

# About Larkin

Journal of The Philip Larkin Society

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*The Philip Larkin  
Society*

## Editorial

We are thrilled to welcome you to the first of two journals published during Philip Larkin's centenary year! This is an enormous milestone for the Society and, as we start to come together to celebrate the continuing relevance and reverence of Larkin's work, we do so under the new presidency of Rosie Millard OBE, whose face graces the cover of this issue. A formal introduction to Rosie from our Chair, Graham Chesters, appears on page 8.

In 2022, as always, Larkin's life and work is inspiring researchers, writers, poets, artists, musicians and more, and we are delighted to include some of these rich outputs in this issue. Poems from Cliff Forshaw, Daniel Vince, Andrew Thomas, Jane Moth, David Green, John Tatum and John Mowat illustrate the long-standing impact of Larkin's poetry as it continues to influence contemporary writers.

John Whitbourn, meanwhile, tells us about how Larkin's work has been incorporated into the country music of Rosanne Cash, daughter of Johnny Cash.

This theme of Larkin and his relationship with others continues throughout the issue: David Green considers Larkin's work alongside that of Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn; John Boaler examines Larkin alongside Orwell; and Tom Miller shares the first part of his memories of Kingsley Amis.

We shouldn't forget that alongside Larkin's centenary, this year marks 100 years since the birth of Monica Jones too. As we remember and reflect on both Larkin and Jones, this issue includes an article by Geoffrey Weston on Monica Jones's school prizes, as well as Philip Pullen's study of the Larkin family's trips to Germany.

*Kyra Piperides  
on behalf of the Editorial Team*

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Registered Charity No. 1085251

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#### Submissions to About Larkin

We welcome contributions, which should be sent by eMail attachment to:

[aboutlarkinjournal@gmail.com](mailto:aboutlarkinjournal@gmail.com)

**The deadline for AL54 is  
31st August 2022**

#### Society Membership

(1 July to 30 June)

##### UK

Institution £50  
Full member £25  
Unwaged/Senior Citizen £18  
Undergraduate Student £10

##### Overseas

Institution £60  
Full member £30  
Unwaged/Senior Citizen £25  
Undergraduate Student £12



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## Letters

### Dear Members,

It's Spring! It's celebration time! Firstly, there's a new copy of our wonderful *About Larkin* to read and enjoy. Secondly, we are learning to live with Covid-19 as restrictions are lifted. And thirdly, it's the anniversary year with, believe it or not, face-to-face meetings planned! What could be better? However, we must also remember that the last two years have been dreadful for those who have been ill or lost friends and relatives due to the virus. We are also full of sadness and empathy for those in Ukraine whose lives are in such a dark place at the moment. Although we have a worldwide membership, we do not have any members in Ukraine, but all of us are heart and soul with the people who are enduring such a terrible war there just now and are not able to enjoy the things we take for granted.

My heartfelt thanks, as always, to all of you, our loyal membership, for your invaluable support and for being with us for another year. As you will read elsewhere in the Journal, there are lots of things planned for this special anniversary year. As membership secretary, one of my hopes is that we increase our numbers significantly this year, so please do spread the word. For instance, a Larkin Society membership would be a lovely gift for a birthday or special occasion; if you are a member of any organisation then an appeal to others that you may be in contact with would be excellent publicity for us. And tell all your friends about us and let's have a real push to encourage a surge in membership to celebrate the year of 2022. What a cause for celebration that would be!

Again, many thanks to you all and keep on Larkin about!

**Carole Collinson**

**Membership Secretary**

### *A Letter to the Editors from Ray Ward*

I was very interested to see in James Underwood's review of the Folio Society edition of the *Collected Poems* (AL 50, p29) the mention of a photo of Larkin, Powell and the Amises "posing outside The Ivy", with Hilly looking displeased, arms

folded and the only one not facing the camera. This must surely be the one which has turned up countless times in books about Larkin, Amis etc: it's in the biography by Bradford, the *Selected Letters* (illustration 22), and (cropped) *The Importance of Elsewhere: Philip Larkin's Photographs* (p150), all dated 1958. (Presumably it was taken with a delayed-action camera: it's known Larkin had one.) I have often wondered where it was taken, but all they say is "in London" [...] Can anyone enlighten me?

I obtained and read John Sutherland's *Monica Jones, Philip Larkin and Me* through the PLS members' special offer and read it as soon as it arrived, so I was interested to see Martin Gray's review (AL 52, pp 20-32). Comments from a retired librarian might be of interest.

Although I didn't like the way in which Gray changed 'Professor Emeritus' to 'Emeritus Professor', the rest of the review is very good. Gray makes no mention of an intensely irritating feature of the book, something which I think was also noticed by others: Sutherland's liking for verbless "sentences". I have read none of his other writings, so I don't know if they are a common feature of his work [...] Such "sentences" are sometimes defensible on stylistic grounds, but Sutherland takes them much too far - they seem to average about one per page - and nearly all could have been avoided by merging them into proper sentences [...]

Another thing I must comment on is Gray's remark that he doesn't know if lacunae in one of Monica's letters are Monica's or Sutherland's. It seems obvious that such things should be made clear, either in a footnote or with the increasingly common practice of using square brackets [...]

One final thing that must be said: the index is a disgrace, consisting of personal names and undifferentiated lists of page numbers so that one cannot look up places, institutions, titles, subjects, etc.

### *A Plea to Lee from John Whitbourn*

Firstly, may I recommend to Society members John

Sutherland's recently published biographical work, *Monica Jones, Philip Larkin and Me: Her Life and Long Loves* – a true labour of love (and affection), which I had the dual pleasure and privilege of following from conception to publication, and *en route* was able to provide some research material and see draft versions. It was also somewhat educational to see how Professor Sutherland's name unlocked the door to Monica's letters in the Bodleian Library's scrupulous care, whereas my previous besieging years of affable conversations with their then custodian signally failed to...

Accordingly, a debt of honour owed to Monica Jones against her bitter detractors has now been paid – and in fine, incontestable, form too. Plus, it's just in the nick of time, while those who knew her are still with us, and before all the Amises and Wilsons *et al*'s 'Black Legend' regarding Ms Jones becomes set in unalterable historical stone. Good!

Here may I also say that *About Larkin* no 51 (April 2021) proved revelatory. Being the probably rare combination of former student of Soviet history/society, as well as Larkin devotee, I have (uniquely?) often wondered, what *would* a Stalinist commissar have made of Larkin and his works? Aside, obviously and simply, from mulch, via a bullet-to-the-nape-of-the-neck and burning of books?

Now, courtesy of Stewart Lee's 'An Awful Pie' article, I need wonder no longer. True, time has moved on and we have been educated by blood-drenched experience. Accordingly, alas for them but happily for us, any nascent present-day commissar class is born out of their optimal time and place. They don't have access to previous GULAG/lead-poisoning options. Plus, the Grim Reaper has put Larkin physically beyond reach.

However, I still heard commissar-qualities in 'An Awful Pie' LOUD in my ear. Especially so as the 'let's-talk-about-me' spiel dragged on. And on. High-octane, fuelled by the temerities of Trump and BREXIT, maybe embittered by not securing the BBC's Jeremy Hardy (dec'd 2019) sinecure-for-life, the commissar-lite tone came over pretty clear to me. Not the full-blown Orwellian (*The Road to Wigan Pier*, Chapter 12) 'half gangster, half gramophone' manifestation, I grant you, not yet anyway; but still 24/7/365 never-bl\*\*dy-off commissar-ish, sounding like a sort of Poundshop Zhdanov or not-needed Sealed Knot style 1930s

Re-enactment Society. Rerunning unwanted history as (to mug Marx for words): '...first time as tragedy, the second as farce'.

Likewise, note its desiccated spirit of *zero* kindness and *zero* compassion: that part of the pastiche was spot-on, albeit purging two qualities I would have thought essential for Larkin-liking.

So, for all his protestations of liking Larkin, I wasn't won over (as with his merely a '*minor English public school*' protestation: how come it's always a *minor* public school they go to? Why never a middling or even elite one?). Courtesy obliges me to take Lee's every word as good coin, but I arrived at the other side of 'An Awful Pie' unconvinced. That being said about the article's animating spirit, I hardly dare disagree with Lee. When commissars – even amateur ones – speak, wise men keep dissent to themselves. Yet I will disagree anyway. Here goes:

I truly doubt Larkin would have '*hated*' him, as Lee twice claims (boasts?). Larkin had too much innate empathy to be a good hater in practice. Unlike some. So: 'dislike'? Yes, maybe. 'Treat as toxic'? Yes, probably. 'Vault a five-bar gate - even in old age - to avoid interaction?' Yes, very likely. And rightly so. But '*hate*'? No. It wasn't in him.

The kettle might be black (if Lee *et al* will permit use of that word) but it shouldn't assume all pots are too.

Hence this plea to Lee. Take a walk on the wild side, revisit your fixed opinions, re-evaluate your options in the light of latest developments: get ye '*hameward tae think again*'. And then – I never dreamt I'd ever say such a thing, but, in the immortal words of Guy Fawkes: '*Desperate diseases require desperate measures*' – please cease supporting Larkin. At least publicly.

He never did you any harm. On the contrary – according to 'An Awful Pie', he's brought you much joy. So stop discrediting him.



# *Philip<sup>The</sup>Larkin Society*

**Notice is hereby given  
that the  
27th Annual General Meeting  
of the  
Philip Larkin Society  
will be held at  
King Henry VIII School,  
Warwick Road, Coventry, CV3 6AQ  
on Saturday, 11 June 2022  
at 12 noon (BST)**

The agenda will be as follows, with papers to be circulated in advance of the meeting:

1. Apologies and opening remarks
2. Minutes of the AGM on 5 June 2021
3. Matters arising
4. Trustees' Annual Report for 2021/22
5. Financial matters
  - 5.1 Treasurer's Report
  - 5.2 Philip Larkin Society Year-end Accounts to 31st March 2022
  - 5.3 Larkin Society Assets
6. Subscription rates, 2022/23
7. Election of officers and trustees
8. Any other business

*Julian Wild  
Secretary  
Philip Larkin Society*

## Not Just an AGM ...

I very much look forward to welcoming you to King Henry VIII School for what promises to be a lovely, Larkin-filled day out in Coventry on the occasion of the PLS Annual General Meeting.

In the morning, at 10.30 am, I will be offering a tour of the school for those of you interested in seeing the place where Larkin was educated. The school history dates from our foundation in 1545 and we have artefacts dating back that far on display in our School Archive. You will also get a taster of the Larkin100 exhibition we're holding from 6 to 14 August, "The School in August". The AGM itself will take place at 12 noon in the Philip Larkin Room, which was opened in 2002. Following the business meeting, a buffet lunch will be provided by our excellent school caterers and can be taken outside to our quadrangle, weather permitting.

After lunch, at 2 pm, our Annual Distinguished Guest Lecture will be given by Dr Philip Pullen, Trustee of the Philip Larkin Society and Chair of Larkin100, the charitable organisation set up to co-ordinate events during Larkin's centenary year. Philip's talk, "I Remember, I Remember: the Coventry Larkin grew up in" will concentrate on Larkin's childhood and teenage years in the City of Coventry and will draw on aspects of the Larkin Archive, including some previously unseen and uncatalogued material. What was it like to grow up here in the 1920s and 30s? What effects did Larkin's experience of school and family life have on him? And to what extent did Coventry remain part of his literary consciousness?

There will also be a presentation by Dr Ben Kyneswood of Coventry University, and the Digital Archivist for Coventry City of Culture, who has developed a digital version of Coventry's Larkin Trail (originally created by PLS member, Don Lee).

After some afternoon tea, the day will conclude with a talk by another former pupil of the school, the novelist Peter Ho Davies, who will be talking about the writer's invisible art of revision. In 2003, *Granta* identified Peter Ho Davies as one of the twenty 'Best of Young British Novelists'. His latest novel *A Lie Someone Told You About Yourself* was one of the *New York Times*' notable books of 2021.

Full details and booking information will be distributed with the AGM papers.

Helen Cooper

## East Riding Festival of Words 2021 Gold Prize Winner

### Yarn Bombing

Guerilla knitters take no prisoners,  
look down on crocheted  
doilies, laugh in the face  
of three-ply mitten makers:  
they want something chunkier, edgier.

Guerrilla knitters form a cadre of clickers  
(knit-one, pearl-one commandos)  
that meet at midnight under streetlamps,  
target litter bins,  
stalk battered highway bollards.  
Fighting shy of CCTV  
(in ribbed balaclavas)  
they go about their  
clandestine prettification:  
snaking turquoise scarves  
around gun-metal railings,  
sneaking bobble hats  
onto road closure signs,  
buttoning oversize cardis  
around sickly ash trees.

Guerrilla knitters go about their cheerful business:  
brightening town centres  
(swapping dog-eared patterns)  
kicking against the bland  
(sharing tales of knitting derring-do)  
smothering streets in psychedelic rib  
(whispering the name *Sirdar* in awe).

Guerrilla knitters  
brandish large gauge needles,  
are never off duty,  
ready to cast on (or off)  
at the drop of a stitch.

