



# About Larkin

Journal of The Philip Larkin Society

No. 38. October 2014

ISSN 1362-542X

---

---



## SOCIETY OFFICERS

### President

Anthony Thwaite

### Vice-Presidents

Melvyn Bragg  
Archie Burnett  
Douglas Dunn  
Tom Courtenay  
Matthew Evans  
Barbara Everett  
Alan Johnson MP  
Andrew Motion  
Rosemary Parry  
Dale Salwak  
Tom Stoppard

### Chairman

Edwin A. Dawes

### Deputy Chairman

Graham Chesters

### General Secretary

Andrew Eastwood

### Treasurer

Jacqueline Sewell

### Events Secretary

Carole Collinson

### City and Region Liaison

Graham Chesters  
Philip Pullen

### Journal Editors

James Booth  
Janet Brennan

### External Liaison

Don Lee

### Literary Adviser

James Booth

### Jazz Consultant

John White

### Education Officer

Belinda Hakes

### Merchandising

Andy Bagley

## SUBSCRIPTIONS (1 July – 30 June)

### UK Institution £60

Full Member £20

Unwaged or senior citizen £14

Unwaged Undergraduate Student £6

### Overseas

Institution £60

Full member £25

Unwaged or senior citizen £20

Unwaged Undergraduate £10

## Address for all Society correspondence

### The Philip Larkin Society

c/o Andrew Eastwood  
Southwood,  
Southgate  
Hornsea  
HU18 1RE  
Email [andrew@theeastwoodbox.com](mailto:andrew@theeastwoodbox.com)

We were greatly saddened to hear of the death of Winifred Dawson who, as Winifred Arnott, was Larkin's muse in Belfast. Ann Thwaite recalls here Win's memorable contributions to the Society's activities. We include also the funeral eulogy delivered by her second husband, Grant Dawson. Richard Palmer, jazz enthusiast and author of a fine monograph on Larkin, *Such Deliberate Disguises*, has also died, and is remembered here by his friend and co-editor John White.

This issue includes a perceptive piece by Mark Rowe, detecting the influence of Théophile Gautier on Larkin's poem 'For Sidney Bechet'. Philip Pullen explores Larkin's attitude towards his parents in response to a misguided article recently published in *English* by Adam Piette and Jim Orwin records Larkin's correspondence with Benjamin Britten's secretary over a possible setting of 'Bridge for the Living'. This prompts the reflection that Larkin seems not to have found, as have many lyric poets, the near-contemporary composer whose music will always be associated with his words. Herrick's 'Gather Ye Rosebuds' is, for many, inseparable from its setting by William Lawes. Certain poems of Goethe and Heine inevitably call to the ear settings by Schubert. Gautier has Berlioz, Hardy Gerald Finzi, and Housman has Vaughan Williams. As time passes, it seems increasingly unlikely that any composer will establish this kind of intimate musical association with Larkin.

This issue also includes reviews of four new books. Don Lee welcomes Dennis Telford's booklet, 'Dearest Bun...' celebrating Monica and Philip's 'secret love nest' in Haydon Bridge. James Underwood analyses a monograph by Rory Waterman exploring connections between Larkin, R. S. Thomas and Charles Causley. The philosophical similarities between R. S. Thomas and Larkin also concern the Iraqi poet, Fadhil Assultani, in *An Outsider Poet*, reviewed here by Susannah Tarbush. We also include Assultani's Arabic translation of Larkin's 'Wants'. Finally, the novelist Suzette Hill welcomes James Booth's new biography, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, which briefly featured in fifth place in the *Sunday Times* 'General Hardback' Bestsellers list between books by Hilary Clinton and Richard Littlejohn: an unheard of achievement for the biography of a poet.

But *About Larkin* 38 is dominated by recent high-profile events in the Society's crowded calendar. James Booth recalls the most enjoyable joint conference of the Hardy and Larkin Societies in Oxford in March. On 6 June the theatre group, Ensemble 52, gave a brilliant fiftieth anniversary performance based on 'The Whitsun Weddings' on a First Hull train, reviewed here by Phil Pullen. The following day, 7 June, under what some fancy is the symbolic arrow shower of the King's Cross station canopy vaulting, the Sheriff of Hull, Baroness Bottomley unveiled a slate ellipse, carved by Martin Jennings, displaying the final lines of the poem. Our new Vice-President, Sir Tom Courtenay, and the Right Hon. Alan Johnson MP also participated. Graham Chesters and Carole Collinson are to be congratulated for bringing this project to fruition, with the assistance of Jerry Swift of Network Rail. The following weekend the Philip Larkin and East Riding poetry prizes were awarded by Don Paterson at the Bridlington Poetry Festival. On 25 June a plaque in honour of Jean Hartley was installed at her house in Victoria Avenue.

Then, at the end of August, Richard Heseltine, worthy successor to Larkin in terms of rebuilding and renewal, welcomed us to the splendidly refurbished Brynmor Jones Library for the launch of James Booth's biography. Appropriately, this was the first official event to take place in the top floor meeting area with its spectacular views of the Humber plain. Despite train delays, Michael Fishwick and Sophie Christopher from Bloomsbury Publishing attended. Finally, John White contributes a revealing interview with James Booth, reprinted from the *Wetwang Gazette*.

**James Booth**  
**Janet Brennan**

# Contents

Forthcoming Events		4
Obituary: Winifred Dawson (née Arnott) 5 February 1929 – 22 August 2014	Ann Thwaite	5
Win	Grant Dawson	6
Hardy's Christminster and Larkin's Oxford: Conference of the Thomas Hardy and Philip Larkin Societies, St Anne's College, Oxford, 28–30 March 2014	James Booth	9
Fifty Years On: Bringing 'The Whitsun Weddings' to Life: A performance by Ensemble 52: 6 June 2014	Philip Pullen	14
Unreal Cities: Gautier's Influence on 'For Sidney Bechet'	Mark Rowe	17
Benjamin Britten and 'Bridge for the Living'	James L. Orwin	20
A plaque for Jean Hartley: Victoria Avenue, Hull		20
Obituary: Richard Palmer, 1947 – 2014	John White	21
'An arrow shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain': The unveiling of the slate ellipse at King's Cross Station: 7 June 2014		22
A childhood annulled? Larkin through the psychoanalytical looking-glass. Review of 'Childhood wiped out' by Adam Piette	Philip Pullen	24
Only Connect: Review of <i>Belonging and Estrangement in the Poetry of Philip Larkin, R. S. Thomas and Charles Causley</i> by Rory Waterman	James Underwood	28
Launch of <i>Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love</i> by James Booth: Brynmor Jones Library, 28 August 2014		30
More sinned against than sinning? Review of <i>Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love</i> by James Booth	Suzette A. Hill	31
Review of <i>Monica: 'Dearest Bun...': A Haydon Bridge Love Story</i> by Dennis Telford	Don Lee	34
Fadhil Assultani and Philip Larkin. Review of <i>Philip Larkin: Outsider Poet</i> by Fadhil Assultani	Susannah Tarbush	35
Bridlington Poetry Festival 12-15 June 2014 : The Philip Larkin and East Riding Prizes		38
James Booth talks to the <i>Wetwang Gazette</i>	John White	41
Notes on Contributors		42
Publications and Merchandise		43

*About Larkin* is produced twice yearly by The Philip Larkin Society.  
The articles in the Journal reflect the personal opinions of the contributors  
and not those of the Society as a whole.

The Annual Larkin Society Commemoration for 2014 will be

## A Christmas Afternoon Tea

*The Mercure Royal Hotel, Hull, Tuesday 2 December 2014, 2.30pm*

Sandwiches, mince pies, truffle log, Christmas cake,  
scones with brandy clotted cream and jam, tea or coffee



Distinguished Guest Speakers

### Anthony & Ann Thwaite

In celebration of *Going Out*,  
Anthony's new book of poems, and  
remembering his long friendship  
with Philip Larkin, Anthony  
Thwaite will be asked some  
unexpected questions by Ann  
Thwaite about his literary life and  
how it relates to what he has  
written.



Tickets £10 (£8 for PLS members) Tel: 01482 847047.

Email: [chriscarole@hotmail.com](mailto:chriscarole@hotmail.com)



The next AGM  
Distinguished Guest Lecture  
will be delivered  
on 6 June 2015 by

### the Rt. Hon. Alan Johnson MP

Honorary vice-President of the  
Society

*further details to be announced*



---

## Winifred Dawson (née Arnott)

5 February 1929 – 22 August 2014

*Ann Thwaite*

*Reprinted, with thanks, from the Guardian, Thursday 28 August 2014*



*'this one of you bathing'*



*Win Dawson, with the young lady's photograph album, June 2007. Photograph © Ann Thwaite*

Winifred Dawson, who has died unexpectedly aged 85, after a stroke, was much loved and will always be remembered for one early relationship. As a young woman in Belfast in the 1950s, Winifred inspired five of Philip Larkin's poems – more than did any of the other women in his life. The 'sweet girl-graduate' (in 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album') was also the subject of 'Latest Face' and of 'Maiden Name' (with 'its five light sounds'), of 'He Hears That His Beloved Has Become Engaged' and, dated the day of her wedding, 'Long Roots Moor Summer to Our Side of Earth'.

'How beautiful you were,' Larkin wrote, 'and near, and young'. His new biographer, James Booth, describes a 'romantic friendship'. Larkin would have liked it to be more, and reluctantly put away his 'inconvenient emotions' and 'dozens of happy memories which, like pressed flowers, I can spend all winter arranging'. There are 26 letters to Win in the *Selected Letters* of Philip Larkin.

Winifred Arnott was born in London and read English at Queen's University Belfast. She lived with a 'very dear aunt and uncle' at Lisburn and was working as a cataloguer in the university library when Larkin arrived in 1950 as sub-librarian. Many of the letters date from the time when she was in London, studying for her postgraduate diploma in librarianship. She returned to Belfast, but in 1954 left to marry Graham Bradshaw, who worked for the Ministry of Defence in London. There were three children but the marriage did not last, and in 1976 Win was on her own.

When my husband, Anthony, and I got to know her, through the Philip Larkin Society, Win was happily married to Grant Dawson, living in an impressive Arts and Crafts house in Winchester and at the heart of a large extended family. She had a wonderful gift for living life to the full and for friendship. It pleased her enormously to become a close friend of three of the other women in Larkin's life: Ruth Siverns (née Bowman), his only fiancée, Jean Hartley, his early publisher, and Maeve Brennan, his beloved colleague.

Win travelled widely and often alone, most surprisingly, perhaps, to Greenland and the Galápagos Islands. She was an intrepid driver, prepared even in her 80s to drive regularly from Winchester to Hull. She rarely missed a Larkin Society event. One of our last memories of her was at King's Cross station in London in June, when the Larkin plaque, with the last lines of 'The Whitsun Weddings', was unveiled, and Win read one of the poems dear to her.

Proud as she was of her association with a great poet, Win was delighted to come into her own with the publication earlier this year of a biography, *The Porter's Daughter*, the life of Amy Audrey Locke, whose remarkable story she had stumbled upon when working as a librarian at St Swithun's School in Winchester. It was the product of many years of diligent research and remains as evidence of the skill and empathy of an unusual woman.

She is survived by Grant and her children, Nicholas, Lucy and Hilary.

---

# 'Win'

## Grant Dawson

*An expanded version of the address given by Win's husband at the funeral on 11 September 2014*

---



*Win at 16 or 17*

Dear friends,

Before the 1939 war, Win's father, Samuel Clawson Arnott, an electrical engineer from Northern Ireland, and her mother, Bertha Minett, from an English family with some Welsh blood, lived mainly in North East England, though they often moved from one place to another. In one junior school she found a friend, Dr Marion Birch, with whom she spoke and exchanged visits all her life, even this year.

When war came, she was evacuated to Northern Ireland to be cared for by her dearly loved uncle Desmond, who worked in a bank, and her aunt Marie, who loved country walking and tried hard to reduce tensions between the two Ulster communities. Their children and relations began to regard Win as a much-loved aunt and, indeed, several of them here today still do. But her uncle had to move from the country to Belfast. Soon afterwards, German bombing began and Win was among 50 girls in her school evacuated to a castle built by Huguenots.

In 1942, boarding in the castle, she met Inge Glaser (later Bachrich), who became another true and very close life-long friend. Inge had been rescued from Hamburg through the wonderful *Kindertransport* missions, not long before her mother and her father, a doctor amongst the poor, were exterminated because he had some Jewish blood. Win and Inge had many adventures in this very

cold castle which were later to fascinate Philip Larkin. They eluded the strict head-mistress, finding secret places for disapproved activities, writing silly rhyming doggerel about a nice, friendly mistress's eyebrow, and so on. But Win was given no science or mathematics education.

Her education was mostly poor, but she had plenty of free time. She read large numbers of books and started developing her great knowledge of English literature and poetry. Even on the last day before her final, savage strokes, she had a short miraculous moment of being roused and coming back to herself. We softly chatted about various things, and for fun she whispered telling phrases from Shakespeare to reinforce points which came to mind.

After achieving some high A-levels – top (in Ulster) in Latin – Win spent an extra year in school to allow her the time to mature. Much of this time seems to have been spent developing her already extensive literary knowledge. Then came three very happy years in Queen's University, Belfast, much involvement with male students, who were often drunk, acting or other trips to Dublin, graduation, a week's walking trip around the Antrim coast with Inge and, soon afterwards, the offer of a job as an Archivist in Queen's great library.

Soon Philip Larkin appeared as the sub-Librarian, often pulling funny faces as he peeped around doors, and discovered Win, he and she being the only ones there with English accents. As is now well known, their relationship was very close and near continuous for two years. It was certainly Platonic. As she emphasised, she didn't fancy him, or then realise that he would become a poet, let alone a great national poet! Also, I am convinced that she gave at least as good as she got, and dealt with Philip simply as one robust person to another. The main, but not only, outcomes of their relationship at that time were recently summarised by Ann Thwaite. Eventually Win was to enjoy, for many years, the business of the Larkin Society (amongst many other activities), culminating in the recent superb book by James Booth, which has a mature account of Win's place in Larkin history.

When Win's job in Ireland finished she went to live in London, and, through mutual love of classical music, met her first husband. He was posted to a research unit in Christchurch, Dorset, and they soon had children:

Nicholas, Lucy and Hilary. Both parents sang in a local choir, and Win learnt the pressures and frustrations of early married life, including the social duties connected with her husband's job.

But then there suddenly came an invitation for her to be a Justice of the Peace: a JP. She accepted, and there began her life as a magistrate, sitting on the bench, with outings to prisons, inspections of all pubs in the district, jolly training sessions in various country houses, and, best of all, sitting alongside a judge in a higher court to silently pass him notes on things which seemed worth probing, and then retiring with him to his room for food and the solving of fiendish crossword puzzles.

Win's first marriage ended, and there came some years of independent life before she began her 33-year second marriage, almost all of which time was spent in Winchester. She burst into more and more activities, and even after having a first painful attack of blood cancer, leukaemia, in 1998, and forbidding any mention of it, even to her children, continued to increase her determination to live life to the full.



*Photograph taken by Larkin in Christchurch, Dorset, 1957 © 2014 The Estate of Philip Larkin*

I offer here a brief summary of the main aspects of that life. Above all, first and foremost, she was a loving mother and grandmother to her expanding family.

**JOBS:** Throughout her adult life, she was employed in a string of diverse, part-time paid and voluntary jobs. These included working in the library of a Bournemouth language school, working in a small company providing family-tree information for wealthy clients, mainly Americans with Irish ancestors, and through the suggestion of her friend Margery Rutter, working in the library of St Swithun's School, sorting and selling old

books. It was this activity which triggered her research into Amy Audrey Locke.

**MUSIC:** Something of major importance to her was singing in many choirs the great body of European sacred choral music of the last few centuries. She had a good voice, could read music, and usually knew precisely what she was singing, even if it was in German or Latin, even when some of her conductors did not. Also, she would join small groups singing madrigals and, more recently, developed an interest in hearing jazz, probably because of Larkin's passion for it, the enthusiasm of her friend, Pam Cotton, and her son's expertise in it.

**FILM:** She allowed a small group of final year students in Winchester University make a somewhat whimsical but essentially true documentary film about her, using several outside locations and our home. Was all that was seen in the film genuine, or was there also an element of acting?

**ART:** Win did much amateur sketching, and frequently visited art galleries. She even joined a class on painting nudes! This was to provide a tempting painting for me to see from our bed. (Do you remember Queen Victoria and Albert?)

**CHURCHES:** In many places we visited, even if only for a day, we would spend time sitting in some local church, or wandering around contemplating what was there.

**ITALIAN:** After we'd been delighted with a lengthy holiday in Italy, which had *no* planning, even one day ahead, she rapidly learnt Italian in a local A-level class, then went on a month-long total immersion course in the language in a non-tourist Italian town. Then, soon after returning, she accepted a government request to conduct a party of Italian-only speaking ladies around Stonehenge and Avebury. This was in an attempt to get their husbands to agree with UK policy on something or other. Her Italian was also invaluable to us on many later visits.

**PEOPLE:** She spent increasing time with the many, many people she had got to know and, even if they died, she continued to speak with their surviving relatives. She also enjoyed street encounters with strangers, especially when with Pam Cotton.

**HOBBIES:** Scrabble, Sudoku, finding and eating strange fungi, growing exotic plants, stripping naked and swimming in cold mountain pools.

**EXPLORATION:** As well as innumerable day and longer trips in this country with members of her family or relations, she went on increasingly adventurous holidays. First she went with me to the Scilly Isles, Snowdonia and elsewhere in Wales and the Lake District, climbing various peaks. Then she and I joined



## About Larkin

with ramblers or sometimes family members on increasingly ambitious trips overseas. Eventually she would travel without me. It has proved impossible to summarise briefly all of this side of her life, but amongst not inconsiderable activities in the UK, Italy and other southern European countries, were many visits to Vancouver to see Inge, once including a five-day train journey from Montreal. Then she would travel on, either North into British Columbia, or down into the USA National Parks. On one trip to northern Canada, she had to escape from the amorous embraces of a lone Hungarian by jumping on a Greyhound bus, and then stopping at a one-horse motel far from anywhere. This turned out to be so dreadful that she had to leave it in the middle of the night and alone in a small pool of light, signal another Greyhound bus to stop and take her back to Vancouver.



