

About Larkin

Journal of The Philip Larkin Society

No. 58. October 2024

ISSN 1362-542X



*Philip^{The} Larkin
Society*

Editorial

'When the lights come on at four / At the end of another year [...] / Give me your arm, old toad; / Help me down Cemetery Road.' Welcome to this year's autumn issue of *About Larkin*, to be enjoyed as the lights flicker on early and the wind gets sharper.

AL58 promises an array of thoughtful articles, letters and reviews, as well as a number of original poems. Joe Riley opens with 'Larkin on the Move', meditating on the relationship between place and poetry. We imagine places through poems, of course, but we also read poems *in* physical places. Completing an 'audio sketch' of Larkin's poems inspired Joe to branch out and create a new podcast series called 'Sketch Poetry'.

Alison Mace pays tribute to her late husband by thinking about elegy and renewal in 'Cut Grass', including two of her own poems about loss. Christopher Levenson takes a similarly detailed if more emotionally detached approach to Larkin's poems, carefully analysing patterns of cadence, internal rhyme and assonance in 'At Grass' and 'Mr Bleaney'. Both articles show that Larkin's genius can be found at a granular level.

The issue includes longer exploratory articles, too. James L. Orwin examines Larkin's posthumous encounters with the pernicious 'poet morality police' and puts forward a spirited defence of the poet's democratic appeal. Victor T. King draws attention to an understudied part of Larkin's library career, focusing on his association with the Southeast Asia Library Group.

We have three letters to the editor. Tom Miller and Ray Ward engage with Geoffrey Weston's article on Kingsley Amis' *The Alteration* (*AL57*), providing illuminating perspectives of their own. Chris Sewart contributes some reimaginings of the first stanza of 'Annus Mirabilis' set in different years and encourages us to have a go ourselves. Finally, society news. James Booth recalls his and Carole Collinson's visit to Betty Mackereth on her hundredth birthday in June. Lyn Lockwood describes the Education Day in March which brought together young people in appreciation of Larkin, while Douglas Bell writes an entertaining account of this year's conference proceedings.

Clarissa Hard, Editor

The Philip Larkin Society

Registered Charity No. 1085251

SOCIETY OFFICERS

President

Rosie Millard

Honorary Vice-Presidents

Archie Burnett
Tom Courtenay
Imtiaz Dharker
Barbara Everett
Martin Jennings
Alan Johnson
Stewart Lee
Blake Morrison
Andrew Motion
Rosemary Parry
David Quantick
Dale Salwak
Ann Thwaite

Chair

Graham Chesters

Deputy Chair

Lyn Lockwood

General Secretary

Julian Wild

Treasurer

Trevor Norwood

Acting Membership Secretary

Graham Chesters

About Larkin Editor

Clarissa Hard

E-news Editor

Daniel Vince

Publications Advisory Board Chair

James Underwood

Media & Publicity

Philip Pullen
Julian Henry

External Liaison

Philip Pullen

Events Organisers

Rachael Galletly
Lyn Lockwood
Julian Henry
Philip Pullen
Simon Smith

Jazz Consultant

John White

Education Officers

Lyn Lockwood
Alexandra Davis

Podcast Editor

Lyn Lockwood

Merchandising Officer

Rachael Galletly

Website Advisor

Graham Scott

Twitter/X

Graham Chesters
Lyn Lockwood
Philip Pullen

Instagram

Julian Henry

Other Trustees

Carole Collinson
Christopher Fletcher

Address for all Society correspondence:

The Philip Larkin Society
c/o Julian Wild
226 West Ella Road,
West Ella, HU10 7RS
julian.wild@outlook.com

Submissions to *About Larkin*:

Submissions should be sent by email attachment to
aboutlarkinjournal@gmail.com
**The deadline for *AL59* is
28 February 2025**

Society Membership 2024-25 (1 July - 30 June)

UK Full Member £35 (hard copy and digital); £25 (digital)
Senior Citizen £28/£18
Student £10/£5
Joint £40/£30

Overseas Full Member £45/30
Senior Citizen £35/£20
Student £12/£8
Joint £50/£40

Contents

Editorial	Clarissa Hard	2
Larkin on the Move	Joe Riley	4
Poem: 'Haltemprice Crematorium'	Robert Black	5
Poem: 'The Weathervane'	Ben Keatinge	5
Poem: 'Setting Out'	Jane Moth	5
'Cut Grass': A Closer Look	Alison Mace	6
Poems: 'Familiar but different' and 'Bressanone'	Alison Mace	7
Betty Mackereth at 100	James Booth	8
Cultural Transcendence: Philip Larkin and the Poet Morality Police	James L. Orwin	9
Poem: 'Grey Morn'	Tony Hicks	17
Poem: 'The Poet's Correspondence'	Chris Sewart	17
Poem: 'Uncle Dacre: The Lamp and the Pen'	John Mowat	18
Poem: 'Inheritance'	Christopher Fletcher	18
PLS Education Day Review	Lyn Lockwood	19
Philip Larkin and Southeast Asia	Victor T. King	22
Patterns of cadence in 'At Grass' and 'Mr Bleaney'	Christopher Levenson	27
Letter to the Editor	Tom Miller	30
Letter to the Editor	Ray Ward	31
Letter to the Editor	Chris Sewart	31
Poem: 'Winter Haiku'	Andrew Thomas	32
Poems: 'Psalm for Betty' and 'Peppercombe Beach'	Suzanne Conway	32
PLS Conference Review	Douglas Bell	33
Notes on Contributors		37
Publications and Merchandise		39
Contents		40

Larkin on the Move

Joe Riley

I first read *High Windows* in the Lower Sixth of Peter Symonds College in 2004. My teacher was a kindly but fiery chap called Pete Winfield, and the combination of two Peters and a Philip would prove to be a watershed moment in my love of poetry.

Fast-forward twenty years and I now teach English to secondary school students, where Larkin is not on the syllabus but always sidles his way into my poetry lessons. Accessible, quotable, and often unforgettable, it's hard to understand why this great of literature doesn't have even one poem in the many exam board anthologies.

The superb 2022 *Larkin Revisited* series with Simon Armitage (who does feature in the GCSE anthology, the devil) provided an insight into how Larkin's works can still stand up today. It got me thinking about how we read poetry in places and how these places can have a profound effect on the way we digest a poem's essence.

So, armed with my Tascam portable recorder and the 1988 *Collected Poems*, I set out to record my spontaneous thoughts on a Larkin poem by reading it in a fitting setting; mowing the lawn would give me a chance to talk about 'The Mower' and 'Cut Grass', and a lovely old church near me would afford an echoey setting for 'Church Going'. I often find myself internally recounting lines of poetry seemingly at random and so thought it would be fun to see if I could let others in on my thought process—or apparent madness.

With my twisted sense of humour, I thought of places which would be fitting but also

completely inappropriate: 'The Old Fools' in a nursing home, 'This Be The Verse' in a nursery, 'A Study of Reading Habits' in a quiet branch of Waterstones. Larkin's poetic voice, sometimes swears or lecherous, doesn't often lend itself to the task of being read aloud without arousing shock or offence—or both—but I feel this is part of the fun.

My aim was to create audio sketches of Larkin's poems without going into granular analysis. I wanted to learn how his poems would sound in a setting that was reminiscent of the poem's story or its genesis, and how it did or didn't alter how I had felt about the poem beforehand.

Reading 'Church Going' in St Nicholas' Church, Newnham was a personal highlight and was exactly what I had envisaged: the atheist just about keeping his composure in this serious house, on serious earth and feeling... *something*. Reading aloud 'The Whitsun Weddings' on a train to London proved an exercise in deflecting funny looks and being careful not to make eye contact with prosecco-infused women when saying the line 'Mothers loud and fat'. It also reminded me of how travel by train can be truly magical, since you take in so many vignettes of activity as the countryside slowly transitions from rural to urban—even if you must change at Clapham rather than Sheffield, and the pies aren't too bad.

'The Trees' proved to be more of an emotional episode to record, not least when I talked about my dear Dad, and I broke my rule of keeping things unfiltered when I edited out the moment I got a lump in my

throat. That poem has, if you'll pardon the clumsy metaphor, grown more and more branches and buds in my heart every year that passes.

As I wrote this piece I recorded an impromptu episode on 'This Be The Verse', ably aided by my beautiful daughter. It's worth a listen if only to hear some cute baby noises. I imagine I'm not the first person to say 'fuck' around the perimeter of Fleet Pond, but maybe the first to do it poetically.

The results definitely vary, and I am perhaps too close to the experience emotionally to be objective, but the readings inspired me to reflect on how all good poetry rakes over the embers of old or forgotten feelings. Sharing these feelings and the connections I draw between Larkin's imagery and our lives today is, I hope, something that has been interesting to listen to.

Doing this podcast has given me the confidence to branch out beyond Larkin, and you can hear my new series '[Sketch Poetry](#)' on all good podcast providers.

The Weathervane

What happened, changed
between the writer's funeral
and today, long after
the *Collected Poems*
consoled us, bringing
gifts in lemon-beige,
the familiar sense of falling,
a miscellany of rain?

The *Life and Letters*,
words, recrimination,
blame, all amiss, because
the wind, the weathervane
turned around, pointing to
the poems' truth again.

Ben Keatinge

Haltemprice Crematorium

By an always unlocked door
You left today.
No dreams died, quite the contrary.

Your actual leaving was like a sleight of hand,
One minute there, then gone.
The painful part smoothed over.

A man I've never met
Spoke all about you, mispronouncing things.
Nice, I'm sure, just not entirely true.

And all in all the job's well done:
The goodbyes said, unspoken
You slipped away. No fanfare.

Sandwiches, tea and homilies.
Not enough but still too much
And all that can be managed.

Robert Black



Setting Out

Our elderly friends and neighbours
All had one,
Tucked away on the top of a wardrobe
Or under the television stand.
'Our Wedding', an album bound
In brocaded plastic
Containing their fresh and eager faces
In black and white.

See them emerging from church doors
Or standing on steps
In a crowd of relatives.
Bending into a be-ribboned car
On the way to the rest of their lives.

Jane Moth

‘Cut Grass’: A Closer Look

Alison Mace

I have always loved ‘Cut Grass’, and my husband Michael did too; he thought it was among Larkin’s best poems, if not his very best. Michael, alas, died earlier this year, and chose the poem, one of three, to be read at his funeral. It was to open the funeral and I chose to read it myself.

Looking carefully through the poem’s twelve lines, I found myself appreciating it as never before, noticing Larkin’s extraordinarily subtle poetic skills. So many aspects contribute to its brilliance. And this was such an appropriate choice because, like a funeral, the poem begins mournfully but develops into a celebration.

Cut Grass

Cut grass lies frail:
Brief is the breath
Mown stalks exhale.
Long, long the death

It dies in the white hours
Of young-leafed June
With chestnut flowers,
With hedges snowlike strewn,

White lilac bowed,
Lost lanes of Queen Anne’s lace,
And that high-built cloud
Moving at summer’s pace.

A very short poem, and a rhyming one, its lines brief and vivid. The shortness of the lines gives the poem a contemplative air. You feel you have to read it slowly, pausing between lines.

The opening stanza has lines of only two

main stresses each, though the lines do become longer, less bleak, more generous, later:

Cut grass lies frail.
Brief is the breath
Mown stalks exhale...

A personal implication may of course be found here, as well as a general comment on how little is left, how quickly spoilt, the beautiful, functioning aliveness of the recently dead. The word ‘exhale’, inviting an awareness of a final breath, also evokes, for me, the scent of mown grass, lovely despite its death.

The poem continues:

Long, long, the death

It dies in the white hours
Of young-leafed June...

Doesn’t ‘white hours’ suggest that bleaching visual effect of the strong sun of midsummer? And ‘young-leafed June’, by contrast with the withering mown stalks of the dying grass, has subtle human connotations, suggesting regret at the loss of a future.