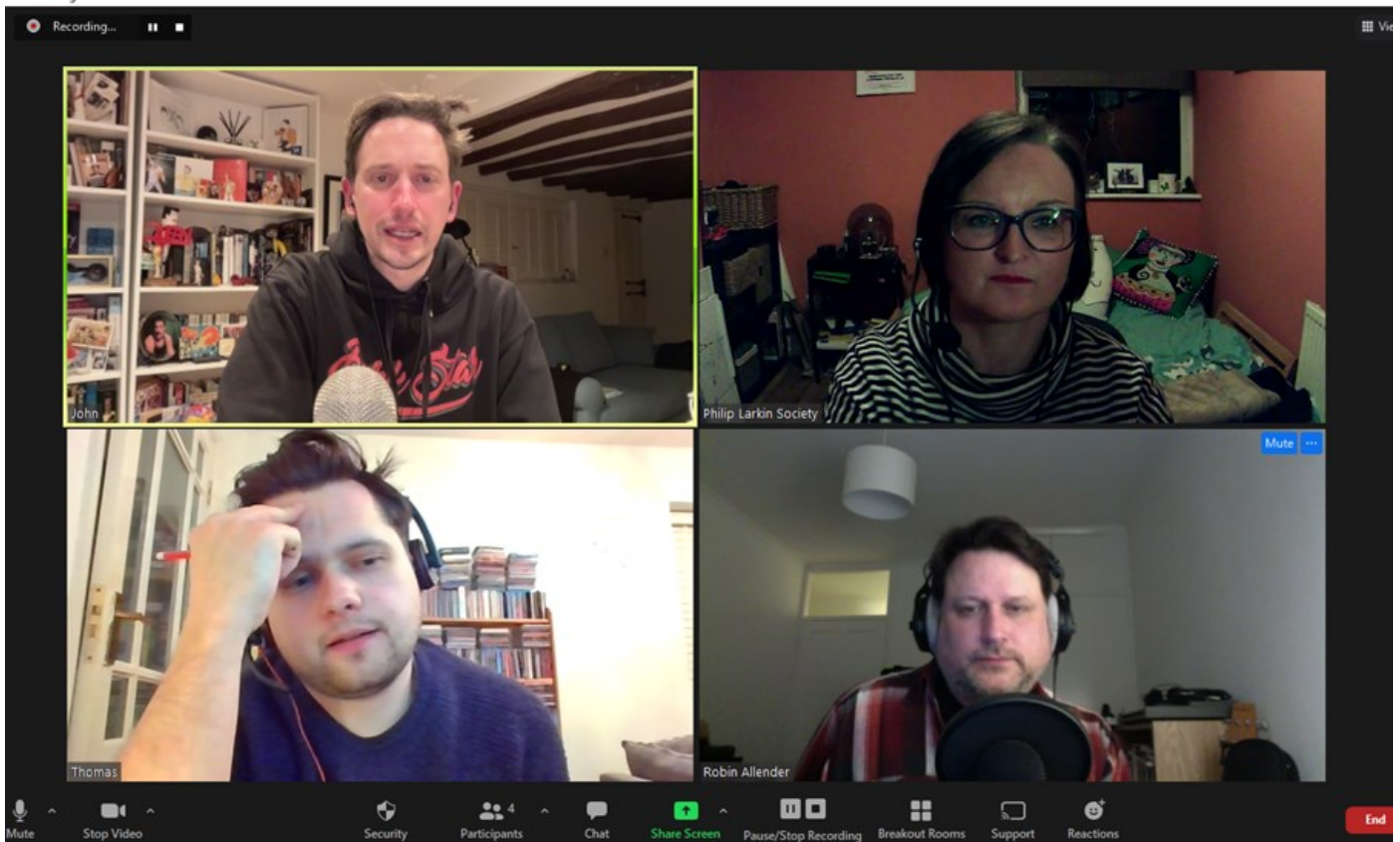
Chris Sewart



# Sending Larkin Chat Around the World

*Lyn Lockwood*

lynlockwood70@yahoo.co.uk



*John Robins, Lyn Lockwood, Thomas Gordon, and Robin Allender recording an episode of Tiny In All That Air, Feb 2022*

It has now been over two years since we launched the society podcast *Tiny in All That Air* and I've been so pleased to reflect on how much it has developed since our early days, and how we continue to find new and fascinating guests to join us. Alongside the Twitter account for the podcast @tiny\_air, we have grown a very interactive community of listeners, Tweeters and guests and have uncovered many new insights into Larkin and his contemporaries, and it is often these people that have brought new listeners and guests along. It's of particular satisfaction to me knowing that the podcast is part of the British Library's digital archive because of its literary value, and that ensures access to every episode for anyone around the world for many years to come. As of the time of writing, the podcast has had over 13,000 separate plays, and each episode picks up more and

more listens, with an average of 500 listens per episode. A third of our listenership is from outside the UK so we are reaching an audience all around the world and continuing to inspire and interest Larkin fans new and old. Many of our listeners are now proud owners of our *Tiny In All That Air* pencil (available to buy at [pls.com](http://pls.com)) and I'm sure some more merchandise will come along in time. PLS member Laura Wilson has provided excellent help with tweets, our producer Simon Galloway still makes us all sound fantastic, and my endlessly patient husband Gavin continues to provide invaluable technical support and glasses of wine/cups of tea.

After the amazing success of the poetry reading episodes in July and August 2021 that featured nearly 50 contributors selecting their favourite



Larkin poems and reading them beautifully (and movingly), we had a September break and then came back in October with Horror Larkin Part 1. Good friend to the podcast, and the PLS in general, musician Wes Finch, put shivers down our back with an astonishing setting of 'If, My Darling' and Joe James and Alex Howard talked us through some of the eerier and more mysterious elements of Larkin's poetry, in poems such as 'Aubade' and 'Ambulances'. We look forward to recording part 2 for October of this year! Trustees Phil Pullen, Rachael Galletly and I had a very convivial day in Beverley in December 2021 with the first face-to-face recording since lockdown, reading and discussing what we saw as 'work poems': 'Show Saturday', 'Toads' and 'Toads Revisited'. Phil's reading of 'Show Saturday' was particularly memorable and we had many comments from listeners who said this was a poem that they had not been familiar with before but had loved hearing it. Rachael's fantastic readings of the toads poems made us laugh out loud.

2022 got off to an amazing start with Dr James Underwood. James is the chair of the PLS's Publications Advisory Board which oversees our journal development and other publishing plans. His book *Early Larkin* (Palgrave, 2021) is full of insights and new readings of Larkin's work up to and including *The Less Deceived*, and so covers the 'juvenilia' such as the romantic story set in World War II 'An Incident in the English Camp' as well as Larkin's letters to Jim Sutton in which he explores what the life of a writer might entail. I enjoy bringing lesser-known texts to the podcast, alongside the well-known and favourites, and reading 'I See A Girl Dragged by the Wrists' from *The North Ship* with James was fascinating.

So, our plans for the future? We are as busy as ever. Our treasurer Thomas Gordan recently pulled off a gigantic coup by getting award-winning writer, comedian and podcaster John Robins and his lifelong friend, fellow writer and podcaster Robin Allender to join us for March's podcast. Please have a listen to their wonderful podcast *The Moon Under Water*, which manages to be both erudite and hilarious as their guests describe their 'ideal' pub. They were wonderful guests with expert knowledge of Larkin, and I really hope they will come back as we had so much more to discuss. I am planning a Monica Jones special for what would have been her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday on 7<sup>th</sup> May of this year, and a special collaboration with the Barbara Pym Society. Soon we will begin to add all the episodes to our new

PLS YouTube channel and hopefully that will draw in even more listeners.

This podcast could not happen without the support of our members and I feel extremely privileged to be able to talk to so many fascinating people about Larkin. Thank you, as always, for listening and supporting. There is now a link on the website that takes you to every episode with just two clicks, with no need to subscribe or register to any provider. And, as I always say at the end of each show, if you have any ideas for guests or topics, have a question or observation, then please get in touch!



Philip Pullen, Lyn Lockwood & Rachael Galletly, outside the Beverley Arms, Dec 2021

### Correction

Line 26 of 'The View from Pearson Park' by Adam Lomax (*AL52*, p. 28) should read:

By dusk this hoddan pageant wound down

The editors extend their apologies to Adam, as well as their thanks for pointing this out in such an amiable and understanding manner.

## *Introducing Rosie Millard OBE, the new President of the Philip Larkin Society*

Graham Chesters  
Chair of the Philip Larkin Society

On 20<sup>th</sup> November 2013, the day after it was announced that a Larkin-inspired bid to become UK City of Culture 2017 had been successful, an article appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* with the title 'Hull: why I adore this unloved city'. The author cites Larkin's description: 'a city that is in the world, yet sufficiently on the edge of it to have a different resonance'. That author was Rosie Millard, an alumna of the city's University and former BBC arts correspondent. She went on to become the very influential and inspirational chair of Hull City of Culture 2017, the company that delivered the city's superb and widely recognised year in the national spotlight. Two years later, the Philip Larkin Society invited her to speak at an event in the Brynmor Jones Library as part of its annual commemoration of Larkin's death on 2<sup>nd</sup> December (see photograph above). Not everyone was there. A Guardian letter writer bemoaned the fact that he had spent the 30th anniversary of Philip Larkin's death on a lonely pilgrimage to Larkin's grave in Cottingham. This was Rosie's response, printed a couple of days later:

*"If only he had thought a bit about it, he might have found his way to the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull, where Larkin was librarian for 30 years. There he would have discovered more than 150 members of the Larkin Society, including his biographer James Booth and his formidable secretary Betty Mackereth, enjoying wine and food in their annual celebration of the great poet, surrounded by a wonderful exhibition of Larkin photographs."*

*As chair of Hull City of Culture 2017, I was invited to speak about "Larkin in the light of 2017", and did so with the assistance of my cherished first edition copy of The Whitsun*



*Weddings. The night was a joyous and totally unforlorn occasion, held in the building he loved. I suspect Larkin would have revelled in it. Next December, we shall all be at Westminster Abbey for the unveiling of Larkin's plaque in Poets' Corner."*

That was not Rosie's only contribution to Larkin's profile in her chairing rôle. She was a great advocate for PLS's ambition to display its unique collection of Larkin artefacts together with the treasures held by the University and the Hull History Centre. The investment by the University and Hull2017 gave birth to an unrivalled exhibition, *New Eyes Each Year*, which attracted over 12,000 visitors to the Brynmor Jones Exhibition Hall.

The Society has been refreshing its list of Honorary Vice Presidents in recent years. In the spring of 2021, it invited Rosie to join that list, as a known lover of Larkin's works and a powerful communicator in the arts sector as a whole. Later that year, after the deeply sad loss of Anthony Thwaite, our Founding President since 1995, the Society offered the position to Rosie. Her response was typically ebullient: 'I am absolutely honoured and delighted to become President of the Philip Larkin Society. Larkin was Librarian at Hull when I joined the University as an undergraduate and his life and work was one of our most central and joyful concerns during Hull's tenure as City of Culture in 2017. To now be invited to help further our understanding and appreciation of Larkin will be a joy and a privilege'.

The privilege is ours. Already, the Society has benefited from Rosie's energetic advocacy as we move towards this summer's centenary date. We fasten our seatbelts.

## Larkin100: the centenary year

*Philip Pullen  
Chair of Larkin100*



Philip Larkin would almost certainly have groaned both inwardly and outwardly in equal measure at the thought of any attempt to publicly celebrate the centenary of his birth, and yet part of him would have been equally disappointed if nothing, like something, didn't happen anywhere.

Under the umbrella of Larkin100 we will be promoting a wide range of Larkin-inspired events and activities throughout the year, with something to suit all tastes and all audiences. Taking its cue from Larkin25, the highly successful 2010 festival that marked the 25th anniversary of Larkin's death and brought colourful toads to the highways and byways of Hull and East Yorkshire, Larkin100 aims to extend its reach both within and beyond Hull. It aims to celebrate and give national recognition to the achievements of Larkin the poet and writer; to re-assess his life and work in the context of the 21st century, and to provide a springboard for a new generation of words, poetry, music and graphic art inspired by what Larkin left behind.

At the time of writing, so many of our plans are still to be finalised. Two years of lockdowns and shutdowns means that we are racing to get up to speed in what is undoubtedly a changed world. But things are gradually coming together and there is a growing, and exciting, sense of momentum. The push is towards making August 9th, Larkin's 100th birthday, a day of huge celebration and commemoration, with events taking place in

Larkin's birthplace of Coventry and in Hull, the city where he was to spend the bulk of his adult life. We are especially pleased to be welcoming the Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage, to Hull on August 9<sup>th</sup> for the launch of what we hope will be the first of '100 days of Larkin', with activities and events taking place in as many forms and in as many places associated with Larkin as possible.

There will be some events taking place before August which will also contribute towards making the year 2022 special for Larkin aficionados. The Philip Larkin Society, for example, is proud to be hosting the AGM of the Alliance of Literary Societies in Hull in May, which provides the opportunity to really show off the literary significance of Hull as a city and the part that Larkin played in it. The Society's own AGM, in June, will be held for the very first time in Coventry, at the school which Larkin attended, and will see the launch of a new digital Larkin Trail in the city, which is coming to the end of its year as City of Culture, having taken over that mantle from Hull.

The Philip Larkin Society website now has a page dedicated to Larkin100 and, alongside our regular Twitter posts and newsletters, will become a major source of updated information about the events scheduled to take place. Be sure to keep a keen lookout!



## Hole

### from Canto 1

...And now I faced that huge Pit-Bull  
from Hull or Hurl or Hole, or wherever the Hell  
I was. And it bounds right up, about to lunge...

What's next, again, gets really odd.  
It just stops dead. Well, almost dead,  
but whimpering, tail between its legs. Head

down on the road as low as it could go.  
Then, it pulled back, fearful, and oh-so-very-slow,  
leaving a slick of slime, the gunge from its tongue,

as a gaunt figure stepped from the shadows  
and pushed the creature back with no more  
than the presence of his presence

and his stare. O that stare I could not see. *That stare.*  
I say he stepped out from the shadows,  
but he was himself a shadow of a shadow,

black-clad, with raybanned eyes in a face  
even as he turned I could not quite make out.  
The street-light spilt like the amber liquid: the scene

all hosed with jaundice, as piss or piss-poor beer might mizzle  
all but the ground where his shadow should have been  
— and that Pit-Bull from Hell, Hull, Hurl or Hole

pulled its three-faced chops back into the night,  
shitting as it went.  
Shitting and whimpering as it went.

\*

He turned and I looked into the... O shall I say,  
the *dark energy*, the abyss of time and space  
that was the very quiddity of his visage?

O the alternate physics of his physiognomy:  
what quarks, what strange particularities,  
what quantum leap into the anti-matter

of that place where face should be...?

“O Stranger, I owe you great gratitude.  
O can you tell me whom it is I must repay?  
Though there is something familiar about the attitude

of your darkly noble head; may I remark  
that I feel you have rightly known renown, great fame?  
O Stranger, will you divulge to me your name?”

His features in the darkness seemed to shift,  
and he was all times and none. What were his clothes?  
Biker's leathers, Elizabethan slops?

Perhaps a doublet with medieval hose?  
Was that a ruff I saw about his neck?  
Was that a toga or Byronic cloak?

The Raybans had tortoise-shelled to librarian's specs;  
the head now glistened like a bald man's dome.  
And he was tall and voluminously macked

against the rain which only fell around his form  
as he steadied an old sit-up-and-beg push-bike,  
his ankles dully lustral with cycle-clips,  
like some austere quicksilver messenger.

Shadows flickered. Time and light were fleet.  
My Mercury merged with murkiness. Was gone,  
and I was left on a mean and neon street,

air thick with boom-boxed bass, particulates  
of inner-city fug, of much-fried grease,  
reconstituted slurry, knitted meat.

*Now this is odd, but I tell no lie:  
I sniffed its whiff, looked down to grock,  
in my mitt somehow, an awful pie.*

\*



Cliff Forshaw: *Philip Larkin and the Myth Kitty 1 (Venus) & 2 (Dionysos)*. Both oil on canvas.

from *Canto 2*

the Mall of Hole

from *Canto 3*

Whole

I was relieved to see my Bald Companion,  
so unearthly wise, subfusc and tall,  
wheeling his ancient bike  
through the gleaming Mall.

That Tall Shade, who'd stayed at my elbow still,  
beckoned me on to a large cool store.  
(Was everything in the Mall of Hole so chilled?)

A crowd pulsed at the beat-and-light-throbbled doors,  
kept back by thick-necked guards  
my Trick-Cyclist ignored.

*I'd never seen him ride – a true push-bike?  
Or his psychepompic gears and wheels?  
Had I become this psychic's side-kick?  
How much of this was real?*

He dinged the bell upon his bicycle  
and somehow all fell still  
as if he'd stopped the world itself  
and all its frenzied din.

At once, the crowd had *thinned* – each body become a ghost.  
I followed in his wake as he steered his barque-like bike  
through the insubstantial host...

(O handlebars for bows! O sneer of cold command!  
As if we were the only righteous there,  
and passing through the drowned and damned.)

