960 to 1978 – during, that is, some of his most productive years as a poet. They met in Hull, East Yorkshire, while working as librarians at the University of Hull in the 1950s, and they continued to work together long after the romance ended. Brennan retired from the library in October, 1985, and still lives near Hull, in Cottingham. *The Philip Larkin I Knew* is about her personal history and her romantic relationship with Larkin, its pains and its residual joys. Its most interesting literary chapters are the ones in which Brennan's knowledge of Larkin's life brings us closer to the poetry itself. Chapter four (Poetic Occasions), for example, relates a number of Larkin's poems to Brennan herself, and this makes it the most interesting textual chapter in the book. And the brief chapter eight (Twelve Painful Months) is about the bad press Larkin received because of the contents of Motion's revealing biography.

The Philip Larkin I Knew is a tonally poised, well-written, smart and open-hearted book, and it has some affinities with Jean Hartley's 1989 autobiography, *Philip Larkin, The Marvell Press and Me*. Hartley was a close friend of Larkin's, and co-founder of Marvell, a small press near Hull that launched Larkin's mature career with the publication of his 1955 volume of poems, *The Less Deceived*. Brennan and Hartley were friends of Larkin's. They knew him well and accepted him for what he was – a complicated person who worked conscientiously as a librarian, wrote well, drank too much, died of cancer and left much of his money to the Society of Authors and to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Brennan and Hartley disliked Larkin's tares and cranks, but they knew him as well as a warm, humorous and decent person, and one, I think, who "out of a quarrel" with himself (to borrow a truism from W.B. Yeats) wrote some of the finest poetry of the 20th century.

The Philip Larkin I Knew is formulated throughout with against-the-grain conjunctions ("but") and introducers such as "contrary to" and "the fact was." Cumulatively, this all gathers into a positive rendition of Larkin, a Larkin who did get along with many people, was admired by children, was protective of animals, had the respect of those who worked with him and was a loving person. Brennan's book sees Larkin as a man who is "flawed, yes, albeit endearing, but never abominable," and it includes the texts of 50 letters between Brennan and Larkin selected from a total of 400 written during the relationship. These letters take up 92 of the book's pages, and confirm that

Larkin was as ordinarily nice as any of the rest of us. They are, of course, interesting for other reasons as well.

Larkin was an agnostic (an "Anglican agnostic," he once declared) and Brennan an Irish Catholic, but they shared a spiritual idealism in spite of their differences. In chapter five (Religion), she sees Larkin's "skirmishes with religion" in a very nuanced way and places much significance in a letter (reprinted fully in the book) that Larkin wrote to his friend Jim Sutton on August 17, 1943. She recognizes in that letter a permanent strength in Larkin's spiritual idealism. As a result, the feelings of betrayal that issue from her reading of Thwaite's edition of the letters and Motion's biography are eventually diminished by a deeper understanding.

Interestingly, the dynamics of Larkin and Brennan's relationship will be familiar to readers of David Lodge's *How Far Can We Go*, a novel about couples struggling with Roman Catholic views on sex and marriage in the 1950s and beyond. It is clear that Larkin chafed at the effect of these restrictions in his relationship with Brennan – D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was, after all, one of Larkin's favourite books, and he agreed with its anti-domestic view of sex and its praise of solitude. He had a simultaneous, morally different relationship with university lecturer Monica Jones, which eventually meant the end of his relationship with Maeve Brennan. Brennan was obviously the muse for a number of Larkin's poems – she is even the subject of some of them – and after he broke off with her in 1978 he became increasingly melancholic. He soon ceased publishing poetry altogether and went into an alcoholic decline that included expressions of bile in some of the reactionary letters he wrote to his male friends, including Kingsley Amis.

The Philip Larkin I Knew is a courageous and valuable book. In some ways, Brennan was the most important woman in Larkin's life, and the Philip Larkin she knew was the best Larkin of all.



**Philip Larkin: *Further Requirements*, edited by Anthony Thwaite
London: Faber & Faber, 2001**

Trevor Tolley

I really fell on this book when I first received it. I was quite astounded by its size, even though I possessed, or had read, almost everything in the original Bloomfield bibliography. It was a revelation to see how much Larkin had written since *Required Writing* had appeared; and I was particularly pleased to see so many earlier pieces that I valued back in print. Among these was the interview with Ian Hamilton. I have always thought this was one of the most informative and searching interviews; and one done before Larkin had become evasive and defensive, as he is in places in the interviews in *Required Writing*. There are also interviews with Neil Powell and John Haffenden and the famous broadcast discussion with Anthony Thwaite concerning the controversial *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse*. It was good to have so many of his essays on Hardy together; and to have the four pieces about Auden, however short, because it seems to me salutary to have the reiteration from so important a poet as Larkin that Auden ceased to be a remarkable poet after he went to America. Some of the pieces I found more challenging than those in *Required Writing*; such as "Inner Horizons", where he not only quite justly takes David Pryce-Jones's book to pieces, but also gives a very acute critique of Connolly's presentation of himself, while still making clear his great admiration for Connolly. We also have his introduction to the reissue of one of Connolly's best collections, *The Condemned Playground*. "Betjeman En Bloc" is back, as is "Not the Place's Fault". Others will find other pieces to rejoice over.

