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REVIEW ARTICLE

**THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL STUDY OF PHILIP
LARKIN'S SELECTED POEMS**

The Social and Political Study of Philip Larkin's Selected Poems

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OVERVIEW

Philip Arthur Larkin (9 August 1922 – 2 December 1985) is widely regarded as one of the greatest English poets of the latter half of the twentieth century. His first book of poetry, *The North Ship*, was published in 1945, followed by two novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947), but he came to prominence in 1955 with the publication of his second collection of poems, *The Less Deceived*, followed by *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). He contributed to *The Daily Telegraph* as its jazz critic from 1961 to 1971, articles gathered together in *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961–71* (1985), and he edited the *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (1973). He was offered, but declined, the position of poet laureate in 1984, following the death of John Betjeman.

After graduating from Oxford in 1943 with a first in English language and literature, Larkin became a librarian. It was during the thirty years he served as university librarian at the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull that he produced the greater part of his published work. His poems are marked by what Andrew Motion calls a very English, glum accuracy about emotions, places, and relationships, and what Donald Davie described as lowered sights and diminished expectations. Eric Homberger called him "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket"—Larkin himself said that deprivation for him was what daffodils were for Wordsworth. Influenced by W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, and Thomas Hardy, his poems are highly-structured but flexible verse forms. They were described by Jean Hartley, the ex-wife of Larkin's publisher George Hartley (The Marvell Press), as a "piquant mixture of lyricism and discontent," though anthologist Keith Tuma writes that there is more to Larkin's work than its reputation for dour pessimism suggests.

Larkin's public persona was that of the no-nonsense, solitary Englishman who disliked fame and had no patience for the trappings of the public literary life. The posthumous publication by Anthony Thwaite in 1992 of his letters triggered controversy about his personal life

and reactionary political views, described by John Banville as hair-raising, but also in places hilarious. Lisa Jardine called him a "casual, habitual racist, and an easy misogynist," though the academic John Osborne argued in 2008 that "the worst that anyone has discovered about Larkin are some crass letters and a taste for porn softer than what passes for mainstream entertainment". Despite the controversy, Larkin was chosen in a 2003 Poetry Book Society survey, almost two decades after his death, as Britain's best-loved poet of the previous 50 years, and in 2008 *The Times* named him Britain's greatest post-war writer.

In 2010, a number of cultural events marked the quarter century since Larkin's death in 1985. Larkin's adopted home City of Kingston upon Hull is marking the anniversary with the Larkin 25 Festival including the public art event *Larkin with Toads*. The festival will culminate with the unveiling of a statue to Larkin inspired by the poem, 'The Whitsun Weddings'. Larkin's poems are appearing on Hull buses and a bus has been named 'Philip Larkin' in his honour by his biographer Sir Andrew Motion, a former English Lecturer at Larkin's workplace, the University of Hull. A compilation of Larkin's favourite jazz recordings has been released to mark the 25th anniversary of his death.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Philip Larkin was born on 9 August 1922 in Coventry, the only son and younger child of Sydney Larkin (1884–1948), who came from Lichfield, and his wife, Eva Emily Day (1886–1977) of Epping. The family lived in Radford, Coventry until Larkin was five years old, and then moved to a large three-storey middle-class house, complete with servants quarters in Manor Road, near to Coventry railway station and King Henry VIII School. Having survived the bombings of the Second World War their former house in Manor Road was demolished in the 1960s to make way for a road modernisation programme, the construction of an inner ring road. His sister Catherine, known as Kitty, was 10 years older than him. His father, a self-made man who had risen to be

Coventry City Treasurer, was a singular individual who combined a love of literature with an enthusiasm for Nazism, and had attended two Nuremberg rallies during the mid-'30s. He introduced his son to the works of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and above all D. H. Lawrence. His mother was a nervous and passive woman, dominated by her husband.