*Grant and Win*

She once travelled on a small ship which made its way far up the Canadian side of Greenland, with rough walking almost every day, followed by similar activities in Iceland and the Faroes. In Australia she went on a long ramble with a small party in the Blue Mountains and then went further north, on one occasion needing to abseil down a cliff and get alone through a dark jungle. This was in 1997, when she was 68.

She took two trips in southern India, one with two companions, one with Hilary and granddaughter Tara. She also took a long pioneering trip through several South American countries, including some almost impossible walking in the Atacama desert. This was never subsequently advertised! And she also enjoyed amongst many, many Italian holidays, a glorious visit to Spain to watch me receive an honour from the King of Spain. There were also touristy tours in Costa Rica, Florida, Morocco, the Baltic, the Dalmatian Coast, the Canaries, Madeira, Lisbon, and other places. She would often choose the most strenuous options, whether we were on our own or with a larger party.

One of the many people who have commented on Win since her death found her 'so intelligent and kind – she was a singular figure'. Another was 'proud to have been

her friend'. Yet others remarked on 'her intellectual curiosity and zest for life'; 'her ever-cheerful optimism, selfless honesty'; 'her beautiful smile and sharp wit'; 'her kindness and concern for those mourning'. She was said to have been 'a strong presence at Larkin events, and her readings of poetry were so perceptive'; 'she was a feisty and caring person whom we will all miss'.

Research on what became her book, *The Porter's Daughter*, lasted well over a decade, because she had patiently to circumvent various difficulties. It is a *tour de force*, though unfortunately it had to be very much cut after last February in order to have it completed before her own then-foreseen death. She was insistent that it should be published without any reference to Larkin, so that it would be judged only on its own merit. There are now (cheap) softback and (quality) hardback versions available. It was essentially self-published and she set out herself to distribute it.

Death came too soon, but seemed inevitable when she contracted shingles on top of her leukaemia in February 2014. From her readings of medical books, she fast realised that she had little time left.

To try to sum up, Win appears a person who performed different roles in life, the role exhibited depending on where she was and with whom. Most people only knew her in one, or perhaps two roles. She endlessly sought out new knowledge, had a great memory, and until this year surprisingly high physical strength and strong desire to embark on new adventures. I consider her mind to have been somewhat masculine in nature. Opinions on the nature of her religious faith differ greatly.

Thank you.

### AGNES WINIFRED DAWSON

BORN 5 February 1929 in Stourbridge, Worcestershire.

FIRST MARRIAGE TO CHARLES GEOFFREY BRADSHAW in the Parish Church of CLAPHAM, BEDFORDSHIRE on 12 June 1954. (NB NOT Clapham, London). Divorced on 19 May 1977.

SECOND MARRIAGE TO THOMAS WILLIAM GRANT DAWSON in BOURNEMOUTH Register Office, Dorsetshire on 16 April 1981 in the presence of all six of the couple's children. Win was described as a Librarian of 6 Harriers Close, Highcliffe, and her husband (also divorced) as an officer in the Ministry of Defence, living in 1 Lakewood Rd. Highcliffe, Christchurch.

DIED at 9.00 pm on 22 August 2014, peacefully in the Royal Hampshire County Hospital, Winchester, attended by her children. Her moving funeral was conducted on 11 September in St Matthew's Church, Otterbourne (near Winchester) and was followed, as Win wished, by her cremation. The church was the one which Amy Audrey Locke, the subject of *The Porter's Daughter*, knew and where she herself was buried.



---

---

# *An Exploration of Hardy's Christminster and Larkin's Oxford*

*James Booth*

*Report on the weekend conference of the Thomas Hardy and Philip Larkin Societies  
at St Anne's College, Oxford, 28–30 March 2014*

---

---

The sunny gardens of St Anne's College, delicate with budding magnolia and almond blossom, made an idyllic setting for the conference, attended by a total of 36 delegates from both societies. After dinner on the evening of Friday 28 March we adjourned to one of St Anne's intimate modern seminar rooms where Dr Timothy Hands, Master of Magdalen College School, Oxford, delivered a lecture diffidently entitled: 'Something almost being said, twice: Oxford (largely) in *Jude*, and Oxford (much less) in "Dockery and Son"'. It proved an insightful, original talk, relating Hardy's early training with the architect Arthur Blomfield to key locations in *Jude the Obscure*. *Jude*, Dr Hands said, 'is partly a novel about styles of architecture played out in the city. The characters define themselves by their architectural views'.



*Dr Timothy Hands*

The analysis was illustrated with evocative images from Augustus Pugin's 1836 book, *Contrasts*, in which the architect compared the glorious buildings of the Middle Ages to the deplorable architecture of his own time. Despite *Jude*'s sincere desire for what Pugin calls 'a return to the faith and the social structures of the Middle Ages', he is, as Hardy shows with bitter irony, excluded

and oppressed at all points by the streets and buildings of Christminster, because of his class. Intriguingly, in *Jude* Hardy expresses a far more sceptical, 'modern' attitude towards the city of 'dreaming spires' and 'lost causes' than that of Philip Larkin. As a grammar school boy from a comfortable background, Larkin's attitudes towards Oxford were less conflicted than Hardy's. Nor did he share Hardy's complex sense of architectural metaphor. He was very happy in the wartime city, despite its austerities, and his Oxford has a touch of the Arnoldian romanticism which Hardy so eloquently rejects.



*John Osborne*

The following morning, Saturday 29 March, after a breakfast buzzing with discussions, we moved to the Mary Ogilvie Lecture Theatre for a lecture by Dr John Osborne, Director of American Studies at the University of Hull, boldly entitled: 'Philip Larkin, "The Whitsun Weddings" and the train journey that never was'. In the car travelling down from Hull on the previous day, some of us from the Larkin Society had been discussing the

## About Larkin

frustrating negotiations over the slate ellipse to be unveiled at Kings Cross on 7 June to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Larkin's best-loved volume. Now, in his familiar provocative manner, Dr Osborne informed us that our efforts were misguided, since the journey recorded in the poem had never taken place! What he meant by this form of words was that the poem's wedding parties had been first observed, as Larkin himself tells us, on a journey he had made one August to Grantham, where he had left his train to travel on to see his mother in Loughborough. The final stage of the journey to London had been added to the poem later, during three years of drafting and redrafting. The 'original' journey was, Dr Osborne insisted, not at Whit and not to London. This fact, he argued, gave the lie to the 'biographicalist' critics ('biographist' would be more pronounceable) who, according to him, naively insist on a one-dimensional Larkin, concerned with the immediate record of personal experience. Adopting the language of class struggle, he opposed against the 'biographicalism' of the 'Larkinocracy' an analysis based on 'textuality'. He denounced the 'sexing' and 'racing' of poems. His 'textual' Larkin is not necessarily a middle class English librarian. The narrator of 'The Whitsun Weddings', as he ingeniously demonstrated through literary parallels and echoes, could be a gay man, a 'hammy' heterosexual, a macho 'gynophobe', a middle class snob, a proto-feminist, a jazz fan, a transatlantic observer, an African American, an English academic in Wales, or even a continental teenage girl. Dr Osborne's lecture caused some head-scratching and, for the remainder of the conference, was a constant focus of discussion among the delegates.

After coffee we were back in the Mary Ogilvie Lecture Theatre, listening to a spell-binding reading by the Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy. She began with the now classic dramatic monologues from *The World's Wife*, 'Mrs Tiresias' and 'Mrs Midas': 'Now the garden was long and the visibility poor', but

that twig in his hand was gold. And then he plucked  
a pear from a branch – we grew Fondante d'Automne –  
and it sat in his palm like a light bulb. On.

She revealed that her own favourite was 'Mrs Faustus', because the wife in this case is, like her husband, herself a morally dubious, overreaching character: 'I was as bad. / I grew to love lifestyle, / not the life.'

Faust's will  
left everything-  
the yacht,  
the several houses,  
the Lear jet, the helipad,  
the loot, et cet, et cet,  
the lot -  
to me.

C'est la vie.  
When I got ill  
it hurt like hell.  
I bought a kidney  
with my credit card,  
then I got well.

Carol then read some of the intimately moving love poems from her sequence *Rapture*. Particularly memorable was 'Syntax', with its embarrassing emotional vulnerability expressed in terms of the historical layers of poetic diction: archaic and modern:

I want to call you thou, the sound  
of the shape of the start  
of a kiss – like this, thou  
– and to say, after, I love,  
thou, I love, thou I love, not  
I love you.

Readers of Hardy's poetry will appreciate Duffy's calculated clumsiness of wording in this poem.



*James Booth, Carol Ann Duffy, Jane Thomas, John Osborne*

After lunch in the Main Hall, the hardier among us pulled on our stoutest shoes and set out on a walk, 'Rude and Obscure: Hardy and Larkin's Oxford' (ingenious titles seemed to be a *leitmotiv* of the weekend). The dense crowds could not obscure the breath-taking beauty of the city on this dazzlingly sunny afternoon. We were ably guided by a team of three: Tony Fincham pointed out Hardy associations. He drew our attention to the chapel of the former Radcliffe Infirmary, to which a surviving architectural drawing by Hardy may be related; he recalled Jude reciting the Nicene Creed to uncomprehending workmen in the Lamb and Flag pub, and pointed out where Sue Bridehead felt her spirit crushed by the narrow dark streets. Don Lee performed a similar function in relation to Larkin, showing us the staircase entry where the poet first met Kingsley Amis, and the toilet attached to the covered Market in which some of the 'ruder' passages of his Jungian dream diary are set. Our third guide, Professor Ken Fincham, provided broader historical and architectural

perspectives, pointing out what Pevsner calls the most beautiful observatory in Europe, now standing free of clutter against the blue sky for the first time in many years, and pointing out the splendid allegorical statue high up on the wall of the Bodleian courtyard, showing James I presenting his works to Fame and the University.

But Oxford, unlike the high serious Cambridge, offers a higgledy-piggledy mix of experiences. We were entranced by the huge expanse of dappled lawn at the back of St John's, seeming for the moment quite deserted.



Here the young Larkin had reflected on aesthetics: 'What is love? Shite. What is God? Bugger. Ah, but what is beauty? Boy, you got sump'n there.' Later, standing at the site of the execution of the Marian Martyrs in Broad Street, our eyes were drawn to the statue atop the bookshop at the corner of the Turl – 'Another time' by Anthony Gormley – which, urban myth has it, is constantly mistaken by short-sighted tourists for an imminent suicide. And in the Market was Brown's Café, still much as I remembered it in 1963, with oilcloth and sauce-bottles. Here my well-heeled public-school contemporaries, rising too late for breakfast 'in Hall', would buy fried bread, sausages and black pudding for a princely 2/6d. Musing on our different historical and personal impressions, our miscellaneous group trailed down back streets to Christ Church, founded by Thomas Wolsey, and featuring in *Jude* under its original name, Cardinal College. Ken reminded us how Pugin in *Contrasts* had rendered the building wholly pre-Renaissance by excluding the odious classicism of Wren's Tom Tower.

Our musing meander then took us to the quiet cul-de sac of Beaumont Buildings, off St John Street, site of the Royal Palace where Richard I is said to have been born, and later the home of Larkin's undergraduate friend Diana Gollancz. We then took the canal route towards the now gentrified Jericho. By this time some of us had flagged and faded away, but the remainder continued our quest, drawn on by the polychrome vision of St Barnabas, its tower modelled on that on Torcello Island,

Venice. Here Gerard Manley Hopkins would resort whenever he 'wanted a spiritual fling'. But would the church still be open after 5.00pm? It was! Our eyes were soothed by the slanting sunlight on muted gold-leaf in the sham medieval Italian interior. Hardy had worked on this church as Blomfield's assistant, and set a scene in *Jude the Obscure* here, in which 'the crumpled, prostrate figure' of Sue Bridehead, 'forlornly covered in a pile of black clothes', is found beneath 'the church's levitating cross – seemingly suspended in mid-air by barely visible wires and swaying gently'. And here was that very cross.



*St Barnabas*

In a serendipitous moment of anarchic literary cross-reference, an iPad gave us access to Betjeman's 'Myfanwy in Oxford':

Tubular bells of tall St. Barnabas,  
Single clatter above St. Paul,  
Chasuble, acolyte, incense-offering,  
Spectacled faces held in thrall.  
There in the nimbus and Comper tracery  
Gold Myfanwy blesses us all.

Gleam of gas upon Oxford station,  
Gleam of gas on her straight gold hair,  
Hair flung back with an ostentation,  
Waiting alone for a girl friend there.  
Second in Mods and a Third in Theology  
Come to breathe again Oxford air.



## About Larkin

As we sat around on the pews, tired and slightly awed, the words lightened the haunted atmosphere. Betjeman, with his blithe, cosy Anglican aestheticism and healthy appreciation of student girlhood, though writing generations later than Hardy, evokes an Oxford still utterly indifferent to the tragedies of those such as Jude and Sue Bridehead.

As a whimsical-sublime coda to our walk, we found our way to the hazy late afternoon vistas of St. Sepulchre's Cemetery off Walton Street, with its toppling headstones and overgrown paths, reminiscent of Larkin's beloved Spring Bank Cemetery in Hull. Here are buried Thomas Combe of the Oxford University Press and Benjamin Jowett, Vice-Chancellor of the University. Our visit was rendered more enchantingly Oxonian by two well-spoken 'down-and-outs', who occupied the centre seats with their dog, taking in the hazy afternoon sunshine and flanked by a neat row of lager cans. They joined diffidently in our discussion and one of them was much impressed by Hardy's poem 'This Summer and Last', persuading us to leave the photocopy with him. The walk had been billed as 'approx. 5 miles', and those of us who had stayed the course to the end can attest it was at least that: at least.



*St Sepulchre's Cemetery*

A splendid dinner was followed, in the Tzusuki Lecture Theatre, by a performance by Bernard Richards of 'Kingers: An Entertainment'. The programme notes insisted defensively: 'This show does not seek to argue the case for Amis as a writer: it is more concerned to present the case of him as a sort of phenomenon. His

status as a writer will have to be argued elsewhere.' Richards impersonated the vain, philistine, sexist novelist with considerable panache and the audience was laughing and wincing by turns throughout. But it seemed painfully obvious, to this observer at any rate, that all the original and memorable material came in the quoted words of Philip Larkin: 'Philip always says...', 'as Philip wrote to me the other day...'. The current generation of sixth formers discovers Larkin's poetry with immediate recognition and delight, almost as though there was no generation gap. In contrast, *Lucky Jim* will appeal to younger readers mainly for its 'period' quality, though some scenes are still very funny. Nothing else in Amis's voluminous *oeuvre* of novels and poems will survive, except in the context of his relationship with Larkin.



*Bernard Richards*

The clocks moved forward overnight and some delegates predictably arrived late for breakfast on the morning of Sunday 30 April. The final formal event, at 9.30, again in the Tzusuki Lecture Theatre, was a far-ranging lecture by Phillip Mallett, Senior Lecturer in English at St Andrews: 'Hardy, Larkin, and the Heartland of the Ordinary'. His title phrase came from Heaney's poem, 'The Journey Back' in *Seeing Things* (1991), in which the Irish poet depicts the ghost of Larkin calling himself sadly 'A nine to five man who had seen poetry.' As Dr Mallett commented, Larkin would not have accepted this ventriloquizing. The real Larkin had not merely glimpsed poetry; he had written it. In 'The Main of Light' (1982), Heaney gave Larkin credit for 'repinning for a more crystalline reality' beneath the 'anti-heroic, chastening, humanist voice', and thus reaching moments 'which deserve to be called visionary'. In *The Redress of Poetry* (2002), he is less approving, convicting 'Aubade' of failing to give 'redress'. Poetry, he argues didactically, must offer 'more than just a print-out of the given circumstances of its time and place.' It must be 'strong enough to help'. 'Aubade' may be a 'high poetic achievement', but its 'vision' is not 'vital' enough. It is



(unlike Heaney's own poetry) 'daunted by death'. (I was reminded of John Bayley's comment that, whenever he feels really depressed, he turns to 'Aubade'.)



Phillip Mallett

Charles Tomlinson takes an even more negative view, accusing Larkin of offering a 'stepped-down version of human possibilities'. Dr Mallett cruelly tested this argument by comparing Tomlinson's sacramental poem, 'A Given Grace', with Larkin's 'Home is So Sad'. Tomlinson's 'Two cups' afloat on the 'mahogany pool' of a table, though 'common ware' seem rare 'reflections':

coolness of brown  
so strengthens and refines  
the burning of their white  
you would not wish  
them other than they are —  
you, who are challenged  
and replenished by  
those empty vessels.

As Dr Mallett commented, the 'grace' given by these cups 'is grace bought at the expense of the human: nobody will ever drink from those cups.' This is very much a still life: *nature morte*. In contrast, Larkin's pictures and piano stool in 'Home is So Sad' are alive with generous empathy for the people who have owned them:

... You can see how it was:  
Look at the pictures and the cutlery.  
The music in the piano stool. That vase.

Both poems use 'you', but Larkin seems to be speaking to the reader, sharing his feelings; Tomlinson, in contrast, seems to be speaking to himself, even congratulating himself on his spiritual refinement. Consequently, the concluding image of 'empty vessels' will prompt the sceptical reader to reflect that the poet's high-mindedness is itself empty: religiose rather than spiritual. Dr Mallett was even-handed, suggesting that 'Home is So Sad' might seem sentimental in comparison.

But it was only too apparent that Tomlinson's poem is bloodless and pretentious compared with Larkin's.

Dr Mallett then moved on to the similar critique of Hardy by Donald Davie in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973): 'instead of transforming and displacing quantifiable reality', Hardy's poems are, on the contrary, 'just so many glosses on that reality, which is conceived of as unchallengeably "given" and final.' Like Heaney's Larkin, Davie's Hardy has a decent, humanist, but insufficiently transformative imagination. In 'At Castle Boterel', Hardy seeks to touch our emotions by claiming no more than that he will remember Emma until the day he dies. This, to Davie, in a patronising put-down, is 'touching; but hardly worth saying at such length'. Davie feels that the 'time of such quality' which Hardy presents as the transcendent factor in this poem should be 'indestructible in a metaphysical reality', either because the poet's mind will survive the death of his body or 'because "quality" exists as a perception in the Divine Mind.' Ultimately, for Heaney and Davie, Hardy and Larkin's poetic limitation is that they do not believe in God or an afterlife. Phillip Mallett delicately implied that, on the contrary, true transcendence has nothing to do with the fictions of religion or metaphysics.