As the poem develops, a third stress is added to alternate lines. This has the effect of quickening the pace slightly, suggesting progress. What follows now is a garland of whiteness, the flowers of mourning – chestnut flowers strewing their petals over hedges until they look ‘snowlike’; white lilac; Queen Anne’s lace – and finally a tall white summer cloud. Look at these white flowers. The petals are strewn, the white

lilac is bowed, the Queen Anne's lace grows in 'lost lanes', and even the majestic, gloriously 'high-built' cloud is moving 'at summer's pace', at a slow march. 'High-built', that archaic past tense, adds solemnity. These concluding lines, a pair, both generous, finally both with three beats – 'And that high-built cloud, / Moving at summer's pace' – work as a celebration, a delighted summer consummation. Larkin, 'summer-born, and summer-loving', exults in the cloud. Yet still all those white flowers – falling, bowed, lost – and the slow-moving cloud amount to a funeral procession, a delicate act of celebratory mourning. And there's another interesting progression. We began looking down, lamenting the frail cut grass on the ground; we finish admiring a cloud high in the sky, lifting our gaze from the ground to hedges, to a tree, to the sky: no longer grieving but looking upward, rejoicing in summer. The poem has carried us, hardly noticing, from a bowed, mourning pose to a positive, upward-looking stance.

There is so much in this small poem. And what of its rhyming? Rhyme is so interesting. What do we think rhyme is for, what's its purpose? I always used to invite pupils to agree with me that rhyme makes what's being said feel *true*, makes the truths of a poem undeniable, demands the reader's agreement. Over the past troubled century English and American poets have taken more and more to half-rhyme, or only occasional rhyme, if they rhyme at all. Full rhyme, like regular rhythm, has come to seem complacent, glib, wrong for our destabilised times; but Larkin's rhyming here is all perfectly matching, ceremonial. I think he means the truths quietly emerging in this delicate little poem to come across to us sounding incontrovertible – even though the reader's appreciation may be subliminal. We may not realise consciously how the poet has achieved it, but it is by Larkin's quietly brilliant poetic skill that we are worked upon, moved, satisfied – and perhaps left in awe.

Familiar but different

I'm buffing up the oblong silver tag
that hangs round the decanter's cut-glass neck;
I put the polish and the duster back,
pour in the whisky; contemplate a swig
at bedtime – well, a nightcap, not too big –
just the half-inch, half water, that we like
– liked, I remind myself, needing to take
care, be precise – my head is full of fog.

It's clearing slightly as I go upstairs.
Things changed, I understand. The house is mine
for what that's worth, mine till my own turn comes.
The bathroom mirror: same old me appears.
Over my shoulder a second image looms..?
No, it's that fog. I'm standing here alone.

Alison Mace

Bressanone in the cathedral

I weep alone in the back row,
close to a bank of candles.
Mine – for him – burns tall,
but not for very long.
I gave ten euros for it –
the least he's worth to me! –
and when his bright flame fails,
short wick in a metal tube,
I take and ignite another.

Sticky-faced, sniffing,
I stand blank before the candles.
What grace? blessing? What comfort?
What solace for the departed?
A woman bent low in a wheelchair
asks me softly in German...
I reach her a candle, light it,
lodge it. Thank you, she says.
For us both now, a new flame glows.

Alison Mace

Betty Mackereth at 100

James Booth



Reflecting on her discussion with Philip Larkin about whether he would die at 63, the same age as his father, Betty Mackereth predicted that she would die at the same age as her mother, 96. Unlike Larkin's, her forecast was wrong, and on 27 June this year (2024) she turned 100. She is very fragile but shows the same feisty personality and bloody-minded common sense as ever. She clearly benefits from the supportive care of the staff of her nursing home in Hessle, though she is now only intermittently aware of the identities of those who visit her. Several years ago she asked me confidentially if James Booth was still alive. We all exploded in laughter.

Carole Collinson and I found her on her birthday surrounded by cards, including one from the Larkin Society. With humorous relish she pointed out the card from the King and Queen, and we added one showing the picturesque roof of Paragon Station, familiar to Larkin, though not to her, as the first car-driver in the library.

It was a heartening, celebratory, if for her tiring occasion, which she seemed to enjoy. When Larkin first interviewed her in 1957, he reflected in a letter to his mother that she seemed 'all right in a way: no doubt she will learn. She'll probably stay all her life now.' He was not to know that she would still be with us in 2024.

Carole and I are most grateful to Betty's nephew Magnus and his wife Jay for allowing us to visit Betty.



Cultural Transcendence: Philip Larkin and the Poet Morality Police

James L. Orwin

The term ‘cultural transcendence’ was coined in the mid 1970s by the literary critic Morse Peckham, taking its place in a theoretical model he had developed in relation to Romanticism. I am taking the license to use his thought-provoking phrase in quite a different meaning. In Peckham, if I understand him correctly, ‘cultural transcendence’ concerns the innovation of ‘new meanings out of meaninglessness’.¹ In our current context I wish to appropriate the term to mean ‘cultural agnosticism’: an approach to experience which transcends our increasingly ideological culture.²

Clearly, the second part of my title refers to the attempts at erasure that can befall anyone who swims against the tide of conformity, and the price some individuals have paid for stepping outside what Christopher Hitchens termed ‘the false security of consensus’.³

As Larkin died in 1985, he can no longer be subjected to the most extreme and savage actions of today’s pernicious morality police, though many of our living writers and artists may become increasingly at risk from these forces and the narcissistic, self-aggrandising #BeKind brigade.

While looking into Morse Peckham, I was reminded of the concept of ‘intentional fallacy’ (with which I believe this essay is more aligned) in the writings of Beardsley and Wimsatt. In their essay, ‘The Intentional Fallacy’, they use a quote from Thomas Hardy’s short story ‘The Three Strangers’—which I think is pertinent to my discussion and to the various attempts to ‘cancel’ Larkin:

“He’s the man we were in search of, that’s true”, says Hardy’s rustic constable, “and yet he’s not the man we were in search of. For the man we were in search of was not the man we wanted.”⁴

I aim to demonstrate that the man Larkin’s detractors, like the cultural Marxist critics in Terry Eagleton’s 1993 film *J’Accuse*, were ‘in search of’ never existed in the poetry. The talking heads assembled by Eagleton, including Al Alvarez, John Lucas, Homi Bhabha and Lisa Jardine, made the simplistic, kindergarten-critic error of interpreting the poems almost exclusively biographically, launching ad hominem attacks they sought to yoke to the work.

¹ David Dennen, ‘What is “Cultural Transcendence”? Revisiting Morse Peckham’s Theory of Romanticism’. Paper presented at ‘Romantic Legacies’, the 13th Annual Wenshan International Conference, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, 18-19 November 2016.

² I am grateful to James Booth for suggesting clarifying amendments to my introductory paragraph.

³ Christopher Hitchens, ‘Be it resolved: Freedom of speech includes the freedom to hate’, Hart House, University of Toronto, Canada, 15 November 2006 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDap-K6GmL0>> [accessed 24 September 2024].

⁴ W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, ‘The Intentional Fallacy’, in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1954), p. 5.

Besides accusing him of having ‘peddled British poetry up a dead-end’, Eagleton also claimed that Larkin was ‘distrustful of the big ideas or the grand gesture’.⁵ As I have argued elsewhere, surely this is a position which might convincingly be seen as representative of postmodern thinking, placing Larkin far ahead of his contemporary critics.

In her 2010 monograph *Opposition in Discourse: The Construction of Oppositional Meaning*, Lesley Jeffries, Professor of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Huddersfield, and Chair of the Poetics and Linguistics Association, highlighted Larkin’s ability (specifically in ‘Is it for now or for always’ from *The North Ship*, but also in ‘Talking in Bed’ from *The Whitsun Weddings*) to ‘challenge and alter conventional opposites by providing unconventional pairings [...] and to challenge user expectations about the nature of opposition generally.’⁶

Jeffries explains how Larkin ‘sets up our expectations of opposition by using apparently straightforward opposites *now* and *always*, linked by the conjunction *or*’, before using the same kind of construction to set up a series of linked but unconventional oppositions: *trick* versus *trysting place*; *mirage* versus *miracle*; and *sham* versus *sign*; expressing the narrator’s ‘initial view of love’ as either ‘just a temporary aberration (*now*)’ or ‘everlasting but wonderful (*always*)’. The poet then ‘turns the whole structure on its head’ by revealing that the original opposition was false, since *now* and *always* are not in fact opposed at all:

I take you now and for always,
For always is always now.

I believe this linguistic dexterity (like some enticing verbal Escheresque tessellation) is one of the aspects of Larkin’s poetry that make it universally appealing, distinguishing it from the personal, parochial and provincial nationalist poetry that the Eagleton ideologues claimed to have identified.

Until quite recently, I really had thought all of this—the mistake of conflating the poet with the poems—had been dealt with decades ago. Jean Hartley, who played a vital role in both bringing Larkin’s work to worldwide attention and helping to secure his reputation and legacy long after his death, published her *Philip Larkin, the Marvell Press and Me* in 1989, four years after Larkin’s death. She was also prominent in the corrective charge against the controversy generated by the publication of Larkin’s *Selected Letters*, which today sees the poet’s reputation being reinterpreted, resurrected and reinforced for the twenty-first century—in terms of the *work* rather than the *life*—by new generations of both creative artists and scholars.

It’s now almost twenty-four years since Jean presented a talk to the Larkin Society titled ‘Philip Larkin and me, or you: the democratic appeal of his poetry’, which was later published in *About Larkin*. In her essay, Jean identified the popular appeal of Larkin’s poetry, and began by reeling off a list of fifteen notable people from a wide range of backgrounds who had fallen in love with the poems of Philip Larkin:

⁵ ‘J’Accuse: Philip Larkin’, *Without Walls*, BBC 4, 30 March 1993
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxxd3fbLgF>>
[accessed 20 September 2024].

⁶ Lesley Jeffries, *Opposition in Discourse: The Construction of Oppositional Meaning* (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 5–6.

I'd like to start with a list: Richard Hoggart, teacher and writer; Marie Evans, a teenage student from the Midlands; Sam Mendes, film and theatre director; Suzuyo Kamitani, a Japanese English teacher in Osaka; Colin Dexter, writer of detective novels; Pete Stevenson, a Canadian bomber pilot during the last World War; Ned Sherrin, polymath; Andrea Ashworth, an abused slum-dwelling adolescent from Manchester; Ian McEwan, novelist; Claire Tomalin, biographer; William Boyd, novelist; Dave Brandon, a slightly deranged plant-seed merchant from Norfolk; Helen Dunmore, novelist; Elaine Crossley, a young journalist from Bolton; and Barrie Rutter, actor/manager of Northern Broadsides. What do all these people have in common? Well, at some time over the last 45 years all of them fell in love with the poems of Philip Larkin.⁷

Towards the end of her talk, Jean gave three specific examples of women who found inspiration in Larkin's poetry, including Suzuyo Kamitani (a Japanese woman in her fifties), who when asked by Jean what it was in Larkin's work that appealed to her, answered 'it's his apprehension of death, his view of life and his pessimism. Very Japanese'.

Coincidentally, in the 1983 Faber cassette recording featuring Larkin and Douglas Dunn reading their own poems, Larkin introduces 'Days' as follows:

'Days' was once included in a book of poems for children as a translation from the Japanese; there were red faces and apologies, of course, but I can see what they meant. As a poem, it just seems to have happened, without any personal cause.⁸

In her essay, Jean went on to say: 'I've given these examples of partisanship because they're all women and because Larkin is the press's favourite exemplar of rampant misogyny'.

In a later piece, 'Philip Larkin's Love of Life', referring to Larkin's 1957 essay 'The Pleasure Principle', Jean says: 'Joy, sorrow, embarrassment, shame, grief and fear are universal; and can be evoked in anyone if a powerful and simple enough form of words can be found to express them'.⁹

It was in 'The Pleasure Principle' (1957) that Larkin identified what he described as 'a cunning merger between poet, literary critic and academic critic'.¹⁰ This merger, he argued, results in readers being 'confronted with pieces that cannot be understood without reference beyond their own limits or whose contented insipidity argues that their authors are merely reminding themselves of what they know already'. He observed that 'the poet has gained the happy position wherein he can praise his own poetry in the press and explain it in the class-room'. He warned that if poetry is to be 'rescued from among our

⁷ Jean's full talk was issued on cassette by the PLS and made available as early as April 2001 (see *AL* 11, p. 39). It was recorded at the Tranby Room, Staff House, University of Hull on 15 November 2000. See also Jean Hartley, 'Philip Larkin and me, or you: the democratic appeal of his poetry', *About Larkin*, 13 (April 2002), pp. 5-10 (p. 5).