My Pale Companion led me in  
and all was still that had been loud.  
He leaned upon his Bike and said,  
"Behold the Cut-Price Crowd!"

The World that was the Word made Flesh  
has dripped right through their cyber mesh.  
Webbed life slips through the holey net;  
they think they surf, but they don't get wet."

\*

My guide had already read my mind,  
and now he said: "Oh, yes, I joked  
– though now that *bon mot* makes me ill –  
that *deprivation* was just a theme I worked,  
like Wordsworth's daffodils.

But now I know this death-in-life  
is undeserved, arbitrary, unearned.  
Lately I see:  
could be you or could've been me.  
Useful to get that learned.

The best of all is not to be born, not here.  
(Others parachute into leafy suburbs,  
where the children of the architects  
who designed this place play tennis,  
go off on school trips to ski.)  
But there is yet worse. Much worse."

\*

I remembered my Tall Companion  
had directed me once before.  
I was lamenting my lack of his wisdom  
when I saw the sun  
bounce off his bonce once more.

I glimpsed him, but briefly;  
he was abruptly gone  
somewhere near the station,  
aptly known as *Paragon*.

Inside he started running,  
as if late to catch a train.  
He was, I saw, quite bikeless.  
I lost, then caught again  
something like his likeness,  
but blurred as if by rain.

A rain that showered him alone  
(like first when we two met).  
A man who's neither flesh nor bone,  
to whom I feel I owe a debt.

His legs now moved so slowly fast,  
his body splitting air.  
Was then that *Time* and *Now* grew strange,  
and flipped up *Here* and *There*.

You know how actors run on stage  
while sticking to the spot?  
He blurred quite still, he faded, cleared...  
He shrank into a dot

of pure dynamic nullity which,  
much like his shower of rain,  
was just some aleatoric, metaphysical,  
thaumaturgical thing I can't explain.

In that moment I saw his statue,  
the monument that he'd become:  
that molten man now caught and cast;  
the bronze had struck him dumb.

Deceased, he leaned out from his plinth,  
dead-late to catch his train.  
My Virgil through the labyrinth,  
where I was caught again.

What had survived of him was verse  
as clear or dark as glass.  
But these lines cast here in burnished bronze  
might not outlast this brass.

Had he finished with his poem-cycle?  
Hung up his tarnished clips?  
Was this bike-pushing Archangel Michael,  
still peddling Apocalypse?

Black clouds had formed within the station,  
air liquidised and blurred;  
light gelled to viscous concentration,  
twisted, whorled and stirred.

A storm now brewed to cover  
the platforms and hotel.  
I saw fragmented metaphors  
from Hole, or Hurl or Hell.

The dome released around the statue  
an arrow shower becoming rain,  
as the stationary rush of that late poet  
drew back his unescaping train.

And suddenly it seemed as if  
gravity had centred on  
the fixity of that unescaping,  
his never leaving Paragon.

Perhaps some singularity  
could explain just what I saw.  
– a shift of earth's polarity  
drawing matter into its maw?

There was a din. I heard a cry:  
"Oh, my God, we're fucked!"  
And another came nearby:  
"I hate this stuff. It sucks!"

A drive of improbabilities:

here all that's live meets all that's dead  
in dadaistic synth,  
Wilberforce's head zooms by  
followed by *his* plinth;

fish fly from out the water,  
sailing sky to dive right down,  
in a rain of catfish and doggerel,  
(O most horrible!) upon the town.

Everything that lies upon the coast  
now **RISES** on  
this event horizon:

where **Cinderella** sings *A CAPELLA*  
and a drunk fella with his unlobbed can of *Stella*

flies through the **air** to the chance meeting  
on a dissecting table

of sewing machine and **umbrella**.

It all **ZOOMS** **here**, **dis**appears

down the **space/time** **plughole**

where we see – O what, my **mole**,  
another Underground?

*I SCRY OBSIDIAN GLASS, DAILY MIRROR  
HEADLINES GIVE ME BROKEN ENOCHIAN,  
THE IMMEMORIAL INCANABULA OF SOME  
PANSOPHISTICALL SHOWSTONE.*

### Three-Headed Devil Dog Eats Triplets.

Is this Hole's Worst Mum?

It all goes in, **deserts**, mountains, **poles**.  
The Taj Mahal Tandoori,

*chicken tikka, tarka dhal, bhel puri,*

a bumblebee and the Humber **Bridge**.  
A BOEING and a fridge.

**And** I am pulled...fall toward

and through that  
**black**

**Black**

**Hole**

\*

*Cliff Forshaw*

### *Bedsheets*

Soon we shall make our beds,  
To not return,  
But to beds of oak, ash or wicker  
And a cold earth beneath.  
Life, gone in a flicker.

9/7/21

*Daniel Vince*



# *The Importance of Almost: the selected poems of Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes but not Philip Larkin*

David Green

When Faber published the *Selected Poems of Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes* in 1962, it had been intended that Philip Larkin would have been included as their other headline act but contractual difficulties with the Marvell Press, who owned the rights to the Larkin poems, precluded that possibility. In a letter of 11/7/1961 to Robert Conquest, Larkin writes, 'Montieth has been broaching a tripartite paperback anthology of Thom, Thed, and Yours Thruly, but I don't expect the ponce will play ball.'<sup>1</sup> And he was right. Rarely able to decline any opportunity to disparage his contemporaries among poets, Larkin readily sees himself as the prisoner of the contract he had signed with George Hartley before going on to say of Gunn and Hughes that he 'can't think of any two who affect him less'.<sup>2</sup>

At the time, and for some years to come, Gunn and Hughes, not necessarily in that order, became bracketed together as fashionable English poets, glamorous on account of their ostensible interest in violence, or the threat of it, as contrasted with the downbeat, domestic Larkin who represented a throwback to previous Englands, or at least one stuck where it was, rather than any of the thrills to be had from his rivals. Al Alvarez, most famously, derided Larkin, in his introduction to the anthology *The New Poetry*, also in 1962, for his 'gentility', openly accepting Larkin's 'At Grass' as 'elegant, unpretentious and rather beautiful in its gentle way' but not finding it as compelling as 'A Dream of Horses' by Hughes, of which he says, 'by the standard of Hughes's best writing, is not all that good.'<sup>3</sup> Gunn, in a similarly backhanded way, commented that Larkin was a poet 'of minute ambitions who carried them out exquisitely'<sup>4</sup>.

Alan Bold's study, *Thom Gunn & Ted Hughes*, published by Oliver & Boyd in 1976, did more to make it appear that those two poets had something

like a shared agenda but it treated them in alternating chapters and, certainly by now if not at the time, did little to demonstrate what it was they had in common. If nobody else had noticed the difference before, it was left to Hughes himself in an interview in 1971 to say that he saw Gunn as a poet of 'gentleness'<sup>5</sup>. Putting Gunn and Hughes together had been a bad fit based on superficial appearances from the beginning. Hughes's first books, his best work, identified with real, raw nature in poems about animals. Some indomitable life force, and will, were as implicit in it as the elemental energy and the appreciation of self-contained foxes, jaguars, otters and birds of prey that led to the heartless anti-poetry of *Crow*, from the *Life and Songs of the Crow* in 1972. While that grim fascination was alleged to be 'real', Gunn's early predilection for soldiers, motorcyclists, the postures of Elvis Presley and other men dressed in leather had only so far been an urban, cosmopolitan and artificial thing adopted to serve a purpose. He was reluctant to be himself. In 'Carnal Knowledge', he wrote, 'Even in bed I pose.'<sup>6</sup>

His early books, at least as far as the break halfway through *My Sad Captains*, published in 1961, had been in search of an identity whereas there is no such crisis to be found in Hughes. The armour adopted in defence against a world he felt vulnerable in was never his own, it was what he admired in others and borrowed from them. The irony went largely undetected by readers who took Gunn's swagger at face value as one who, in lines he later found disownable, had written,

I think of all the toughs through history  
And thank heaven that they lived continually.  
I praise the overdogs from Alexander  
To those who would not play with Stephen Spender.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Philip Larkin, *Selected Letters*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (Faber, 1992), 331

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> A. Alvarez, *The New Poetry* (Penguin, 1962), 31

<sup>4</sup> Thom Gunn, *Shelf Life* (Faber, 1993), 225

<sup>5</sup> 'Ted Hughes and Crow': an interview with Egbert Faas, *London Magazine*, Jan 71, 7

<sup>6</sup> Thom Gunn, *Fighting Terms* (Faber, 1954), 20

<sup>7</sup> Thom Gunn, *The Sense of Movement* (Faber, 1957), 30

Had Larkin been included in the tripartite *Selected Poems*, the three might have been more easily identified in a triangular relationship based on their lack of similarity. However, at least until much more recently, it was convenient for literary criticism to put writers into groups only to have to delineate them later.

What Larkin had in common with Gunn was an alleged affiliation to the Movement, the grouping identified anonymously in *The Spectator* on 1 October 1954, by J. D. Scott and/or Anthony Hartley. That nobody who was in it acknowledged such a movement didn't stop it becoming the accepted way of identifying the English poets of the 1950s who had in common their difference from the poetry of the 1940s and, as it soon was to turn out, from each other. For the most part, they were empirical, formal and coherent but whatever qualities Larkin, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings and Gunn were alleged to share in 1954, it wasn't long before they were all more identifiable by their idiosyncrasies than their likeness.

Two more different personalities than Larkin and Gunn would be difficult to invent even if their poetry had made them appear polar opposites. Contemporary reviews of their first mature books, Gunn's *Fighting Terms* in 1954, and Larkin's *The Less Deceived* in 1955, mostly identified them as significant new talents. However, one was soon to adventure his way to California, to live with his boyfriend and indulge in the hedonistic, hippy counter-culture of Jefferson Airplane, LSD and a wider realm of 'experience' and eventually provide *The Listener* magazine with a passably highbrow appreciation of The Beatles. The other meanwhile remained devoutly non-cosmopolitan, provincial and unadventurous, administrative and fogeyish, mentioning The Beatles only in terms of some perceived early 1960s liberation that he found himself unwittingly caught up in.

The *Letters of Thom Gunn*, published in 2021, served to shed more light on the lifestyle that was eventually to lead to the immensely humane reportage from the front line of the AIDS epidemic in *The Man with the Night Sweats* in 1992. Gunn never surrendered his commitment to the libertine, bohemian pursuit of enlightenment or, as he listed among his interests in *Who's Who*, 'cheap thrills'<sup>8</sup>.

Three volumes of Larkin's letters reveal a mawkish devotion to his neurotic mother, some sub-fourth form right-wing banter with his unsuitable friend, Kingsley, and the continued evasion of any commitment to the girlfriend who lived in hope of making an honest man of him. If Gunn's letters display a thoroughgoing promiscuity and indulgence in pursuit of a dangerous idyll that resulted in the loss of so many friends from drug overdoses or sexually transmitted diseases, Larkin's do as much for their shrivelled precaution, their ongoing complaint and the right-wing sympathies that make him appear emotionally incomplete. Although he envied Kingsley Amis's facile successes with attractive women and felt himself so awkward and underachieving in comparison, in his duplicitous, furtive way, he eventually proved able to keep three girlfriends on the go at one time. But it turns out he wasn't quite as modest as it first looked when he turned down the OBE in 1968. That wasn't because he didn't approve of such an award; it has been suggested it was because he thought himself worthy of something better. And he wasn't wrong. CBE, Companion of Honour and the Queen's Medal for Poetry all arrived in their turn whereas when Hughes nominated Gunn for the Queen's Medal, Gunn said no 'on the grounds that it is an inappropriate award for an absentee like me'<sup>9</sup>.

\*

Two of their best-known poems that first appeared in print six months apart show the strategies used by Larkin and Gunn to be similar in literary ways. 'An Arundel Tomb' was published in the *London Magazine* in May 1956 after Gunn's 'On the Move' had been in *Encounter* in December 1955. Both were to become early anthology pieces that they came to be identified with. Both can be seen as 'ironic', undermining what they might be seeming to say. The about-turn in recent decades that has seen literary biography prevail over the primacy of the text has tended to reduce poems to a way of interpreting the poet who has become the object of study but that ought not prevent us from concentrating on the words. While 'On the Move' expresses some admiration for the leather-clad motorcyclists first suggested to Gunn by Marlon Brando's film, *The Wild One* (1953), and,

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Colm Tóibín, *The Genius of Thom Gunn*, in *The New York Review of Books*, Jan 14, 2010 inter alia

<sup>9</sup> Thom Gunn, *The Letters of Thom Gunn*, ed. Michael Nott, August Kleinzahler and Clive Wilmer (Faber, 2021), 546



While Hughes championed poets from Eastern Europe with translations and later produced his *Tales from Ovid*, Larkin and Gunn were more 'literary' in their use of intertextual reference in their own poems. Larkin's 'Sad Steps' refers back to Philip Sidney after whom he was named and 'I Remember, I Remember' comes from Thomas Hood. Gunn's early method of taking Biblical stories such as that of Lazarus or Jesus and his mother as models was revived in his last book, *Boss Cupid* (2000), in 'Dancing David'. 'At the Back of the North Wind' is from a book by George MacDonald, 'Rastignac at 45' lifts a character from Balzac's *La Comédie humaine* and 'In Santa Maria del Popolo' takes a painting by Caravaggio as its ekphrastic starting point. In *About Larkin* (No.18, 2004), Roger Craik found them taking leads from, if not exactly being 'influenced by', each other.<sup>20</sup> Gunn's 'For a Birthday', with its capitalized 'My Darling', looks like a knowing acknowledgement of Larkin's 'If, My Darling' and in the opposite direction, Larkin's 'Livings II' uses a lighthouse as had Gunn's 'Round and Round'.

Despite Gunn and Larkin apparently adopting robust attitudes both in their poems and in their lives, they are poets of sympathy and meticulous in their methods at their best. If Gunn relaxed more than was sometimes good for him in his later work, neither became as diffuse and rambling as Hughes in his later work, including the confessional, laboured *Birthday Letters*. The success of *Crow* seemed to send Hughes off into myth-making other-worldliness whereas *Philip Larkin Poems: Selected by Martin Amis* didn't need Martin Amis to select them: Larkin's quality control had already done the job in the three major volumes which didn't include, for example, 'The Dance' which never made the grade. There are very few poems in the three mature collections that are not worthy of 'Selected' status and, at less than 50 pages each, they add up to something shorter than, for example, *Douglas Dunn's Selected Poems 1964-1983*, at 262.