Coffee was followed by an 'Open Mike' poetry reading. Among the poems chosen I remember Hardy's 'Beyond the Last Lamp' and 'The Self-Unseeing', and Larkin's 'This Be the Verse' and 'Morning at last: there in the snow'. But the real surprise came with two original poems composed by delegates themselves. John Osborne entertained us with a brilliant meditation, recited word-perfect from memory, on Betjeman's famous last words: 'I wish I'd had more sex.' The rhymes had something of the subtle wit of Noel Coward or even Cole Porter. And Lianne Brooks recited 'An Arundel Tomb (are we there yet?)', recounting one of those unforgettable mishaps that so often spoil our intended epiphanies. The eager literary tourists, having taken hours to get to Chichester, and having parked too far off, are 'so excited, full of wonder' at finding themselves at the famous tomb that they make the 'awful blunder' of blocking the view of another visitor who snaps at them: 'Are you moving?' and covers up Larkin's framed words with her guidebook.

We spent the remaining time before lunch on a Larkin Quiz composed by Carole Collinson. The runaway winner, a team consisting of John Osborne, Jane Thomas and Graham Chesters, was disqualified as possessing too much combined expertise. The single winner, to no-one's surprise, was Tony Fincham. Then, during lunch in the main dining hall, the frail coincidence of our conference dissolved itself amid farewells and plans for further encounters. We dispersed to the car-parks and the railway station and went our separate ways.

---

---

# *Fifty Years on: Bringing 'The Whitsun Weddings' to Life*

*Philip Pullen*

---

---

*A performance by Ensemble 52 on a First Hull Train, 6 June 2014. Writer and story development – Dave Windass (additional material by the cast). Directed by Andrew Pearson. Performed by Roya Amiri, Laura Aramayo, Sarah-Jayne Curry, Marc Graham, Amy Eidskrem-Hughes, Jamie Eidskrem-Hughes, Zoe Hughes, Matt Jamie, Bernie Laverick, Samantha Laverick, Sarah Naughton, Matt Sutton, Andy Wilson. Songs & Lyrics by Bernie Laverick. Readings of poems by Bill Nighy. Jazz by Ken Ford Jazz Quartet. Stage management and sound by Matthew Lund. <http://e52.co.uk/site/>*

\*\*\*

*'You couldn't be on that train without feeling the young lives all starting off, and that just for a moment you were touching them... and at every station more wedding parties. It was wonderful, a marvellous afternoon.'* (Philip Larkin: *Further Requirements*)

We were late getting away. Almost to the hour at which Larkin's famously delayed train pulled out of Hull Paragon station on a sunlit Whit Saturday afternoon sometime in the mid-1950s, our more than three-quarters-full 2014 equivalent began its slow and stopping curve southwards. This was the realisation of the ambitious plans of the Hull-based Ensemble 52 theatre group to enact the scenario depicted in 'The Whitsun Weddings' in order to mark the fiftieth anniversary of its publication. And what a brilliant event it turned out to be!



Arriving at the station we had been immediately thrown into the vividly colourful atmosphere of the departing wedding parties, their gaiety enhanced by the sunlight

streaming through the station windows. Two newly wed couples setting off from Hull emerged in a flurry of excitement from the Royal Station Hotel (as it was called in Larkin's day), surrounded by family and guests. It was a truly festive occasion, complete with the kind of jazz band that Larkin would have relished.



As the wedding parties posed to have their photographs taken alongside Larkin's statue (as so many couples do today), there, standing just off camera watching them, was Philip Larkin himself, an uncannily realistic representation by the actor Matt Jamie. He may not have had Larkin's familiar bald pate but he certainly had his height, his presence and his taste in ties.



So successful was the acting that several bystanders thought they were in the presence of real 'just-married' couples, adding to the infectious level of gaiety and anticipation as we waited for the train to arrive.



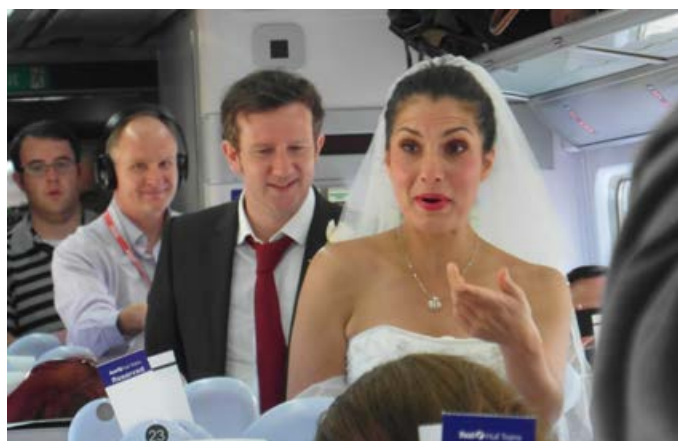
And at last we were off. Actors, audience and associated media personnel all crowded into Coach A of the ('late running') 12.30 Hull Trains service to London Kings Cross: some 70 people in all. Although, thankfully, there is no fish dock to smell any more, the landscape we passed through was in many respects unchanged from the time when the poem was written. We too 'ran behind the backs of houses', caught sight of 'blinding windscreens' and were soon at the point where,

The river's level drifting breadth began,  
Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.

Performing a theatrical event on a train is no mean feat but the cast achieved it with panache.



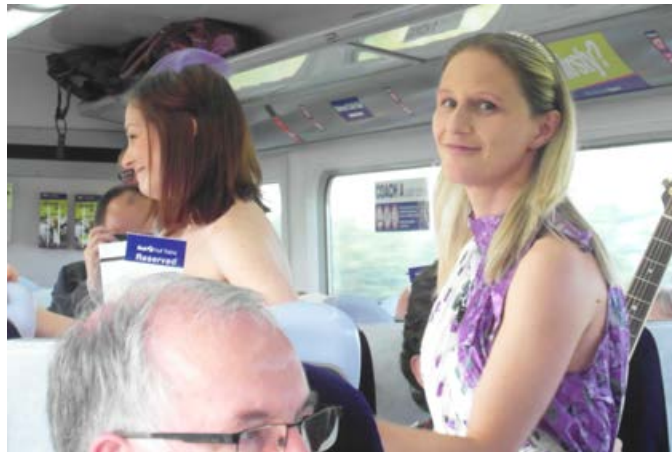
Able to rehearse previously only in a makeshift setting of chairs assembled to represent a railway carriage, the skills of actors to improvise and respond to the settings were fully tested. And it worked amazingly well. What they gave us was a full-on, three-dimensional bringing to life of the wonderful narrative power of the poem, capturing the detail and opening up all the dramatic possibilities evoked by Larkin's words.



It took us right to the heart of the action, not only observing but also interacting with the exuberant newly-weds while catching sight of the poet himself, looking on from his solitary seat in the corner of the carriage. And at every station that we stopped at – Brough, Goole, Doncaster, and Retford – new couples climbed on board. They brought with them a flavour of different historical

eras from the 1950s to the present day. One couple were taking part in the TV series 'Don't Tell The Bride', another represented a mixed marriage – a white English groom and his Iranian bride.

There was a female same-sex couple, celebrating 'our own March 29<sup>th</sup>' (the date on which same-sex marriages were legalised) and a couple each of whom was marrying for a second time, having met on a dating site.



We watched as the cheering relatives waved them on their way, straining to hear if the uncles were really shouting smut (one or two of the grooms certainly were!)



We cheered as they made their entrances on the train, watched their excited amusement as they discovered the presence of the newly-weds already on board and listened in to their conversation as they began to share experiences and even their guilty secrets. Using the full length of the carriage as their stage, the couples acted out the early moments of their newly formed identities,

## About Larkin

evoking elements of their own histories and sharing their hopes and dreams for the future, in some cases mingled with some early doubts about whether they had done the right thing. We saw sheer joy and passionate expression written all over their faces but also caught their first spats – over the tattoos of a previous girlfriend's name on a husband's arm and over the brother who had pinched the church collection. We heard about the 45-minute best man speech that listed 'all the women and the diseases', and we caught the rather ominous lament of an inebriated bridegroom – 'You have got me, you have got me now, you have got THE man!'

And it was the words as much of the action that stuck in the mind. In parodies of marriage itself, the couples showed us that this was to be a journey that was to go much further than the terminus at Kings Cross and was full of the sound of hope springing eternal, mingled with some early seeds of doubt and possible regret.

I could not help thinking how much this reflected Larkin's own equivocal feelings about marriage and imagined him sitting in the corner, thinking to himself, 'I told you so'. Some of the dialogue carried a resonance with Larkin's very own words.

I don't want to repeat the mistakes of mum and dad.

I want us to be happy. Most people just pretend to be happy, but behind closed doors it's another story.

I want arguments that are all about making up.

I want to never grow up forever.

Alongside the dialogue came Larkin's poetry, in the form of recordings of four poems read by the actor Bill Nighy, one of the newest members of the Philip Larkin Society. We heard him read 'The Whitsun Weddings', of course, and felt privileged to be listening to it in this unique setting, but also 'Here', capturing the reverse journey we would make later, swerving east back into Hull, evoking 'the mortgaged half-built edges' to which some of the couples would return. Nighy's reading of 'Talking In Bed' offered a sadder reflection of what might lie ahead for as communication became more strained:

Lying together there goes back so far,  
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.

Finally, a reading of one of Larkin's very late poems, 'The Winter Palace', added yet more layers of more sombre emotion as it reflected on a life lived and forgotten, perhaps even the wedding days themselves, as the ageing process takes hold.

It will be worth it, if in the end I manage  
To blank out whatever it is that is doing the damage.

Then there will be nothing I know  
My mind will fold into itself, like fields, like snow.

But above all, it was the hope and passion behind these flamboyant wedding parties that won the day as the champagne (or at least its Cava substitute) flowed.

The couple marrying for the second time captured this perfectly, as the guitar-playing husband, looking like a cross between Keith Richard and John Cooper-Clarke, sweetly serenaded his new wife:

'Here's to us'  
One more chance, one more go  
We'll make it rock  
We'll make it roll.



As the train approached London, there were no blackened walls of moss to welcome us. Decades of electrified trains had put paid to that. Instead, there were new sights that Larkin might well have reflected on, had he experienced them. As we passed the huge bulk of the Emirates Stadium, the home of Arsenal Football Club and the somewhat fortunate victors over Hull in this year's FA Cup, loud shouts of 'cheats' came from the proud Hull couples (*and* some of the passengers).

I wondered what Larkin would have made of it all. He is often portrayed as a curmudgeonly misanthropist who wanted no fuss made of his fame, but evidence suggests that, in reality, this was far from the case. His letters, especially, show him taking a more than cynically amused pride in his growing public recognition. Writing to Monica Jones in 1964, for example (the year in which the poem was published), about a train journey back to Hull, he reflects on being asked by two fellow passengers to autograph copies of *The Whitsun Weddings*. He was, he declared, 'the Ringo Starr of contemporary verse'.

Our journey ended, as the poem did, with an arrow shower – not a real one of course, but a metaphorical one, suggested by the design of the magnificent new roof at Kings Cross Station which, if looked up at with an imaginative eye, gives an impression of arrows falling from the sky. Beneath this canopy the new Larkin ellipse was to be unveiled the following morning. Fittingly, as dawn broke the next day, those of us who had stayed over, woke up to the sound of London rain.

*Photographs © James Booth.*



---

# *Unreal Cities: Gautier's Influence on 'For Sidney Bechet'*

M. W. Rowe

---

Asked by Philip Haffenden if cutting himself off from European literature might amount to 'a sort of narrow-mindedness or chauvinism,' Larkin replied: 'You remember that wonderful remark by Sidney Bechet when the recording engineer asked him if he'd like to hear a playback. 'That don't do no good.' That's what I think about foreign literature.'<sup>1</sup>

No informed Larkin-lover now takes such remarks at face value. Four decades of research have shown that, far from thinking foreign literature redundant, Larkin was frequently intrigued and creatively engaged by it. He wrote a version of a poem by Baudelaire, and another influenced by Villon, in 1943;<sup>2</sup> and said that Laforgue's 'Winter Coming On' was the poem 'I've been trying to write all my life'.<sup>3</sup> In 1951, he produced a robust translation of Verlaine's 'A Mademoiselle \*\*\*',<sup>4</sup> and, in the same year, praised the poems in H. E. Berthon's anthology, *Nine French Poets 1820-1880*.<sup>5</sup>

As these interests and activities suggest, Larkin's French was rather better than the 'plume-de-ma-tante'<sup>6</sup> standard he claimed for it: Berthon's anthology of linguistically difficult poems contains no translations; and his school friend Noel Hughes said that Larkin 'was good at languages' and 'could translate into and from [French] with ease.'<sup>7</sup>

In view of these facts, it's not surprising that several of Larkin's poems show Symbolist influence. He himself said that the last line of 'Absences' sounds like 'a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist',<sup>8</sup> and critics have detected the imprint of Baudelaire's 'Le Port' on 'Arrivals, Departures',<sup>9</sup> and Mallarmé's 'Salut' on 'Sympathy in White Major'.<sup>10</sup>

However, the French poet who exerted the greatest influence on Larkin, early and late, was Théophile Gautier. Larkin had read *Mademoiselle de Maupin* by 1943 because Gautier's romance plays a role in the plot of *Trouble at Willow Gables*, and Larkin quotes a remark from it, in French, as the epigraph to section iv of chapter 10.<sup>11</sup> It's also clear that the famous preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, with its passionate defence of *L'art pour l'art*, influenced Larkin's early aestheticism,<sup>12</sup> and Larkin's title for his 1967 poem 'Sympathy in White Major' is an obvious allusion to Gautier's 'Symphonie en blanc majeure'.<sup>13</sup>

Gautier's poem was finished in 1849, but was first collected in *Emaux et Camées* [Enamels and Cameos],

his most important book of poetry, in 1852.<sup>14</sup> Here, the poem forms part of a triptych, each section of which has musical resonances: 'Etude de mains,' 'Variations sur le carnaval de Venise' and 'Symphonie' itself.

If we compare the last of these with 'Sympathy in White Major', we can see that Larkin echoes Gautier's title largely to point up an ironic contrast: 'Sympathy' rejoices in the clubland clichés of social morality, and is a resigned if breezy celebration of his failure to connect with others; 'Symphonie' is an ardent, idealised and glacial vision of female beauty. In other words, the title gives Larkin's poem added edge, but the title does not imply, and the poem does not show, an important debt to Gautier.

If, however, we look at the second part of Gautier's triptych – 'Variations sur le carnaval de Venise' – and compare it with Larkin's 'For Sidney Bechet,' we can see that the former did have a profound impact on the latter; indeed, Gautier supplies both the topic and ground plan of Larkin's poem.

Gautier's 'Variations' is divided into four subtitled sections, each of which has eight four-line stanzas. The first section, 'On the Street', says that 'Le carnaval de Venise' is an old folk tune which is found everywhere: it's played by every musical-box, street violinist, barrel-organ, beggar, and dance band; it's sung by every canary and café-singer; and even his grandmother learned it as a child. But one night, says Gautier, the tune was taken up by Paganini,<sup>15</sup> who wove a fantastically evocative set of variations around it; and the rest of the poem describes the semi-mythical Venice which Paganini's composition conjures up:

A frail string vibrates and there  
– summoned up by a pizzicato –  
Joyous and free, as in former days,  
The city of Canaletto!<sup>16</sup> [ll.61-4]

The Venice contemporary with Gautier's poem was very far from being 'joyous and free', because the city was starving, ravaged by disease and under artillery bombardment. Napoleon had ended the old Republic in 1797, and since 1814 the city had been under repressive Austrian rule, but in 1848 a Venetian lawyer called Daniele Manin led an initially successful uprising. Gautier supported this revolution, but by 15 April 1849, when his poem was first published, the uprising was clearly doomed, and Manin negotiated an honourable

## About Larkin

capitulation on 24 August. Austrian rule continued until the creation of a unified Italian state in 1866.

In the second section of the poem, 'On the Lagoons', Gautier offers eroticised descriptions of canals, gondolas, domes, pink facades, marble staircases, and the city's masquerades. In the third section, 'Carnival,' Gautier goes into more detail about the city's festivities. He imagines some typical carnival characters and scenes: Harlequin beats Cassandra, Pierrot applies his make-up, Pulcinella looks for his hooked nose; and he then conveys the sensual thrill of recognising a woman beneath her mask.

In the final section, 'Sentimental Moonlight', the music turns Gautier's thoughts to his own experience of love. He recalls a previous *amour* with a mixture of pleasure and sadness, and says how the sound of a violin harmonic<sup>17</sup> quickens his emotions:

That e-string note,  
Vibrates like a glass harmonica,  
Its thin and childish voice  
A silver arrow which pierces me.

A sound so unnatural, so tender,  
So mocking, so sweet, so cruel,  
So cold, so burning, that, on hearing it,  
One feels a fatal pleasure. [ll.113-120]

If we now consider 'For Sidney Bechet,' we can see that it is modelled – either consciously or unconsciously – on Gautier's poem.

Larkin does not indicate that his own poem is sectional, but in fact it breaks down naturally into the same four parts as 'Variations'. In his first section, Larkin, like Gautier, describes listening to a great foreign virtuoso whose playing evokes visions of a semi-mythical carnival city. Unlike Gautier, Larkin does not tell us which piece his virtuoso plays, but in a number of other places the poet mentions his admiration for Bechet's performances of 'Maple Leaf Rag', 'Nobody knows the Way I Feel this Morning' and several other popular melodies.<sup>18</sup> Like 'The Carnival of Venice', these were largely well-worn pieces not composed by the virtuoso himself; but it was his magical ability which transformed them into dazzling and evocative works of art. Indeed, writing to Robert Conquest in 1955, Larkin says: 'I like the remark made about Sidney Bechet by a young white disciple: 'You never hear Sidney say *That's an awful tune*. He's always looking for what it has for him'.<sup>19</sup> As in Gautier's poem, the carnival city is built on water and is in the performer's native country.

It is striking that each poem emphasises, not only the power of the performance, but the evocative vibration of single notes – perhaps because we are more conscious of vibrations in single notes than in sequences. The word 'shakes', for example, in the following passage, probably refers to Bechet's famously wide vibrato:

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes  
Like New Orleans reflected on the water.

Similarly, Gautier writes: 'A frail string vibrates and there / – summoned up by a pizzicato – [...],' and 'That e-string note, / Vibrates like a glass harmonica.' In all three cases, the listener has an enhanced awareness of the note's vibration because a slightly non-standard technique is used to produce it: a more than usually exaggerated vibrato on the clarinet: pizzicato and harmonics on the violin.