⁸ Douglas Dunn and Philip Larkin, *A Faber Poetry Cassette* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).

⁹ Jean Hartley, 'Philip Larkin's Love of Life', presented at a Philip Larkin Study Day at the Wren Library, Lincoln Cathedral on 11 September 2004; and again at the Larkin Study Day held in the Lyndsey Suite, University of Hull on 13 March 2008.

¹⁰ Philip Larkin, 'The Pleasure Principle' (1957), in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), pp. 80-2 (p. 81).

duties and restored to our pleasures', this must start with poetry readers asking themselves more frequently whether they enjoy what they read.

Larkin is at pains to point out that he uses the word 'enjoy' in the commonest sense: 'the sense', he says, 'in which we leave a radio on or off'. He concludes the essay with a quote from Samuel Butler: 'I should like to like Schumann's music better than I do; I dare say I could make myself like it better if I tried; but I do not like having to try to make myself like things: I like things that make me like them at once and no trying at all'.

From her own perspective, in a talk titled 'Love and Larkin' presented to the Society in 2001, Winifred Dawson (née Arnott), another of Larkin's loyal women friends, dismissed the accusations made against the poet up to that point:

Since Philip's death and the publication of the *Letters* and Andrew Motion's *Life*, our perspectives have changed greatly. I don't think we need now defend him against the charges of being 'a man with a distaste for women', 'a waspish spinster', 'a miserable old curmudgeon', and 'a foul-mouthed bigot who made a small talent go a very long way'; words which I hope their writers have lived to regret—that was Peter Ackroyd. In fact, Philip now stands revealed as a man with a great capacity for, and need of, and understanding of the needs of others for love. What else can we call the long-lasting relationships with other people,

mostly women, which ran through his whole life? Consider these few lines from 'Faith Healing':

In everyone there sleeps
A sense of life lived according to love.
To some it means the difference they could make
By loving others, but across most it sweeps
As all they might have done had they been loved.
That nothing cures.

and then ask if Philip knew about love.¹¹

Further reassurance came in October 2003, when The Poetry Society named Larkin the nation's favourite poet, with *The Whitsun Weddings* named the best loved collection, and its title poem the best loved poem.¹²

Then in 2008, in 'Larkin and Post-modernism', the concluding chapter of his monograph *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, John Osborne (having in earlier chapters discussed the poet's influence on the Chinese-American writer, Adeline Yen Mah) brought to our attention a slew of other Larkin-admiring creative artists, including Leonard Bernstein, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Tom Courtenay, Oliver Ford Davis, Bob Geldof and Damien Hirst.¹³ He included a list of 'new millennial' fiction writers and contemporary poets whose work is, to varying degrees, influenced by Larkin's poetry.

I myself have written about the positive influence Larkin's poetry had on the haunted existence of the American jazz singer

¹¹ Winifred Dawson, 'Love and Larkin' (a Philip Larkin Society audio cassette: Hull, April 2001). The cassette was listed in the 'Audiotapes' section of various issues of *About Larkin*, first listed in *AL14*. It was recorded at the Tranby Room, Staff House, University of Hull on 6 April 2001. Jean Hartley reviewed the talk in *AL12*, pp. 28-30.

¹² John Ezard, 'Poets poll crowns Larkin king of verse', *Guardian*, 15 October 2003 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/oct/15/books.artsandhumanities>> [accessed 24 September 2024].

¹³ John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 260.

Susannah McCorkle, in ‘A Woman Singing Songs’.¹⁴ I also highlighted Larkin’s appeal to modernist and postmodernist contemporary classical composers—Alexander Goehr, Robin Holloway, Thomas Adès and Errollyn Wallen—in ‘all the right notes’.¹⁵

On 23 June 2022, the *Guardian* carried a story under the title ‘Nadhim Zahawi: axing Larkin and Owen poems for GCSE is cultural vandalism’.¹⁶ The story concerned the then Secretary of State for Education denouncing a decision by the OCR examination board to replace, from next year, two works (by Philip Larkin and Wilfred Owen) ‘with a more diverse range of authors, to be studied as part of its GCSE English literature course’. Larkin’s ‘An Arundel Tomb’ was to be removed from the ‘Love and Relationships’ section of the GCSE anthology; Owen’s ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ from the ‘Conflict’ section.

The Iraqi-born Education secretary had taken to social media to attack the decision to replace the poems, and called for their reinstatement. He went on to say: ‘As a teenager improving my grasp of the English language, Larkin’s poems taught me so much about my new home. We must not deny future students the chance to make a similarly powerful connection with a great British author, or miss out on the joy of knowing his work’.¹⁷

Four days later, Jeremy Noel-Tod responded

in *The New Statesman* with an article, ‘No, Philip Larkin is not being “cancelled” by schools’, asserting—in the manner of an abuser telling their victim that they’re imagining the abuse—‘The culture war against teachers and academics is manufactured by right-wing newspapers and rent-a-quote reactionaries’.¹⁸

In his piece, the academic chooses to focus not on the Larkin poem in question, ‘An Arundel Tomb’, but on one he believes more appropriately suits the point he wishes to make, ‘Posterity’. But he falls at the first hurdle by suggesting that ‘Posterity’ is autobiographical, claiming the poem is ‘about being a famous poet’.

On 29 June that year, the online magazine *Unherd* featured an article titled ‘Black kids should study Larkin’, in which the author, Tomiwa Owolade, addresses the issue of the decolonisation of the curriculum. He writes:

The viewpoint of the curriculum decolonisers is based on the assumption that black students resonate most with poetry written by black poets. That is nonsense... Race is not the only thing that defines the life and experiences of a person; I used to think only avowed racists believed it does. At a more practical level, why should a poem be taught if it can speak to students only on the basis of their being black: what about the Asian and white and mixed-race students in the classroom? This is not

¹⁴ James L. Orwin, ‘A Woman Singing Songs’, *About Larkin*, 27 (April 2009), pp. 24–26.

¹⁵ James L. Orwin, “... things that don’t mean too much”: Philip Larkin set to music’, *About Larkin*, 36 (October 2013), pp. 27–31.

¹⁶ ‘Nadhim Zahawi: axing Larkin and Owen poems for GCSE is cultural vandalism’, *Guardian*, 22 June 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jun/23/nadhim-zahawi-wilfred-owen-philip-larkin-poems-gcse-english-literature>> [accessed 24

September 2024].

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jeremy Noel-Tod, ‘No, Philip Larkin is not being “cancelled” by schools’, *The New Statesman*, 27 June 2022 <<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2022/06/philip-larkin-is-not-being-cancelled-schools>> [accessed 24 September 2024].

inclusion; it is division.¹⁹

Owolade meticulously eschews the biographical approach employed by Noel-Tod, and speaks to how the universality of Larkin's poems 'move me at a visceral level'. He writes:

they convey the sense that, yes, this is what it is like to be haunted by fear and loneliness and impotence. And they do so with artistic virtuosity, using the right words in the right order to express such feelings.

Owolade asks readers to consider the two stylistically contrasting descriptions of death in the poem 'Aubade': 'the anaesthetic from which none come round' compared to:

The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible,
Nothing more true.

He then responds to Noel-Tod's suggestion that Larkin should be replaced on the curriculum by the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka:

If Noel-Tod wants to argue Soyinka is as good a poet as Larkin, fair enough, but his argument doesn't reference art or merit. He is treating poetry as a sub-set of sociology — arguing that we should read non-white poets because they offer us insights into social and political issues.

Owolade rightly points out that such an approach 'is profoundly patronising to a writer such as Soyinka', the first African to

have won the Nobel Prize for Literature; and that despite this achievement, 'a white poetry critic like Noel-Tod doesn't value him for his artistry, but for his activism'. Owolade then goes on to argue equally vigorously for the poetry of Seamus Heaney, before quoting the words of W. E. B. Du Bois:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not.
Across the colour line, I move arm in arm
with Balzac and Dumas. From out of the
caves of evening that swing between strong-
limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I
summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what
soul I will, and they come all graciously with
no scorn nor condescension.

I'd like now to turn to my own research into musical settings of Larkin's poetry to further highlight the universal appeal of his artistry, but with one caveat: when I refer to a composer from a particular country, I mean they live and work in that country; or they were either born in or have immigrated to that country. For example, Arya Zappa, whose real name is Maral Salmassi, was born in Tehran in 1975 before her family moved briefly to Jordan. With the fall of the Shah's regime in 1979, the family had to move back to Tehran. Eventually they escaped the brutality of that regime and settled in Germany in 1986, when Maral was 11 years old.

I want to use a selection of the composers of the musical settings to illustrate the wide range of nationalities and identities for whom Larkin's poetry has served as an inspiration. First I think I should start by looking at the most popular choice for musicians to set (primarily in contemporary song), 'This Be The Verse'.

¹⁹ Tomiwa Owolade, 'Black kids should study Larkin', *Unherd*, 29 June 2022 <<https://unherd.com/2022/06/black-kids-should-study-larkin/>> [accessed 24 September 2024].

The subject matter of ‘This Be The Verse’ is so obviously universal that it would be difficult to suggest that this alone establishes the point I want to make. But even this single poem has proved inspirational for composers and songwriters from more than fifteen different countries, including Poland, Austria, Spain, Greece and Germany; and there are at least three foreign language settings: Catalan, Italian and Polish. So, notwithstanding the subject matter, I think this goes some way to demonstrating the universal appeal of Larkin’s work.

Next, I’ll highlight four composers for whom the exploration of identity is crucial to their social and creative personalities; and yet they still find artistic inspiration in Larkin’s poetry without any kind of compromise to their individuality.

I’ll start with two of the composers who have set ‘This Be The Verse’:

Paul Lerwill, who also found personal and creative expression under the name Gregory Gray, before finding wider artistic recognition—and a somewhat contented notoriety—after morphing into Mary Cigarettes, under which pseudonym he composed ‘They Fuck You Up’, a setting of ‘This Be The Verse’.

Mary Cigarettes’ video of this song can be found on YouTube, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4BTVoksDkg>

Xara Fiasco is a songwriter from New South Wales. She’s what is known as a ‘resident’ of the multimedia platform and virtual world of Second Life, which allows its users to create

online avatars for themselves and to interact with other users and user-created content within a multiplayer online environment. She performs her music live, for fellow residents of her virtual community, from her home studio. Xara Fiasco also set Larkin’s ‘This Be The Verse’.

Xara Fiasco’s video of ‘This Be The Verse’ can be found on YouTube, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VW4BZY6cFYA>

Kerrin Tatman is a composer, multi-instrumentalist and creative producer based in Newcastle upon Tyne, and also a Co-Director of Puppets in Beverley Ltd. Kerrin’s exploration of personal identity includes the use of the gender-neutral pronouns ‘they / them’.

Tatman’s video of this song can be found on YouTube, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVij30DXWDY>

Finally, the previously mentioned **Arya Zappa**, who addressed identity in an interview with *Kaput* magazine online:

Arya Zappa is my real self. This might sound strange since it’s the status quo to hide behind a persona or mask on stage. For me the contrary is the case – I had to become myself in order to be able to sing or to perform.²⁰

She continues:

Taking a closer look at the human condition, identity is at the core of our existence, while none of us gets to chose

²⁰ Arya Zappa, ‘What is Real? This question drives me and is at the center of my work’, *Kaput*, 10 March 2020 <<https://kaput-mag.com/stories/en/arya-zappa-what-is-real-this-question-drives-me-and-is-at-the-center-of-my-work/>> [accessed 20 September 2024].

our parents, gender, name, religion, nationality, hair, eye or skin color nor the lives we would like to live. Who are we? After a long period of intense introspection, I asked myself this question and started to live who I truly was. There wasn't a point where this happened, it was a process over several years. A metamorphosis so to speak.