Though Larkin's private pronouncements became more right-wing, only hints of this leaked into the published poems. His grief for the hedgehog he thought he had killed in 'The Mower' on the other

hand, alongside poems like 'The Explosion', 'Dublinesque' and 'Talking in Bed', show him in the end with pity for more than just himself. Gunn's increasing use of drugs and shared experience meanwhile show him to have developed a sense of community that emanated from *Touch* and the,

dark  
wide realm where we  
walk with everyone.<sup>21</sup>

Those English poets that emerged in the 1950s wrote at first in metre but some were to diverge from it more than others. Gunn's first books wore their metrical discipline like the protective garb of his tough guys but in moving to America he also moved via syllabic verse forms to a free verse style assimilated from the likes of Gary Snyder, but he retained his 'clenched', rhyming, strict forms, too, to become a genuine all-rounder in cricket terms. Hughes said of *Crow* that the idea was, 'originally just to write his songs...In other words, songs with no music whatsoever,' as 'the very sound of metre calls up the ghosts of the past and it is difficult to sing one's own tune against that choir.'<sup>22</sup>

Larkin ventured into free verse in later poems like 'Days', 'Water' and 'The Mower' but was by nature the most traditional in his respect for metre and the need for a two-syllable word to do with heraldry, like 'blazon'. What Larkin and Gunn shared was a 'rigour' that Hughes dispensed with in his search for release from it. For Gunn, it was credited to his time spent studying with Yvor Winters, with his 'exercised intelligence'. His insistence on the crucial difference between being 'disinterested' and 'not interested' and the specific use of a word like 'seeded', not 'sealed', in his 'Tamer and Hawk', show him as precise in his language as Larkin with his subtle music and careful phrasing, 'randy for antique', 'stubbly with goodness' or his fertile catalogue of 'not untrue and not unkind' negative constructions.<sup>23</sup>

The reputations bestowed by posterity have gone in different directions. Larkin was attacked on account of juvenile and misanthropic incorrect attitudes found in the *Selected Letters* published in 1992 before recovering via the 'great, minor poet, like George Herbert' that Anthony Thwaite saw him as

<sup>19</sup> Thom Gunn, *Selected Poems*, ed. Clive Wilmer (Faber, 2017), 246

<sup>20</sup> Roger Craik, Thom Gunn and Philip Larkin, in *About Larkin* no.18, Autumn 2004, 17

<sup>21</sup> Thom Gunn, *Touch* (Faber, 1967), 27

<sup>22</sup> Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), 104

<sup>23</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (Faber, 2003)

at the first Larkin Conference in Hull in 1997 to having lines pass into the language and being added to Hardy, Eliot, Auden and few others as one of the most important English poets of the twentieth century. Hughes, having been vilified no less, was never regarded as less than 'major' from his early, immediate impact with *The Hawk in the Rain*. Gunn struggled to hold on to the eminent status accorded to him early in his career, the 'stylistic uncertainties' misidentified by Edward Lucie-Smith seemingly making him neither wholly English or American, but Donald Davie found him 'shouldering his way to centre stage' as he compiled his survey, *Under Briggflatts*.

Hughes imagined himself breaking away from tradition into his rough-hewn poems of vague, shamanistic import whereas Larkin represented a retro step back from Modernism, the dubious influence of Ezra Pound and a purgative return to common sense. Gunn might have increasingly presented himself as a representative of the counter-culture but was always part of a much deeper literary heritage that included John Donne and Elizabethan poetry. It's even less clear now what the sensibilities of Gunn and Hughes were thought to have in common but, with very little to be found that makes Hughes anything like Larkin, the only remaining common ground is in the tenuous similarities outlined above that make Larkin and Gunn look unlikely cousins. Neither of them, from what they said about each other, might have welcomed the attempt to bring them closer together but, once the poems are in print, it's not for them to say. The impulse to write poems left both Larkin and Gunn in their final years but they ended in contrasting ways. Larkin's last great poem, 'Aubade', was the bleak meditation on mortality whereas Gunn had completed the transition from alienation to an inclusive generosity of spirit like that in 'The Butcher's Son', in which the son had been thought missing but then returns,

Beaming a life charged now  
Doubly because restored,<sup>24</sup>

[and]

Within his hearty smile  
His lips contained his father's  
Like a light within the light  
That he turned everywhere.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Thom Gunn, *Boss Cupid* (Faber, 2000), 18

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 19

### *At Eight I Rise to Suburban Sound*

At eight I rise to suburban sound  
To descend down one flight  
Of stairs

To open the thick red drawn  
And glare at the light blue dawn  
Air

I reascend, reassess and re-  
dress to audit a day of one's own company.

Matched socks up, buttons dressed and glittering  
Listening  
To the neighbour's nattering

Half a measure of cheap coffee  
Half a measure of buttery toast  
Half a measure of shallow hope  
Oh, Thursday  
For today I mope.

It is days like these which fade,  
And drift,  
And draw one to consider:  
What are days for?

Daniel Vince

*An account of one's morning. Of course I do  
not wake at eight, unless it is on a Thursday,  
for then the binmen come.*

## Monica Jones: prize-winning pupil

Geoffrey Weston



Kidderminster High School are in my possession. The first, awarded for her 'A' in the School Certificate in English Literature in the Upper Fifth, 1937-38, was *The Collected Poems of James Elroy Flecker*. Born in 1884, Flecker worked in the consular service in the Eastern Mediterranean, but died of tuberculosis in Switzerland in 1915. His poetry was influenced by the Parnassian style and his death at the age of thirty was described at the time as unquestionably the greatest premature loss that English literature had suffered since the death of Keats.

For her 'A' in the School Certificate in Latin in the same year, Monica received the prize of the novel *Precious Bane* by Mary Webb. Webb was an English romantic novelist and poet of the early twentieth century, whose work was chiefly set in the Shropshire countryside and among Shropshire characters and people whom she knew. The book is characterised by a mingling of peoples, traditions, turns of speech and proverbial wisdom. After her death, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin brought about her commercial success when, at a dinner of the Royal Literary Fund in 1928, he referred to her as a neglected genius.

Monica Jones entered Kidderminster High School on a scholarship in 1935 at the age of thirteen. Describing herself to Andrew Motion as a 'dim, dull girl', she nonetheless impressed her teachers, English Literature being a particular strength.<sup>1</sup> Following her death on 15 February 2001, Dr David Wykes gathered together several recollections from Monica's school friends for publication in *About Larkin*. Eileen Worrall (née Gregory) remembered her as a great reader, brilliantly clever and always top of the class. Mary Southall had a vivid memory of an incident on the school bus. Someone had rudely declaimed, 'Oh, she's swallowed a dictionary!', to which Monica retorted, 'I swallowed one years ago, and now I'm slowly digesting it'.<sup>2</sup>

Four of the prizes awarded to Monica at

Monica's post-Matriculation work in the Upper Sixth, 1939-40, was recognised by the award of A E Housman's *More Poems*. Housman's will, enacted after his death in 1936, permitted his brother Laurence to publish from his verse manuscript writing any poems which appeared to be completed and did not appear to be inferior to the average of his published poems. *More Poems* was the result.

Monica's final prize, for Form work in the Upper Sixth, was awarded in the academic year 1940-41, when she had already left school to take up her open exhibition to read English at St Hugh's College, Oxford. The prize, *The Poems of John Donne*, was obviously invaluable to her Oxford studies: the work is heavily annotated, particularly the Songs and Sonets [sic] section, not only with her own observations but with those of J B Leishman, Fellow of St John's and University Lecturer in English.

<sup>1</sup> 'Monica at school', *About Larkin*, 12, October 2001, pp. 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> Motion, Andrew. *Philip Larkin: a writer's life* (London: Faber, 1993), p.166.



**Tenorman**

A kid, each Sunday I would set  
 The wooden radio to hear  
 Edmundo Ross and there I'd get  
 Over the pure ionosphere  
 An unknown Scottish tenor sax.  
 I never knew that earning dough  
 To pay for food and rent and tax  
 Was Bobby Wellins who would go  
 Beyond the rhumba, he who cried,  
 Who keened, who whooped, who squealed, who  
 made

*Under Milk Wood* a Celtic ride  
 Through Dylan's town and star-filled glade.  
 My Bobby Wellins, you're the man  
 Who ate Coltrane and Zoot and Getz,  
 Swallowed a winged Bird, yet can  
 Sound only like yourself, so let's  
 Buy all his CDs. Here's the prob.  
 That reedy cry, the fibrous sound,  
 The sinewed lyric and the sob  
 Are on the Tracey tracks, unfound  
 Elsewhere for there's yawning gap  
 Where ten years' stunning, running squeal  
 And tender yawp, the Wellins map  
 Of all the complex things we feel,  
 Should be and isn't. What went wrong?  
 Upon the stand our man can send  
 A dozen ideas off on long  
 And dangerous treks and see them bend  
 And twist and, when he's ready, draws  
 The flex and all come home, so where  
 Did Wellins send himself? What cause,  
 That silent sax, the long ten-year  
 Sabbatical? Where did he go?  
 An artist, and alive, and never blow?

Outgrowing Rhumba Ross, Ted Heath,  
 A student in the clubs of Leeds,  
 With girlfriend Sue, a pal called Keith,  
 A beer in hand, I heard the reeds  
 Of Zoot, of Tubby Hayes and copped  
 Sophistication, so I thought.  
 You dig? The penny hadn't dropped  
 And hung suspended till I caught  
 The Wellins wail in middle age

And all the time the man was gone.  
 Did he, like Pepper, feel a rage  
 To make his veins like rods of neon  
 To feel some solipsistic power?  
 Or like Red Rodney, turn to crime  
 And in some cell and by the hour,  
 Like Lionel Hampton, tap and chime  
 The bars and make believe they're vibes?  
 I like to think that Wellins went  
 Into the deep where the seal abides,  
 That by some magic that is meant  
 For genius to draw upon  
 He learned the wheeling 'cark' of gull  
 And down below the solemn boom  
 Of surf that's coursing into Mull.  
 The welkin darkens, Wellins goes,  
 Hops tide, glides off from Scottish shores,  
 Rides on the gulf where the whale blows,  
 The dolphin goes. Our man explores  
 To where he finds the warmer climes.  
 He breaks the waves' translucent sheen  
 And over sparkling shingle climbs.  
 The mist retreats, and there's the scene:  
 See where a golden city stands.  
 It suns itself and through it rolls  
 A river holding in its hands  
 A paddle steamer from whose poles  
 Unrolling banners in the breeze  
 Spell out a name we know from dreams,  
 A city lemon-lit, of ease,  
 Both old and always New Orleans.  
 Wellins, who's learned the seal's bark,  
 The dolphin's gibber and his wail,  
 Is warping time and now can mark  
 From blocks away, but it is frail,  
 The sound of Buddy Bolden's horn,  
 To us a legend, tale; a tune  
 To Wellins hearing it reborn,  
 And strolling through the city's noon.  
 And just as Johnny Hodges did  
 (a leap in years) Bob learns to scat-  
 ter notes with Sidney Bechet, hid  
 Out with the Bird up north, the cat  
 Who turned the music all around.  
 The hushing Webster, Prez, the Hawk,  
 Wherever you can hear the sound  
 Of saxes' gentle syrup, squawk  
 Or intricate chromatic slide,

No matter now the 'Where or When',  
 Wellins is playing at their side  
 With Lester, Benny, John or Ben.  
 Hey, tell me who's the unknown Brit  
 Who gave the Bird a plastic sax?  
 Don't bother, listen as they hit  
 Each note exact, as true as facts,  
 As true as love, the final word,  
 The always there inferred. He went  
 Into the language shared by Bird  
 And Brit, the heard, the element  
 That states at last the love and pain.  
 Depth-seeker, stalker of the phrase  
 That unifies the rippling skein,  
 Time-travelling down the distant days,  
 He cuts *Nomad* – a code? I'm glad  
 The sailor's home from sea, a jazz-  
 Man's *Iliad* complete, the bad,  
 The good resolved, the Alcatraz  
 Of woe escaped, the height regained.  
 Out walking in the early dawn  
 The light is pure because it rained.  
 Hear, hear across the sea the horn  
 Of Neptune, Wellins, who can say?  
 It summons up the refreshed day.

John Mowat

### ***Rainyday Woman***

And poetry is like the sort of girlfriend  
 That leaves you on account of all your drinking  
 Which you say isn't half as bad as she says  
 But still she won't come back until you stop.

I know the Köchel numbers of sonatas,  
 The name that Alpha Cygni's better known by,  
 The scores from long-forgotten cricket matches,  
 And that is all the use I claim to be.

We commit to no more than rainy Wednesdays  
 In suburbs where the library's always closed then,  
 And I perform repeats of all the stories  
 She's heard before in slightly different versions  
 And then, if I'm polite enough to do so,  
 I ask her how she is but not to dance.

David Green

### ***Summer Song***

She sang all summer long  
 after the baby came:  
 'Look what I've got!  
 Look what I've got!'  
 she seemed to say.

And the birds joined in with her  
 from the thick-leaved wood below:  
 'I'm on my second clutch!  
 I'm on my second clutch!'  
 they piped preposterously.

Yet was it part-relief  
 to have survived the birth,  
 mother and baby both?  
 And the bird-song  
 inarticulating in the wood

might as well be saying:  
 'Keep off magpie!  
 Keep off crow!'  
 subverting the usual  
 sentimental glow.

Andrew Thomas

### ***Remembering 'The Trees'***

They hang there like worn flags,  
 Undergarments crisping in the last of the sun  
 By the tall windows of my flat.  
 A clothes maiden full.  
 Why 'maiden' I wonder  
 As I tidy the tired lace  
 Of the once romantic pants,  
 Faded in a Havisham manner.  
 Years before this, weary of love,  
 With the champagne glasses  
 Having left your table  
 Scarred with ring marks,  
 I've memories of reading 'The Trees' with you,  
 Overcome by the truth of it.

Jane Moth

# Germany Calling

*Philip Pullen*



Philip Larkin hardly ever ventured abroad, that is to say beyond the confines of the British Isles. We can almost count on the fingers of one hand the number of times he left these shores<sup>1</sup>: Brussels on a school trip in 1939; Paris with his friend Bruce Montgomery in 1952; and three visits to Germany, twice in the mid 1930s with his parents, and once more in 1976, accompanied by Monica Jones, when he flew to Hamburg for an overnight visit to accept a literary award. Larkin famously said that

his teenage visits to Germany ‘sowed the seed of my hatred of abroad’ and a number of reasons have been put forward to try to explain what triggered this negative response. Larkin himself pointed to his inability to speak or understand the language and the acute embarrassment this had caused him<sup>2</sup>, especially his misunderstanding of a question from a bus driver about whether he liked Germany. Larkin assumed he’d been asked whether he had been to Germany before and replied in the

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity this excludes the visits to the Channel Islands which Larkin made, firstly to Jersey with his parents in 1939 and on various occasions on holidays to Guernsey and Sark with Monica Jones in the 1950s and 60s

<sup>2</sup> See Larkin’s interview with Miriam Gross in Thwaite (ed.) *Philip Larkin: Required Writing Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber, 1983), 47

negative<sup>3</sup>. But there are other factors, much closer to home, that may also have contributed to this unfortunate outcome, not least his relationship with his father.

The Larkin family connection with Germany was driven very energetically by Philip's father, Sydney, whose admiration for the country was clearly something he encouraged the rest of the family to share and experience firsthand, with varying degrees of success. While both Eva and Kitty Larkin developed a lifelong love of the country, Philip did not. What was it that accounted for this difference in response? As ever, in telling the Larkin story context is everything and it is well worth delving into the archival evidence to look for further clues.