Larkin's early childhood was in some respects unusual: he was educated at home until the age of eight by his mother and sister, neither friends nor relatives ever visited the family home, and he developed a stammer. Nonetheless, when he joined Coventry's King Henry VIII Junior School he fitted in immediately and made close, long-standing friendships, such as those with James "Jim" Sutton, Colin Gunner and Noel "Josh" Hughes. Although home life was relatively cold, Larkin enjoyed support from his parents. For example, his deep passion for jazz was supported by the purchase of a drum kit and a saxophone, supplemented by a subscription for *Down Beat*. From the junior school he progressed to King Henry VIII Senior School. He fared quite poorly when he sat his School Certificate exam at the age of 16. Despite his results, however, he was allowed to stay on at school; two years later he earned distinctions in English and History, and passed the entrance exams for St John's College, Oxford, to read English.

Larkin began at Oxford University in October 1940, a year after the outbreak of World War II. The old upper class traditions of university life had, at least for the time being, faded, and most of the male students were studying for highly truncated degrees. Due to his poor eyesight, Larkin failed his military medical examination and was able to study for the usual three years. Through his tutorial partner, Norman Iles, he met Kingsley Amis, who encouraged his taste for ridicule and irreverence and who remained a close friend throughout Larkin's life. Amis, Larkin and other university friends formed a group they dubbed "The Seven", meeting to discuss each other's poetry, listen to jazz, and drink enthusiastically. During this time he had his first real social interaction with the opposite sex, but made no romantic headway. In 1943 he sat his finals, and, having dedicated much of his time to his own writing, was greatly surprised at being awarded a first-class honours degree.

EARLY CAREER AND RELATIONSHIPS

In autumn 1943 Larkin was appointed librarian of the public library in Wellington, Shropshire. It was while working there that in the spring of 1944 he met his first girlfriend, Ruth Bowman, an academically ambitious 16-year-old schoolgirl. In autumn 1945, Ruth went to continue her studies at King's College London; during one of his visits their friendship developed into a sexual relationship. By June 1946, Larkin was halfway through qualifying for membership of the Library Association and was appointed assistant librarian at University College, Leicester. It was visiting Larkin in Leicester and witnessing the university's Senior

Common Room that gave Kingsley Amis the inspiration to write *Lucky Jim* (1954), the novel that made Amis famous and to whose long gestation Larkin contributed considerably. Six weeks after his father's death from cancer in March 1948, Larkin proposed to Ruth, and that summer the couple spent their annual holiday touring Hardy country.

In June 1950 Larkin was appointed sub-librarian at Queen's University Belfast, a post he took up that September. Prior to his departure he and Ruth split up. At some stage between the appointment to the position at Queen's and the end of the engagement to Ruth, Larkin's friendship with Monica Jones, a lecturer in English at Leicester, also developed into a sexual relationship. He spent five years in Belfast, which appear to have been the most contented of his life. While his relationship with Jones developed, he also had "the most satisfyingly erotic [affair] of his life" with Patsy Strang, who at the time was in an open marriage with one of his colleagues. At one stage she offered to leave her husband to marry Larkin. From summer 1951 onwards Larkin would holiday with Jones in various locations around the British Isles. While in Belfast he also had a significant though sexually undeveloped friendship with Winifred Arnott, the subject of "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album", which came to an end when she married in 1954.

In 1955 Larkin became University Librarian at the University of Hull, a post he would hold until his death. For his first year he lodged in bedsits. In 1956, at the age of 34, he rented a self-contained flat on the top-floor of 32 Pearson Park, a three-storey red-brick house overlooking the park, previously the American Consulate. This, it seems, was the vantage point later commemorated in the poem "High Windows". In the post-war years, Hull University underwent significant expansion, as was typical of British universities during that period. When Larkin took up his appointment there, the plans for a new university library were already far advanced. He made a great effort in just a few months to familiarize himself with them before they were placed before the University Grants Committee; he suggested a number of emendations, some major and structural, all of which were adopted. It was built in two stages, and in 1967 it was named the Brynmor Jones Library after the university's vice-chancellor.