A live performance video of Arya Zappa performing a number of her songs based on Larkin texts can be found on YouTube, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZQSLJowcbo>

The songs on Arya Zappa's album *Dark Windows* contain numerous references to Larkin poems, to such an extent that I think at least four should be classed as musical settings. In addition, the title of Zappa's most recent album, *A Study of Dreaming Habits*, released in July 2022, seems like a clear reference to Larkin's poem 'A Study of Reading Habits'.

Before I finish, I'd like to name-check three more women artists whose recent work has been inspired by Larkin poems:

Stina Quagebeur was born in Belgium in 1985, and at the age of 11 came to England to study at the Royal Ballet School. In 2013, Quagebeur created a choreographic work titled 'Domna', based on Larkin's poem 'Loved Ones'. More information here: <https://www.stinachoreographer.com/works>

Klaartje Quirijns, who was born in The Netherlands, moved to New York City in 1998 and has lived in London since 2007, released a 75-minute documentary film essay in 2019 titled 'Your Mum and Dad: A Devastating Truth', inspired by 'This Be The

Verse'. More information here: <https://www.klaartjequirijns.com/media-news/your-mum-and-dad/>

Ana Sokolovic, who was born in Belgrade in 1968, and has lived in Montreal since 1992, has recently composed an opera, 'The Old Fools', influenced by lines from Larkin's poem of the same name. The opera was commissioned by the Canadian Opera Company and was scheduled to be premiered in 2022. More information here: <https://myscena.org/newswire/coc-announces-new-commission-the-old-fools-by-sokolovic-and-bentley/>

In his Foreword to 1982's *A Rumoured City*, Larkin wrote of Hull:

People are slow to leave it, quick to return.
And there are others who come, as they think,
for a year or two, and stay a lifetime,
sensing that they have found a city that is
in the world, yet sufficiently on the edge of
it to have a different resonance.²¹

I like to think this also applies to people coming to Larkin: for a year or two of study, and then staying a lifetime, captivated by that 'different resonance', those enticing verbal tessellations.

.....

Those wishing to discover more about the 383 works by 254 composers from 32 different countries who have set Larkin to music can find further information in James Orwin's *Astonishing the Brickwork: Philip Larkin set to music* (Dancing Sisters, Hull, 2022) or at the website www.larkintomusic.com.

²¹ Philip Larkin, 'Foreword', in *A Rumoured City: New Poets from Hull*, ed. by Douglas Dunn (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 1982), p. 9.

Grey Morn

Christmas is the hardest day,
 blending joy and sorrow, hope and hardship
 in an overarching lie that slowly hardens,
 Locking all dreams and memories away
 into a falsehood of what might have been
 and what I now know can never be.

But still in some small way,
 the child in me will dare to hope and dream
 that some lingering magic may wash the lie clean,
 Resurrect some faded technicoloured day
 of a Christmas-card family, biscuit-tin bright,
 that played and danced by the firelight.

That long unremembered day,
 tree, table, heavy with yuletide delight,
 chestnuts roasting, carols swelling in the frosty night,
 Then, later by the fire's warm glow, games to play,
 Father red-faced, Mother laughing with bosomed love,
 forfeits and happiness, mistletoe above.

And how I love that dream,
 imagining and then reimagining,
 painting it anew with each and every retelling,
 Reliving each staged and threadbare-worn scene,
 wishing to live that day, to be that family,
 to wake and find that day stretching before me.

But... Christmas day dawns grey,
 washed in rain-swept darkened loneliness,
 Christmas radio booming, breaking the stillness,
 Counterpointing my life with that make-believe day,
 my frozen-for-one dinner that tastes like the pack,
 my empty-nest... Christmas... it's a load of crap.

Tony Hicks

The Poet's Correspondence

Oh, we saw you,
 Mr. Owl Face, unblinking
 eyes a camera-obscura, weighing
 us up, inveigling into our
 supposed paradise.

But did you know, did you realise
 – sat in your high windows –
 that your tricky letters, all
 inky sleight of hand, would
 keep on delivering? Perpetual
 confessions, self-uncensored.

Did you comprehend that you
 would be a bandwagon? Your
 correspondence appropriated
 by left and right, city and town,
 historian and critic.

All you wanted was to write and administer:
 shrug off your life (mother and all),
 step into sexual light (Belfast and all),
 play a little Jazz (Bechet and all).
 A better remembrance than
 girlie mags and terrace chants.

So, for some, you have become
 a catapult of rumour, an
 archive of misdemeanours,
 neatly researched and catalogued,

patiently waiting, inexorably,
 for the endless rollercoaster of
 acclaim and notoriety,
 notoriety and acclaim.

Chris Sewart



Uncle Dacre: The Lamp and the Pen

Dear Uncle Dacre, super memoirs of an awful time –
 The Changi jail, the jungle trek, the Thailand-Burma line!
 When war retreats you've still to give to monarch and to God
 A service to colonial rule, the blessing and the rod.
 While I might wince at Britain's tale, the kampong and the town,
 The jungle and the peak rise up in what you've written down.
 The days of empire fade away. Farewell the stately rout.
 You come back home to English rain and a book that must come out.
 I'm writing too and now enclose a pamphlet of my verse.
 My love to Aunt Celeste of course. I'm glad the hip's no worse.

Dear John, I'm glad you liked my book. A reprint's in the press.
 About your verse I hesitate. Indeed I must confess
 A need to venture carefully. On second thoughts I shan't.
 You say your piece and feel you must. Your uncle and your aunt
 Find much of it a little ripe. We hope your mother's well.
 We may be off to France next month: it's still too soon to tell.

The view I force that puts me down, it's just as much my fault
 As that man's mote whose sight I try. I wait here at this halt.
 It's late the day, it's late the year and look, the glass is bleared.
 I wait, not quite a traveller – a candidate uncheered.
 I'm unarrived, not here nor there, and furthermore I'm cold
 While back and forth a plastic cup is wind-selected, rolled.
 This urinary winter light is what I hate the most.
 I wait and the 'Gods of the Elder Days', the ones we long to hear,
 My father's brothers, the scholars and scribes, the men we love and fear
 Are absent or deaf and the words unsaid are merely a space in the heart.
 I wait on the platform, wait to be called, wait to become a part
 Of the clan of the men of the lamp and the pen and what is there to say?
 I carry the name and I write as I can, yesterday and today.

John Mowat

Inheritance

Your camera
 was left to me
 and in its
 blind heart I
 found a film
 tightly wound
 with memory.
 Perhaps the park,
 where between
 hollows left by
 bombers we
 scuffed behind
 oversized kites
 you lashed up,
 almost lofted
 from gorse
 and chalk scarps;
 or the Rover sunk
 on the drive
 beside a house
 like the others,
 panel fencing,
 creosote, oil tank;
 or maybe granny,
 bashful in tartan.
 Strange I thought
 to see again what
 you framed
 and collapsed
 in time, just
 as the distant
 shot of mountains
 you never took
 vanishes valleys
 in between.

Christopher Fletcher



‘Something made’: PLS Education Conference Day, 13 March 2024

Lyn Lockwood



It has been a number of years since the PLS has run an education event on this scale, although our contact with schools and teachers has continued informally throughout this time. Our new Education Secretary and trustee Alex Davis has helped us to maintain connections with the secondary-school classroom and shown great passion in teaching Larkin. We were very grateful for all her input in getting the day up and running, as well as putting together a programme outline for us to take to Hull. (Sadly we were unable to entice her away from the whiteboard for the day itself).

We all know how important it is to spread the appreciation of Larkin's poetry among young people so that he continues to be enjoyed by future generations. These events

are brilliant forums for this, also giving young people a taste of university life.

At the University of Hull's Canham Turner Building, just in the shadow of the Brynmor Jones Library, we were joined by Wyke Sixth Form College, Havelock Academy Grimsby, Tranby School and Hymers College, totalling about 40 students and 4 members of staff. The appropriately named (or not, maybe?) Eliot Suite was soon filled with the gentle hum of poetic conversation and all things Larkin.

The day began with Hull poet Vicky Foster, who reflected on the original Greek meaning of the word 'poetry' which is 'something made'. She then led us all through a detailed reading of Larkin's 1970 poem 'The

Explosion', which is the final poem from *High Windows*. Vicky guided us through writing our own poems using 'The Explosion' as a source of inspiration and suggested structure.



Vicky asked us all to describe a memorable event – and, like Larkin, we did not have to use an event we had witnessed for ourselves. Larkin watched a television documentary about mining communities with his mother which triggered his imagination. The students ranged far and wide in their choices, from events unfolding in shopping centres and music festivals to the Covid-19 lockdown, the Great Fire of London, the Blitz and the Russian Revolution. We looked at Larkin's ominous use of visual imagery ('Shadows pointed towards the pithead' in the opening stanza), the intimacy of the detail around the miners ('Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter'), the economic use of language ('oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke'), and the nature imagery ('One chased after rabbits'). We also explored the pivotal moment of the explosion ('sun-scarfed as in a heat-haze, dimmed') and the ambiguity of the final image, where the miners walked 'somehow from the sun', one carrying the 'lark's eggs... unbroken'.

Vicky also talked us through a rather 'unpoetic' encounter between Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes, showing the striking image

of the two heavyweights of verse sharing a platform in 1975, when Hughes came to the University of Hull to deliver a lecture and Larkin famously compared him to a 'Christmas present from Easter Island.' This led to another writing activity in which we described ourselves from the point of view of an onlooker, encouraging us to examine our use of perspective and tone.

The afternoon was dedicated to further poetry reading, analysis and discussion. Trustee and Larkin researcher Dr Philip Pullen took us back to the opening of *High Windows* with a reading of 'To the Sea', placing it in its historical context alongside family photographs of the Larkins and highlighting the significance of one particular family holiday to Rhyl in North Wales, when Eva and Sydney Larkin first met under the watchful eye of the 'seaside quack'.



I opened my session with a reflection on anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson's intriguing comment, 'You can't think without metaphors'. This led into a reading of 'Solar'. After this the students shared their thoughts about the imagery used in the poem, then explored sun imagery more broadly in Larkin, linking back to 'The Explosion' and taking note of Larkin's own curious solar connection as an August-born astrological Leo. Society Chair Professor Graham Chesters intrigued the students with a 'consequences' style presentation of 'Dublinesque', in which we were only allowed to read the poem as the folded paper unfurled stanza by stanza, taking

us far away from the 'Solar' world of the 'suspended lion face' to the contrasting 'pewter' and 'afternoon mists' of a Dublin funeral procession.



We closed the day with the students sharing their thoughts and ideas, somehow still full of energy and enthusiasm! We hope they continue to read and enjoy Larkin, as well as to produce their own writing and use their imaginations. We wish them all their best in their studies. Thank you to Ms West, Mr Latham, Mr Mason and Ms Parker for bringing their students along; they were wonderfully polite and erudite. Thank you also to Vicky Foster for her engaging and inspirational workshop session. We hope to run the day again.



'Massacre' was written by Abby Huxley-Binns from Wyke College

On the morning of the massacre,
Frozen air hung limp,
The January sun a cold light.

Soleless boots shuffle onward
Children hanging at the hip
Noses snuffing, eyes leaking.

Sung from starving lips,
Words played on the air;
"God save the Tsar!"

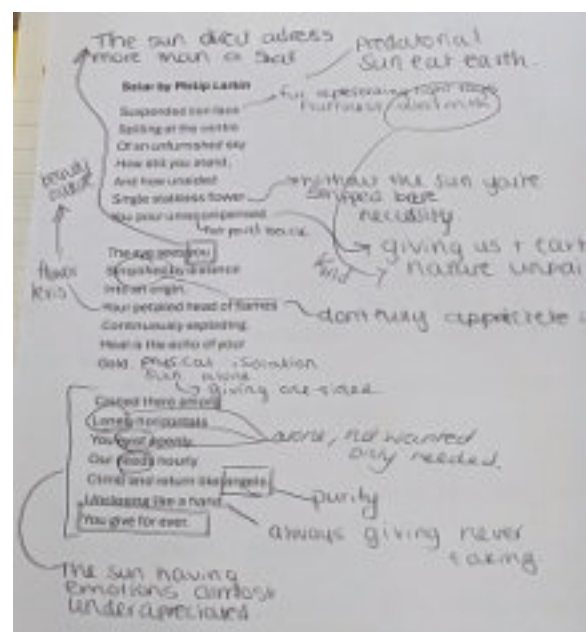
Led by the black cap,
Hands stretching towards the heavens,
Open like a flowering bud, soon picked
from the stem.