This emphasis on vibration has at least three effects. It enhances the sense that we are experiencing an insubstantial and fragile vision; it increases the feeling of life and movement; and it helps evoke the shimmering reflections in the waters on which Venice and New Orleans are built. In Larkin, the reference to reflections is explicit ('shakes, / Like New Orleans reflected on the water') while Gautier's 'The domes on the blue waves' [l.49] is ambiguous: it can either suggest domes which seem to rise from the waters; domes which are reflected in the waters; or, most likely, both.

After discussing the tune and its performer, Gautier offers us two visions of his city going about its frequently erotic pleasures: the people on the waterways, and those taking part in the carnival. Immediately after describing Bechet and his performance, Larkin offers us two eroticised visions of New Orleans. The first is the legendary Quarter of balconies, flower baskets and quadrilles where everyone makes love and goes shares. The second is the vision of mute, glorious Storyvilles where sporting-house girls sit around the imaginer's chair while, in the background, old jazzmen play and talk.

Gautier, casting his mind back to the now virtually inconceivable freedoms of the past ('the city of Canaletto'), was not only imagining an ideal freedom for himself, but also for the repressed citizens of a ravaged Venice. Similarly, Larkin, casting his mind back to a now vanished New Orleans (symbolised by a closed and largely demolished Storyville)<sup>20</sup> was not only imagining an ideal freedom for himself, but for veterans who regarded this vanished culture as, in his own words, 'a kind of Cockaigne'.<sup>21</sup> Both poems convey sympathy – for the politically oppressed and marginalized – as well as longing.

Prompted by the flirtatious contents of the previous two scenes, the fourth and final section of each poem shows the poet thinking about himself and love. In Larkin, the vision is of pure unsullied happiness ('On me your voice falls as they say love should, / Like an enormous yes. [...] Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity'); in Gautier, the vision of love is ambiguous and hovers between pleasure and sadness, possibly because happiness is recalled in more troubled times:

In the distant echoing mists,  
As in a nearly forgotten dream,  
I contemplate, still pale and sad,  
My old love of yesteryear. [ll.105-8]

Some jazz may suggest a realm of pure happiness, but in classical music – i.e. that which is 'long-haired [...] and scored' – grief and pity are never far away.

Thus we have two poems which can both be divided into four sections. The first section describes a great foreign virtuoso transforming a popular melody, where the vibrations of a single note evoke visions of a semi-mythical carnival city, a city in the musician's own country which is built on water. The next two sections present separate images of freedom by imagining the cities' stereotypical but exotic inhabitants indulging their frequently sexual pleasures. Prompted by these thoughts, the final section in each case shows the poet contemplating his own relationship with love.

There are several reasons why Bechet may have brought a French poem about classical music into Larkin's mind. 'Bechet' is a French name; New Orleans was a French foundation and the influence of the language and culture is pervasive; the clarinettist was involved with the *Revue Nègre* in the 1920s; and he ended his career in France. In addition, Bechet's early improvising was influenced by the scales and arpeggios of classical variation technique, and he was one of the first black jazz musicians to be highly praised by an outstanding classical musician – the French-speaking, Swiss conductor, Ernest Ansermet.<sup>22</sup>

Larkin finished 'For Sidney Bechet' in early 1954, and this was towards the end of the period when he was most open to French influences. All the evidence for Larkin's interest in French poetry, mentioned at the beginning of this article, dates from 1943–51. Moreover, from 1952–3, Larkin was having an affair with Patsy Strang, who was fluent in French and wrote French poetry, some of which she sent to Larkin ('It is exceedingly clever: I had to look one or two words up.')<sup>23</sup> In such circumstances, being influenced by a French poem when writing about a Frenchified subject seems utterly natural.

I began with Larkin invoking Bechet's name to help him deny any interest in foreign literature; I end by suggesting that Bechet's name can help us find one of foreign literature's deepest imprints on Larkin's mature poetry.

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.) *Philip Larkin: Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews* (London: Faber, 2000), 54. Quoted in John White, 'For Once One feels the French Were Right': Philip Larkin and Sidney Bechet', *About Larkin*, No.37 (April 2014), 25–6.

<sup>2</sup> 'Femmes damnées' and 'Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis' in Archie Burnett (ed.), *Philip Larkin: The Complete Poems* (London: Faber, 2012), 117, 227.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber, 1993), 202.

<sup>4</sup> See 'Country Beauty': Philip Larkin, Transcribed by James Booth,' *About Larkin*, No.36 (October 2013), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, 202.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940–1985* (London: Faber, 1992), 658.

<sup>7</sup> Dale Salwak (ed.), *Philip Larkin: The Man and his Work* (Iowa: Iowa University Press, 1989), 55.

<sup>8</sup> Thwaite (ed.) *Further Requirements*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Everett, *Poets in Their Time: Essays on English Poetry from Donne to Larkin* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 238.

<sup>10</sup> Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, 235–6.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Larkin, (ed.) James Booth, *Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fictions* (London, Faber, 2002), 115.

<sup>12</sup> See M. W. Rowe, *Philip Larkin: Art and Self* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 49–52.

<sup>13</sup> This connection wasn't obvious when Barbara Everett first pointed out its full significance in 1980. See Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, 232–8.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Whyte, 'Théophile Gautier, "Les Variations sur le Carnaval de Venise" et le jeu des variants,' *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des études françaises*, Vol.55, Issue 55, 2003, 459.

<sup>15</sup> Gautier's poem gives the impression that he had listened to Paganini (1782–1840) performing his own set of variations. In fact, the immediate inspiration for the poem was a performance by Paganini's pupil Camillo Sivori (1815–94) in early 1843. Rather remarkably, and despite the claims of his concert posters, Sivori did not play Paganini's unpublished set of variations, but another unpublished set by Sivori's rival, the Moravian violinist, Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst (181–65). In fact, Sivori's repeated plagiarism of this piece, and his subsequent denials, were the cause of a major public scandal in the English and French press in 1844. For more details see: M. W. Rowe, *Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst: Virtuoso Violinist* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 113–126; and Whyte, 'Théophile Gautier', 461–2.

<sup>16</sup> Translations are my own.

<sup>17</sup> A harmonic on the violin is where the note is pitched not by *pressing* the string onto the fingerboard but by merely *touching* the string at certain fractional points on its length (a half, third, quarter etc.). The result, when the bow is drawn across the string, is a high, silvery, slightly unearthly sound, especially on the e-string – the highest string on the instrument. Paganini and his followers were the first to explore the full potential of violin harmonics, and in Gautier's day their extensive use was still quite novel.

<sup>18</sup> White, 'For Once One Feels [...]' 24.

<sup>19</sup> Thwaite (ed.) *Philip Larkin: Selected Letters*, 243.

<sup>20</sup> White, 'For Once One Feels [...]', 25, and Burnett (ed.), *Complete Poems*, 405.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Larkin, *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961–1971* (London: Faber, 1985), 54. Quoted in White, 'For Once One Feels [...]', 25.

<sup>22</sup> See White, 'For Once One Feels [...]', 23.

<sup>23</sup> Thwaite, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, 216.



---

# *Benjamin Britten and 'Bridge for the Living'*

*James L. Orwin*

---

As far as I am aware, the connection between Philip Larkin and Benjamin Britten has not been noted or explored until now. Although in the final stages of writing his *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, James Booth was unaware of the relevant correspondence until I drew his attention to it in June 2013.

If we look at the genesis of 'Bridge for the Living', we discover that the first hint Philip Larkin received about the plans to commemorate the Humber Bridge was in an addendum to a letter from Sir Brynmor Jones dated 17 September 1973. There was no mention of a 'commission', or 'musical setting'; Sir Brynmor simply writes: 'I should like to discuss with you a proposal which has been put to me. It has nothing to do with the University!'

On 24 October Larkin wrote to Faber and Faber's Charles Monteith, requesting clarification of the position regarding certain aspects of copyright if he were to 'write something about the Humber Bridge (due in 1976) that could be set to music and sung by the Hull Choral Union'. Monteith's reply of 29 October enclosed notes by Faber's copyright expert Peter de Sauty covering the three main points raised by Larkin.

By mid-November, Larkin had received a letter from Sidney Hainsworth inviting him (along with Sir Brynmor Jones) to lunch to discuss the proposal. The meeting took place on 10 December and in a letter dated 13 December, Larkin confirmed to Hainsworth the principal points agreed at the meeting, but added:

I think I safeguarded myself by saying that, in the last analysis, one can never give a firm promise about the production of a poem, but I will certainly try.

At the meeting, Sidney Hainsworth had presented Larkin with a list of 10 composers, and had also suggested that Larkin seek the advice of Robert Marchant, Director of Music at the University of Hull, and a founder member of the Hull Chamber Music Club (later renamed Hull Chamber Music Society), as to the suitability of those included.

The ten composers suggested were: Richard Rodney Bennett, Gordon Cross, Sebastian Forbes, Anthony Hedges, John Joubert, Kenneth Leighton, William Mathias, Nicholas Maw, John Rutter and Douglas Young; however, Larkin specifically asked Robert Marchant if he could suggest any other composers who

could be included for consideration. Marchant thought, 'as an outside chance', it might be worth approaching Benjamin Britten to propose a collaboration.

Larkin wrote to Hainsworth on 21 December to update him with this information, adding that Britten would 'of course be a good deal more expensive than either Joubert or Hedges' (both of whom were under consideration, not least because they were local, and therefore the Humber Bridge would hold some significance for them; but also because they were successful choral composers and, like Britten, were considered to favour 'traditional' idioms). Hainsworth approved of the idea to approach Britten; in a letter dated 27 December, he asked Larkin to write to Britten, which Larkin did on 15 January 1974.

Larkin received a reply, dated 23 January, from Britten's personal assistant Rosamund Strode, informing him of the composer's ill health, and giving this as a reason for his declining the invitation to collaborate on the commission. The way the commission then proceeded is well documented, with Anthony Hedges eventually composing the music to Larkin's words.



*Jean Hartley's daughters, Laurien and Alison, with Alison's daughter, Sarah (centre), at the installation of the plaque at 82 Victoria Avenue on 25 June 2014.*

*Photograph © Graham Chesters.*



---

# Richard Palmer

(25 February 1947 – 8 August 2014)

John White

---



Richard Palmer, who died unexpectedly on 8 August, was in equal measure an ardent admirer of Philip Larkin, and a passionate jazz enthusiast. Readers of this journal will doubtless remember his many contributions as well as his appearances as an accomplished and witty speaker at meetings of the Philip Larkin Society. Educated at Dulwich College, Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and the University of East Anglia (where he received a PhD for his dissertation on Norman Mailer), Richard firmly opted for the profession of 'schoolmaster' but also taught for the Open University, and was the author of the best-selling primers *Brain Train* (1984) and *Write in Style* (1993).

One of his pieces for *About Larkin*, 'Helping the Old Too, As They Ought' (*AL* 21, Summer 2006), recounted the delights and rewards of introducing his students at Bedford School (where he was Director of General Education and Head of English) to Larkin's poetry. He reflected that: 'It quickly became clear that each poem engaged the majority of these pupils directly and deeply, to a degree I had not experienced before.' For an adult readership, Richard wrote *Such Deliberate Disguises: The Art of Philip Larkin* (Continuum 2008) which included a trenchant and provocative reinterpretation of *All What Jazz*, an exegesis of the major poems and a pioneering appreciation of 'Larkin the Librarian'.

Reviewing it in this journal, Terry Kelly concluded that it was 'full of insights' and added 'I think the jazz-loving librarian from Hull would have approved of Richard Palmer's book.' My long friendship and happy collaboration with Richard produced *Reference Back: Philip Larkin's Uncollected Jazz Writings 1940–84* (University of Hull Press 1999), now in its third and revised edition as *Larkin: Jazz Writings* (Continuum 2004).

For many years Richard was an internationally respected critic and essayist for *Jazz Journal*, and also wrote acclaimed short biographies of tenor saxophonists Stan Getz (1988) and Sonny Rollins (1998) and pianist Oscar Peterson (1984). Peterson (who became a family friend) was so impressed by Richard's acumen and scholarship that he chose him as the editor of and consultant for his autobiography, *A Jazz Odyssey: The Life of Oscar Peterson* (Continuum 2002). Richard then compiled and wrote the booklet for a companion CD: 'Oscar Peterson: A Jazz Odyssey' (Verve 2002). When Kenneth Clarke featured Peterson on one of his BBC Radio 4 jazz programmes, Richard was the obvious choice as guest contributor.

At Richard's secular funeral service of 'Words and Music', there were recordings of Larkin reading 'Water' and 'Reference Back', and performances by Stan Getz (the moving 'First Song') and Oscar Peterson's graceful and instantly memorable version of 'You Look Good To Me'. Richard, one feels, would have given them all his critical blessing.



At the 2007 Conference: Lawns Centre, with Belinda Hakes

**'An arrow shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.'**

**The Unveiling of 'The Whitsun Weddings' slate ellipse  
at King's Cross Station, 7 June 2014**



*Eddie Dawes, Martin Jennings, Alan Johnson, Anthony Thwaite, Virginia Bottomley, Tom Courtenay, Graham Chesters*

Carved by Martin Jennings, the slate ellipse displays the final lines of the title poem in Larkin's *The Whitsun Weddings*. The unveiling was carried out by Baroness Virginia Bottomley, High Sheriff of Hull, and was followed by lunch and the Society's AGM in the newly refurbished gastro-pub, The Parcel Yard, located on King's Cross Station.



*Baroness Bottomley*



*Sir Tom Courtenay, with Anthony Thwaite, Phil Pullen,  
Lianne Brooks and John White*





*Anthony Thwaite; behind him, Jerry Swift*



*Jackie Sewell; behind her, Rosemary and David Parry*



*Rt Hon Alan Johnson MP*



*Alan Brownjohn*



*Martin Jennings*



*Jerry Swift of Network Rail with Graham Chesters*



*Carole Collinson*

*Photographs © James Booth*

*Find more at [www.philiplarkin.com](http://www.philiplarkin.com) Events Gallery*



---

# *A childhood annulled?*

## *Larkin through the psychoanalytical looking-glass*

*Philip Pullen*

Adam Piette: *Childhood wiped out, Larkin, his father, and the bombing of Coventry*,  
English, 2013, Vol. 62 no. 238, pp 230–247

---

Philip Larkin's childhood years have always been of particular interest to Larkin scholars, not least because of his own protestations in a poetic form that these years were 'unspent' or that childhood itself was 'a forgotten boredom'. Coupled with this is the depiction of family life in which no one was particularly happy, not least because of the somewhat unfortunate pairing of Larkin's parents, Sydney and Eva, and the complex effect this had on their son. Adam Piette adds a new dimension to the assumptions made about Larkin's response to his childhood years by claiming that the experience of war, literally on the home front, namely through the huge devastation caused by the bombing of Coventry in November 1940, presented Larkin with 'a psychological opportunity to annul his childhood and perform a ritual burying of his father's influence over him'. In an approach that leans heavily on a Freudian-inspired analysis, in which nothing is what it seems on the surface, the crux of Piette's thesis is that:

the Coventry blitz wiped out Larkin's childhood, erasing the traces of his pre-war biography, to be replaced by a deliberately questionable fiction of a life with dead parents, a child self presumed dead, and a home town a mass grave for forbidden desires and an unacknowledged father.

It is Sydney Larkin's acknowledged fascist sentiments which, Piette argues, profoundly troubled Philip and which the devastation of the City for whom Sydney was City Treasurer allowed him symbolically to forget. Piette claims that:

The war that destroyed Coventry had been prefigured in, prepared for by, the battles Larkin remembered between his father and mother before the war. His father is scripted as a propagandist of violence as Hate and Pain.

In the first of what he calls two 'important speculations', Piette draws on Andrew Motion's account of the most direct way in which the young Philip was exposed to Sydney's political enthusiasms – the family trips to Germany in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> He also quotes from the interview Larkin gave to Miriam Gross in the *Observer*,

during which Larkin stated that the two trips to Germany 'sowed the seeds of my hatred of abroad'. In this interview Larkin attributes this attitude to the struggle he had with the German language – 'not being able to talk to anyone or read anything.'<sup>2</sup> Piette sides with Motion in dismissing this as an 'evasive' reply and implies that 'the difficulty might lie elsewhere, displaced and disguised within these evasions: the difficulty of acknowledging his father's politics'. Thus Larkin advances 'on the surface' explanations: that as a schoolboy struggling with a significant stammer he had great difficulty in speaking any language, let alone a foreign one, and that he felt embarrassment at misunderstanding what was said to him, on one occasion inadvertently insulting the driver of the bus he was travelling in.<sup>3</sup> Piette dismisses these in favour of a deeper, unconscious set of motivations, located in the dynamics of the father-son relationship.

Piette's second speculation relates to the analysis of Larkin's literary output during and immediately after the war. It is within his first novel, *Jill*, published in 1946 and in the poems Larkin wrote in the period immediately following the Coventry 'blitz' that Piette claims we can find evidence of the profound effect of this wartime event on Larkin's persona and his psychological relationship with his father.

Piette draws a direct link between the reactions of the fictional figure of John Kemp in *Jill* and Larkin's own reactions to the Coventry bombing, encapsulated in the dramatic visit he made to the city with Noel Hughes two days after the German raid, hitching rides from Oxford in an anxious search for their families. This real-life experience is mirrored in the journey that John Kemp makes from Oxford to the fictional town of Huddlesford. That the factual and fictional experiences are linked is undeniable. When *Jill* was first published, Larkin even wrote to his father to say that, 'The air raid stuff is all Coventry of course.'<sup>4</sup> Larkin also acknowledged the similarity that existed between himself and Kemp and in a letter to Kingsley Amis, written during the drafting of *Jill* in 1943, spoke of the need to amend this:

There is not a single intelligent character in the book: John Kemp is getting rather clever, but that's because he is growing like me, a tendency that I shall sternly repress in the third draft.<sup>5</sup>

It is this biographical distancing in the character of John Kemp that leads Piette to argue that, in the process of writing *Jill*, Larkin was able to allow 'a biographically-free third person voice to emerge,' culminating in 'the destruction of his autobiographical subjectivity'. And of course, in many respects, John Kemp *is* very different from Philip Larkin, insofar as he is depicted as a working class scholarship boy from the North. But, beyond this, Piette also asks us to assume that the psychological experiences reflected upon by the fictional John Kemp are a direct, albeit unconscious and symbolic, representation of Larkin's feelings about his own childhood and family circumstances. Thus, on the train back to Oxford, John Kemp contemplates the destruction he had witnessed:

It meant no more to him now, and so it was destroyed: it seemed symbolic, a kind of annulling of his childhood. The thought excited him. It was if he had been told: all the past is cancelled: all the suffering connected with the town, all your childhood, is wiped out. Now there is a fresh start for you: you are no longer governed by what has gone before.<sup>6</sup>

This passage represents the crux of Piette's argument. Larkin is here, we are told, 'confessing' to a psychological need to fictionalise his relationship to Coventry after the blitz.