Like many of his contemporaries in the 1920s and 30s, Sydney admired the effectiveness of Germany's post-war recovery, and, from a professional perspective as Coventry's City Treasurer, appreciated the country's efficient system of local government. Unfortunately, it was a position that would also lead him dangerously close to the politics of fascism. Larkin admitted that his father 'had been an ardent follower of the Nazis and attended several Nuremberg rallies during the 1930s', although there is no evidence that Sydney Larkin ever joined or supported a fascist organization, and certainly no indication that this was an aspect of German history that appealed in any way to his son.

It is worth bearing in mind that Sydney Larkin made two very different types of visit to Germany in the 1930s. Firstly, there were the various excursions he made while acting in an official or semi-official capacity as City Treasurer or as President of the Institute of Municipal Accountants. On some of these visits he would be accompanied by his wife, Eva<sup>4</sup>. Secondly, there were the holiday visits. These would<sup>5</sup> often take the form of what we would now call a 'package holiday' organised by a travel company and it is these that I shall be focusing on here, in particular the two visits which included Philip Larkin in 1936 and 1937. They

provide some fascinating insights into Larkin family life during the 1930s and the ways in which Germany created a lasting impression on each family member.

Not long after the First World War had ended, Germany began to receive a growing number of foreign visitors as a modern tourism industry started to emerge across Europe, facilitated by easier travel arrangements by motor bus, automobile and train. Julia Boyd's fascinating account of travellers to Germany during this period captures the way in which a combination of curiosity, enthusiasm, blind-eye-turning, promotion by travel companies such as Thomas Cook and deliberate image manipulation and full-on propaganda by the Third Reich encouraged a perception of Germany as an enjoyable holiday destination, despite the alarming undertones of an increasingly brutal political regime.

You did not have to be pro-Nazi to marvel at the green countryside, the vineyard-flanked rivers or the orchards stretching as far as the eye could see. Meanwhile, pristine mediaeval towns, neat villages, clean hotels, the friendliness of the people and the wholesome cheap food, not to mention Wagner, windowboxes, foaming steins of beer, drew holidaymakers back year after year even as the more horrific aspects of the regime came under increasing scrutiny in their own countries.<sup>6</sup>

The Larkins first holidayed in Germany in August 1934. It was the first time that the whole family had not taken a holiday together. Leaving Philip and Kitty to spend a summer break with their grandparents in Colwyn Bay, Sydney and Eva embarked on a tour of the Rhineland.

As with previous holidays taken in England, Sydney Larkin's diaries provide a major source of evidence for what took place during the German visits. These fascinating travelogues, preserved in the Larkin Archive, contain precise detail about journey times and routes taken (train to London, boat train to Ostend via Folkestone, train to

<sup>3</sup> See Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin, A Writer's Life*, (London: Faber, 1993), 26

<sup>4</sup> For example, Sydney and Eva attended the International Congress of Accounting in Berlin in 1938/1939

<sup>5</sup> The Motion biography states that the idea behind the visits was that 'Sydney would combine some of his 'business' interests with a few days sight-seeing'. In fact, a close reading of the diary account reveals that the trips he made with family members were overwhelmingly holiday orientated.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Boyd, *Travellers in The Third Reich: the rise of fascism through the eyes of everyday people*, (London: Eliot & Thompson), 3



Cologne and then on down to the Rhine for a river cruise), places of interest visited and activities undertaken. As such, they are similar in tone and content to the diaries used in earlier years to record the family's excursions to places like Bigbury-on-Sea and Newquay. Sydney continues to make acerbic observations of fellow travellers and of people encountered *en route*. One additional fascinating feature of the German diaries, however, is the way they reflect the contemporary political and social landscape the family experienced and from which they could not escape. The pages of the 1934 diary, for example, contain pasted-in photographs of Swastika-bestowed streets, not untypical of the kinds of 'holiday snaps' that any other visitor might have brought back with them at the time. The holiday also coincided with the death of the German President von Hindenburg on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1934, an event which led to Hitler taking over supreme power as Führer and Chancellor. Sydney's diary records the death of Hindenburg but considers and remarks on it only in terms of the detrimental impact it had on the holiday.



On this day died Von Hindenburg [sic] and the event had considerable effect on our holiday in that all music was stopped. We therefore had to spend our evenings drinking in taverns instead of dancing in cafes.<sup>7</sup>

The visit also coincided with the tricentenary of the famous passion play in Oberammergau which Sydney and Eva attended on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1934, an event which brought very large crowds to the village in Bavaria. The experience of watching the play and of the village itself had very different effects on them. Eva's excitement and enthusiasm is expressed in a postcard she sent to her daughter, Kitty: 'We have seen the first part of the Passion play. We return to the theatre at 2 o'clock till six. It is wonderful.'<sup>8</sup> Sydney, on the other hand, dismissed it as 'the most commercialised piece of religion conceivable' and questioned the authenticity of the lead actor.<sup>9</sup> However, he did concede that the play had been 'very finely produced.'

Sydney and Eva holidayed in mainland Europe again in 1935, this time visiting Freiburg, Schönau, and Basle. The following year they took Philip with them on a tour of Cologne, Königswinter and Wernigerode in the Harz Mountains. He had just turned fourteen. One of the most fascinating features of this particular visit, a tour organised through Thomas Cook, is the fact that the family crossed the channel by plane, travelling from Croydon to Cologne and thus were amongst the earliest of commercial air passengers. It was not the smoothest of journeys, especially on the return trip. Sydney's account gives us an interesting flavour of these pioneer years of commercial air flight.

We set off in due course for the aerodrome, which is a very fine one with acres of flat ground all round it. There was tremendous ado with examining tickets, luggage weights, passports, money etc with a totally inadequate staff [...] There were also too many people for one plane and we were consequently split up into two parties, one to go directly to London, the other to call at Brussels. We were in the later party. In

<sup>7</sup> Sydney Larkin's diary for 1934. Hull History Centre, DLN1/3

<sup>8</sup> Postcard from Eva Larkin to Kitty Larkin, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1934, uncatalogued, History Centre, Hull

<sup>9</sup> Anton Lang, the most famous of the passion players. He played the part of Jesus on several occasions and spoke the prologue in 1934.



going to Brussels we were in a German plane similar to the one we came in, but whereas in coming we kept for the most part to a height of 2000 metres, in going to Brussels we did not rise above 500 Metres and much of the time we were less than that. Whether because of the flight or some other cause I don't know, but Philip became ill and was on the point of being sick when we landed at Brussels.<sup>10</sup>

Once again, the diary details suggest a typical sight-seeing holiday in a foreign country, with visits to cultural sites interspersed with afternoons of swimming or lounging in deckchairs, and evenings spent in cafés and bier kellers. Sydney tells us that Eva and Philip also spent their time reading and writing letters. Sydney showed a great fondness for evenings spent drinking, singing and dancing.

After supper we all repaired to Das Gasthaus zu der Vier Loewen, where dancing was to be in the upper room. The company was very numerous, all the long tables being filled with people. The dances were splendid [...]

There were several Bavarian fellows there, in costume, and one of them yodelled for us very skilfully. His tongue work and articulation was marvellous.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that the holiday may not have suited Philip as much as his parents becomes painfully clear from Sydney's diary. It reports that he frequently fell ill after eating or drinking and was put out by not being able to attend a cinema showing with his parents as the film was categorised as being for adults only. Listening to a Bavarian yodeller is unlikely to have appealed to a young man whose musical ear was already becoming finely tuned towards jazz bands.

In 1937, Philip was to return to Germany, this time accompanied only by his father. Booth suggests that Sydney had intended this to be an exercise in male bonding characterised by Sydney's 'determination to find a good place for 'bier', in order to initiate his son into this adult masculine pleasure.'<sup>12</sup> But Philip was exposed to more than just his father's company, as this holiday took the form of an organised tour of the Rhineland with a party of adults chiefly in their twenties and thirties. Sydney's diary is curiously fixated on recording the characteristics and foibles of these fellow travellers, particularly the female members of the group.

Audrey : Small, about 5 ft high, dark hair, blue eyes, quiet and simple voice, age uncertain - anything from 20 to 30 - always making friends and a great favourite with all the boys wherever she went - was never five minutes without "clicking" with a boyfriend - never a girl. When asked where Audrey was, May always said: "She's doing her stuff."

May Friend of Audrey [...] Shrieks with laughter at her own jokes. Had her serious moments and was full of common sense.<sup>13</sup>

Altogether Sydney presents pen portraits of 18 party members and their leader, Herr Esser ('Not a good one. He only led on occasions.'). It is not difficult to imagine the potential embarrassment

<sup>10</sup> Sydney Larkin's holiday diary 1936, Hull History Centre, DLN 1/5

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> James Booth, *Philip Larkin: life, art and love*, (London: Faber, 2014), 21

<sup>13</sup> Sydney Larkin's holiday diary 1936, Hull History Centre, DLN 1/6



Sydney's attitude and behaviour may have caused his young teenage son.

There is more to discover about this group. Among some uncatalogued photographs in the Larkin Archive is a group photograph which includes Philip and Sydney. It was taken at the National Monument, the Niederwalddenkmal, in Rüdesheim on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1937 and provides further clues about the nature of the holiday itself. The sign 'W.T.A.' at the bottom of the picture indicates that the tour had been organised through the Workers Travel Association.

The WTA was founded in 1921 by the British trades union and cooperative movement. It was an organisation intended to enable travel and holidays at an affordable price for working class people with the aim of 'promoting the growth of mutual understanding between workers of all countries.'<sup>14</sup> Perhaps an element of the peaceful intentions behind the movement is reflected in a little incident recorded in Sydney's account of the day spent in Rudesheim:

German said to one of our party at the national memorial who had been wounded in the war, speaking of the war, "Ach, it was not good!" Our wounded man: "Lousy!"<sup>15</sup>

Once again, the diary entries reveal some aspects of historical detail in terms of world events. During a cinema visit the family watched a newsreel of the Duke of Windsor's wedding and another featuring the Derby. Another entry offers a fascinating description of travelling by motor coach along a new state Autobahn to Heidelberg: 'a wonderful road with one way traffic and none other than motor traffic,' Sydney writes, 'The junctions with other similar roads are done by bridges. No ordinary road joins this motor road.'

Sydney gives fewer indications of his son's attitude during this visit, in fact he hardly mentions him.

Where Philip does get referred to it is most often in the context of him feeling tired or going to bed early. On the journey home from Ostend, Sydney reports dolefully, Philip 'felt bad all the way'.

There seem to have been multiple reasons for the negative impact the two German trips had on Philip. In several respects, it could not have been described as a very comfortable experience. Being 'abroad' had paradoxically brought him closer to some awkward aspects of his home life, as well as exposing him to challenging social encounters that he may have found very difficult to embrace or deal with satisfactorily, particularly with a debilitating stammer and no proper grasp of the language. His mother, at least, seemed to have understood his dilemma. Writing to Philip in 1966 and recalling the German holidays of the 1930s she remarked, 'I wondered whether Daddy would have been so keen on it if he had visited it when he was younger, about the age you were when you set foot there first.'<sup>16</sup>

Eva's own experiences of Germany were far more positive. Her letters recall the joys of holidays spent in the Black Forest and elsewhere. In 1953, her memories were invoked by a group of German students visiting Loughborough: 'it did seem strange to hear the German accent again, and my thoughts went back to the old days when Daddy and I had such happy holidays in Germany. What a different person I feel now!'<sup>17</sup> Similar positive feelings must have been evoked in Kitty too, who holidayed with her father in Berlin in 1938 and after the war would enjoy several holidays in Germany and Austria with her husband, Walter, including a visit to Oberammergau in August 1970. As for Sydney, had he lived beyond 1948, perhaps his relationship with Germany would have continued. Writing to Philip in November 1945, he tells him that he is 'still flirting with the German Commission.'

They now want to see me. I think I could easily get a job with them and if you really

<sup>14</sup> Sydney was no stranger to organised holidays organised by trade or professional organisations, having arranged a family holiday at the National Association of Local Government Officer's (NALGO) holiday camp at Cayton Bay near Scarborough in 1933.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Eva Larkin to Philip Larkin, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1966, uncatalogued

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Eva Larkin to Philip Larkin, U DPL 4/9/35, History Centre, Hull. It is unfortunate that Eva's own written reflections of those holidays have been lost. She told Philip that Sydney had given her a black notebook in which to record her own notes during their holidays, but when she went to seek it out in later life had been disappointed to discover that she had torn out all of her notes.

would like to be made to realise how well you are off come and take my place here while I go to teach the Germans how to govern themselves in the English fashion!<sup>18</sup>

Philip Larkin's final visit to Germany took place on 19 April 1976, when, along with Monica Jones, he flew to Hamburg to receive the Shakespeare Prize from the FVSA Foundation. It was a visit that he made reluctantly and worried about for months beforehand, although ultimately, it appeared to be a success. Larkin's reported reactions to the visit varied according to with whom he was corresponding, but they were not generally positive or complimentary. Typically, he reserved his most negative reflections for letters sent to Kingsley Amis, Charles Monteith and Robert Conquest, telling Conquest that his address had been 'devoted to the theme of how giving talks and readings and generally living the life of Riley sods you up as a poet. Since it was all in English nobody understood and I got no laughs but the chap before me got no laughs in German, so that was all right.'<sup>19</sup>

Larkin's comments may well have been more than a little disingenuous. As Andrew Motion noted, he chose to overlook 'the excitement and pleasure which show in his and Monica's faces in photographs taken at the prize giving.'<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the account given to Winifred Bradshaw a month earlier reflects his real feelings more honestly. 'It was the first time I'd been abroad since I went to Paris for four days in 1952,' Larkin told her, 'and I'm greatly relieved to be back. They were all very kind, but oh, the strain.'<sup>21</sup>



Hamburg, 1976. Monica seated in front row.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Sydney Larkin to Philip Larkin, 19 November 1945, U DPL 4/9/28, History Centre, Hull<sup>19</sup> Letter from Philip Larkin to Robert Conquest, 26 May 1976, in Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940 – 1985*, (London, Faber, 1992), 541

<sup>20</sup> Op. cit, 458

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Philip Larkin to Winifred Bradshaw (nee Arnott), 26 April 1976, in Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940 – 1985*, (London, Faber, 1992), 541



Selfie, 1957

### *Sunday Shave*

Take one measure of foam and  
Apply to one's cheek  
Under chin  
And the firm upper lip.

Take a stainless blade to skin  
Vertical first,  
Horizontal second,  
Styptic on standby.

Draw the tepid water to a shallow level  
And shake off excess to  
Cleanse, prune and scape  
What lies on the face still.

Until one looks up to think,  
Why Sunday is a good day to shave.  
For a week without work, or friend?

Or a week with oneself  
Or drink.

1/7/21  
Daniel Vince

# Red Martini

## Part 1

*Tom Miller discusses Philip Larkin's relationship with Kingsley Amis*

*I must open by stressing that all the quotes from Kingsley are factual. When we were discussing Judgment at Winchester, I was permitted to make notes of Kingsley's criticisms, and of course other material entered the record. I had no need to make anything up, even if I had had a mind to, and I did not, because he was such a dazzling conversationalist.*

\*

The bulging bad book of Kingsley Amis contained many well-known names.