Shaking hands of immovable idols,
Let slip,
One line bleeding into the other.

Copper on the air
Hung next to the wailing of women,
Childless mothers lament.

Slick and wet,
Warm on the gravel ground
Beneath stampeding feet.

Cold ones left behind,
Fuller than the ones fleeing,
Illuminated in the sun.
The chiming midday for an empty home.



Philip Larkin and Southeast Asia

Victor T. King

Philip Larkin and the Southeast Asia Library Group (SEALG)

The connection between Philip Larkin and Southeast Asia might seem improbable. However, recently, in sorting files in the Southeast Asia Museum in the Wilberforce Building at the University of Hull, my colleagues and I came across records of Larkin's contribution to the development of library holdings on Southeast Asia and his formative role in the national Southeast Asia Library Group (SEALG). It is important to recover this forgotten dimension of Larkin's life and career at Hull.

SEALG was founded as a United Kingdom-based professional organisation for librarians, archivists, subject specialists and curators, which is still flourishing after 56 years of activity. It is one of a number of library groups reporting to the National Committee for Information Resources on Asia (NACIRA). Its origins can be traced to a conference at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London in 1967, which focused on the 'Acquisition of Library Materials from Asia'. Following this, SEALG was founded at a conference of British institutions with responsibilities for library provision in South-East Asian Studies organised by the Centre for South-East Asian Studies and the

Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull on 5 April 1968 (the region is rendered here as either Southeast or South-East Asia).¹

The chairperson for the meeting was the then Librarian of the Brynmor Jones Library, Philip Larkin. His secretary was Brenda E. Moon, Deputy Librarian, who served as the first secretary of SEALG and editor of its *Newsletter* and *Handbooks on South-East Asia Library and Map Resources* until she left Hull in 1980 to take up her appointment as Librarian at Edinburgh University (1980-1996). Initially, the SEALG chairperson was nominated by the institution responsible for the organisation of each annual meeting, hence Larkin chaired it in Hull in 1968. At its 1971 meeting SEALG decided that the chair be elected; Larkin was appointed and served as the first permanent chair (1971-1975).²

Four British institutions attended the Hull meeting: SOAS, the British Museum, the National Lending Library for Science and Technology and the University of Hull. The most prominent Dutch institution for the study of Southeast Asia, Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV), Leiden, joined soon afterwards, and SEALG subsequently expanded its reach beyond Hull to other major libraries in continental Europe, particularly Germany, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Spain, Portugal, Italy

¹ SEALG [Southeast Asia Library Group], *News and information from libraries & archives about Southeast Asian collections in Europe* [online newsletter], 2024 <<https://southeastasianlibrarygroup.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 27 April 2024].

² Margaret Nicholson, 'History of the Southeast Asia Library Group', *SEALG* (2008) <web.archive.org/web/20230630092625/https://www.sealg.org/index.html/about/> [accessed 27 April 2024].

and Sweden.

Currently, though some of its officers are in London, at SOAS, the University of London Library, and at the British Library, the senior officers are at J. W. Goethe University, Frankfurt and Universiteitsbibliotheek, Leiden; others are at the Royal Library, Copenhagen and the Asian Library at Lund University. Its aims were announced in the first issue of the SEALG *Newsletter* in 1968. 'The South-East Asia Library Group is a group of scholars and librarians concerned with library provision for South-East Asian Studies, aware of the difficulty of obtaining material from South-East Asia, and willing to explore means of co-operation. They are hoping to share the services of staff travelling to South-East Asia for book-buying in the field, to exchange information on their holdings and their facilities for loan or photocopy, possibly to compile union lists of periodicals and theses, and to consider other means of achieving further co-ordination of their resources'.³ Acknowledging the difficulties of accessing resources on Southeast Asia, particularly in indigenous languages, SEALG agreed to share information and library items and coordinate the acquisition of publications. It currently has partnerships with the South Asian Archive and Library Group (UK), the Association of Southeast Asian Studies (ASEAS, UK), the European Association for Southeast Asian Studies (EUROSEAS), and the Committee on Research Materials on Southeast Asia (USA).

A number of publications appeared in pursuit of these aims, organised under Larkin through the Brynmor Jones Library: *Directory of libraries and special collections*

on Asia and North Africa, compiler Robert Collinson with Brenda E. Moon (1970), *Survey of library resources*, editor, Brenda E. Moon (2nd ed. 1973), *Periodicals for South-East Asian studies: a union catalogue of holdings in British and selected European libraries*, compiler, Brenda E. Moon (1979), *South-East Asia: languages and literatures: a select guide*, editors, Patricia Herbert and Anthony Milner (1989).⁴

Under Larkin and Brenda Moon's guidance, SEALG helped to enable Hull's collection including archives, reference works, rare and valuable books, manuscripts, periodicals and newspapers, to expand rapidly. An early *Information Sheet* on the Centre for South-East Asian Studies, established in 1963, features 'The South-East Asian Collection', by Lewis Hill.⁵ It reports that 'The bulk of South-East Asian materials in the Brynmor Jones Library was brought together on the fourth floor of the new building in the summer of 1969 [Larkin's 'lifted study-storehouse']. This consolidated works on South-East Asia previously shelved under subject in many parts of the library, and absorbed the content of the Centre Documentation Room including the author/subject/country catalogue. From then on, we could actually see the collection, and browse exclusively through area studies, as well as enjoy the excellent facilities of the new library'. At that time, it was estimated that the collection comprised over 11,000 volumes.

A 'Report and Statement' prepared for the University Grants Committee (UGC) visitation to the Centre (14 October 1969), by the then Director of the Centre, Professor M.A. Jaspán, also refers to the library

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cited in Nicholson, *ibid*.

⁵ L. G. Hill, 'The South-East Asian Collection in the Brynmor Jones Library', *Information Sheet*, 3 (University of Hull: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, 1970), pp. 2-4.

collection. 'The growth of this special collection is to my mind the most important single development affecting the Centre's growth and status both nationally and internationally... In June 1969 the Collection, which had previously been dispersed in the old library building, was brought together on the 4th Floor of the new West Extension... The creation of such an excellent collection in a small redbrick university, and in so short a time, may be seen as an act of faith, on the one hand, and on the other of the sustained goodwill and effort of many members of the University. Of these I should like to make especial mention of the Chairman of the Senate Committee for South-East Asian Studies (Professor Sir Brynmor Jones), the Librarian (Dr P. A. Larkin), the Deputy Librarians (Miss B. E. Moon and Mr A. C. Wood), the Chief Cataloguer (Mr P. A. Hoare), the Periodicals Officer (Miss M. Brennan) and the Centre's two Library Co-ordination Officers, Dr G. R. Elliston and Mr L. G. Hill.'⁶ The whole process of reorganisation and re-cataloguing of the holdings continued into the academic year 1971-1972.

Larkin and the Centre for South-East Asian Studies at Hull

Philip Larkin continued to take a close and supportive interest in the development of the collection. He recognised immediately that this was an important source of national funding and a means to raise his Library's international profile with the addition of specialist collections. Aside from his reputation as a distinguished poet, he occupied a position as the senior manager of a resources centre. In 1972 he succeeded in

appointing a full-time Assistant Librarian, Helen Cordell, responsible for administering, expanding and cataloguing Southeast Asian materials. This post continued during Larkin's time and then during that of his successors, Ian Mowat and Dr Richard Heseltine. In his survey of 'Maritime Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom from 1945 to 1985', Peter Carey makes reference to the 'excellent library provision at Hull', noting that Brynmor Jones Library 'has been supremely fortunate in having had a succession of very able Librarians and Assistant Librarians.... Miss Brenda E. Moon, Miss Helen Cordell [now at SOAS...], Mr Alan Lodge [now the Assistant Librarian of the Rhodes House Library in Oxford...] and Miss Helen Stephens [the present incumbent]'.⁷ The close connection between the Library and SEALG, which Larkin fostered, was sustained and those responsible for the Southeast Asia collections continued an active administrative involvement in the Group. For a period, Helen Stephens served as secretary of SEALG. Her successor, Margaret Nicholson, spent most of her career at the Library working assiduously on behalf of SEALG and the Centre for South-East Asian Studies.

Margaret died peacefully at Hull Royal Infirmary on 21 June 2023, having been appointed as Assistant Librarian, under Larkin, in 1967. She also attended the 1968 foundation meeting of SEALG. After the departure of Helen Stephens, Margaret took over responsibilities for the Southeast Asian materials until her retirement in 2004. She also produced a valuable 26-page guide to the collection.⁸ She was appointed auditor of

⁶ M. A. Jaspan, *Director's Report and Statement for U.G.C. Visitation*, 14 October 1969 (University of Hull: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, 2 October, 1969 [typescript]).

⁷ Peter Carey, *Maritime Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom: A Survey of their Development 1945-1985* (Oxford: Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford, 1986), p. 25.

⁸ Margaret Nicholson, *South-East Asian Studies and Special Collections* (University of Hull: Brynmor Jones Library, 1997).

⁹ Jana Igunma (with contributions by Helen Cordell and Victor T. King), 'Margaret Nicholson (1939-2023)', *SEALG* (20 August 2023) <<https://southeastasianlibrarygroup.wordpress.com/2023/08/20/margaret-nicholson-1939-2023/>> [accessed 29 April 2024].

SEALG in 1986; a member of its Committee in March 1990; its Secretary/Treasurer in 1994 and then its Treasurer until 2022.⁹

Although the Southeast Asian Studies programme and five staff posts were transferred in 2003 to the East Asian Studies department at the University of Leeds, along with volumes necessary for teaching, the greater part of the library of over 30,000 volumes remains in Hull. Richard Heseltine, the then Librarian, argued that such a valuable collection could not be given to Leeds, though he acknowledged that materials essential for teaching should be transferred. The Southeast Asian archives, however, as with other university archives, were moved to the Hull History Centre. It was also decided that the Southeast Asia Museum, which had been established in 1968 by Mervyn Jaspan as a teaching collection (named The University of Hull Collection of South-East Asian Art and Traditional Craftsmanship in 1970, subsequently renamed the University of Hull Southeast Asia Museum), should stay in the Wilberforce Building. Lewis Hill, Fellow and then Lecturer in South-East Asian Social Anthropology from 1969, and Honorary Curator of the Museum since 1972, also continued his curatorship until 2022. The Museum currently comprises well over 3,000 objects.¹⁰

During her retirement Margaret Nicholson worked in the Museum as a volunteer, alongside Lewis Hill, Helen Jaspan, Professor Jaspan's widow, and Kathie Jenkins, a local Hull College lecturer with interests in Southeast Asian material culture.

Appropriately, given the Larkin connection, the Museum has recently been brought into the fold of the Brynmor Jones Library alongside the University of Hull Art Collection, overseen by the Ferens Fine Art Committee, with Dr Monica Janowski appointed as Curator. The Museum may eventually be relocated to a space in the library, and parts of its collection in store have now been moved into the library basement. For the time being it remains in the Wilberforce Building, and will open to the public from September 2024.