LATER LIFE

In February 1961 Larkin's friendship with his colleague Maeve Brennan became romantic, despite her strong Roman Catholic beliefs. In spring 1963 Brennan persuaded him to go with her to a dance for university staff, despite his preference for smaller gatherings. This seems to have been a pivotal moment in their relationship, and he memorialised it in his longest (and unfinished) poem "The Dance". Around this time, also at her prompting, Larkin learnt to drive and bought a car. Meanwhile Monica Jones,

whose parents had died in autumn 1959, bought a holiday cottage in Haydon Bridge, near Hexham, which she and Larkin visited regularly. His poem "Show Saturday" is a description of the 1973 Bellingham show in the North Tyne valley.

In 1964, in the wake of the publication of *The Whitsun Weddings*, Larkin was the subject of an episode of the arts programme *Monitor*, directed by Patrick Garland. The programme, which shows him being interviewed by fellow poet John Betjeman in a series of locations in and around Hull, allowed Larkin to play a significant part in the creation of his own public persona; one he would prefer his readers to imagine.

Larkin's role in the creation of Hull University's new Brynmor Jones Library had been important and demanding. Soon after the completion of the second and larger phase of construction in 1969, he was able to redirect his energies. In October 1970 he started work on compiling a new anthology, *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973). He was awarded a Visiting Fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford for two academic terms, allowing him to consult Oxford's Bodleian Library, a copyright library. Larkin was a major contributor to the re-evaluation of the poetry of Thomas Hardy, which, in comparison to his novels, had been overlooked; in Larkin's "idiosyncratic" and "controversial" anthology, Hardy was the poet most generously represented. There were twenty-seven poems by Hardy, compared with only nine by T. S. Eliot; the other poets most extensively represented were W. B. Yeats, W. H. Auden and Rudyard Kipling. Larkin included six of his own poems—the same number as for Rupert Brooke. In the process of compiling the volume he had been disappointed not to find more and better poems as evidence that the clamour over the Modernists had stifled the voices of traditionalists. The most favourable responses to the anthology were those of Auden and John Betjeman, while the most hostile was that of Donald Davie, who accused Larkin of "positive cynicism" and of encouraging "the perverse triumph of philistinism, the cult of the amateur the weakest kind of Englishry". After an initial period of anxiety about the anthology's reception, Larkin enjoyed the clamour.

In 1971 Larkin regained contact with his schoolfriend Colin Gunner, who had led a picaresque life. Their subsequent correspondence has gained notoriety as in these letters "Larkin was particularly frank about political and personal opinions", expressing right-wing opinions and using racist language. In the period from 1973 to 1974 Larkin became an Honorary Fellow of St John's College, Oxford and was awarded honorary degrees by Warwick, St Andrews and Sussex universities. In January 1974 Hull University informed Larkin that they were going to dispose of the building on Pearson Park in which he lived. Shortly afterwards he bought a detached two-storey 1950s house in a street called Newland Park which was described by his

university colleague John Kenyon as "an entirely middle-class backwater". Larkin, who moved into the house in June of that year, thought the four-bedroom property "utterly undistinguished" and reflected, "I can't say it's the kind of dwelling that is eloquent of the nobility of the human spirit".

Shortly after splitting up with Maeve Brennan in August 1973, Larkin attended W. H. Auden's memorial service at Christ Church, Oxford, with Monica Jones as his official partner. However, in March 1975 the relationship with Maeve restarted, and three weeks after this he initiated a secret affair with his secretary Betty Mackereth, writing the long-undiscovered poem "We met at the end of the party" for her. Despite the logistical difficulties of having three relationships simultaneously, the situation continued until March 1978. From then on he and Jones were a monogamous couple.