He deplored, for instance, A. J. Ayer ('A dreadful man... Utter egoist... No sense of humour'), Princess Diana, who might be 'wicked', the 'epicene' Marlene Dietrich, Peter Hall, Rex Harrison ('He was even for an actor enormously stupid'), Edward Heath and Roy Jenkins ('Pompous buffoons'), Danny Kaye ('Oh, Christ! Oh, God!... Bad at being a human being, and full of schmalz'), James Mason who 'didn't try hard enough', John Osborne ('My heart sank when he came into the room'), Peter Ustinov ('Merit-free and talent-free, but not \*\*\*\* free') and Shirley Williams ('People think that she is sincere because her clothes are a mess and she doesn't get her hair done').

Worst of all was the Queen Mother: 'I hate her,' he reported on November 28, 1987, over lunch at Bentley's. 'She was once very rude to me'.

The reference to Peter Hall deserves amplification: our relevant talk at the Carlton Tower on June 7, 1984, ran like this:

TM (about Poppea at Glyndebourne): The music was all right, but the production, by Peter Hall, was awful. Jane (my wife) thinks that Glyndebourne is now so fashionable that producers can strive for effects for their own sakes, regardless of whether they are going to help the audiences enjoy the music.

KA: Peter Hall will do anything! I heard him at a Foyle's Literary lunch, in honour of that important contemporary writer, Dirk Bogarde. (Laughter.) Peter Hall gave the encomium. Unfortunately, he forgot that he wasn't among theatre people. He said, 'Dirk has never been content to rest on his laurels... First, he was a great movie star... Not content with that, he became a great actor... Still looking for new

worlds to conquer, he became -- and I use the word advisedly -- a great novelist!' Well, there hasn't been a great novelist since Dickens.

TM: Not even the author of *Lucky Jim*?

KA: No. As Larkin says, 'We're only taken seriously because there is so little competition'. Peter Hall is a terrible, terrible fellow.

The traffic however was not all one way...

Kingsley applauded, among others, Yul Brynner who 'gave an immense amount of pleasure to millions of people', Daphne du Maurier, Ian Fleming, Dick Francis, George MacDonald Fraser, Graham Greene ('He can write, damn him!'), the 'transparent' Alec Guinness, the 'very sweet' Audrey Hepburn, the 'absolute knockout' Deborah Kerr, Gavin Lyall, Vera Lynn, Fred MacMurray, Laurence Olivier ('You can't go wrong with the Shakespeare films'), the novelist Elizabeth Taylor and the early work of Evelyn Waugh, though his later books were too propagandistic.

However, when I asked him, at the White House, Regent's Park, on March 19, 1981, who were the most impressive people whom he had ever met, he instantly gave the names of Tibor Szamuely, Robert Conquest and, 'of course, Philip Larkin: he's better than me'. (I reciprocated by naming Archbishop Lord Fisher, Sir Stuart Hampshire and Kingsley himself.) At the Savoy Grill on October 7, Kingsley said that Mr Larkin was better as a poet than Anthony Powell was as a novelist, which was why he had not named Powell on the earlier occasion.

The reader is entitled to ask how I was able to make voluminous notes on conversations with the novelist.

I had been an admirer of Kingsley Amis' novels for some time, but interest hardened into fascination when I read his *The Alteration* (1976), because his counterfactual world reminded me strongly of Aldous Huxley's studies of the Counter-Reformation, *Grey Eminence* and *The Devils of Loudun*. Somehow, I had to meet the author. Fortunately, opportunity presented itself, because, through the late Julian Critchley MP, I had

a loose connection with the old *Illustrated London News*, and editor Jim Bishop permitted me to interview the novelist. I got the sense that I had made a favourable impression on Amis, and bravely, because he did not suffer fools gladly, I invited him and Jane Howard, to whom he was then married, to join my wife and me for a performance of *The Magic Flute* at Glyndebourne.

The evening was a great success, and Jane Howard asked me to lunch in London. On this occasion, I mentioned that I wanted to write another counterfactual novel, *Judgment at Winchester*, in which, after the Axis powers have won World War II, the Anglo-American leaders are put on trial in a historic Southern city. Kingsley offered to help with this project, and a long series of lunches ensued, at which Kingsley commented on manuscripts that I had sent. *Judgment at Winchester* never achieved publishable standard (this is probably a good thing, because otherwise I should have been associated with anti-Semitic sentiments, that I do not share, uttered by Nazi characters), but the effort was well worth while, because I learnt an immense amount about plotting and construction, and I was permitted to make notes that covered a variety of subjects.

Naturally, Mr Larkin often came up in conversation. However, he was never used by Kingsley in a novel, though Monica Jones stands behind Margaret Peel in *Lucky Jim*. Specifically, Larkin is not the source of the character Embleton in *You Can't Do Both*, as Kingsley reported at the White House on October 21, 1994. (At the same restaurant on November 4, 1993, I asked if the picture of the character Peter Thomas on the jacket of his novel *The Old Devils* was based on the appearance of Mr Larkin, but this is not the case.) The reverse is not true...

Larkin, despite his masculine appearance, entertained doubts about his sexuality and invented a female alter ego, Brunette Coleman. With her help, he wrote a novel, *Jill*, partly set in a girls' school in which we read about one Patsy Hammond:

*Patsy was indeed Jill's only friend. They were roughly the same age and had been new girls in the fourth form, which was rather late to enter the school. Patsy was smaller than Jill, with a pale, doleful face, dark hair and expressive hands, and could make Jill sick with laughing. She could imitate almost*

*anybody. Together, they had formed an alliance against the rest of the world.*

Jill is upset when Patsy is taken away from the school, much as Larkin was distressed when Kingsley was called up and obliged to leave Oxford.

(Kingsley also appears as Lester Ince in C. P. Snow's *The Affair*; as Donald Fisher in John Wain's *A Winter in the Hills*; as Peter Rugeley in John Braine's *One and Last Love*; and as Duncan Cambus in Iris Murdoch's *The Book and the Brotherhood*.)

At the Carlton Tower on February 2, 1985, we were considering University education, and I reminded Kingsley that he had once quoted a friend saying, 'In England, if you are any good, you go to Oxford or Cambridge'. Kingsley replied, 'That's Larkin! He talks about the emotional and physical conjunction of the places.' A little later, we discussed 'reference figures', that is, persons whose opinion is important to one: Kingsley gave as his reference figures Robert Conquest and Philip Larkin. At the same lunch, I commented on Kingsley's correct insistence on judging people and things at first hand. He replied that, 'I was half-sure that Ezra Pound and Picasso were no good, but it took a nudge from Larkin to make me confident enough to say, "I don't like it."'

John Wain, whom Kingsley disliked, came under criticism at the Hyde Park Hotel on March 28, 1985. Kingsley reported that, 'Larkin thinks that Wain has a corny mind. He listened to Wain narrating a jazz programme on the radio. Mind you, Wain is well qualified to do that. I was a bit disappointed not to be asked to do one myself. Anyway, Wain said things like, "Well, Joe, wherever you may be..." Larkin thought he couldn't be doing it for real'.

Later, I asked why Larkin had never married. The conversation then ran:

KA: General lack of drive and selfishness. I'm selfish and I judge you to be selfish...

TM: Heavens, yes!

KA: But Larkin is much worse. Most young men are so keen to get it that they're prepared to promise a girl half of everything in order to persuade her... Larkin was too sharp for that!

*to be continued ...*

## Awkward Reverence

This article was first published by the Orwell Society ([www.orwellsociety.com](http://www.orwellsociety.com)) in its Journal No. 18, Spring 2021.

John Boaler

Despite almost a generation separating them and their contrasting political views – with one being a great poet, the other a great prose writer – John Boaler sees a surprising number of affinities and connections that link Philip Larkin and George Orwell.

“That intolerable woman upstairs has purchased a wireless set,” he said. “I had been hoping to live out the rest of my life out of the sound of those things.”

### Porteous to George Bowling, in Orwell’s *Coming Up For Air*<sup>1</sup>

“...So it happens that I lie  
Where Mr Bleaney lay...  
...and try

Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool, to drown  
The jabbering set he egged her on to buy.”

### Philip Larkin, ‘Mr Bleaney’<sup>2</sup>

Christopher Hitchens noted that Philip Larkin, while a student at Oxford, once met Orwell when he was invited to speak to the ‘English Club’ on the topic of “Literature and Totalitarianism”, and that Larkin later told his biographer Andrew Motion that Orwell was one of his first literary inspirations. This is surprising given that the two men might seem to have been polar opposites. Yet Hitchens sees a surprising convergence in the way the two writers evoke ‘England’, referencing the final pages of *Homage to Catalonia* and Larkin’s 1972 poem ‘Going, Going’, finding a common mood of “melancholy and pessimism.” He also notes a similarity in their attitude to religion but takes his Orwell-Larkin comparison no further “in the undeclared contest for the most symbolic Englishman.”<sup>3</sup>

Their education and working lives were quite different. Larkin went to grammar school and then to Oxford University; Orwell attended Eton College on a scholarship, but did not go to university. Larkin had a full-time career as a librarian. Apart from his five years as a policeman in Burma, Orwell never pursued any career, other than writing. He took a succession of short-term and part-time jobs (including teaching, tutoring, running the village stores in Wallington, BBC talks assistant, literary editor of *Tribune*) but these were always secondary, and, with the exception of the BBC post (which he took essentially as a way to back the country’s war effort), done to support his writing. Larkin’s literary reputation rests mostly on three slim volumes of poetry, though he also published two novels, reviewed books and jazz records, and edited *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*. Orwell, despite his early death (he died at 46; Larkin at 63), is estimated to have written two million words, and his fame largely rests on *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and his essays.

In adulthood Orwell was, certainly compared to Larkin, industrious and engaged both as a writer and *beyond* his writing. His *Complete Works* comprise 20 volumes. In addition to five years in Burma as a policeman, and the various other jobs mentioned above, he lived in Paris for a year, managed a small-holding, regularly reviewed books, married twice, fought in Spain, had long spells in hospital, spent some months convalescing in Morocco, joined the Home Guard, published six novels, and reported from France and Germany at the end of the Second World War.

Orwell met and came to know many contemporary leading literary and intellectual figures (e.g. Eliot, Spender, Connolly, Russell, Ayer, Koestler) during the 1940s, but Larkin largely shunned such company and associations, keeping up mostly with old university friends such as Kingsley Amis, John

<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, *Coming up for Air* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1939), p. 155

<sup>2</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 81

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *Orwell’s Victory* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 111

Wain and Bruce Montgomery/ Edmund Crispin.

When he died in 1950, Orwell was at the height of his powers. By the time Larkin died, he had virtually stopped writing, and had not published a book of poems for over ten years, the last being *High Windows* (1974).

But I think it was in their politics (nostalgia apart) that the two writers diverged most – Orwell the democratic socialist: Larkin right-wing, a Tory and admirer of Margaret Thatcher.

Yet despite these many differences, Orwell and Larkin have more in common than Hitchens noted.

1. Both were self-effacing, modest, no-nonsense Englishmen.
2. Orwell and Larkin loved the English countryside.
3. Each sought to escape distraction and unwelcome attention: Orwell in 1946, when he left London and moved to Jura to concentrate on writing *Nineteen Eighty Four*; Larkin, happy to remain in Hull, knowing it put him beyond the reach of metropolitan journalists and other writers.
4. Both were rejected for military service in WW2 regarding their health.
5. Both had clear, plain writing styles. Orwell said: “Whoever writes English ...is struggling against vagueness, against the encroachment of Latin and Greek, and, above all, against the worn-out phrases and dead metaphors with which the language is cluttered up.”<sup>4</sup> He regretted the “purple passages” in his early novels “in which words were used partly for the sake of their sound”.<sup>5</sup> Larkin’s poetry is notable for the lucidity of its language.
6. Larkin consciously avoided drawing on the “myth kitty” in his poetry (unlike e.g. Eliot and

Auden) and drew exclusively on modern life for his subjects. Orwell, despite his classical education, makes barely a reference in his writings to ancient Greek or Roman history, literature or mythology.

John Rodden notes the huge impact Orwell had on the Anglo-American generation which came of age in the decade following World War II, and describes how “Orwell’s plain voice influenced the tone and attitude of Larkin’s poetry (and that of several other Movement poets).”<sup>6</sup>

Larkin in “The Writer in His Age”<sup>7</sup> said: “...good writing is most likely to deal with present-day situations in present-day language, but only because good writing is largely a matter of finding proper expression for strong feelings, and those feelings are most likely to arise from the writer’s own experiences and will be most properly expressed in his own language...” That sounds almost like Orwell. And in an interview with John Haffenden<sup>8</sup> Larkin stated “... I don’t want to transcend the commonplace, I love the commonplace...Everyday things are lovely to me.” This reminds me of Orwell’s celebrations of the perfect pub, toads mating, comic postcards etc., and, like Hitchens, of the last page of *Homage to Catalonia*. The convergences between the two writers go beyond mood and tone.

Philip Larkin edited *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973) and rather perversely, I think, included in it the poem “A Wartime Exchange.” It comprises ten satirical stanzas by the pacifist Alex Comfort, and Orwell’s response, in the same vein, in a further ten stanzas. In my opinion, neither poem is good enough to deserve inclusion in this prestigious anthology. Together they comprise 300 lines of verse – more lines that Larkin allocates to Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen, and several other well-established poets. I suspect his personal regard for Orwell, as one of his first literary inspirations, influenced the inclusion of “A Wartime Exchange”, giving him an opportunity to acknowledge Orwell’s significance. In passing, I note that Larkin’s Oxford anthology

<sup>4</sup> George Orwell, ‘The English People’, in *The Collected Works of George Orwell (CWGO)*, ed. by Peter Davison (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), p. 219

<sup>5</sup> ‘Why I Write’, *CWGO* (1998 [1946]: XVI) p. 317

<sup>6</sup> John Rodden, ‘The rope that connects me directly with you – John Wain and the Movement Writers’. *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* (1998) Vol. 20, No. 1 pp. 59-76

<sup>7</sup> Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 3

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57



includes many very odd choices of poems, few of which I imagine will survive the volume's next updating.

Andrew Motion in *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (1994) refers to Larkin's unpublished school stories written in 1943, his final year at university. One story "What We Are Writing For" begins with a mention of Orwell's essay "Boys'

Weeklies" (published in 1939, and collected in *Inside the Whale* of the following year).<sup>9</sup> As an undergraduate Larkin was already acquainted with Orwell's work.

Once he became known as a writer, Larkin began to receive requests to review books and wrote a hundred or so reviews, many of them of poetry collections. In his biography, Motion records that the reviewers Larkin had most admired as a young man were Shaw, Orwell and Connolly, and that he tried to emulate their combination of wit and clarity, commenting: "His reward was to never seem laborious".<sup>10</sup> This is yet another characteristic he shared with Orwell.

Hitchens notes that "Larkin and Orwell showed a very similar attitude to religion." Larkin, writing in his poem 'Church Going', felt an 'awkward reverence' upon entering a church as a non-believer. Orwell felt a similar respect, despite his own non-belief, and in the will he made out on 18 January 1950 stated, "And lastly I direct that my body shall be buried (not cremated) according to the rites of the Church of England..."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 100

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 502

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1980), p. 579



## Larkin Goes Country

John Whitbourn<sup>1</sup>

During one of the deepest, darkest, dullest stages of the Covid Lockdown era, an old friend and I decided to bolster mutual morale via a YouTube exchange. Every few days one would e-mail the other with a couple of musical hyperlinks, the agreement being that one could be an old and well-known favourite, but the second should be more 'off the wall', well away from the recipient's usual listening tastes.