Other Connections

Many of the students in the Centre for South-East Asian Studies went on to careers focused on Asia. One in particular recorded his brief memories of Philip Larkin in a light-hearted piece in the *Financial Times*.¹¹ Kieran Cooke took a joint degree in Political Studies and South-East Asian Studies (1969-1972), before enjoying a successful career in journalism as a Foreign Correspondent for the BBC, *Financial Times*, *The Independent* and *The Guardian*, based variously in Indonesia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Greece and Ireland. He also served as a press officer at the United Nations in New York and was a long-time contributor to the BBC flagship programme 'From Our Own Correspondent'. Recently he published a book on his career, covering more than 40 years of foreign adventures, entitled *The Accidental Foreign Correspondent*; a follow-up to his *A Not So Foreign Correspondent in Ireland*.¹² As an aside, several widely travelled Hull students ended up in journalism, the media, publishing, and in Asia. Another distinguished BBC Asia

¹⁰ See Victor T. King, 'The Southeast Asia Museum at the University of Hull', *Southeast Asia Library Group Newsletter*, 55 (December 2023), pp. 46-57. <<https://sealg.hypotheses.org/files/2024/01/newsletter2023.pdf>>.

¹¹ Kieran Cooke, 'Home Truths. A time-bomb ticking away in Hull', *Financial Times*, 18 May 1996.

¹² Kieran Cooke, *A Not So Foreign Correspondent in Ireland* (Co. Mayo: Kilsallagh Press, 2018) and *The Accidental Foreign Correspondent* (Co. Mayo: Kilsallagh Press, 2022).

Correspondent is Rupert Wingfield-Hayes who took a BA in South-East Asian Studies many years later than Kieran Cooke, from 1985 (the year of Larkin's death) to 1988. Wingfield-Hayes' career has ranged over Tokyo, Beijing, Taipei and the Middle East; he was also detained and interrogated in North Korea [Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK] in May 2016. The Southeast Asian collection in Larkin's Library provided the support and resources to enable them to move far beyond their alma mater.

In his *Financial Times* article Kieran Cooke recounts his memories of Larkin, the university and the city in the early 1970s. This followed his revisit to Hull in the mid-1990s. He had been invited to present a seminar paper in the Centre for South-East Asian Studies on his work in Asia. He starts with a recollection of his time in Hull:

Philip Larkin bumbled round the corner, catching me in a compromising position with one of his assistants in the library's theology section. Being 'a gent', the poet emitted a mild harrumph and, before turning on his heel, apologised for his presence... Twenty-five years ago Larkin was librarian at Hull University and I was an undergraduate... Larkin would talk of students from the US who were 'doing him' for their special literature grades. They would ring him from London to say they were on their way but then, hearing the complications of the train connections through Doncaster and Goole, would trot off to Newcastle and see someone else... Larkin was not, in public, an expressive man. But he would permit himself a satisfied smile at the thought of fresh-faced American sophomores passing him by.

Perhaps this is journalistic licence on Kieran Cooke's part. Yet there is an interesting connection with Larkin's American sophomores; undoubtedly Larkin received a substantial number of letters from those who wanted to know more about his poetry and his critical observations on jazz. He often bemoaned this unsolicited correspondence. Larkin also enjoyed conversations at lunch in the Senior Common Room. On occasion he sat with my long-standing colleague, the late Lewis Hill, who, though a decade behind Larkin, also hailed from Coventry. They had mutual interests; Lewis was an avid book collector. They had both attended what is now King Henry VIII School and had also been undergraduates in Oxford.

In June 1993, some years after Larkin's death, Hill wrote a letter to *The Times* drawing attention to the problems that staff in ethnographic museums face in responding to the numerous enquiries they receive. He referred to the importance of Linda Cheetham's (later Mowat) booklet, at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford in attempting to address these pressures. It was published in Hull by the Museum Ethnographers Group at a time when Lewis was editor of their *Newsletter* and then its *Journal of Museum Ethnography*.

There is a sequel to this paper in the next issue of *About Larkin*; it traces unsolicited correspondence, Larkin's encounter with American sophomores and his views about America.

¹³ Linda Cheetham [Mowat], *The Innocent Researcher and the Museum* (University of Hull: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, for the Museum Ethnographers Group, 1987).

Patterns of cadence, internal rhyme and assonance in Philip Larkin's 'At Grass' and 'Mr Bleaney'

Christopher Levenson

What makes a poem great? Obviously many things, but one major factor is memorability. Why else, without ever consciously having memorized them, can I recall so many lines from Yeats, Hopkins or Donne? However, most readers of poetry who are not themselves poets and probably some who are do not analyse why some lines of poetry stick in their minds, whereas the vast majority of lines do not. Sometimes lines lodge in the memory simply because we have heard them quoted so frequently. That is the case with, say, 'beauty is truth, truth beauty' or 'All changed, changed utterly / A terrible beauty is born', but many more stay with us because of a combination of skills that not even the poets themselves are necessarily aware of. In fact it is the very unconsciousness, the instinctiveness of this skill, that marks out the mature poet.

Thus, while Coleridge's definition of poetry as 'the best words in the best order' still leaves us with the task of deciding what are the best words and which is the best order, nevertheless it is a better starting point than saying, for example, 'when I feel that the top of my head has been taken off then I know that it is poetry'. At least it involves concrete, discussable elements present in any poem.

A good poem, I suggest, distinguishes itself from the merely average by virtue of the intensity of its organization, its density of sound and its total control of cadence. These are attributes that Larkin at his best has in abundance. What I want to do is to demonstrate this by a close examination of two of my favourite Larkin poems, 'At

Grass' and 'Mr Bleaney'.

Although relatively few poets nowadays adhere, as Larkin mostly does, to strict rhyme schemes or a regular metre (usually iambic), other formal elements such as assonance and internal rhyme tend to be more prominent in establishing a sense of the poet's control over the poem's material.

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
Till wind distresses tail and mane;
Then one crops grass, and moves about –
The other seeming to look on –
And stands anonymous again...

Most casual readers would notice the alliteration of 'the cold shade they shelter in' in the first stanza of 'At Grass', but fewer would be aware of the repeated hard 'c' sounds in the opening two lines, 'The eye can hardly pick them out / From the cold shade they shelter in', nor perhaps the way in which the word 'distresses' in the next line, its sibilance foreshadowing 'grass' in the fourth line, has the further suggestion of 'tresses' as in a woman's hair, unlike such possible synonyms as 'disturbs' or 'disarrays'. Readers need not notice this, but if they do it only adds to the complexity and layering effect of the poem.

The same kind of aural patterning exists within the vowel sounds, as in the sequences of short 'i' sounds 'till wind distresses', the 'o' sounds in 'crops', 'look on' and 'anonymous', and the stressed 'a' sounds in

reader is thrown *in medias res* into a discussion between the persona and the unidentified landlady. But we are not told who or what ‘the Bodies’ were, nor why they moved him.

These unexplained details are interspersed with the poet’s description of the interior landscape of the room – ‘flowered curtains, thin and frayed / Fall to within five inches of the sill’ (again the repetition of ‘f’s and the short ‘i’ sounds of ‘thin’, ‘within’, ‘inches’ and ‘sill’, echoed in the next stanza by ‘window’, ‘strip’, ‘building’) – and an equally dispiriting view outside of ‘a strip of building land / Tussocky, littered’, where the tussocky, littered quality is enacted by the way these two adjectives are tacked on. Another detail about Mr Bleaney – his gardening skills – is juxtaposed with a catalogue of absences and inadequacies: ‘Bed, upright chair, sixty watt bulb, no hook / Behind the door, no room for books or bags’, so the reader expects the speaker to reject the room. Instead we are shocked to be told ‘I’ll take it.’

What follows in the next two and a half stanzas is a series of details about the former tenant and his relationship to the landlady, his relatives, his routines, all without overt judgment of any kind except perhaps for ‘jabbering set’. This is what the persona knows (‘I know his habits...’). It is against this accumulation of trivial facts that the poet places the acknowledgement of his ultimate ignorance of any deeper meaning to his predecessor’s life. This takes up the final two stanzas, which I have found are almost impossible to read aloud correctly at first sight.

Consider Yeats’ sentence structure in ‘After Long Silence’:

Speech after long silence; it is right,
All other lovers being estranged or dead,
Unfriendly lamplight hid under its shade,

The curtains drawn upon unfriendly night,
That we descant, and yet again descant...

or even more dramatically in this penultimate stanza from ‘A Prayer for My Daughter’:

Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
The soul recovers radical innocence,
And learns at last that it is self-delighting
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
And that its own sweet will is Heaven’s will;
She can, though every face should scowl
And every windy quarter howl
Or every bellows burst, **be happy still...**

Like Yeats, Larkin has a virtuosic command of the suspended sentence, so that the piling up of subordinate clauses that leads up to the last three words, ‘I don’t know’, take on huge symbolic meaning. The reader thus becomes painfully aware, not just from the words themselves but from the effort to get to the words, of how little we know of others’ inner lives, hopes, and fears.

These two poems, though excellent examples of Larkin’s skill in creating appropriate internal sound patterns and in manipulating sentence structures and cadence for dramatic or narrative effect, are far from unique. The techniques involved become second nature and are evident to a greater or lesser extent in all his best poems – ‘Church Going’, ‘An Arundel Tomb’, ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, ‘Dockery and Son’, ‘Here’, and ‘Faith Healing’. More than is the case with most of his contemporaries, then, Larkin’s poems need to be read aloud, preferably more than once, to appreciate how carefully they are structured as sound and how expressively those sounds reinforce the sense.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I was much interested by Geoffrey Weston's thoughts (*AL57*) about Kingsley Amis' novel *The Alteration* (1976), which I frequently discussed with the novelist.¹

It was this novel that made me decide that, one way or another, I had to meet him.

I had enjoyed Amis' early comedies, such as *Lucky Jim* (1954), but I started to take him seriously when I read his *The Anti-Death League* (1966). I was fascinated by *The Alteration*, because it reminded me of two of my favourite non-fiction novels, *Grey Eminence* (1941) and *The Devils of Loudun* (1952), by Aldous Huxley, which are both set in the Counter-Reformation and feature a clerical theme. *The Alteration* also touches on the idea of overpopulation, which concerned Huxley.

Kingsley was provoked into writing the novel by hearing a recording by the last castrato singer. He felt that he had to react, because the very idea of neutering someone to preserve his voice presented large moral issues such as the claims of Art and the claims of the State.

Enormous thought went into the composition of the novel. Thus, England's capital is moved to Cowley, because rebuilding London would have been too great an exercise. The characters are drawn with care,

and each is the sort of person that is needed to move the story along. Although the novel was hailed by the science-fiction community, Kingsley was not primarily trying to write science fiction: an 'alternate world' was a device necessary to permit a castration for artistic purposes in Europe late in the twentieth century.

Reading the book gives one an eerie sense of living in two or more centuries at the same time. I once told Kingsley that I had this impression in real life in the 1950s. I was a boy at Eton, which was then a Victorian school because two World Wars and the Depression of the 1930s had inhibited change; and my home was in Ireland, which was still in the eighteenth century because there had been no Industrial Revolution there. But I moved between the places in turboprop aircraft, which could only possibly have existed in the twentieth century. Kingsley responded that I was thus the perfect reader of the book.

It has been suggested that the book reflects Amis' preoccupation with his declining libido, and this amateur Freudianism may be valid. However, the central message of the novel is political. I believe that the book is in the same league in political satire as *Candide* (1759) and *Animal Farm* (1945).

The idea of castrating someone in the interests of an institution is a metaphor for removing a person's economic freedom in

¹ I describe my friendship with Kingsley Amis in 'Red Martini', a two-part article appearing in *AL53* and *AL54*.

the alleged interests of the community. Kingsley thought that, for all their fine sentiments about individual liberty, persons on the Left were in fact restrictive and intolerant, and would stoop to the use of force if they could get away with it. Thus, two cruel officers of the Inquisition are named Foot and Redgrave after left-wing publicists of the time, and the Head of the Holy Office is Lord Stansgate, that is, Tony Benn.

In conversation I once suggested that if a revised edition of *The Alteration* were called for, in the first scene, which is set at a royal funeral, a member of the congregation might be Sir Eric Blair, retired Master-General of the Indian Imperial Police and author of a book of husbandry for the natives, *Animal Farm*. Kingsley was amused by this suggestion, but he thought that the book should be called *Animals and their Farm*. I added that the funeral sermon might be given by the foremost preacher in the English Church, Monsignor Philip Larkin, Bishop of Leicester, but we agreed that in the light of Mr Larkin's difficulties in public speaking, he could not be used in this way.