What needs to be acknowledged here is that Larkin is *displaying* the process of ... self-censoring construction and self-fashioning as [a] psychoanalytic symptom.

As a result, for Piette, Sydney Larkin becomes 'a textual and cultural absent presence'. In Freudian terms, Larkin is experiencing an 'Oedipal desire to censor the paternal imago'. Piette concludes that:

At the heart of his 1940s work, then, is a deliberate act of self-censorship, a performed cleansing of the record to erase traces of his father's influence.

At this stage, we might want to ask whether this applies to *all* of his father's influences, or just the uncomfortable political ones? It is, after all, a rather a bald statement to make. Moreover, Piette seems to want to extend this annulling process to Larkin's entire family by suggesting that his journey 'across the waste land of Coventry in 1940' symbolised 'a self satisfying erasure of his family traces'. What does this imply about Larkin's relationship with his mother, for instance, both before and after the war and her influence over him? Piette says nothing about this, which is perhaps surprising given Larkin's

own admission to his friend James Sutton that he contained elements of both his parents, causing a state of inertia, 'for in me they are incessantly opposed'. 'Pray the Lord,' Larkin told his friend, 'that my mother is superior in me.'<sup>7</sup> The thousands of letters Larkin and his mother shared between each other, broken only during the period when they lived together in Leicester, is testimony to her constant influence over his life.

Turning to Larkin's poetic output, Piette draws on several of the poems Larkin wrote during and immediately after the war to indicate ways in which their symbolism is directly evocative of the devastation caused by bombing and displays an underlying theme of 'erasure' and destroyed identity. Examples quoted include:

We are born each morning, shelled upon.  
(*'Many famous feet have trod'*)

The houses are deserted, felt over smashed windows,  
No milk on the step, a note pinned to the door  
Telling of departure.  
(*'New Year Poem'*)

By now this blackened city in the snow  
Argues a will that cannot be my own,  
And one not wished for.  
(*'Time and space were only their disguises'*)

That the experience of war profoundly affected the symbolic content of language is undeniable. Indeed, the derivation of the word 'blitz' itself, from the German word 'Blitzkrieg' or 'lightning war', is a well-known example. After the devastating Coventry raid, the Germans coined the word "Coventriert" which became anglicised into 'Coventrated', a term synonymous with 'total destruction'. It is fascinating, therefore, to see how many of Larkin's early poems are steeped in the symbolic imagery of war and destruction and the psychological impact these processes had on identity. Not all the quotations cited by Piette, however, necessarily carry this imagery. In quoting from the 1946 poem, 'Many famous feet have trod', Piette distorts the meaning by quoting out of context. When correct punctuation is restored, the quotation does not conjure up an image of wartime bombing:

We are born each morning, shelled upon  
A sheet of light that paves  
The palaces of sight, and brings again  
The river shining through the field of graves.

We are coming fresh from our shells, not being bombed by one.

Piette, it would seem, is on even shakier ground in attributing the content of these poems so closely to Larkin as narrator and in suggesting that they, in some way, resonate with angst concerning his father. In his discussion of 'Conscript', for example, a poem Larkin

## About Larkin

dedicated to James Sutton, who served in the army during the war, Piette defines this as being, 'a difficult poem about war guilt, about his father's name, about being on the wrong side in the war, 'even going as far as to suggest that in the final two lines, 'Which would not give him time to follow further/The details of his own defeat and murder', that the phrase 'follow further' should perhaps be read as 'follow Father.'

In a similar way, Piette gives an extraordinary reading of the one poem which clearly does have biographical and paternal roots, 'An April Sunday Brings The Snow', which Larkin drafted and completed shortly after his father's death from cancer in 1948. Piette claims that this elegiac poem 'finds domestic comfort in the fact that now his father's historical memory has been unnaturally blanked out and covered, as the plum trees have by the unseasonal April snowfall'. Ever the Freudian, Piette tells us that, 'the lyric voice is free to transcend the patriarchal family and its political and Oedipal conditions.' He concludes:

The Coventry bombing is being displayed as introjected, as an internal force both dispersing blackened pre-war beliefs and generating a childhoodless subjectivity, free of patriarchal history rendered sweet and meaningless by the war and its deaths.

Strange fruit indeed! It is simply not the case that Larkin's pre-war biography was removed without trace, or that he ceased to recollect it. Whatever unconscious processes may have been taking place within Larkin's psyche, there is no evidence to suggest that the experience of the destruction of Coventry removed or changed Larkin's conscious memory of the place, his childhood within it or indeed his relationship with either parent. We only have to look at the letters Larkin wrote to his family for confirmation of this.

Piette himself acknowledges that Larkin's reactions to his father were 'extremely mixed' and that, in contrast to 'the bile against his parents in letters to friends', his letters home from Oxford were 'affectionate'. Not only are they affectionate, but many of them are admiring, too. So much of the content of the Oxford letters is addressed specifically to Sydney and gives the impression that Larkin held both his parents in high regard. Two days before the Coventry raid, on 12 November 1940, Philip writes to compliment his father on the 'powerful style' in his letters. He imagines him writing 'in an old farmhouse on a windy and stone-littered moor... watching the racing clouds through the tall windows.'<sup>8</sup> Was this admiration all to change as Coventry burned? The tone of the subsequent letters does not suggest so. In February 1941, he reports that he has read part of his father's recent letter out loud to his Oxford friend, Norman Iles, prompting Iles to comment 'that it sounded like the first intelligent parent he had

ever come across'.<sup>9</sup> In April 1941 he writes to express his appreciation of the humour in his father's letter: 'it made me burst out laughing while I was tying my tie'.<sup>10</sup> In March of the same year, he congratulates him warmly on his being awarded an OBE.<sup>11</sup>

Letters to his parents also show Larkin fondly recalling aspects of his pre-war family life, including memories of his father. In 1946, for example, he tells them that watching football matches being played in a park in Leicester reminded him of 'misty winter Saturdays with Pop watching games in the Memorial Park'.<sup>12</sup> Much later, in 1972, he is in the process of getting Sydney's watch mended and comments to his mother:

I can almost remember him buying it: it was certainly before the war, & down Smithfield Street in Coventry (if I remember aright). He bought me one at the same time, wch was much appreciated as I could then tell how long each school lesson had still to go, & so feel less bored.<sup>13</sup>

In a 1974 letter he recalls the pre-war streets of Coventry:

I think so often about our days in Coventry, how the traffic used to go up and down St Patrick's Road, and I shd come in in the evening to find you 'picking fruit', with a cupful of water to put the maggots in – poor maggots! Do you remember how Daddy never liked hot pie, so his piece was always cut out and left to cool?<sup>14</sup>

The very way in which Larkin refers to his father throughout this correspondence with his mother, either as 'Daddy' or 'Pop', does not suggest that here is a man Larkin wished to dismiss or, along with his childhood, annul the memory of. Dutifully, after his father died, he would make an annual journey over to Lichfield with his mother to visit his father's grave. Frequently, when reflecting on some of his achievements, a famous person met, or the library extension successfully completed, both mother and son find themselves asking, 'What would Daddy think?' or reflecting on 'how pleased Daddy would have been.'

That Larkin would have been troubled by 'the blackened reputation' of his father, at least in the immediate post-war years, is also not convincingly borne out by the facts. Sydney Larkin retired from public office in 1946, after having received many accolades for his work as a public servant. From the period at which he left Oxford, Philip took his father's professional advice when applying for posts, and when writing council reports while in his first job as a municipal librarian in Wellington. It was Sydney, too, who procured the references for Larkin's successful application to University College, Leicester, and used his influence to obtain early reviews of Larkin's first publications in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*. James Booth's recent



biography of Larkin emphasises some of the other important ways in which Philip remained 'his father's son'. He reminds us, for example, that Larkin learnt his religious scepticism from his father who 'imparted to his son his own adventurous appetite for literature'.<sup>15</sup>

But Piette is encouraging us to look beyond the surface evidence and for more unconscious and symbolic motives, as any analysis based on psychoanalysis is bound to do. There is at least some evidence to suggest that Larkin, or at least the young Larkin of the 1940s, might well have agreed with elements of Piette's analysis. While at Oxford, Larkin took great interest in the work of the Jungian psychologist, John Layard. Writing to James Sutton, in January 1943, he comments:

Insofar as psychology is a religion I accept and believe it. Insofar as it is a science I reject it utterly. Science of anything is merely dead rags on a living figure.<sup>16</sup>

But would Larkin really be prepared to take quite such a leap of faith? Piette's analysis certainly reveals how much of Larkin's literary output was influenced by war-time imagery and his experiences of the war on his own doorstep. But that this experience in itself led to a symbolic wiping out of childhood and a detachment from parental influences is difficult to accept. His parents, it seems, continued to influence Larkin throughout his life.

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber 1993), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with the *Observer*', Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955–1982*: (London: Faber 1983), 47.

<sup>3</sup> A recollection from Kingsley Amis, cited in Motion (1993, 26) that, during his first visit, in 1936, Larkin misread the question, 'Do you like Germany?' for 'Have you been to Germany before?' and answered 'No,' which led to the driver not talking to him for the rest of the day.

<sup>4</sup> Postcard from Philip Larkin at Oxford to Sydney Larkin in Warwick, 29 October 1946, U DLN/6/46/66, The History Centre, Hull.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Thwaite, editor, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940–1985*, (Faber: London, 1992), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Larkin, *Jill* (London: Faber 1996), 202.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Philip Larkin to James Sutton, 12th April 1943, U DP/174/2, The History Centre, Hull.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Philip Larkin at Oxford to Sydney Larkin in Coventry, 12 November 1940, U DLN/6/40/12, The History Centre, Hull.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Philip Larkin at Oxford to Sydney Larkin in Coventry, 22 February 1941, U DLN/6/41/10, The History Centre, Hull.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Philip Larkin at Oxford to Sydney Larkin in Coventry, 28 April 1941, U DLN/6/41/23, The History Centre, Hull.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Philip Larkin at Oxford to Sydney Larkin in Coventry, 8 March 1941, U DLN/6/41/14, The History Centre, Hull.

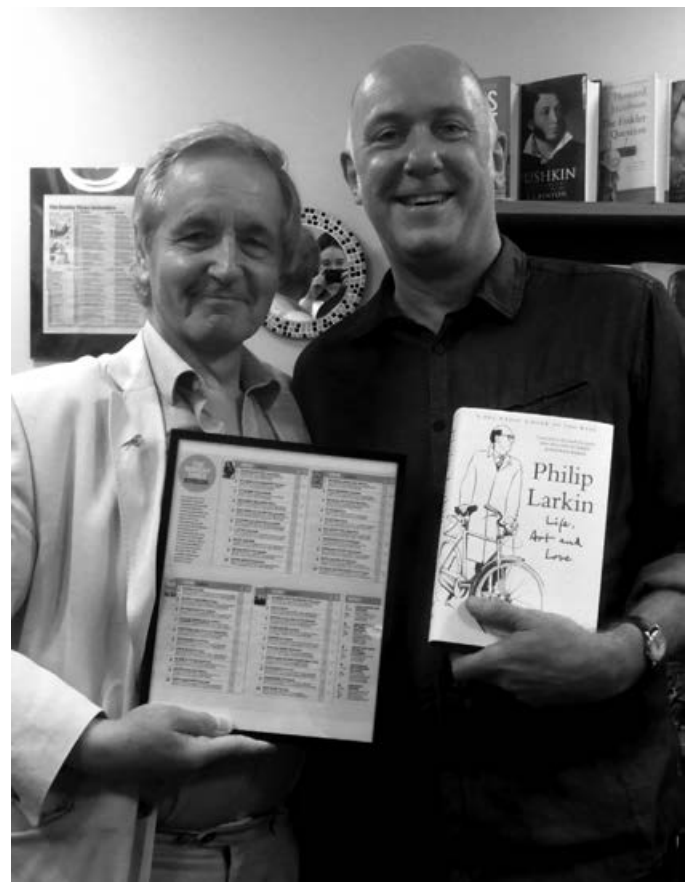
<sup>12</sup> Letter from Philip Larkin in Leicester to Sydney and Eva Larkin in Loughborough, 20 October 1946, U DLN/6/46/64, The History Centre, Hull.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Philip Larkin in Hull to Eva Larkin in Syston, 14 September 1972, U DLN/6/72/52, The History Centre, Hull.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Philip Larkin in Hull to Eva Larkin in Syston, 25 July 1974, U DLN/6/74/136, The History Centre, Hull.

<sup>15</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, (London: Bloomsbury 2014), 25.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Philip Larkin to James Sutton, 2 January 1943, U DP/174/2, The History Centre, Hull.



James Booth with Michael Fishwick of Bloomsbury Publishing, in Bloomsbury's offices, Bedford Square, on 15 September 2014. James is holding the Sunday Times Bestseller List which placed his biography at no. 5 in the General Hardback category.

Photograph © James Booth

#### Correction

The editors apologise for the mistake in *About Larkin* 37 in which James Booth misspelled the title of Barbara Pym's novel *Crampton Hodnet* throughout his article.

---

---

# Only Connect

## James Underwood

Rory Waterman, *Belonging and Estrangement in the Poetry of Philip Larkin, R. S. Thomas and Charles Causley* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 220pp. £60. ISBN 978-1-4094-7087-8.

---

---

Rory Waterman intriguingly combines discussions of Philip Larkin, R. S. Thomas, and Charles Causley, three poets who 'epitomize many of the emotional and societal shifts and mores of their age', in the hope of making possible 'new and persuasive readings'. Focused conceptually on belonging and estrangement, the book's six chapters explore literary traditions and audience; geographical and cultural origins; relationships, particularly marriage; war; society and isolation; and faith and mortality.

Although such an underpinning does, at times, lead to somewhat pedestrian analysis, generally it allows for insightful readings of their work. Waterman is at pains to show how belonging and estrangement are not oppositional and static experiences but have shades and crossovers, as in the case of the 'man kicked out of his home' and the man 'who has chosen to leave his wife' – both are estranged, but in very different ways. When such thinking is brought to bear on the three poets, it reveals the tensions and ambiguities in their work. This is particularly true of Waterman's succinct and fascinating readings of Thomas's 'Iago Prytherch' works, a loose grouping of poems from across his career. The 'half-witted' Prytherch, a fictionalised peasant, representative of the impoverished rural Welsh, is often subjected to sneers of condescension – such emotional intensity reflecting back on Thomas, who felt deeply estranged from the communities he was supposed to know and serve as priest. But in 'The Peasant', an early poem, the experience of war shows him to have more in common with Prytherch: both remain at home, rather than engaging in combat, Prytherch preserving 'his stock' against 'siege of rain and the wind's attrition' – the poem's military language reflecting its composition during the Second World War. Prytherch is described as 'your prototype' – thereby bringing peasant, poet, and reader into a triangle of community and belonging.

The juxtaposition of these poets can be enlightening, particularly on questions of linguistic and geographical belonging: Causley felt no estrangement from his native Cornwall, despite not speaking Cornish, whereas Thomas felt dismayed by his inability to speak Welsh, viewing Causley's Cornwall as a warning to Wales regarding the dilution and Anglicisation of an historic vernacular culture. Perhaps more exploration of the connections *between* these poets would have been

fascinating. We learn from the beginning that Thomas was dismissive of almost all his contemporaries, while Larkin, a fan of Causley, once privately called the Welshman 'Arse Thomas [...] the bible-punching old bastard'. Yet Waterman informs us, at the end of his study, that Thomas admired Larkin's poem 'Faith Healing', while Causley treasured 'The Explosion'. This leaves one to wonder what kind of cross-pollination occurred between the three, though perhaps this would require a different kind of study.

Waterman, himself a poet, is especially strong on poetic forms and techniques. His interrogation of Causley's ballads finds allusions and formal subversions which undermine the common perception that his work is simple. However, Waterman perhaps misses two opportunities. The first is the general issue of who reads poetry. Waterman acknowledges this question, but his study of belonging and estrangement does pose the question of precisely who these poets' work belonged to, or was estranged from. The other question is more specific. Waterman asserts that 'with very rare exceptions his [Causley's] work eschews intertextuality, and shows little or no evidence of outside influence at all in anything but the broadest terms'. Such comments seem strange, given the clear influence of the Blake of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, or the Wordsworth and Coleridge of *Lyrical Ballads*. Despite his own claims, Waterman places Causley's war poems within a broader context of Second World War poetry, yet he misses some fairly obvious connections to Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' in his discussion of theism in Causley's 'At St Hilary'. Given the critical neglect of Causley's work, further excavations might help to stimulate more attention; however, Waterman's inclusion of Causley in this study makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of this particular poet. This is in part due to some extensive archival research in the Causley collections at the Universities of Exeter, and Buffalo, New York – scholarship which has truly benefited the study.

It is pleasing, also, to see Waterman's extensive research done in the Larkin archives held by the University of Hull. However, his discussions of Larkin are problematic, particularly when it comes to the poet's relationship with place. Waterman insists on asserting Larkin's English rootedness and patriotism, despite all of

the evidence to the contrary (though, in his defence, he joins a long line of critics before him who would agree). As evidence of Larkin's fundamental Englishness, Waterman cites several times the line from 'The Importance of Elsewhere', 'These are my customs and establishments', but fails to consider the subsequent lines, 'It would be much more serious to refuse. / Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence.' A key poem about estrangement from England, then, is cited as evidence of 'an innate sense of belonging' to England. This misreading comes just after an inaccurate discussion of Larkin's posthumously published poem, 'March Past'. In his introduction, Waterman rightly claims that his is one of the first books on Larkin to appear since the publication of Archie Burnett's *Complete Poems*. However, Waterman ignores Burnett's re-naming of the poem, from 'The March Past' to 'March Past'. Although Waterman catches the pun in the former title, and disagrees with Tom Paulin's analysis of the poem as evoking British superiority, his claim that the poem is about 'a Protestant Orange parade' cannot be justified by any evidence from the text itself. Indeed, he acknowledges that the anti-militaristic final stanza, undermines his claim elsewhere about Larkin's desire 'to reinforce the military deterrent' (Waterman's italics). Mistakes like these lead Waterman to assert that anything which encroaches on or threatens Larkin's 'trenchant' Englishness 'is to be shunned and even vilified'. Whether intended or not, here Waterman reinforces the views of critics like Lisa Jardine, who find (at best) xenophobic and (at worst) racist attitudes present in Larkin's work. This ignores the multitude of contradictory evidence – what about the 'Polish airgirl' of 'Poem XII' in *The North Ship*, whose foreign voice waters 'a stony place'? Or Katherine in *A Girl in Winter*?