The essays include some of Larkin's earliest pieces of literary journalism, and Anthony Thwaite explains their origin in his informative introduction. These include Larkin's second published piece of literary journalism, "Not Literary Enough", a review of John Heath-Stubbs's *A Charm Against the Toothache*, that appeared in the cyclostyled *Poetry and Audience*, put out from the English Department at Leeds University, where Heath-Stubbs was the Gregory Fellow in Poetry. John still remembers the review and its strictures from a friend who at that time had not come as far as he had.

There are many remarks that are as revealing of Larkin as they are of the works he is discussing. About Donald

Davie's *The Forests of Lithuania*, adapted from a Polish poem: "Personally I am always sorry when poets desert their private agonies to rehash others' literature." Or his characterization of Cecil Day Lewis's autobiography, *The Buried Day*: "This is the Forrest-Reid-Walter-de-la-Mare view of life: nothing quite equals being a kid." Rather telling, in view of the original reception by some people of Anthony Thwaite's edition of *Collected Poems*, is: "If one is interested in a poet one wants all his poems in the order in which they were published..." ("Last-but-one Round-up") Or reviewing a life of Edward Fitzgerald in 1985: "His last ten years, like all last ten years, were sad..."

The most revealing passage is the one quoted on the cover of the hardback edition from "How or Why I Write Poetry", broadcast on the BBC Overseas Service:

I suppose the kind of response I am seeking from the reader is, Yes, I know what you mean, life is like that; and for readers to say it not only now but in the future, and not only in England, but anywhere in the world.

Those who picked it out must have thought that it was an exemplary sentiment; and in a way it is. But it could be said of any piece of writing, not especially of poetry. To take the quotation by its tail, with its hope that his poetry might give rise to the appropriate recognitions "anywhere in the world", one is left asking how it fits in with the remark in his review of Roy Campbell's *Collected Poems*: "Almost all translations seem to me condemned to be poetic zombies, assemblages of properties walking around with no informing intelligence or soul..." He recognises here the obvious fact that poetry is a complex verbal performance, not to be equated merely with sentiments that find an echo in every breast. His own abrupt response to Ian Hamilton, "Foreign poetry? No!" is partly a manifestation of his frequent anti-cultural pose; but it also arises from a recognition of the obvious fact that the impact of the poem is mainly through its language and not through any expression that can be substituted for what is articulated. He recognises the peculiar constrictions in the genesis of a

poem, when he says in "Context": "Very little that catches the imagination...can get its clearance from either the intelligence or the moral sense." Yet in later life he seems more and more to want to see poetry in terms of directly saying something (or showing something) in an accepted medium, free of the sophisticated contortions of the modernist, but for which he had an outstanding talent. In the late "Interview with John Haffenden", included here, he said, concerning the poem 'The Whitsun Weddings' and

the journey in which it originated: "It was wonderful, a marvellous afternoon. It only needed writing down. Anybody could have done it." Did he really mean that?

It is impossible here to give more than a general idea of what the book contains, as the list of contents is as long as this article. One can only say that it is a fine and much needed collection, and all admirers of Larkin will welcome it, with gratitude to Anthony Thwaite for bringing it all together.

PHILIP LARKIN: INCIDENTS FROM PHIPPY'S SCHOOLDAYS,
ed. Brenda Allen and James Acheson
with illustrations by Rodney Fitzgerald
Edmonton, Canada: Juvenilia Press, 2002, pbk ISBN 0-9688283-0-2

James Booth

In the winter of 1939-40 the seventeen-year old Larkin reviewed his writing career so far, burning many pieces and preserving only the best (see *About Larkin* 13, 2002, p. 21). Among the latter was 'a life of Hugh Minden Philipson, in play and prose form'. He still found this piece, which must have been written when he was 15 or 16, 'roaringly funny'. It takes the form of a spoof biography of the English teacher at King Henry VIII School, Coventry. It owes, however, more to the vivid literary inspiration of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and the Billy Bunter stories, than to actual experience:

Bates hurled himself across the study, and crashed Philipson to the floor. The Hon. Percy was not far behind. There was a rending sound as a cheap waistcoat and jacket split up the back, and a squeal of anguish.

"OOHH.... Bates, I shall report you to the Head prefect... Oh!... ow... my jacket... my waistcoat..."

The remains of the punch were swamped over Phippy's meagre features, and his steel-rimmed spectacles were cracked into a thousand pieces.

A pair of poor-fund boots were dragged off and thrown into the fire... .

The effect is less like that of Thomas Hughes's classic than the *Beano* comic, most notably in the amoral, bloody-minded enjoyment of unmoralised mayhem.