Sincerely,

Tom Miller

Dear Editor,

I was interested in Geoffrey Weston's article on Kingsley Amis's *The Alteration* (AL57, pp. 37-38), having read and enjoyed many of Amis's writings, both fiction and non-fiction, including this book.

Amis argued strongly that genre authors (identified with a particular type or category of fiction) are often better writers than those regarded as 'serious' or 'literary', but tend to be looked down on because of their genre

identification. One category in which he was particularly interested was science fiction; he wrote the first survey of the field by someone with academic credentials, *New Maps of Hell* (1960), and himself tried his hand at science fiction. *The Alteration* is an example, being of the sub-genre called alternate history, in which things which did happen didn't and things which didn't happen did.

I was, however, surprised to see no mention of Keith Roberts's story collection *Pavane* (1968; later editions have an additional story), which has the same theme of a twentieth-century Britain which is a Catholic theocracy. Amis indirectly acknowledged this, mentioning an imaginary Roberts book entitled *Galliard* (pavane and galliard are, of course, both dances). However, while *The Alteration* is satirical, with real people appearing in new guises (there is a sculptor called Jacob Epstone, A. J. Ayer is a professor of dogmatic theology, and the Pope is, as Weston says, a Yorkshireman – though generally agreed to be based on Harold Wilson, not John Braine!), *Pavane* is, in places, horrific and harrowing: the Inquisition still exists, and is seen at its appalling work.

Ray Ward

Dear Editor,

I finished my presentation 'Living One Street From Larkin' at the March conference with a number of tongue-in-cheek (irreverent?) reimaginings of the first stanza of 'Annus Mirabilis' all set in different years – two are reproduced below. It was a lot of fun doing this and I produced many variations, which the reader will not have to suffer! But maybe readers of *About Larkin* could fire up their imaginations, thumb through an almanac or two, and send in their versions to the journal?

As I said in my presentation, 'Try this at home, it's a lot of fun!' I look forward to

reading them.

Regards,

Chris Sewart

PS. My thanks to James Booth, whose enthusiasm for this idea at the conference encouraged me to share this.

Annus Mirabilis (Reworked 1)

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen eighty-three
(Which was rather late for me) –
Between the end of Michael Foot
And Kajagoogoo's first LP.

Annus Mirabilis (Reworked 2)

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen seventy-four
(Which was rather late for me) –
Between the end of the three-day-week
And Brian Eno's first LP.

Winter Haiku

Winter's drab dark days:
a blackbird's yellow beak halts
the unfolding dusk.

In the green bird bath,
sluicing water through his wings,
my blackbird showers.

White frost on the lawn:
the green spears of daffodils
pierce the frozen grass.

Straddling the valley,
a voluminous dark cloud
rimmed with molten gold.

A bright sun-shower:
anchored by hills, a rainbow
startles the village.

The bright grass shimmers
in the late winter sunshine:
soon cattle will come.

Andrew Thomas

Psalm for Betty

You folded his death certificate
in the Book of Kings.
You prayed:
you knew Elisha
had raised the Shunammite's son from the dead.
You prayed,
but no one gave your son breath.

I see your young hands
resting the only evidence he existed
between these thin pages.
They buried him without you knowing;
you buried him in the cradle of your ribs.

Suzanne Conway

Peppercombe Beach

Now the sun's gone
three sea slaters emerge
from a barnacled oyster shell
to feed on seaweed.

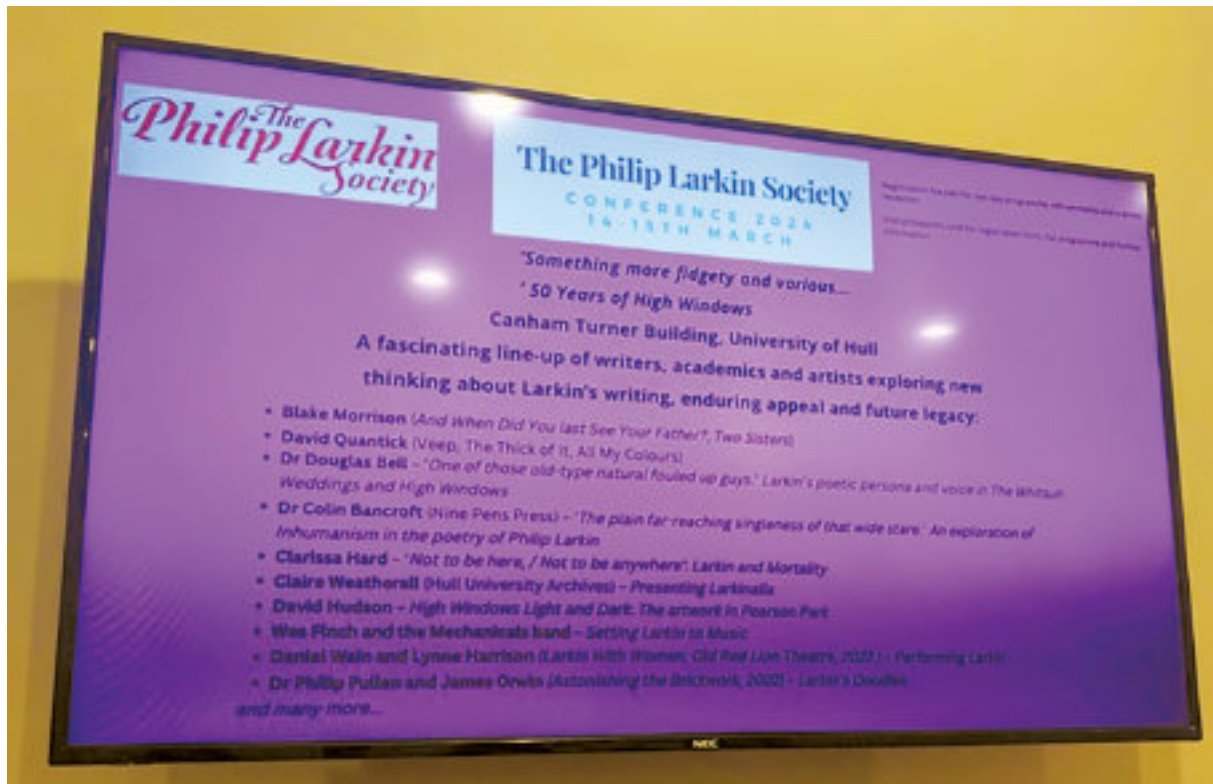
As a child I would kneel close
to the ground and befriend these souls,
mock-armoured, palm them
as they curled.

They hide in crevices and under rocks:
I would like to lie down in the sand
inside this oyster shell and sleep,
let the edges serve as a windbreak.

Suzanne Conway

‘Like an enormous yes’: Review of the PLS Conference, March 14-15 2024

Douglas Bell



For anyone with an interest in Roman history, March is usually vilified as an inauspicious month, the so-called ‘Ides of March’ (15 March) representing the date in 44 BC when Julius Caesar was brutally murdered by his former friends Brutus and Cassius. This year, however, 15 March had significantly more positive connotations for me, as it was the second day of the eagerly anticipated Philip Larkin Society conference, an event I had been patiently awaiting since September of the previous year.

I cannot say what Larkin himself would have made of his conference falling on the Ides of March, though being as classically educated as he was, I have little doubt that he would have picked up on the reference. He might

even have penned a laconic comment or two to his friend Kingsley Amis, wryly joking perhaps that exposure to a Brutus and Cassius can end up seriously damaging your bum. Either way, as far as I am concerned, the conference was a resounding success, falling on me in the way that we were told Sidney Bechet’s music fell on Larkin, ‘like an enormous yes’. In this brief and unashamedly subjective review, I will therefore try to re-live my reactions to those two extremely enjoyable days in March and provide a snapshot of the event for any readers of *About Larkin* who were unlucky enough not to be able to attend.

Before I begin the review itself, I would first like to share a little of my personal history, as

this underpins my experience of the conference and my feelings about the different things that I was exposed to there.

I am currently a Professor of English Language Education with the University of Nottingham on their Ningbo campus in mainland China. Although I am British, I have been an expatriate for most of my working life, with extended overseas postings in Austria, Japan, Turkey, the United States, Australia and for the past seven years, the People's Republic of China. If we wind the clock back to 1987-1991 though, for those four years I was an undergraduate at the University of Hull. Although English was not my major, Philip Larkin had actually been one of the reasons for me choosing Hull as my university. I had first encountered his poetry in the early 1980s and it was very much a case of love at first sight. This love affair then blossomed and deepened when I studied *The Whitsun Weddings* as one of the required collections of post-war poetry for my English A Level. The rest, as they say, is history: Philip Larkin has endured as my all-time favourite British poet and I find myself constantly returning to his work.

When I first went to Hull in 1987, Larkin was already two years dead, although for me his spirit was still alive and well. If I closed my eyes, I could all too easily sense his presence in several of his former haunts, such as the Royal Station Hotel and Spring Bank Cemetery, or in the Old Town pubs I frequented such as Ye Olde White Harte or Ye Olde Black Boy. I duly found out that several of my professors had been occasional drinking partners with Larkin and over time, they opened up and shared their anecdotes with me, making me fiercely regret that I had

not arrived in Hull just a few years earlier and been able to meet the man. As it was, I could only pay my respects at his graveside in Cottingham and ponder on how amazing it was that somebody I had never known could affect me so deeply.

I finally left Hull in 1991 to work as an English teacher in Japan. While I had a half-baked notion that I would no doubt return to the city at some point, career aspirations and international travels took over, which meant that an extended visit to Hull never in fact materialised. Attending the PLS conference this year thus represented my first proper return to the city in over thirty years.

The conference itself formally opened on the morning of Thursday 14 March with a welcome speech by the Deputy Chair of the PLS **Lyn Lockwood** and an overview of the Larkin collection by **Claire Weatherall**.¹ From the outset, I was immediately struck by their genuine sense of friendliness and conviviality. One of the occupational hazards of my day job as a professor is that I frequently get to attend international academic conferences. Unfortunately, many of these often turn out to be rather austere events with very little attention paid to humour or bonhomie. This was expressly not the case here. After Lyn and Claire's welcome, the opening plenary by **David Quantick** had the audience rolling in the



¹ A playlist of the conference proceedings can be found on YouTube: <<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDsL9hv32GI8XbNrK2hBlssFS55chYuo>>

aisles with his insightful and entertaining portrayal of Larkin as the people's poet, interspersed with amusing observations on characters as diverse as Boris Johnson, Jeremy Corbyn, Purple Ronnie, Ted Hughes and Pam Ayres.

The rest of the morning continued on this emotional high note with absorbing and highly thought-provoking papers from **Dr Clarissa Hard** on Larkin and mortality, **David Hudson** on Larkin's artwork in Pearson Park and **David Lewis** on the relationship between Larkin and Charles Causley.



After a very nice buffet lunch, the afternoon sessions began with an opening talk by the poet, **Professor Blake Morrison**, in which he shared some anecdotes of his connections to Larkin and also read aloud a couple of his own recent poems. The technically complex sestina poem, 'Sister', commemorating the loss of his younger sibling, was particularly

² The podcast can be found here: <<https://podcasts.apple.com/sk/podcast/celebrating-the-philip-larkin-society-conference-2024/id1486735740?i=1000652939372&l=sk>>

memorable for me, echoing in many ways Larkin's own style of writing in its meticulous attention to poetic form, metre and content.



The remainder of the afternoon then took on a more artsy feel with a compelling drama performance of Larkin's work by **Daniel Wain** and **Lynne Harrison**, a quirky response to Larkin from **Emma Penfold-Hall** and some superb Larkin-inspired music by **Wes Finch** and **The Mechanicals**.



Once again, I found myself reflecting many times that afternoon on the differences between the PLS conference and the conferences I more typically attend for my day job. As I later explained during an interview for the PLS podcast, one of the big



attractions of the PLS conference was its sheer range and diversity.² How refreshing to have not only academic papers, but also some humorous talks, drama performances and live music! In this sense, the conference truly did offer something for everybody and there was never the feeling that one needed to be a high-brow academic in order to appreciate it. Day One duly closed on a predictably convivial note with a wine reception in the University Art Gallery followed by an informal conference dinner in The Haworth pub.