Problems occur also in the chapter on society and solitude. Larkin is said to have a 'sweeping distaste' for the working-class – 'his is clearly a very middle-class sensibility'. Yet Waterman himself describes 'Vers de Société' as 'anti-middle-class rhetoric', and one thinks of lines from other poems like 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad', or 'Wanking at ten past three / [...] Someone else feeling her breasts and cunt' – not exactly the patter of respectable middle-class suburbanites. This preoccupation results in yet another class-conscious reading of 'The Whitsun Weddings' (a journey that 'really happened' – we know from Burnett it didn't), ignoring the extensive revisionist work done on this poem by John Osborne and Gillian Steinberg. Indeed, part of the problem seems to be the persistence of biographical thinking, and the conflation of poet and narrator, which both Osborne and Steinberg have so persuasively critiqued. And yet an anecdote, which Waterman recounts, seems instructive. A decade after the end of the Second World War, Causley (a veteran of that conflict) visited the British Cemetery in Bayeux.

Waterman's research has unearthed a leaflet for a nearby tourist attraction, on the back of which Causley scribbled an early version of his poem, 'At the British War Cemetery, Bayeux'. Initially the poem was to have a narrow focus, on the grave of one unknown British sailor seen in the cemetery. But by making the poem less specific, 'Causley shifts the emphasis to a sense of belonging, of unity, among the war dead of all ranks and occupations'. The specific biographical occasion is only the chrysalis from which a more beautiful entity eventually emerges. Waterman understands that to read the event and the poem in parallel is to miss the point of the poem. In his reading of Larkin's 'An Arundel Tomb', Waterman comments that the effigy is not a truthful representation, but rather 'a symbiosis of art and artifice'. This is a good point, but the same could be said of any work of art, Larkin's poems included. Despite the stated aim of providing 'new and persuasive readings', it will be difficult to say anything substantially new about Larkin from now on without engaging with the work of anti-biographical scholars like Osborne (whose 2008 monograph is fleetingly dismissed as 'protestations') and Steinberg (whose book is cited only in the bibliography), and without properly incorporating the revisions to Larkin's corpus made by Burnett's edition of the *Complete Poems*.

Not all of Waterman's readings of Larkin are problematic, however. His discussions of 'An Arundel Tomb' and 'Aubade' are excellent, and truly benefit from his archival research. Reading the former, Waterman corrects Andrew Motion's description of Larkin's qualifying comment in his workbook that 'Love isn't stronger than death just because two statues hold hands for six hundred years'. This statement is not jotted at the end of a full draft (as Motion says), but rather *before* Larkin writes the final stanza. This is noteworthy, because it changes the relationship between poem and comment: rather than the comment being Larkin's belated critique of the entire poem's potential triteness, it shows the poet deliberately setting up the final stanza as a bleak qualification of its previous stanzas. If we then, as Waterman suggests, read the word 'love' as a pun on 'nil', then there 'is a case to be made' that this famous love poem 'is actually considerably less consoling than "Aubade"'. Revisionist thinking like this is most welcome and leaves one wishing there were more.

So, although this book would benefit from an engagement with the drastic changes within Larkin scholarship which have been taking place since 2008, it does partly achieve its aim of presenting new readings of these three poets through the juxtaposition of their work. The work on Larkin is less fresh and more problematic, but there is much to celebrate here, not least some incisive readings of Thomas and Causley, some superb archival research, more critical attention for Causley, and the odd flash of astuteness when it comes to Larkin.



# Launch of *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love* by James Booth Brynmor Jones Library: University of Hull, 28 August 2014



*Michael Fishwick of Bloomsbury Publishing*  
Photograph © Linda Hart



*Photograph © Linda Hart*



*Photograph © Jim Orwin*



*Betty Mackereth signs James's copy*



*The View. Photographs © Eleanor Foreman Booth*

***More photos at [www.philiplarkin.com](http://www.philiplarkin.com)***

---

# More sinned against than sinning?

Suzette Hill

James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love* (Bloomsbury, 2014), 532pp. ISBN 978-1-4088-5166-1

---

If the purpose of a literary biography is to instil in its reader a deeper insight into the subject's character, an acuter grasp of his artistry and a fuller appreciation of the context and value of his work, then James Booth not only succeeds but triumphs. As one who has enjoyed Larkin's poetry for many years, I have been inspired by reading this study to re-visit and delve more fully into that distinctive verse. And while Booth's observations have undoubtedly enhanced my literary pleasure, they have also left me regretful... not on account of any negative revelations (of which there are a fair handful) but because I now so wish I had met the subject!

Such regret is by no means universal, as several notable commentators have indicated. Quite often in Larkin articles there is more than a whiff of denigration, not so much of the poetry but of the man. It has been fashionable in some quarters to deride the 'Hermit of Hull' as being the stereotypical misogynist: crusty, musty and insular; repressed by his upbringing, callous in relationships, chary of life generally and bolstered only by gin, porn and the rigours of the Dewey system. The view is as convenient as it is crude, for it reassures the detractors of their own moral and psychological balance. And I recall, some years ago, a few of my students (by no means all) expressing worried concern about Larkin's perceived insensitivity towards women, children and the elderly, and his alleged patronage of the less privileged as apparently shown by the 'cut-price crowd' of 'Here' or his description of the estate-bound mothers of 'Afternoons' with their laundry and carefully displayed wedding albums. Oh yes, they nodded firmly, Larkin was clearly snobbish, snide and not nice to know. Ah well, *chacun à son gout*... And having read Booth's book I am confident that, in addition to the verse, my 'gout' would have been for Larkin the man. The two, of course, are not mutually exclusive; but whereas with some artists the creation is more appealing than its creator (or indeed vice versa) in Larkin's case – through Booth's analysis – the persona emerges as compelling as the poetry.

In fact, far from being the costive misanthropist of popular perception, with a life skewed to the sleazily sterile and selfish (as one reviewer has recently implied), it is clear from the poetry itself, and reinforced by the multiple details of this vivid biography, that Larkin's most striking feature was not just his humanness (that complex mélange of charm and gloom, cynicism and

sentiment, rancour and romance, coarseness and decorum, Eeyore moodiness and Pooh Bear friendliness) but his essential *humanity*. And while the opposing personality traits may intrigue, tantalise, enrage or engage, it is this humanity which confirms Larkin's value both as man and artist. Examples of this are legion and everyone has their favourite piece or poem. But for this reader the searing perceptions of 'Afternoons' ('Something is pushing them/To the sides of their own lives.'), 'Toads Revisited' ('Turning over their failures/By some bed of lobelias'), 'Faith Healing', 'At Grass', 'Love Songs in Age', 'The Whitsun Weddings' ('While girls gripping their handbags, tighter, tighter, stared/As at a religious wounding.'), 'The Old Fools' and the superb 'For Sidney Bechet' et al., et al., all testify to Larkin's acute empathy with human needs and frailty.

And, in this respect, what Booth brings out so palpably is not just the poet's instinctive eye for the minutiae of physical context but also his unerring observation of personal vulnerability and subtleties of emotion. In 'Faith Healing' for example, Larkin is meticulous in detailing the impresario's sartorial choice and authoritative manner. '*Now, dear child, what's wrong?*' is the benign but perfunctory question. The overall effect is one of managed order and brisk, slick control. In contrast to such polished formality is the slack, ungainly disorderliness of his female clients (or victims) whose 'thick tongues blort' and who shake 'moustached in flowered frocks'. As Booth observes, the description is one of brutal realism – something which surely makes the famous concluding lines all the more harrowing. Booth sees this final section as showing the poet's 'almost embarrassing empathy' with the women. But I am not so sure about embarrassing – even with the qualification. Here and elsewhere, as the biography graphically demonstrates, it is clear that Larkin perceived not so much 'the skull beneath the skin' as the need within the skull – and saw it with startling compassion.

Such compassion is sharply expressed in a much later and for some infamous mini-elegy, 'The Hedgehog' – or, as Booth reminds us, subsequently re-named 'The Mower'. (Shades of Marvell perhaps? 'For death, thou art a mower too.') The poem starts as a sombre lament for the dead creature which Larkin had unwittingly mangled with his mowing machine, and the spare, bare, unrhymed words define both the pathos and the poet's guilt – 'Now



## About Larkin

I had mauled its unobtrusive world/Unmendably.' While admiring the technical dexterity, some have condemned the sentiment as mawkish; and, as Booth ventures, one could argue that there is just the faintest whiff of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. But the poem's scope extends far beyond the hedgehog and its unfortunate end or, indeed, the slayer's grief. (Incidentally, who has not run over some denizen of the night and felt the tears well up!) In a way, the incident is a Jamesian *donné*, something that occasions a much larger perception, in this case:

The first day after a death, the new absence  
Is always the same; we should be careful

Of each other, we should be kind  
While there is still time.

The transition from 'it' to 'us' comes as a shock, and in their stark simplicity these lines confer a moral dimension of deep and salutary effect. Their mood is too restrained to sound didactic (unlike the declamatory ring of Auden's 'we must love one another or die'), and their aspiration too modest to be dismissed. As such they are hauntingly potent.

But was Larkin 'careful' of his relationships? Or indeed kind to his lovers? The sceptic might say oh yes, careful to preserve himself from the encroachment of others! But that would be a limited view, for this dense and persistently probing biography shows otherwise. Larkin *did* care for others, and in his own muddled way (like most of us) tried hard to be kind where he could. There is extensive and revealing treatment of Larkin's relations with his mother – who at times quite clearly drove him mad. And *yet* he kept faith until the end, seeing her frequently and writing two or three times a week! And these were not perfunctory little notes but attentive, jocular letters and postcards, often accompanied by marginal sketches and cartoons. She was not an easy person, and as she got older became increasingly frail and more difficult. But it wasn't simply filial duty that kept him so attached, for despite his inward chagrin he seems to have been unfailingly patient, chatty and forbearing. We are back surely to that innate imaginative empathy so frequently encountered in the poetry. Before reading Booth's book, I had not realised that 'Love Songs in Age' and 'Reference Back' were based on an actual person, i.e. Eva the mother. And while I am not sure that this knowledge has necessarily enhanced my response to those moving poems, it has certainly enlarged and coloured my picture of their author.

Light is also thrown on those byzantine *amours* which the study probes and delicately unravels. Larkin's failure to commit to any of his ladies, and in particular to the leading ones, Maeve and Monica, has engendered not only puzzlement but hostility. *Why didn't he marry? Why didn't he settle down?* echo the tart voices. The answer is obvious: 'the pram in the hall', as Connolly's *Enemies of Promise* so memorably put it. The constraining hand of

marital domesticity, with its threat to artistic and personal freedom, was not for Larkin. In the chapter headed 'Crisis and Escape' Booth writes, 'He was more certain than ever that what he, Philip Larkin, wanted was not marriage,' and goes on to quote Larkin himself: 'Women don't just sit still and back you up. They want children: they like scenes: they want a chance of parading all the emotional haberdashery they are stocked with. Above all they like feeling they "own" you – or that you "own" them – a thing I hate.' Cyril Connolly would have understood this! However, it is quite clear that neither Maeve nor Monica did; and yet they were dogged in their loyalty: Maeve, presumably, out of a naïve belief that patience would eventually prevail, and Monica because of their intellectual bond and his own ambivalent indulgence of her hard-edged personality. Booth quotes amusing extracts from a letter to Monica where Larkin finally nerves himself to deliver a few home truths (p171). Most people, having that particular bucket thrown at them, would have crawled off and called it a day. But not Monica: she was made of sterner stuff – or was it perhaps of more desperate?

But, as with Eva, Larkin was bound to both women by affection and genuine concern – a kindness which he cannot throw off. This is effectively shown on p304 where, after two telling comments from Larkin, Booth adds, 'Kindness did indeed require him to continue both relationships. And kindness required also that he take all the blame on himself.' In fact, in many ways, the instinct for kindness, and its accompanying web of responsibility, parallels the plight of the protagonist in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*. If one ignores the latter's religious angst (and, as Booth shrewdly argues, Larkin was no closet Christian), it is obvious that the fictional Scobie had much in common with the real-life Larkin. Both men are torn and harried not so much by the emotional pressures from the women themselves, the plaintive Louise and the vulnerable Monica, but by their own innate compassion and sense of guilt. Major Scobie, caught between wife and mistress, is the more tortured, but Larkin too is clearly troubled by the rival claims of the 'wholesome' Maeve and the rebarbative but needy Monica. (Question: Is Larkin known to have read *The Heart of the Matter*? If so, the book must have surely struck chords.)

However, quite plainly such kindness did not necessarily extend to those who were not his intimates, and some of the funniest patches in the book are illustrations of his scathing, often scurrilous, attacks on colleagues and fellow literati. He much admired Dylan Thomas – but, I fear, I can now never encounter mention of his namesake, that late dour cleric of Mid-Wales, without spluttering with mirth. Sorry, RS, but you must admit that 'Arsewipe Thomas' does have a satisfying ring! As does his description of the 'pop-eyed' library deputy, the luckless Wood: 'little jumped-up sawn-off



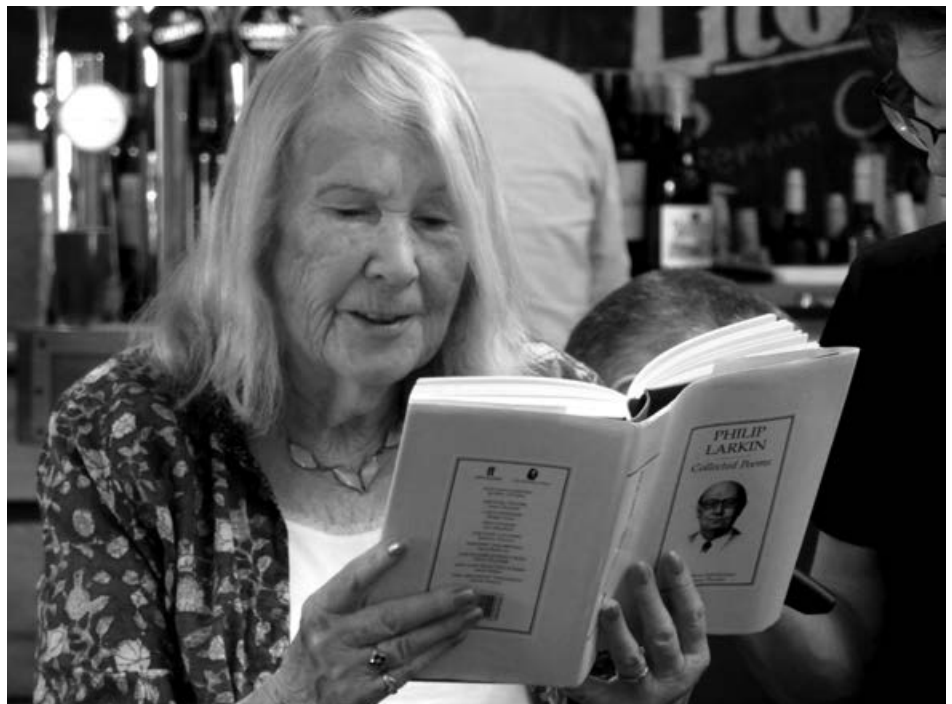
sod! The book supplies many such examples, which keep one giggling happily. Some are pungently raw, disgraceful even, but Larkin's flair for caustic mockery so frequently included himself ('bald, deaf bicycle-clipped Larkin, the Laforgue of Pearson Park') that it all seems pretty fair game. What was not fair, and indeed downright vicious, was his and Monica's gleeful defacing of Iris Murdoch's *The Flight from the Enchanter*. Such larks, Pip? I think not. It is a sordid, puerile little incident, though with luck its exposure may prompt readers to return to Murdoch's early novels, arguably better than the later ones. It says much for the biographer's integrity that he chose to include the reference. Being cowardly this writer would have ducked it!

To carry weight, a critical biography must be comprehensive, rigorously researched and well-documented. All these criteria apply to the current publication. However, there is something else that is necessary: the capacity to entertain and stimulate. Without these features a work may well inform but it will not enliven. This does both. There is a wide sweep of topics: the significant Hardy influence (signalled throughout); frustrations as novelist manqué and the off-beat yen for schoolgirl literature; fair and enlightening comments on his father Sydney; the ambiguities of the poet's racial and political attitudes; a lively exploration of his jazz interests and a well detailed section on his choice and criteria for *The Oxford Verse* anthology. But it is the close reading of the mechanics of the verse (notably the aural element), the humour, and the author's deft handling of language that make this such a satisfying read. The infamous

'This Be the Verse' (p365), for example, is perceptively scrutinised, but it is Booth's comment on the line, 'And add some extra just for you' which truly delights: '. . . and the malicious relish of that final insinuating phrase [...] has the verbal taste of vermouth in a martini.' This is good stuff, but equally sharp is an observation he makes about Maeve's inscription on a Christmas card from Larkin: 'There is something moving about the way the flowing strokes of Larkin's fountain pen are hemmed about on all sides by the neat ball-point of Maeve's piety.' *Multum in parvo*? Oh yes! The juxtaposed dichotomy of *flowing* and *neat* and *fountain-pen* and *ball-point* is masterly, defining as it does the essential difference between their characters. *Hemmed about*, too, is subtly loaded as it neatly hints at the growing shadow of constraint. (Yes, Larkin was quite right not to marry her: the effect on his poetry, and doubtless his life, would have been disastrous.)

It is impossible to capture the 'essence' of another human being but, through Booth's scrupulous and vivacious analysis, there emerges a portrait at once disarming and memorable. Melancholy, mordant and complex, Larkin was undoubtedly difficult. But, as so many found, he possessed a talent not only to amuse and to write brilliant poetry, but in his own oblique way, to love. The warts are there all right, but these are as nothing compared to the value of the generous spaces. Not since Roy Foster's magisterial two-volume tribute to W.B. Yeats have I read such an illuminating and absorbing biography, and one where critical analysis blends so smoothly with scholarly research.