The scene in a Manchester slum, is similarly farcical in its shameless class prejudice:

Mrs. P. You shut yer face! (Smack!) Wot's this stuff yer poring over now? Let me see it! Cor! Soffockles? (Sophocles) Never 'eard on 'im!

An' 'oo's this? Senneckay? (Seneca) Cor! 'Ere, you come and turn the mangle!

Phip. Oh, but mother...

Mrs. P. If Maggie Griggs' son Jimmy can do it (smack) so can you! Kim on! (Exit both)...

(three hours later)

Mrs. Phip. Hark, I reckon I 'ear yer father cummin'! Get under the table!

Phip. Ooh yes.

(off) (Evry eenin evry dye if yer go dahn Lambeth wye yew'll fine em all dewin the Lambeth work OOII!!) Enter Phip Snr. "Beastly drunk".

Mr. Phip. Where's that young skulk of a son o'mine? Hic! 'Ere's is things? Where is 'e?

Mrs. Phip. You get out of this 'ouse, Joe Philipson, if yer can't be 'ave yerself better than this!

Mr. Phip. You shut yer trap! (smack) Oh, 'ERE you are!

In its uninhibited gusto this *is* still roaringly funny, at least to this reader. We next see the luckless Phip in Oxford, a keen member of the Christian Union, before he finds his proper role in life, as a grammar school teacher. At every point his pigeon-chested feebleness of spirit is ridiculed, and his attempts to assert order and decorum in a vivid world of mindless hearties and haughty aristocratic aesthetes, is hilariously doomed.

The piece is well edited with excellent notes, detailing parallels with earlier boys' stories and references to the fascist politics of the time. The illustrations are also highly amusing. This is a fascinating curio for those interested in Larkin's early development.



THE PHILIP LARKIN SOCIETY

Programme for 2003

Saturday 15 March:

A Larkin Study Day

For all lovers of Larkin's work, but of particular interest to sixth-form students and their teachers.

Venue: Wyke Sixth Form College, Hull

Cost: £10 (please bring packed lunch)

For booking forms contact:

Carole Collinson, 32 Queen's Drive, Cottingham, HU16 4EL; Tel: 01482 847047

Saturday 24 May: 2.00 – 4.00 p.m.

Paraffin Joe and his Nitelites [*for Larkin's Jazz Scene*]

Readings, with music played by Michael Garrick and Martin Hathaway

Venue: The National Jazz Archive, Central Library, Traps Hill, Loughton, Essex

Admission: **Please send s.a.e. Ticket only admission.** Society members £3.00; non-members £4.00

Contact: Wendy Cole, 237 Main Road, Broomfield, Chelmsford, Essex, CM1 7AS

Saturday 9 August:

"To the Sea" – Snooker at Scarborough

The Seventh Birthday Anniversary Walk, organised by Don Lee and Gloria Gaffney

For further details contact:

Don Lee, 51 East Park Close, Ardwick, Manchester, M13 9SD, Tel. 0161 273 4995

Friday 26 September: 7.30 p.m.

Professor Peter Dickinson

Larkin's Jazz

Professor Peter Dickinson's *Larkin's Jazz* was composed after the poet's death, but is based on earlier discussions between poet and composer. This talk will refer to these discussions and subsequent correspondence. The talk will be followed by the playing of a recording of the composition.

Venue: The Tranby Room, Staff House, University of Hull

Admission: Society members £2.00; non-members £3.00

Sunday 16 November:

Barry Rutter:

Reading Larkin

Barry Rutter, in his inimitable style, takes a look at Larkin's poetry.

Venue: Hull Truck Theatre, Spring Street, Hull

Admission: To be confirmed

Saturday 29 November at 2.00 pm

Annual General Meeting and Distinguished Guest Lecture

Patrick Garland

Filming Larkin

Venue: Tranby Room, Staff House, University of Hull

AGM: 2.00 pm, Guest Lecture 3.00 pm

Admission: Members free; non-members £3.00

NOTICE BOARD

The Society's website is at <http://www.philiplarkin.com>

Submissions to *About Larkin*

We welcome contributions from Society members. Text should be typewritten on one side of A4 paper and in double-spacing, and where possible accompanied by a disk. The copy deadline for the October 2003 issue of *About Larkin* is 31 July. Please submit contributions electronically to orwin@philiplarkin.com, or in hard copy to The Editors, 82 Victoria Avenue, Hull, HU5 3DS.

Larkin Society and Related Publications

ABOUT LARKIN: ISSUES 1-14: (£7 each, incl. p. & p.)

No. 1: Ruth Siverns (Bowman), 'Philip Larkin at Wellington'; Maeve Brennan interviews Winifred Dawson (Arnott)

No. 2: Ann Thwaite, 'Having Larkin to Stay'; Douglas Dunn, 'Philip Larkin's Dilemma: Should Artists Marry?'; Letter from Larkin to his mother

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