And so it was, courtesy of my Country-inclined pal (appropriately a Surrey Hills hillbilly, like me), that I heard Rosanne Cash's 'I Was Watching You' for

the first time, a song addressed to (and yet in some ways perhaps also *from*) her late – many say great – father, Johnny. Wikipedia duly informed me that this track was drawn from her eleventh studio album, *Black Cadillac*, released in 2006.

I liked it. I like most melancholy (up to and including downright *distraught*) music, especially when it also climbs to Country music's abiding aspiration of being '*three chords and the truth*'<sup>2</sup> – an ambition not unconnected to my own liking for Larkin. Yet none of that represents my reason for troubling *About Larkin* readers with the above trivia.

<sup>1</sup> With due thanks to Jim Orwin, Rosanne Cash and Danny Kahn for their kind cooperation.

<sup>2</sup> Songwriter Harlan Perry Howard (1927-2002)

Not only did I like the song, but even my failing hearing heard Larkin-related klaxons. At first I thought I'd heard one such poetic reference – but, in the immortal words of Ian Fleming's Auric Goldfinger, that could be mere happenstance.<sup>3</sup> But then came another and then another. This took matters to another level.

Thanks to those everyday (albeit double-edged-sword<sup>4</sup>) miracles of the Worldwide Web and YouTube, it was easy to slow things down, call up the full lyrics and analyse them for significance, whereafter I was convinced. Right from the first line (my highlighting):

Headlights on a Texas road  
And Hank Williams on the radio  
**Church wedding, they spent all they had**  
**Now the deal is done to become Mom and Dad ...**

Inspiration from and a reference to 'The Whitsun Weddings'?

Then:

... And I was watching you from above  
**'Cause long before life there was love...**

A reference to the last line of 'An Arundel Tomb' - albeit obliquely?

Then:

**See those little girls dressed like china dolls**  
**All for one then one by one they fall.**

'The Whitsun Weddings' again?

Then:

... High on a hill where the world passes by  
You never came back but I know you tried

'Cause I was watching you from above  
**When it all falls apart there is love...**

A second oblique reference to the conclusion of 'An Arundel Tomb'?

Then:

... I didn't know it but you were always there  
Until September when you slipped away  
In the middle of my life on the longest day.  
Now I hear you say  
I'll be watching you from above  
**'Cause long after life there is love**  
Baby, I'll be watching you from above  
**Long after life there is love.**

Surely two direct and unmistakable hat-tips to that immortal last line of 'An Arundel Tomb'?

Of course, it's possible that my ear is biased, because anything that manages to conjoin Philip Larkin and Hank Williams has already got my vote. However, on the basis of the citations above, I still thought that the case for a Rosanne Cash/Philip Larkin interaction was strong (albeit not widely known – at least not in Larkin's homeland).

The next stage was to consult with my friend and fellow Larkin aficionado, Jim Orwin of Hull, who has for years been researching musical settings of Philip Larkin's poems, and intends to publish a book on the subject, including a catalogue of all the known settings.<sup>5</sup> And he too, after initial scepticism, started to hear the 'secret harmonies' in 'I Was Watching You' that I had. Jim accordingly took up the baton to consult Ms Cash's management agency<sup>6</sup> in New York, who very kindly and straightaway put the question to the oracle songstress herself, and then gave permission to cite her and offer this article to *About Larkin*.

And Ms Cash's verdict?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 'Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. The third time it's enemy action'. Ian Fleming, *Goldfinger*. 1959

<sup>4</sup> Both being drug-dealers in the 'Hyperlink Vortex' narcotic, capable of devouring the hours (or even lives) of susceptible knowledge-seekers.

<sup>5</sup> Go for it, Jim! During the poet's birth centenary year would be nice...

<sup>6</sup> Danny Kahn of Cross Road Management, New York.

<sup>7</sup> Forwarded e-mail communication 5th November 2021.

It's possible the poem [presumably both 'The Whitsun Weddings' and 'An Arundel Tomb' – JW] sunk into the song subliminally. A lyric of mine that would have a more obvious connection is 'Everyone But Me'.<sup>8</sup>

*'Time has transfigured them into untruth'* has a great deal of resonance for me, but even more so: *'What will survive of us is love.'*

This demi-confirmation I here take the liberty of reinforcing with Ms Cash's words in an online interview recorded 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020 (*'The Quarantine Tapes'* 015):<sup>9</sup>

**Interviewer:** ... which in a sense is connected to your love of Larkin's poem 'An Arundel Tomb' where he says *'time has transfigured them into untruth'*...

**RC:** You forgot the last line of that Larkin poem ... *'What will survive of us is love.'* ... One of the reasons I love that poem so much is that...

Ms Cash then goes on to discuss the public perception of Larkin's alleged 'bit misanthropic, curmudgeonly', 'ill-humoured' nature ('though I obviously didn't know him' ...) and yet his ability to compose such a sublime line.

Taken together, these clinch the Cash/Larkin crossover case, as far as I'm concerned – perhaps even 'beyond all reasonable doubt'.

Proving what, precisely? Maybe merely that Larkin's works now cast their net far and wide, exerting a vast 'zone of influence' and inspiring luminaries in other widely varied genres. His influence is perhaps more 'far and wide' than we presently suspect, suggesting that we should keep eyes and ears ever open to the possibility of Larkinalia in however unlikely a location. This equally opens up the delicious possibility of hearing those aforementioned 'secret harmonies'<sup>10</sup> which connect disparate forms and thus link (and gild) our – so we thought – very separate, private, pleasures. This proves us to be, contrary to our sometimes darker suspicions, subtly constructed and connected beings, and thus the very antithesis of T. S. Eliot's despairing conclusion (in a Margate seafront shelter in 1921) that:

I can connect  
Nothing with nothing.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, although Larkin was not, as far as I'm aware, positively known to be a Country music fan,<sup>12</sup> in my humble opinion I still think that in life he would have been pleased – pleased to the point of having-a-drink-to-celebrate – to learn he had sparked inspiration in the New World – and in whole new worlds within that New World to boot.

And in the Afterlife, where – according to intelligence imparted to his first biographer – Larkin allegedly spends his time 'tramping'?<sup>13</sup> My guess, on the basis of absolutely-no-evidence-whatever, is that the news will raise a rather proud Larkinian smile.

And if that guess cannot presently be proved:

... Well,  
We shall find out.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Song by Rosanne Cash, from her 14<sup>th</sup> album, *'She Remembers Everything'*, 2018. I confess this poor old brain can't quite see it, but Ms Cash surely knows best.

<sup>9</sup> <https://quarantine-tapes.simplecast.com/episodes/the-quarantine-tapes-015-rosanne-cash> (16 minutes in)

<sup>10</sup> A phrase misattributed (deliberately so, it seems) to Welsh poet Henry Vaughan (1621-1695) by author Anthony Powell, who also used it in the title of the last book (1975) in his twelve volume series, *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

<sup>11</sup> *The Waste Land*, part III, 'The Fire Sermon' (1922). In 2009 'English Heritage' listed the relevant seafront shelter as a Grade II protected building. Happily, those quoted words weren't Eliot's *conclusive* conclusion. By all accounts he found unexpected joy late in life.

<sup>12</sup> Although, as Jim Orwin sagely notes [e-mail 17/02/2022]: 'Like the Blues, which Larkin admired, Country music is a story-telling medium, so it would be no surprise to discover Larkin was a Country fan of a sort.'

<sup>13</sup> Via a cassette tape supplied to Andrew Motion by a spiritualist former associate of Larkin's. On which a voice apparently very much like the poet's confided this comforting info.

<sup>14</sup> 'The Old Fools' (1973), *High Windows*, 1974.

## *Rosie Millard in conversation with James Booth*

Helen Cooper

Link to video: <https://tinyurl.com/4ysjmha9>

To mark the anniversary of Larkin's death, the Philip Larkin Society held an online members' event which was Rosie's first official engagement as our newly appointed President.

An added dimension to the encounter was that James (introduced by Graham Chesters as 'the Society's Literary Advisor and the World's pre-eminent Larkin scholar') had been one of Rosie's tutors during her undergraduate studies at Hull University. Rosie recalled how rigorous James had been when marking her essays and, at times, there were glimpses of this 'uneasiness' as they confronted the crucial question: how do we tackle negative analysis of Larkin the man to avoid his work being 'cancelled' during his centenary year?

Rosie made the point that the centenary will provoke analysis of Larkin and highlighted the danger that negative views of him will present. She pointed out that the current cultural climate is even more intense than it was in 1992 when Larkin's private correspondence was first published, giving rise to a great deal of criticism of him as a racist and misogynist. James confessed to not understanding why people are so offended and Rosie reiterated the risk that if an artist has done something that in fact offends, it might cancel out the whole of their work.

This theme persisted throughout the discussion, punctuating consideration of other topics, such as Larkin the code-switcher, whether he would have accepted the Poet Laureateship if he had been offered it instead of Betjeman, and what James' biography added to the earlier Motion biography. Rosie pointed out that in *Life, Art and Love*, James demonstrates a clear understanding rather than a judgment on Larkin's poetry and queried whether his rationale was to lead the reader to make their own judgment. James responded that one cannot make a judgment about something one does not understand and said that he had disagreed with the criticism of Larkin that Motion's biography prompted. James revealed that Larkin's sister had said of the Motion biography that 'there's no love in it' and James said that Larkin's correspondence

in fact revealed a man of empathy, sympathy and generosity of spirit. Larkin proved his code-switching abilities in his correspondence. He had multiple correspondences, each requiring a different version of Larkin, each running simultaneously and at different rates. Just because he sometimes lied to or withheld information from Maeve Brennan, for example, did not mean that his correspondence with her was dishonest.

James related a self-deprecatory anecdote about Larkin's reaction to him collecting petition signatures among the university's staff. Larkin did not, apparently, know James, but he did say that with his petition he was performing a valuable function because it 'would be useful to have a complete list of all the pricks in the university!'

Rosie questioned how James himself had come to appreciate Larkin's poetry. James said that, at first, he had regarded Larkin as an old-fashioned, traditional, parochial and very English poet who could not be taken very seriously. In other words, Larkin is not post-modern, not post-colonial, not into theory and not helped by being popular. James never dreamt while Larkin was alive that he would be taught in university English departments, but his view changed as he read more of his poetry and listened to recordings of Larkin reciting 'The Whitsun Weddings' (a guilty pleasure along with listening to Elgar on a Sunday afternoon!). And thus, to some extent, and despite his protestations that he does not understand people wanting to 'cancel' Larkin, James inadvertently confirmed that Larkin's salvation lies in his work.

As the discussion came to its end, Rosie decried the fact that so often in British cultural commentary, to be good one must be difficult. She compared Larkin's poetry, which on one level is not difficult, to David Hockney's art, which is easily digestible, even though what he does is very sophisticated and difficult. She pointed out that people all over the world feel that Larkin's poetry speaks to them because it is so humane and that this is something that will stand him in good stead as he is reassessed over the coming year.

So-called ‘cancel culture’ does challenge all of us at one time or another to re-evaluate long-held beliefs and it can come as a profound shock. At the same time, we need to understand that the liberation struggles of our youth have moved on to identity struggles that we do not really understand because we are no longer young. Yes, we have the wisdom of greater life experience and long memories that romanticise our support for *causes célèbres* such as the anti-apartheid movement or the

de-criminalisation of homosexuality: wisdom that should be sensitively contributed to current debates, not used to dismiss them. The fact is that, in some of his correspondence, Larkin did express the indefensible and the fact that he did not do so in all his correspondence makes no difference. Our task is to persuade people not to dismiss his art, even though they do not like the artist, because by doing so they would deprive themselves of its beauty.

## *John Tatum and ‘the stillness / that speaks / of infinite movement’*

Clarissa Hard

*Review of John Tatum, Towards an Unknown Fiction: Collected Poems 1948 -1999.  
Waterloo Press, £16 (softcover), ISBN 978-1-906742-32-4*

When I first opened this volume, I did so with the express intention of reading a few poems before bed. Needless to say, I was still engrossed in these vivid, finely wrought poems late into the night.

*Towards an Unknown Fiction*, alongside its companion volume, *An Explosion of Skittles: New (Collected) Poems 2000 - 2020*, collects over 70 years of John Tatum’s poetry into two volumes. Astonishingly, this is the first successful attempt to publish his work as a collection. Waterloo Press has compiled several chapbooks and hundreds of poems published over the years in different journals and periodicals, such as *Partisan*, *Envoi*, *Yellow Crane*, and *Outposts* – a particular favourite of The Group. Furthermore, there is a wealth of new material here; many poems remained unpublished for decades until 2020. This provides us with the exciting opportunity to discover a poet’s mind, as well as revisit a bygone era in light of fresh work.

I was immediately struck by the painterly quality of the verse; Tatum is minutely attentive to gradations of light, subtleties of colour, and the perspective and depth of a landscape. He has a sharp eye for detail and carefully observes the composition of each ‘scene’, such as the foregrounding of certain objects or layering of different textures. Indeed, as the foreword informs us, Tatum was taught an

appreciation of poetry and painting concurrently at Shebbear College; he went on to become an esteemed watercolour painter as well as a poet, and his twin crafts bear closely on one another.

Many poems contain ekphrastic allusions to painting techniques or brushstrokes, or else take visual art as their subject matter: ‘An Etching in a Gallery’, ‘A Painting of some Sailors’, ‘To a Statue of Pan in a Hotel Garden’, and ‘A Glimpse of Art’ are a mere handful of examples. Meanwhile, ‘Portraits’ compares the ‘Dutch School’ with the ‘English Style’, and ‘John Nash’s Cornfield’ invokes specific artists (Nash and Constable), meditating on the creative process behind the finished product. Such poems seem to explore the possibility of translating a particular artistic style into language, presenting us with a frame within a frame. They invite us to reflect on the nature of different artforms and how they mediate self-expression.

Even if the poems do not reference art explicitly, they still appeal to the visual imagination in a very direct way. As Tatum states in the foreword, ‘My poems I regard as the verbal equivalents of my watercolours’; they present themselves as linguistic portraits or ‘wordscapes’, filling the mind with sharply rendered images.<sup>1</sup> Take the sensitivity to light, shading, and texture in ‘The Visitor’ (p. 110),

<sup>1</sup> I take ‘wordscapes’ from two titles of Mr Tatum’s poems, ‘Wordscape XXXII’ and ‘Wordscape XXXIII’.



for instance –

Now shadows slide away  
from bookshelves  
as your voice  
startles the room;  
light splashes  
the deep floor [...]

or the sensuality of the opening stanza of the Hardy-esque ‘A Lost Voice’ (p. 74) –

Light slides down  
dank stones  
where algae gleams green  
and ferns triumph  
in crevices, while far below  
black water  
is a stilled swirl,  
imprisoning stars.