*Win Dawson reading at the  
Parcel Yard, King's Cross  
Station, on 7 June 2014.  
See pp.22–23*



---

# Monica: 'Dearest Bun'

Don Lee

Dennis Telford: *Monica: 'Dearest Bun'* (Haydon Bridge Parish Council, 2014) ISBN 978-0-9576531-5-3

---

This is a delightful, 76-page colourful guide to Monica Jones' little Northumbrian cottage and the riverside village that, on occasions, she shared with Philip Larkin from 1962 until 1984. Aimed at the literary tourist, it serves as a model for other places associated in some way with Larkin. Accurate and useful maps emphasise the book's practical value to visitors to Haydon Bridge that is becoming increasingly known as Larkin's 'secret love nest' where he and Monica could indulge in their 'private games', well away from the pressures and prying eyes of Leicester and Hull.

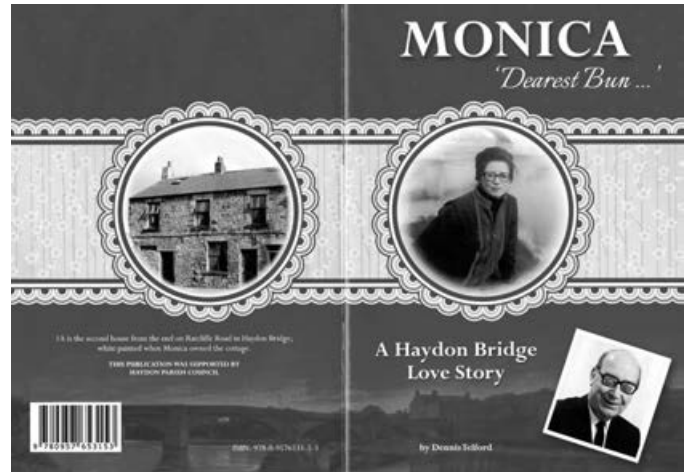
The author, who has lived in the area all his life, takes a keen interest in local history and is a past editor of the *Haydon Bridge News*. He has compiled a number of local titles already and, for good measure, is a recording singer-songwriter in the folk idiom. One of his recent songs, 'Afterwards; Another he loved just as well', an enigmatic and affecting ballad about Larkin and Monica, is likely to feature on his next album, and the words are included in the guide.

Naturally, much of *Monica: 'Dearest Bun'* has been culled from Andrew Motion's *Life* and his *Granta* piece 'Breaking In', a passage from which is usefully reproduced as an appendix, together with relevant extracts from Larkin's *Selected Letters* and *Letters to Monica*. But there is freshly researched material that will be new to Larkin specialists, too. For instance, the railway allotments in 'Show Saturday' are identified as being near Haydon Bridge station, there are details of a stormy exchange between Larkin and Basil Bunting in the *General Havelock Inn*, nicknamed 'Pussy's Pub' by Larkin and the funny story of a black-caped Monica misidentified as Batman by a village youngster! Diligent digging by reporter Telford has identified the riverside path Philip took to the local newsagent – and it is details of this nature that I, for one, find most valuable.

I cannot recommend this guide highly enough, so I suggest fast action to secure your copy of the limited-print first edition.

*Copies from Dennis Telford, The Buildings, West Rattenraw, Haydon Bridge, Northumberland NE47 6ED. £6.50 (UK) £7.00 elsewhere, incl. p&p.*

**NOTE:** Next year the Society hopes to organise a visit to Haydon Bridge and a walk based on the book, coordinated by Don and Dennis.



---

## The Haydon Bridge Plaque

Joseph Tulip

THE modest house in Haydon Bridge, where renowned poet Philip Larkin spent many holidays, was swamped by 100 villagers this week.

Residents turned out in force for a special ceremony to unveil a blue plaque at 1A Ratcliffe Road, where Larkin regularly visited his friend and lover Monica Jones, over a period of more than 20 years after she moved into the property in 1961.

With the support of Haydon Parish Council, local historian Dennis Telford has led the campaign for a plaque to follow similar installations in Hull and Belfast, where Larkin had connections. He said: 'Larkin lived and worked in Hull, and wasn't initially impressed by Monica's move to Haydon Bridge.

'However, his first visit here in 1962 was enough to change his mind. I am delighted that what has been a 10-year project has led to today, and it is nice to see so many people from the village come along.'

Entertainer Brendan Healy unveiled the plaque, which includes an extract from a letter from the poet to Monica, in which he describes the house as 'distinguished and exciting and beautiful,' and how it can 'never be ordinary with the Tyne going by outside'.

*Reprinted from the Hexham Courant, 3 September 2014*

See a video of the unveiling at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHIkTLiKNdU>

---

---

# *Fadhil Assultani and Philip Larkin*

*Susannah Tarbush*

Fadhil Assultani, *Philip Larkin, An Outsider Poet: Transcending Solitude, Sex and the Ordinary* (Leeds: Mira Publishing House, 2013), 84pp. £6.60. ISBN 978-1-908509-05-5

---

*Fadhil Assultani*

## **Philip Larkin**

### **An Outsider Poet**

Transcending Solitude,  
Sex and The Ordinary



The study *Philip Larkin, An Outsider Poet: Transcending Solitude, Sex and the Ordinary* by the Iraqi poet, translator and journalist Fadhil Assultani may be the only work on Larkin by an Arab author written and published in recent years in English. Assultani has lived since 1994 in London, where he is head of the cultural department of a leading pan-Arab newspaper, *Asharq al-Awsat*. He was editor-in-chief of the cultural quarterly *Aqwas* from 2009–2011, and contributes poems to the independent Iraqi daily *Al-Mada* 'to reach Iraqi readers after so many years of discontinuity with them.'

He wrote his Larkin study as the dissertation for an MA in Modern and Contemporary Literature at Birkbeck College, London University. Mira Publishing House of Leeds has published the dissertation as an 84-page book. In addition to writing about Larkin, Assultani is one of the few translators of his poems into Arabic. His translations of the poems 'Wants', 'The Literary World',

'New eyes each year' and 'How to Sleep' appear in his compendious anthology *Khamsoun Ama min Al-Shi'ir al-Britani 1950–2000 (Fifty Years of British Poetry 1950–2000)* published in Damascus in 2008. The anthology contains the work of 56 British poets in Arabic translation. Assultani edited and researched the book, and carried out all the translations. He worked on the anthology on and off for 10 years.

Assultani is a key figure on the lively Arab-British cultural scene. His own poetry has appeared in English translation in publications including *Banipal* magazine of modern Arab literature, *Open Democracy*, and *Modern Poetry in Translation's* March 2003 *Iraqi Poetry Today* issue, which was the first collection of modern Iraqi poetry to appear in the West. His poems have also been translated into Dutch, Spanish, Kurdish and Persian.

Assultani was born near the city of Hillah, capital of Babylon province, in 1948. That year also marked the birth in Iraq of the modern Arab free verse poetry movement, which Assultani describes as 'the biggest revolution in Arabic poetry for more than 1,000 years'. From Iraq the new poetry movement spread to Lebanon, Egypt and other Arab countries. In classical Arabic poetry, verse is written according to the rules of al-'amud, meaning pillars or columns. 'There is a rhythm in free verse, and rhyme as well, but with different units, not just one unit as in classical Arab poetry', Assultani says.

There were three major Iraqi pioneers of the free verse movement: Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Abd al-Wahhab Al-Bayati, and the woman poet Nazik al-Malaika. British and other English-language poets – including T S Eliot, W H Auden, Ezra Pound and Edith Sitwell – were a major influence on the Iraqi poetry movement. Sitwell famously had a profound effect on the poetry of al-Sayyab. Her poem 'Still Falls the Rain' influenced his 1960 poem 'Song of Rain'.

Assultani came of age as a poet in this atmosphere of experimentation with form. He wrote his first poem at the age of 11: 'It was of course about love'. His poetry was first published, in a newspaper literary supplement, when he was 17. He was eager to read the new poetry,



## About Larkin

and would borrow money to buy the latest issue of *Al-Adab* literary magazine founded in Beirut in 1953. He was particularly influenced by al-Sayyab, whom he regards as the greatest Arab poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Assultani studied English literature at Baghdad University's College of Arts. 'We studied prose and poetry, we studied Eliot, we studied Dylan Thomas, we studied Graham Greene, we studied Henry James and many many more.' After graduation in 1971, he became a journalist on the daily culture page of the Iraqi Communist Party newspaper *Tariq al-Shaab* (*The Way of the People*). The editor of the culture page was Saadi Youssef, who turned 80 this year and is regarded as the most famous living Iraqi poet. When Youssef left the newspaper, he recommended that Assultani be appointed in his place.

In 1977 Assultani left Iraq, disillusioned with the Iraqi Communist Party and its policy of joining with the Baath Party in the National Progressive Front. Saddam Hussein was becoming the most powerful man in Iraq and beginning his brutal dictatorship. In 1978, Assultani recalls, 'about 500 Iraqi intellectuals left Iraq – poets, novelists, architects and so on'. Many more left during Iraq's subsequent wars, sanctions and waves of internal repression.

Assultani became an English teacher, first in Morocco and then in Algeria. His poetry was published in *Al-Hurriya* (*Freedom*), published in Damascus. Its literary editor was a leading Palestinian poet, Ghassan Zaqtan. Assultani's first poetry collection, entitled simply *Poems*, was published in 1982 by East & West Publishing House, set up in London by an Iraqi journalist. In 1985 he moved to live in Damascus, where his second collection *Incomplete Anthem*, was published. His third collection *Burnt by Water* was published in Beirut in 2000. His most recent collection is *The Various Colours of the Lady*.

The distinguished Iraqi-American author, university teacher and translator Saadi Simawe, who edited the Modern Poetry in Translation *Iraqi Poetry Today* issue, and has translated some of Assultani's poetry, sees Assultani as part of a new trend in Iraq literature: 'a kind of complex imagination in which existentialism is mixed with humor alongside an unusual compassion for all humans'.

The Iranian author Amir Taheri, a columnist on Asharq al-Awsat, wrote a preface to Assultani's study entitled 'Larkin and Assultani: several points in common'. He writes that Assultani's dissertation 'came to me as a treat', for two reasons: 'First because I have been a fan of Larkin since, as a student in London, I discovered him in the 1960s.' And secondly, 'in the 1990s I had the pleasure of making Fadhil Assultani's friendship which, in turn, gave me the privilege of being among the first readers of his poems as he committed them to paper.'

Taheri says that although they 'hail from different horizons', Larkin and Assultani have several points in common. Both are the product of cultures in which poetry is still of great importance. Taheri recalls that he was surprised in his first encounter with Britain to find that compared to other European countries he knew, including France and Germany, poetry attracted large audiences. And 'one might even claim it was in Iraq, the ancient Mesopotamia, where the epic of Gilgamesh marked the birth of literature as deeply felt human response to the mysteries of existence.' Taheri adds that 'from the start, I saw Larkin's work as a poetical version of chamber music. He is the poet of small touches, fleeting moments, and flashes of insight, the poet of enduring transience as formulated in 'Modesties', one of his shortest poems.' For his part, Assultani 'especially in his poems written in the past decade or so, has distanced himself from the epic ambitions of many Arab poets of his generation and moved closer to what René Char called 'the small music of life'.

In the introduction to his study, Assultani refers to Colin Wilson's 1956 book *The Outsider*, which was translated into Arabic soon after its appearance in English, and was received with enthusiasm by Arab readers and writers. Assultani notes that the cultural climate in mid-twentieth century England was not receptive to the techniques of surrealism, nor to the concept of an outsider. Regarding the first, David Gascoyne was something of an exception, and lived for some time in France. Wilson's *The Outsider* 'tellingly focused on foreign writers, with the exception of T. E. Lawrence and H. G. Wells.'

For this reason, perhaps, 'Larkin was not viewed as an outsider, apart from some references to his life as a solitary and a bachelor which has nothing to do with the concept of being an outsider in its philosophical interpretation'. But Larkin was not just a loner or reclusive person: from the beginning, he 'held his own existentialist views on life, art, society, sex, solitude, selfhood and otherness, belonging, uncertainty, self-realization, anxiety and undecidedness'.

Assultani writes: 'For me, Larkin, both as a person and as a poet, is an outsider, in the existentialist sense of the word, and he is in harmony with himself. There aren't two distinct Larkins, or two sides of him, as many of his critics suggest. By making a comparison of his poetry, prose and his personal letters, we can discern coherent views and visions that govern his seemingly contradictory attitudes.' From this perspective, Larkin's work 'forms one protracted poem, in which he meditates on these big issues occupying humanity in the twentieth century'. Larkin's whole persona, 'similar to existentialist outsider characters in modern literature, confronts the issues preoccupying his age, such as consciousness, freedom of choice, human knowledge, and selfhood and otherness in modern societies. Confronting these issues, Larkin's approach is neither nihilistic nor pessimistic.'

## حاجات

Assultani argues that by analysing his early poems, even as far back as the 1930s, and comparing them with his later poems 'we will see that there are coherent existential issues penetrating the poetry from the very beginning'. A sense of alienation from the outside world characterised much of his poetry. In his first published poem 'Winter Nocturne' which appeared in his school magazine the *Coventrian* in 1938 when he was 16, we find: 'A web of drifting mist o'er wood and wold, / As quiet as death.' And the final line 'Dark night creeps in, and leaves the world alone.' In the 1954 poem 'Places, Loved Ones', published in *The Less Deceived* (1955), Larkin writes: 'No, I have never found / The place where I could say / *This is my proper ground / Here I shall stay.*' In his 1979 interview with the *Observer* he said: 'I do not really notice where I live'. The 1974 poem, 'The Life with a Hole in It', with its 'three-handed struggle has the same theme as 'Wants', written in 1950 and published in *The Less Deceived*. 'Mr Bleaney' (1955, and published in *The Whitsun Weddings*) is 'perhaps the most existential poem Larkin ever wrote'.

As regards Larkin's fiction, the protagonists of Larkin's two published novels *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter* – John Kemp and Katherine Lind – are outsiders haunted by alienation.

Assultani notes that Terry Whalen wrote in his 1986 book *Philip Larkin and English Poetry* that Larkin is close to poets such as Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn and R. S. Thomas, sharing with them 'not only the depth and integrity, but also profound doubts, tensions and existential anxieties and, and exploration which are everywhere attentive to bleaker truth and realities of our day'.

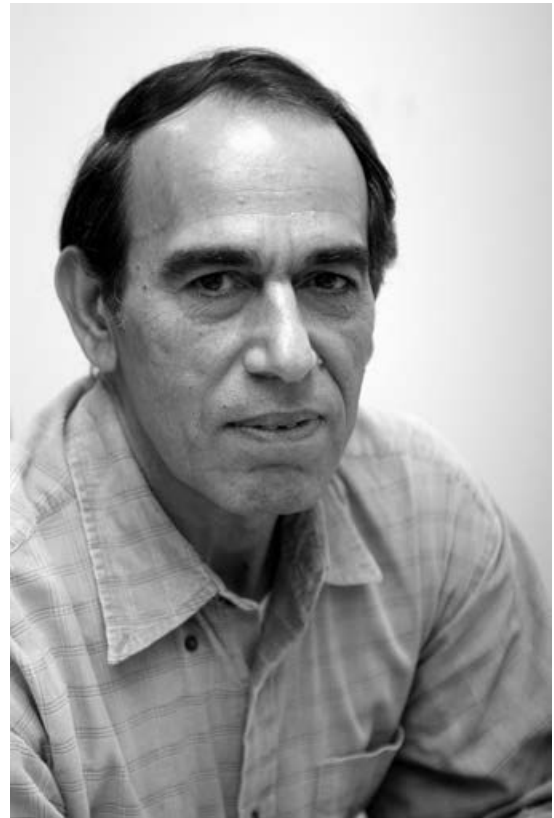
Assultani argues that Larkin is closest to R. S. Thomas. 'It might even be claimed that Larkin shares more themes with Thomas than with any other British poet in the second half of the twentieth century, though their approaches and style have differences.' He adds that 'waiting, absences, death, failure, suffering, echo, shadows, and death are very common vocabularies in their poetic discourse. It seems that both poets echo ideas of Kierkegaard, perhaps unconsciously in the case of Larkin, and consciously with Thomas who read Kierkegaard and dedicated a poem to him.'

They are preoccupied with almost the same existential themes. 'Unlike the secular Larkin, Thomas's approaches to his themes are arguably theological, but his main concern, like Larkin's, is the human condition.' He compares Larkin's 'Church Going' with Thomas's 'In Church'. Assultani's enthusiasm for Larkin and his work suggests that, far from being an insular poet, Larkin transcends boundaries of nationality and language. His poetry has a universal appeal.

أولها جميعاً ، الرغبة أن نكون وحيدين  
 مهما اسودّت السماء ببطاقات الدعوة ،  
 مهما اتبعنا التوجيهات الجنسية المطبوعة  
 مهما التقطنا صوراً للعائلة تحت سارية العلم -  
 فوقها جميعاً ، الرغبة أن نكون وحيدين .

دونها جميعاً ، تجري شهوة النسيان  
 رغم الشد الماكر للروزنامة ،  
 التأمين على الحياة ، طقوس الخصب المجدولة ،  
 نفور العيون العميق من الموت  
 دونها جميعاً ، تجري شهوة النسيان .

Larkin's 'Wants' in Fadhil Assultani's translation



Fadhil Assultani

# The Philip Larkin and East Riding Poetry Prizes

Bridlington Poetry Festival: The Orangery, Sewerby Hall, 12–15 June 2014



*Don Paterson, competition judge,  
with Rob Miles, First Prize*



*Squirrel Poetry-Lover*



*Sue Lozynskij: East Riding Prize*



*Alex Constable:  
East Riding Young Person's Prize*



*Matthew Dobson:  
Commendation*



*Peter Barker recites his commended haiku;  
Antony Dunn on left*



*Mark Fiddes: Commendation*





*Ian Duhig*



*James Booth at the Larkin Society table*



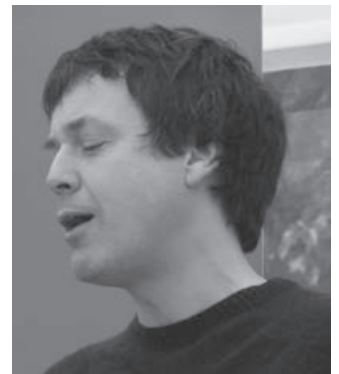
*Wendy Cope reads and signs*



*Mary Noonan*



*Karen McCarthy Woolf and Polly Clark*



*John Wedgwood Clarke*

**Photographs © James Booth**

**For more and to read all the prizewinning poems go to: <http://www.bridlington-poetry-festival.com/>**

# The Philip Larkin and East Riding Poetry Prizes 2014

For all the winning poems and notes on the poets go to:  
[www.bridlington-poetry-festival.com/](http://www.bridlington-poetry-festival.com/)

## *First Prize*

### **Making Way**

*A keeper*, you said of the house, but I'd sensed everything  
trying to make its way; those errant velvet fingers  
from your orchid pots; the oak  
putting on its chain mail of ivy and moss  
and losing; the birds we fed still pinned  
to their shadows; crisp wasps  
electrocuted by views  
through grubby double glazing, and you  
just weeks before, showing your wrists  
as if uncuffed, asking for my thoughts on a fragrance.