Day Two of the conference started bright and early with tea and coffee and this time a welcome from **Dr Philip Pullen**. As my own talk had been scheduled for 10:15am, I was thankful that I had used my common sense for once and been prudent in cutting short the revelry of the previous evening. Like Cinderella, I had dutifully returned to my room before midnight, although the next morning, it must be said that a hefty price still had to be paid for my wanton mixing of prosecco, red wine, real ales and several gin and tonics. Larkin, I am sure though, would have heartily approved. If Andrew Motion is to be believed, he might even have offered me some port. However, thanks to several black coffees, by 10:15 the combination of hangover and jet lag had abated somewhat and even though I was still looking like a

panda, I felt sufficiently restored to deliver my presentation.

The rest of the morning was taken up with engaging papers by **Helen Cooper** on the connection between Larkin and Freud, a revised view of Larkin and children by **Dr Sam Perry**, a highly stimulating discussion of Larkin, Britpop and nostalgia by **Adam Lomax** and a penetrating analysis of Jake Balokowsky's use of language by **Professor István Rácz**.

Similar to Day One, lunch was then followed by a series of papers which once again transcended the traditional academic genre. **Mary McCollum** shared a creative and entertaining poet's view of an imaginary encounter with Larkin; **Chris Sewart** told of what it was like living one street from Larkin and also read some of his poems, while **Dr Philip Pullen** and **Jim Orwin** shed some welcome light on the meaning of Larkin's doodles and artwork. The conference was then formally closed by **Professor Graham Chesters** and the remaining participants were invited to take part in a guided tour of the Brynmor Jones library to visit Larkin's former office.

As the day ended and each of us went our separate ways, I found myself reminded of Larkin's closing words from 'The Whitsun Weddings':

...it was nearly done, this frail
Travelling coincidence; and what it held
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
That being changed can give...
there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

In closing this review, all I can say is that rain or shine, I for one am already eagerly anticipating the next PLS conference. I very much look forward to seeing you there.

Notes on Contributors

Douglas Bell is a Professor of English Language Education with the University of Nottingham Ningbo China. He is the author of two recent books: *English for Academic Purposes: Perspectives on the Past, Present and Future* (Channel View Publications, 2024) and *Studying for a Masters in TESOL or Applied Linguistics: A Student Reference and Practical Guide* (Routledge, 2023).

Robert Black was born on the Isle of Sheppey. After a career that took him all over the world in the navy and then the chemical industry, he has retired and lives on the border between West and North Yorkshire. He can boast of no significant poetry-related academic achievements, but loves it for all of the insights into life that it has shown him, which is why Philip Larkin's work burns so brightly for him.

James Booth was editor or co-editor of *About Larkin* from 1997 to 2020, with a short break. His *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love* appeared in 2014, and he edited Larkin's *Trouble at Willow Gables* (2002) and *Letters Home* (2018). Articles and reviews on Larkin, the Amises and Monica Jones can be found in *The Critic*, 2019 and 2021, and his article 'Brunette Coleman Revisited' was published in *Essays in Criticism* in 2024. The link can be found on Twitter/X: [@PLSoc](https://twitter.com/PLSoc).

Suzanne Conway is a poet, writer and teacher. She has published articles, essays, reviews, and over thirty poems in magazines and anthologies, including *The Poetry Review*, *The Dark Horse*, *The North*, *The Result Is What You See Today: Poems About Running* (Smith|Doorstop), *The Alchemy Spoon*, and elsewhere. She teaches at The Poetry School, and the University of Exeter where she is completing a PhD in Creative Writing. Her PhD involves writing a poetry collection and the critical commentary: "'Tantalizing Vagueness': Intimacy and Distance in the Poetry of Edward Thomas". www.suzanneconway.co.uk.

Christopher Fletcher is a trustee of the Philip Larkin Society. He is Keeper of Special Collections at the Bodleian Library, the University of Oxford, where he is also a Professorial Fellow

of Exeter College and a member of the English Faculty. He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and a member of the Grolier Club. He was previously a curator of literary manuscripts at the British Library. He is a keen photographer and motorcyclist.

Tony Hicks has had the toad squatting on him for the last forty odd years, first in the Civil Service and now in the NHS. He was uneducated by the schools in Putney but re-educated at his local library, where some boys one day were laughing over swearwords in a book of verse. After they had gone he read the book, was infected with Hull-based poetry and has been writing ever since. He has published in magazines, books, anthologies and had work read out at funerals. However, he still hopes for the lottery to help pitchfork that toad.

Ben Keatinge won the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award 2022, an annual prize for the best unpublished manuscript by an Irish poet. Born in Dublin, he first studied Philip Larkin at secondary school while growing up in London, very belatedly joining the PLS in 2023. As an academic, he has edited *Making Integral: Critical Essays on Richard Murphy* (Cork UP, 2019) where Larkin's friendship with Murphy is explored.

Victor T. King is Emeritus Professor, School of Modern Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds and Distinguished Professor at the Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD). Formerly he was Director and Professor at the Centre for South-East Asian Studies. He served as Dean of the School of Social and Political Sciences, Director of the Graduate School and Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Hull. He also chaired the Library Committee at Hull during the tenure of Dr Richard Heseltine. He has published widely in the field of Asian sociology and anthropology (see victortking.org).

Christopher Levenson, first recipient of the Eric Gregory Award and author of fourteen books of poetry, most recently *Moorings* (Caitlin Press, 2023), taught English and Creative Writing at

Carleton University, Ottawa until 1999, where he co-founded and was first editor of *Arc* magazine. Having lived and worked at various times in Holland, Germany, India and Russia, he now lives in Vancouver, B.C. where he frequently reviews poetry for the *BC Review*. His *Night Vision* was shortlisted in 2014 for the Governor General's award.

Lyn Lockwood lives in Sheffield and works for the NHS. She has been a trustee of the Society since 2014 and is deputy chair of the PLS. Lyn supports with merchandise and events as well as writing and presenting the PLS podcast *Tiny In All That Air*. She is a keen Larkin collector and has been known to make Larkin-related embroidery and cakes.

Alison Mace is the author of a full collection, *Man at the Ice House* (The High Window), and a pamphlet, *Last of the Cake* (Dempsey & Windle). Her poems have been appearing in *About Larkin* since 1999. She lives in Gloucestershire, where she is active in poetry writing groups.

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 for 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.

At the age of six **Jane Moth** was bridesmaid to her much older sister and recalls blinking on a chill March Saturday at the flashlight used by the photographer. The resulting black-and-white pictures in her sister's wedding album became an abiding fascination, as did spotting any other similar photographs in the homes of relatives. The hopeful expressions of the happy couples seemed to hold so much promise.

John Mowat was born in 1941 in the Hospital of All Angels in Los Angeles. The hospital was full of photographers because film star Jane Wyman had just given birth to Maureen. The baby's father was the then supporting actor Ronald Reagan, and Maureen went on to act opposite Elvis Presley in 1964. Mowat finished his education in Britain and was the first to teach Film Studies at the University of Hull (as well as American Literature). He began writing poetry in 1985 and was published in Jon Silkin's *STAND*. He outlives Maureen Reagan who died in 2001.

James L. Orwin was born in Rosyth, Scotland, but has lived in Hull since 1961. A former committee member of the Philip Larkin Society, he registered philiplarkin.com for the Society in February 2000, and three days later uploaded the first pages of the Society's very first website. His poems have been published in *About Larkin*, *The Rialto*, *MAGMA*, and various other small magazines. He is the author of *Hull 2017: 2,017 Facts About Hull and people associated with the city* (2017) and *Astonishing the Brickwork: Philip Larkin set to music* (2022), both published by Dancing Sisters.

Joe Riley is a teacher of English and Drama who loves Larkin's poetry, so much so that he did an undergraduate dissertation on it in 2009. He enjoys rugby, cricket, singing in his band, craft beer and spending time with his beautiful girls.

Chris Sewart is a writer living in Beverley, East Yorkshire. His poetry has been published in numerous small press journals and in 2019, he was the recipient of the Larkin Poetry Prize in the East Riding Festival of Words Poetry Competition. In February 2024, Chris was festival poet for the Stage 4 Beverley Music Festival, which involved supporting Roger McGough in his 'Alive & Giggling Tour' appearance. He will return as festival poet in 2025, which will also include his first solo show, 'Yarn Bombing and Other Poems'. Chris' poem in this issue, 'The Poet's Correspondence', was originally written and performed for his 'Living One Street from Larkin' presentation at the 2024 Larkin Conference.

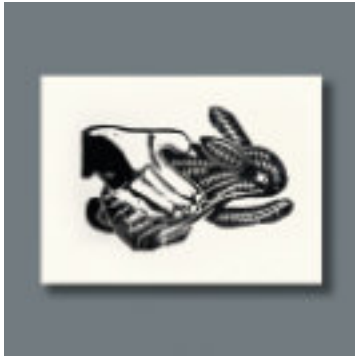
Andrew Thomas, educated at schools in South Pembrokeshire and at Bangor and Cardiff universities, taught English in secondary schools for 35 years. He has written articles, short stories and poems for various magazines and was once the editor of *Staple*, a publication of Bangor University's School of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

Ray Ward was born in Sheffield in 1947. He worked in the City Libraries (1964-74), becoming a Chartered Librarian, and attended the University of Hull (1974-7), where he met Larkin when on a library committee. He has a signed copy of *Jill*. Having completed a BA in Politics, he returned to library work in Sheffield, London, South Wales, Bristol, Leeds, Hastings, Brighton and (briefly) Saudi Arabia. He is now retired in London. He joined the PLS when it was formed and has attended many of its events.

Publications and Merchandise

www.philiplarkin.com/shop

Purchases can be made from our website using PayPal



Available in black ink £5

Grab one of our lovely new lino prints, depicting Larkin's hand holding the wicker rabbit that featured in a number of his photographs. 'Bun' or 'Dearest Bun' was the way he often addressed his lover, Monica Jones



Available in blue ink £5

Still available, our merchandise designed by artist DJ Roberts:



T-Shirt – unisex. Sizes M, L and XL £18



Fridge magnet £5



Tote £10

Drawing on places of significance in Larkin's life, DJ Roberts has designed these wonderful pieces:



Print 1



Print 2

Prints are A4-sized. £10 each or both for £18.

Contents

Editorial	Clarissa Hard	2
Contents		3
Larkin on the Move	Joe Riley	4
Poem: ‘Haltemprice Crematorium’	Robert Black	5
Poem: ‘The Weathervane’	Ben Keatinge	5
Poem: ‘Setting Out’	Jane Moth	5
‘Cut Grass’: A Closer Look	Alison Mace	6
Poems: ‘Familiar but different’ and ‘Bressanone’	Alison Mace	7
Betty Mackereth at 100	James Booth	8
Cultural Transcendence: Philip Larkin and the Poet Morality Police	James L. Orwin	9
Poem: ‘Grey Morn’	Tony Hicks	17
Poem: ‘Poet’s Correspondence’	Chris Sewart	17
Poem: ‘Uncle Dacre: The Lamp and the Pen’	John Mowat	18
Poem: ‘Inheritance’	Christopher Fletcher	18
PLS Education Day Review	Lyn Lockwood	19
Philip Larkin and Southeast Asia	Victor T. King	22
Patterns of cadence in ‘At Grass’ and ‘Mr Bleaney’	Christopher Levenson	27
Letter to the Editor	Tom Miller	30
Letter to the Editor	Ray Ward	31
Letter to the Editor	Chris Sewart	31
Poem: ‘Winter Haiku’	Andrew Thomas	32
Poems: ‘Psalm for Betty’ and ‘Peppercombe Beach’	Suzanne Conway	32
PLS Conference Review	Douglas Bell	33
Notes on Contributors		37
Publications and Merchandise		39



PLSoc



philiplarkinsociety



philiplarkin.com



tinyinallthatair