Light, shadows, and colour take on a curiously tangible quality here, sliding, splashing, and gleaming of their own accord – even sound is palpable, a synaesthetic presence ‘startl[ing] the room’. ‘A Lost Voice’, in particular, manages to capture both stillness and animation, much as a painting depicts movement without moving. ‘[S]tilled swirl’ is marvellously economical, evoking the dynamic motion of swirling before stilling it and compressing it into a state of being; the reader is asked to undergo several mental stages of visualisation in those two words alone. The poems are richly physical, attempting to capture the immediacy of sense-experience. This vivid quality is reinforced by the musicality of the verse, with its assonance, alliteration, and flexible prosody.

Usually these ‘wordscapes’ express Tatum’s love of the natural world, especially the English countryside. Elsewhere, we find detailed portraits of cities, buildings, and the minutiae of daily human life; all of these ‘seem arranged / by an artist’s deliberate perspective’ (‘In the Cathedral’, p. 101). These poems are wonderfully local, encapsulating a specific point in time and space. Occasionally they shift from the particular to the universal; there are moments of uplift, especially towards the end of a poem. ‘The room, the door, / the furniture, the unnecessary accumulations / of age’ – rather reminiscent of Larkin’s ‘specially chosen junk’ – give way to a ‘sense of things beyond’ (‘Aunt Jane’, p. 44); the reader then encounters these moments of

suspended activity and repose.

More often than not, however, Tatum seems interested in the interaction *between* the infinite and the transient, rather than their juxtaposition; his poems explore how the eternal might take root in the present. How might ‘a moment caught from time’ create ‘eternal gestures’ (‘Autumn Afternoon’, p. 270, and ‘Recognition’, p. 273), or the sight of workmen on a roof prompt the speaker to observe that ‘existence / seems contained within this solitary / afternoon’ – the blows of their hammers ‘all held within / a mountain’s compass’ (‘Olargues’, p. 103)?

This question of ‘a moment caught from time’ naturally bears on the nature of artistic expression, or indeed, the creation of fiction: the act of capturing the essence of a multifaceted experience and reproducing it in a work of art. Tatum addresses this question in his poem ‘On the Merits of the Video Camera Versus the Pen and the Watercolour Brush’ (p. 6, my italics):

Life unrolls entertainingly enough  
on the screen, yet somehow  
*the soul is missing; which*  
*perhaps only the stilled moment*  
*can preserve.* The figure  
caught half-way down the lane,  
a frozen drift of cloud, a ‘plane  
at that precise point in the sky.

The stillness of a canvas, or the brief temporal space of a poem, manages to capture a moment more faithfully than something more technically proficient and ‘complete’ like a video camera. ‘[T]he soul is missing’ in a perfect record of the past. Instead, there is a sense of distillation here; the artist or poet captures a snapshot in time, makes it emblematic, and leaves us to fill in the gaps in our own imaginations. Paradoxically, a ‘precise point’ becomes universal *because* of its precision; it contains the ‘soul’ or quintessence of the landscape.

This is a running theme in Tatum’s work, as we find in ‘At Emanon Hall’ (p. 49, my italics again):

What is happening is no longer  
happening; words, like paint,  
can fix a scene. Everything  
is stilled; *movement*

*contained within stillness*: how  
you lean by the windows in faltering light,  
the dark trees beyond...

The poem then calls into question whether ‘these intimacies now [...] are caught for ever’, but concludes that ‘these marks by pen or brush’ are ‘the best that we can hope for’, since

[t]here is no peace  
amid the flux we live in.

Might we be able to deduce that the ‘pen or brush’ grants us a kind of ‘peace’, then: an antidote to the chaos of ‘flux’? Interestingly, Tatum uses strikingly similar language in ‘Morning’ (p. 252), where he describes how ‘[a]ll is flux, the world, / in vortex, / swirling’, and contrasts this with the tranquillity of a town:

The town is still now,  
but with the stillness  
that speaks  
of infinite movement...

These lines feel like a paraphrase of ‘movement contained within stillness’, harking back to the power of ‘the stilled moment’. Perhaps the singularity of an image imposes some kind of order on ‘the flux we live in’ or ‘the world, / in vortex’; perhaps it makes life comprehensible. It also makes the experience captured more personal, since, as I’ve suggested, we are able to flesh it out in our own minds. The descriptions in the poems are not meant to be exhaustive; they are suggestive, rather than prescriptive, prompts to our fertile imaginations.

Plus, I presume that ‘the stillness / that speaks / of infinite movement’ owes something to the nature of art itself, which preserves the ‘movement’ for posterity; it captures an ephemeral moment which then finds renewed life with each reading, thereby achieving ‘infinite movement’. These questions deserve more attention than I can give them here, however; I would be fascinated to ask Mr Tatum for his thoughts.

There is a certain integrity to this kind of poetry; Tatum aims to crystallize a point in time, presenting it to his readers without imposing any analysis or forcing a moral onto the poem. As he comments, ‘I let any meaning there might be speak for itself’. This makes for a refreshingly honest read, since his

poetry is free from didacticism or political ideology. Accordingly, he is sometimes difficult to ‘place’ within a particular literary group. Certain affiliations run throughout his poetry, Philip Larkin and Edward Thomas being the most prominent to my mind, but Tatum also experiments with different verse forms, registers, and types of diction. ‘Park Bench’ (p. 150) reads like a Poundian haiku, for instance, while he forays into so-called ‘concrete poetry’ in ‘Seascape’ (p. 251), whereby part of the poem’s meaning is conveyed by its appearance on the page:

The ragged clouds sweep down  
to where  
the sea  
snarls at the lashing wind.

Words thoughts  
are flicked away and lost [...]

Likewise, ‘Blue Rooftops’ (p. 151) plays with the boundaries of language itself, deconstructing spelling and punctuation:

sudnli the trez wr nakd  
seguls in th parcs an  
sad colrs in th fayding ski [...]

These poems give us a brief insight into the sheer variety of Tatum’s poetic output and his willingness to experiment.

Occasionally I found myself a little disoriented by the scale of the collection, unable to chart any kind of narrative through the poems. This is in large part due to its structure; the collection is not ordered chronologically, but rather thematically (although some poems are grouped together according to the periodical in which they first appeared). The book opens with a poem from 1960, for instance, but includes the relatively early St Ives and *Outposts* poems near the back. The bulk of the poetry is included in ‘The Poems I-XIV’ section, but what do these numerals designate? Most sections are not obviously discrete in terms of subject matter and style.

Furthermore, some individual poems have dates, but most do not – this struck me as inconsistent and a touch confusing. I was longing to when certain poems were written, or at least get a rough estimate: this is especially important as *Towards an*

*Unknown Fiction* spans over 50 years of material. When imagining a cityscape, there is a vast difference between a city in the 1950s and 1990s, for instance. The chronology is of cultural and historical interest; I wanted to be able to map Tatum's poetry onto certain literary events, or else trace a progression through his development as a poet. A few words justifying the logic behind the ordering of the poems would have been appreciated.

Nevertheless, the publication itself has a lot going for it. The poems are printed on high-quality cream paper, attractively typeset, and bound with Tatum's own watercolour as the front cover. The collection is very reasonably priced considering how much material has been collected – and how much *new* material has been unearthed by this endeavour. While Tatum published in numerous periodicals over the years, it would be difficult to locate these poems, let alone compile them; there are also many genuinely never-before-seen poems, which Tatum provided especially for this publication. He worked closely with Waterloo Press and *Towards an Unknown Fiction* is in line with his wishes; he also included several of his own explanatory notes.

Reading over Tatum's work, this publication struck me not only as timely, but urgently overdue. It was a real pleasure to discover his poetry, and I imagine that many Larkin devotees such as myself would enjoy his *Collected Poems*: their intensity of vision, sincerity, and often elegiac, but ultimately life-affirming, tone. I will let the poetry itself have the final word, since I'm sure it will outstrip my powers of persuasion. These two stanzas, taken from 'Another Fiction' (p. 60), seem to typify Tatum's outlook:

I am alive now;  
tense to the afternoon,  
whose birdsong  
and distant traffic  
draw me in with promises;

yet something alien  
shimmers beyond boundaries  
of pleasure, draws it away,  
leaving memories of words  
someone might have said.

## Notes on Contributors

**John Boaler** is a retired English teacher. In retirement he has completed a Research MA at Swansea University on the representation of work in literature of the 1930s.

**Graham Chesters** is Emeritus Professor of French at the University of Hull and Chair of the Philip Larkin Society. He was a founder of the Society in 1995 and has over the years served as General Secretary and Deputy Chair. He was behind the Larkin25 celebrations in 2010 which paved the way for Hull becoming City of Culture in 2017.

**Helen Cooper** is a co-opted Trustee of the PLS and works as the School Librarian & Archivist at Philip Larkin's *alma mater*, King Henry VIII School in Coventry. She was one of the first thirty girls to join the School in 1975.

**Cliff Forshaw** is a poet and painter. He has been Senior Lecturer in English at Hull and Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Hull and York universities. Collections include *Vandemonian* (Arc, 2013), *Pilgrim Tongues* (Wrecking Ball, 2015) and *Satyr* (Shoestring, 2017). *Re:Verb*, a narrative sequence

about Rimbaud, and *French Leave: versions and perversions*, are due from Broken Sleep Books. <http://www.cliff-forshaw.co.uk/>

**David Green** was born in Nottingham in 1959 and lives in Portsmouth. His most recent collection of poems was *The Perfect Book* (2018) and he writes about books and music at <http://davidgreenbooks.blogspot.com/>.

**Clarissa Hard** is currently a third-year PhD student at Christ's College, Cambridge, where she also completed her Masters and achieved a Starred First at undergraduate level. Her thesis explores the relationship between physicality and imagination in Philip Larkin's poetry, invoking other literary figures such as Yeats, Hardy, and D. H. Lawrence.

**Lyn Lockwood** lives in Sheffield and works for a national charity. She has been a trustee of the society since 2014 and supports with merchandise and events as well as writing and presenting the podcast. She is a keen collector of Larkinalia and has been known to make Larkin related embroidery and cakes.

**Tom Miller** was educated at an ancient independent school and New College, Oxford, where he read Law. He qualified as a solicitor, but worked for many years in banking, ending up as a reporter on his local paper. He has met three Prime Ministers, two Chancellors of the Exchequer, two Archbishops and A. J. Ayer; and has circumnavigated the globe three times. His retirement home is in Guernsey.

**Jane Moth** Having recently returned to her native Staffordshire after an absence of fifty years, Jane is enjoying hearing her native tongue spoken and buying as many Stoke made cups and saucers as can be squeezed into the cupboards of her new home.

**John Mowat** I was born in 1941 and was a teenager in Bristol during the brief period of "It's Trad, Dad" and Acker Bilk. My next exposure to jazz was my friendship with jazz-scholar John White and when my wife and I lived under a flat occupied by jazz fan Philip Larkin.

**Kyra Piperides** was born in Lancashire, then grew up in Leicestershire and Lincolnshire. Despite this, her heart belongs to Yorkshire. After studying for her BA and MA in Hull, she researched *Yorkshire Poetry* during her PhD at the University of York. She has since taught at the University of Huddersfield and Wilberforce College, Hull.

**Philip Pullen** is a Trustee of the Philip Larkin Society and Chair of Larkin100, a charitable organisation set up to promote and coordinate the Larkin centenary in 2022. He is a Larkin writer and researcher and has an intimate knowledge of the Larkin Archive at Hull History Centre. Born and brought up in Coventry, his research interests and publications have focused on Larkin's family life and in particular the relationship he had with his mother, Eva Larkin. He is currently working on a number of projects closely linked to the centenary celebrations.

**Chris Sewart** is originally from Leicester and now lives in Beverley. He won the 2019 Larkin Prize with his poem *Fencing Project* - 1975. He is studying for an MA in Creative Writing with the Open University. For this he is working on a linked short story collection set in a self-storage warehouse.

**Andrew Thomas**, educated at schools in South Pembrokeshire and at Bangor and Cardiff universities, taught English in secondary schools for 35 years. He has written articles and poems for various magazines and was once the editor of *Staple*, a publication of Bangor University's School of English. A further collection of his short stories, *Once Upon A Place Revisited*, is to be published later this year.

**Daniel D. Vince** is an undergraduate English Literature student, studying at Canterbury Christ Church University. He has secured a place to study at the University of York for an MA by Research on 'The Angry Young Men', social realism and post-war counterculture. He is a rare bookseller at The Plantagenet King and is a lover of all things literary.

**Geoffrey Weston** worked with Philip Larkin in the Brynmor Jones Library for 16 years. Long retired from his final post of Associate Director of Academic Services, he occupies his time with Larkin-related research, school governorship and walking on the North Yorkshire moors and coast.

**John Whitbourn** came late to liking Larkin and is accordingly keen to recoup 'the years that the locust hath eaten'. Post a looked-forward-to holiday in the sun being postponed in favour of a Society AGM, Mrs W now consistently refers to the Bard of Hull as 'Bl\*\*dy Larkin!' John is an author and lives in Surrey. Stewart Lee (About Larkin 51) would 100% hate him.

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Page 23: Larkin Family, 1936 (The Estate of Philip Larkin)

Pages 25 and 26: Sydney Larkin, 1937 (The Estate of Philip Larkin)

Page 28: Photograph of Philip Larkin in Hamburg, 1976 (Foto Hamburg)

Page 28: Philip Larkin, 1957 (The Estate of Philip Larkin)

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## Call for Papers

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# 'Bad habits of expectancy': towards Larkin 200

In the last five years, renewed focus has been on Philip Larkin.

Beginning with Hull's tenure as UK City of Culture 2017, the baton was passed from his adult home to his birthplace for Coventry UK City of Culture 2021; this has culminated in 2022 with Larkin100, a nationwide programme to celebrate 100 years since the poet's birth. Of course, this has not been half a decade of continuous celebration: this time has been fraught with social, cultural and political crises and controversies on a worldwide scale. As Larkin's Centenary year draws to a close, this conference will consider the future of Larkin studies. We invite emerging and established researchers, performers, writers, teachers, artists, culture and heritage professionals, and others with an interest in Larkin to Hull to look towards the year 2122 together.



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**Proposals (up to 300 words) should be submitted to [larkinconference@gmail.com](mailto:larkinconference@gmail.com) by 31st July 2022.**

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We invite submissions of papers, panels, roundtables and performance proposals on (but by no means limited to) the following topics:

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- Larkin and politics
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- Larkin and biography
- Larkin and placemaking
- Local Larkins
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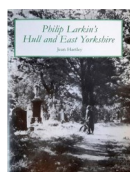
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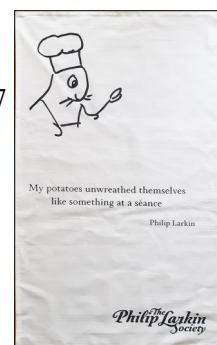
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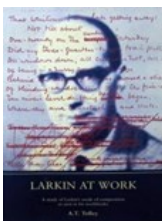
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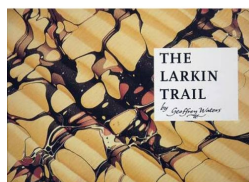


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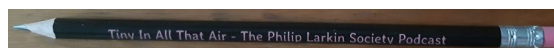
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