Rob Miles © 2014

## *East Riding Prize*

### **Infestation**

I bait the shell of a new Porsche with muffins  
leave it in the market-place overnight.  
I hear it snap –  
then a scrabble of small print and clauses.

Morning.  
The trap's still moving.  
I click a key  
the locks open.

The banker's face is a mess of crumbs  
he's made two nests -  
one lined with tenners  
the other with claims against tax.

I drive him out to the countryside  
set him free, somewhere past Ipswich.  
They say you should never do that –  
they can't survive in the wild.

Sue Lozynskyj © 2014

## *East Riding Young Poet's Prize*

### **Why Alice Left Wonderland**

There are still people who hold onto fairy tales.  
I wonder every day the reason why  
People are afraid of their imaginations  
Secretly, everybody knows that  
Fantasy is something worth living for  
To escape, people convince themselves that  
It is fatal to get lost inside your wonders  
As deep down, we all know that is far from truth  
I wish to be locked away in a perfect infinity  
Even in reality, it would be foolish to say  
Happy endings don't really exist

Do you ever question why Alice left Wonderland – because  
She already had her own wonderful world  
Unfortunately people will always believe that  
Following your imagination will lead you to madness  
However, it is entirely true that  
To Alice, she was in a beautiful eternity  
She was lost, lost deep within its dark depths  
Despite this, no harm would ever come to Alice  
For it is foolish to believe that  
Real danger really is when you're lost in a perfect world  
(Now read in reverse – bottom to top)

Alex Constable © 2014

---

---

# James Booth Talks to the Wetwang Gazette

John White

---

---

When our reporter Zoe Brighthouse visited James Booth, best-selling author of *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love* (Bloomsbury, £300.75) in his new penthouse apartment overlooking Hull Marina, she found him in an expansive (and possibly inebriated) mood. What follows is an unedited transcript of their conversation.

ZB: First of all, Professor Booth, let me congratulate you on the publication of your splendid biography of Philip Larkin.

JB: Get stewed! Books are a load of crap! Wanna glass of washing sherry?

ZB: N-O – spells No!

JB: Hoity-toity!

ZB: I know that Larkin was for many years your colleague at the 'uni'. Did you have an intimate personal relationship?

JB: [*Indignant*] To what are you alluring? Homosexuality is a filthy habit! The Bible tells us so.

ZB: I gather that you have quite a large collection of Larkin memorabilia.

JB: [*Adopting a cod Cockney accent*]: I got socks, ties, spectacles, laundry lists, girly pics, lawnmowers and razor blades. You wanna buy them? I'm cutting me own throat: but to you, the lot for 50 squid.

ZB: Are you familiar with your former colleague John Osborne's writings?

JB: Of course. I'm particularly fond of *The Entertainer* and *Look Back in Anger*.

ZB: How about Andrew Motion?

JB: I need to go to the bathroom.

ZB: Did Larkin believe in life after death?

JB: [*Sniggering*] He didn't even believe in life after dinner!

ZB: How did you manage to produce such a sensitive, informed, erudite, readable and compassionate biography of Larkin?

JB: Sheer genius!

ZB: John Walsh was unimpressed by your reinterpretation of Larkin 'the man'. What do you say to that?

JB: Thatcher's bum! I'd like to ask that ass about his fool research! And I can still deal out the old right hook to dirty dogs twice my size!

ZB: And what of Larkin's 'women'?

JB: I should 'of' been so lucky! Three bints on the go at the same time! Strike me pink and call me pink stripes. Know what I mean? [*leers*].

ZB: Do you share Larkin's love of animals?

JB: Bleedin' hedgehogs and rabbits! Get real! I'm a butterfly man me'sen. Butterflies to me are what daffodils were to Wordsworth. [*sighs*]. Come back and see my collection of Marbled Whites sometime! Naturally the foundation will bear your expenses [*winks*].

ZB: Many people take exception to Larkin's use of four-letter words. Do you share that distaste?

JB: Fuck no!

ZB: Was Larkin a racist?

JB: No way, Jose! His jazz heroes and heroines were black: Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Sidney Bechet, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Al Jolson and the Black and White Minstrels.

ZB: Does Larkin offer any guidelines for the younger generation?

JB: Yeah. Get out as early as you can and don't have any kids yourself. [*Ruefully*] Wish I'd listened to him.

ZB: Who do you plan to write about next?

JB: Now I've got rid of that old fart, I thought I might do a revisionist piece on split infinitives, lesbianosity and post-modern tropes in the shorter verse of Pam Ayres.

ZB: You obviously stand to make a lot of 'wonga' from your new book. How do you feel about that?

JB: [*Makes the money sign*] I listen to money singing. It's like looking down from long French windows at a provincial town. [*smirks*]

ZB: Thank you for speaking to us so frankly, Professor Booth.

JB: *Mon plaisir*, petal. Sure I can't interest you in a pair of autographed Larkin cycle clips? I could even throw in a hearing aid, batteries *included*. And what about these lovely jubbly Beatrix Potter ornaments? [*Generously*] Here, take one home for the kiddies!



---

---

# Notes on Contributors

---

---

**Suzette A. Hill** was an undergraduate at the University of Nottingham in the early 1960s (in the glow of the Chatterley trial, when her English prof – Vivian de Sola Pinto – was a witness for the Defence). She later gained her M. Litt. from the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne for a thesis on the poetry of Louis MacNeice. Her professional life was spent teaching English in adult education; and in retirement she writes humorous crime novels, the latest being *The Venetian Venture* (Allison & Busby). [www.suzetteahill.co.uk](http://www.suzetteahill.co.uk)

**Don Lee** was born in Manchester, and educated at Middleton Grammar School. His careers have been as an insurance claims investigator in private industry and a management information officer in local government. He is a campaigner on public rights of way. His hobbies include book and record collecting, exploring town and country, and seeking out oddities of all kinds. He has planned and led the Larkin Society birthday walks, and his 'Philip Larkin's Coventry' was published in 2009.

**James Orwin** was born in Rosyth, Scotland, but has lived in Hull since 1963. He works as a self-employed Painter & Decorator. He is webmaster for The Philip Larkin Society, and is an authority on musical settings of Philip Larkin's poetry. In 2010 he curated (and was executive producer of) *all night north*, a CD of new songs by young bands and songwriters from Hull using poems by Philip Larkin as lyrics. He has published two short collections of poetry: *Hold Something Warm* (1996) and *Lost Thoughts and Radio Waves* (1999), and has had work published in several small magazines and anthologies, including *The Rialto*, *Magma*, *The Hull Connection* and *10 Miles East of England*. He has published several articles in *About Larkin*, and has presented papers at a number of academic conferences and Study Days.

**Philip Pullen** was born and brought up in Coventry and is familiar with most of the haunts of the young Philip Larkin. He now lives in Beverley and is a committee member of the Philip Larkin Society. He has spent most of his working life teaching in further and higher education and from 2001 until his retirement in 2011 was an HMI with Ofsted. Although his academic background is in the social sciences he has had a life long passion for English literature. He is currently researching the relationship between Philip and Eva Larkin as revealed in their extensive correspondence.

**M. W. Rowe** is Honorary Researcher in the School of Philosophy at UEA. His most recent book is *Philip Larkin: Art and Self* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011) which was nominated for the James Russell Lowell Prize 2012. He is currently writing a biography of the philosopher J.L. Austin (1911-1960) for OUP, and overseeing a recording - on 7 CDs - of the complete works of the violin virtuoso H.W. Ernst (1812-65).

**Susannah Tarbush** published pieces in *About Larkin* 25, 26 and 27 concerned with her mother, Penelope Scott Stokes, Larkin's Oxford muse. She has a B. Phil from Oxford University in Modern Middle Eastern Studies and works as a freelance journalist, editor and consultant specialising in the Arab world. She is a consulting editor of the London-based magazine of modern Arab literature *Banipal*, two of whose regular contributors have Larkin connections: Iraqi journalist and critic Fadhil Assultani, the subject of her review in this issue, and Egyptian author and journalist Youssef Rakha, who won a Philip Larkin prize for essays on Bataille and Aelfric in 1998 while at Hull University.

**Ann Thwaite** first met Philip Larkin in the sixties. She met Win Dawson through the Society, as members from the very beginning. She has published over thirty books; two of her biographies (of A.A. Milne and Edmund Gosse) won major prizes. A collection of seven short stories, *Running in the Corridors*, came out recently.

**James Underwood** is a PhD candidate and tutor in the Department of English, University of Hull. His research, funded by the University, focuses on Philip Larkin. He teaches poetry within the Department, and is co-founder and co-convenor of the Poetry & Politics Project. In 2012 he was awarded an MA (with Distinction) in Modern and Contemporary Literature from Hull, having graduated with a first class degree in English Literature from the University of Durham in 2011.

**John White**, the Society's Jazz Consultant, is Emeritus Reader in American History at the University of Hull, where he taught from 1965 until 2002. With Trevor Tolley he produced the four-CD set, 'Larkin's Jazz' (2010). He is co-editor (with Richard Palmer) of *Larkin: Jazz Writings, 1940-1984* (Continuum, 2004), and contributed to Dale Salwak's *Philip Larkin: The Man and his Work* (Macmillan, 1989). His talk, 'Philip Larkin: Funny Man', delivered to the Larkin Society in 2010 (*AL* 29 and 30), is available on CD.

---

# The Philip Larkin Society

## Publications and Merchandise

For further information visit: [www.philiplarkin.com](http://www.philiplarkin.com)

All prices quoted are UK delivered. Please refer to our website for overseas prices.

Purchases may be made from our website using 

---

### Submissions to *About Larkin*

We welcome contributions to the journal from Society members. Copy should be sent by email attachment to [j.booth@hull.ac.uk](mailto:j.booth@hull.ac.uk) or in hard copy to: The Editors, *About Larkin*, 8 Alpha Terrace, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 5PT.

The copy deadline for *About Larkin* 38 is 2 March 2015.

### Publications

All prices include postage and packing. For prices in US dollars and euros, please contact the Merchandising Officer, Andy Bagley. Please make cheques for all Society publications payable to 'The Philip Larkin Society' and send to:

Philip Larkin Society Publications  
Andy Bagley  
33 Newland Park  
Hull HU5 2DN

**About Larkin: Journal back issues:** £8.00 each.

Issues containing important Larkin works are: Letter to Eva (2); 'The Library I came to' (3); 1943 Letter to his parents (4); 'Story 1' (10 – out of print); 'Peter' (11); 'An Incident in the English Camp' (12); Schoolboy writings (13); 'We met at the end of the party'; prose and poetry from 1940\* (14); 'Apples on a Christmas Tree' (20); 'Biographical Details: Oxford 1' (23); 'Biographical Details: Oxford 2' (24); 'New Brooms'; 'Poem for Penelope'; early letters\* (25); Dream Diary (1942–3) Part 1 (27); Dream Diary (1942–3) Part 2 (28). Those asterisked contain a large quantity of significant material.

### Books

Maeve Brennan, *The Philip Larkin I Knew* (Manchester University Press: Philip Larkin Society Monograph 3) £15.50

A unique memoir of the poet, deeply personal and revealing.

A.T. Tolley, *Larkin at Work: A Study of Larkin's mode of composition as seen in his workbooks* (Larkin Society Monograph 1) £8.00

Jean Hartley, *Philip Larkin, The Marvell Press and me* £10.50

'Jean Hartley's story is a vital piece of evidence for anyone curious about Larkin's life.' Andrew Motion, *The Observer*.

Jean Hartley, *Philip Larkin's Hull and East Yorkshire* £7.50

The second edition of this popular topographical and walking guide to the area, home to Larkin for 30 years.

Graham Chesters (ed.), *The Making of Larkin's Statue* £10.00

Dedicated to the memory of Dr Jean Hartley, this book tells the inside story of the statue, from commissioning to installation.

Geoffrey Waters, *The Larkin Trail* (Kingston Press) £13.50

Crammed with art work and accompanying narrative, this makes an excellent companion to *Philip Larkin's Hull and East Yorkshire*.

Andrew McKeown and Charles Holdefer (eds.), *Philip Larkin and the Poetics of Resistance* (Paris: l'Harmattan) £8.25

The proceedings of the 2004 conference held in Poitiers, France.

*Old City, New Rumours*, an anthology edited by Ian Gregson and Carol Rumens (Five Leaves Press/ The Philip Larkin Society) £6.99.

Contributors include: Douglas Dunn, Roger McGough, Andrew Motion, Sean O'Brien and Maurice Rutherford.

### Poetry by Maurice Rutherford

*Love is a Four Letter World* (Peterloo Poets, 1994) £8.25

Observations about childhood, wartime service, and retirement. Hull and its poets, including Philip Larkin, are major presences.

*This Day Dawning* (Peterloo Poets, 1989) £4.50

An original and funny offering from the renowned Hull-born poet.

**Larkin Society Audiotapes:** £4.00 each

Winifred Dawson: *Love and Larkin* (2001)

Zachary Leader: *Editing Kingsley Amis's Letters* (2001)

Alan Plater: *By the tide of Humber I fell among poets* (1998)

Dale Salwak: *Philip Larkin: An American View* (1997)

### CDs

*An Evening with Maureen Lipman CBE:* £8.00

Maureen Lipman was the distinguished guest at a dinner and auction which raised £9,000 towards the Larkin statue. Recorded on 2 September 2010, the CD captures the wit and humour of this successful event.

**John White:** Philip Larkin: *Funny Man:* £8.50

John White's marvellously observed and informed presentation at the University Staff House on 23 January 2010 takes us as close as we can to spending an hour in Larkin's company.

**Anne Fine:** Philip Larkin: *A Personal View* £10.00

Anne Fine's challenging, witty and personal presentation to the Annual General Meeting, June 2004.

**All Night North** £11.50

12 contemporary folk, pop and rock songs featuring the poems of Philip Larkin

### DVDs

**Jean Hartley A Tribute:** £10.00

A recording of Jean Hartley: An Appreciation of the Writer, Artist, Friend and Publisher of Philip Larkin's *The Less Deceived* – James Booth's Lecture at the Society's 2012 AGM.

**The Unveiling of the Philip Larkin Statue:** £10.00

This DVD captures the atmosphere of the unveiling of the Philip Larkin statue on 2 December 2010.

**Required Performance.** Professor Edwin Dawes, our Chairman, works his magic at the Annual General Meeting 2006: £10.00

### T-shirts

Medium, large and extra-large sizes, in two styles, featuring iconic images of Philip Larkin, and printed on good quality cotton: £15.00

**Philip Larkin Poster (A2)**

From a 1964 photograph during the filming of the Monitor television programme (© 1964 Anne James): £8.00

### Stationery

Notelets (pack of 5): £3.20; Postcards (set of 4): £2.00.

Bookmarks (5): £2.00

### Monitor stationery

Pack of two notelets (and envelopes): £1.50

Set of four postcards: £2.00

*These items feature images of both Philip Larkin and John Betjeman from the 1964 BBC Monitor documentary programme 'Down Cemetery Road'.* (Photographs © 1964 Anne James)

### Larkin in 25 objects exhibition

Set of 6 beautiful images of Larkin's belongings by Larkin25 photographer Dennis Low, the objects providing an insight into Larkin's life, and throwing new light on familiar poems: £3.80

### Fridge magnets

Three different black and white photographs of Larkin £2.40 each; set of three £5.50

**Wotlarx Enterprises:** David Pattison, *This Was Mr Bleaney's Bike* £6.99 '... a good and ingenious plot...' Alan Plater

# Contents

## Forthcoming Events

- Obituary: Winifred Dawson (née Arnott)  
5 February 1929 – 22 August 2014 Ann Thwaite
- Win Grant Dawson
- Hardy's Christminster and Larkin's Oxford: Conference  
of the Thomas Hardy and Philip Larkin Societies,  
St Anne's College, Oxford, 28–30 March 2014 James Booth
- Fifty Years On: Bringing 'The Whitsun Weddings' to  
Life: A performance by Ensemble 52: 6 June 2014 Philip Pullen
- Unreal Cities: Gautier's Influence on 'For Sidney Bechet' Mark Rowe
- Benjamin Britten and 'Bridge for the Living' James L. Orwin
- A plaque for Jean Hartley: Victoria Avenue, Hull
- Obituary: Richard Palmer, 1947 – 2014 John White
- 'An arrow shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming  
rain': The unveiling of the slate ellipse at King's Cross  
Station: 7 June 2014
- A childhood annulled? Larkin through the  
psychoanalytical looking-glass. Review of 'Childhood  
wiped out' by Adam Piette Philip Pullen
- Only Connect: Review of *Belonging and Estrangement  
in the Poetry of Philip Larkin, R. S. Thomas and Charles  
Causley* by Rory Waterman James Underwood
- Launch of *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love* by James  
Booth: Brynmor Jones Library, 28 August 2014
- More sinned against than sinning? Review of *Philip  
Larkin: Life, Art and Love* by James Booth Suzette A. Hill
- Review of *Monica: 'Dearest Bun...': A Haydon Bridge  
Love Story* by Dennis Telford Don Lee
- Fadhil Assultani and Philip Larkin. Review of *Philip  
Larkin: Outsider Poet* by Fadhil Assultani Susannah Tarbush
- Bridlington Poetry Festival 12–15 June 2014:  
The Philip Larkin and East Riding Prizes
- James Booth talks to the *Wetwang Gazette* John White

## Notes on Contributors

## Publications and Merchandise

*Cover illustration: Winifred Bradshaw (née Arnott; later Dawson), with son Nicholas,  
in Christchurch, Dorset, 1957, taken by Philip Larkin.*

*We are grateful to The Society of Authors, on behalf of the Larkin Estate,  
for permission to publish this photograph. © 2014 The Estate of Philip Larkin*