FINAL YEARS AND DEATH

In February 1982 Larkin turned sixty. This was marked most significantly by a collection of essays entitled *Larkin at Sixty*, edited by Anthony Thwaite and published by Faber and Faber. There were also two television programmes: an episode of *The South Bank Show* presented by Melvyn Bragg in which Larkin made off-camera contributions, and a half-hour special on the BBC that was devised and presented by the Labour Shadow Cabinet Minister Roy Hattersley.

In 1983 Jones was hospitalised with shingles. The severity of her symptoms, including its effects on her eyes, distressed Larkin. As her health declined, regular care became necessary: within a month she moved into his Newland Park home and remained there for the rest of her life.

At the memorial service for John Betjeman, who died in July 1984, Larkin was asked if he would accept the post of Poet Laureate. He declined, not least because he felt he had long since ceased to be a writer of poetry in a meaningful sense. The following year Larkin began to suffer from oesophageal cancer. On 11 June 1985 he underwent surgery, but his cancer was found to have spread and was inoperable. On 28 November he collapsed and was readmitted to hospital. He died four days later, on 2 December 1985, at the age of 63, and was buried at the Cottingham municipal cemetery near Hull. His gravestone reads "Philip Larkin 1922–1985 Writer"

Larkin had asked on his deathbed that his diaries be destroyed. The request was granted by Jones, the main beneficiary of his will, and Betty Mackereth; the latter shredded the unread diaries page by page, then had them burned. His will was found to be contradictory regarding his other private papers and

unpublished work; legal advice left the issue to the discretion of his literary executors, who decided the material should not be destroyed. When she died on 15 February 2001, Jones, in turn, left one million pounds to St Paul's Cathedral, Hexham Abbey, and Durham Cathedral.

From his mid-teens Larkin "wrote ceaselessly", producing both poetry, initially modelled on Eliot and W. H. Auden, and fiction: he wrote five full-length novels, each of which he destroyed shortly after completion. While he was at Oxford University he had a poem published for the first time: "Ultimatum" in *The Listener*. Around this time he developed a pseudonymous alter ego for his prose, Brunette Coleman. Under this name he wrote two novellas, *Trouble at Willow Gables* and *Michaelmas Term at St Brides* (2002), as well as a supposed autobiography and an equally fictitious creative manifesto called "What we are writing for". Richard Bradford has written that these curious works show "three registers: cautious indifference, archly overwritten symbolism with a hint of Lawrence and prose that appears to disclose its writer's involuntary feelings of sexual excitement".

After these works Larkin started his first published novel *Jill* (1946). This was published by Reginald A. Caton, a publisher of barely legal pornography, who also issued serious fiction as a cover for his core activities. Around the time that *Jill* was being prepared for publication, Caton inquired of Larkin if he also wrote poetry. This resulted in the publication, three months before *Jill*, of *The North Ship* (1945), a collection of poems written between 1942 and 1944 which showed the increasing influence of Yeats. Immediately after completing *Jill*, Larkin started work on the novel *A Girl in Winter* (1947), completing it in 1945. This was published by Faber and Faber and was well received, *The Sunday Times* calling it "an exquisite performance and nearly faultless". Subsequently he made at least three concerted attempts at writing a third novel, but none went further than a solid start.

It was during Larkin's five years in Belfast that he reached maturity as a poet. The bulk of his next published collection of poems *The Less Deceived* (1955) was written there, though eight of the twenty-nine poems included were from the late 1940s. This period also saw Larkin make his final attempts at writing prose fiction, and he gave extensive help to Kingsley Amis with *Lucky Jim*, which was Amis's first published novel. In October 1954 an article in *The Spectator* made the first use of the title *The Movement* to describe the dominant trend in British post-war literature. Various poems by Larkin were included in a 1953 PEN Anthology that also included poems by Amis and Robert Conquest, and Larkin was seen to be a part of this grouping. In 1951 Larkin compiled a collection called *XX Poems* which he had privately printed in a run of just 100 copies. Many of the poems

in it subsequently appeared in his next published volume.

In November 1955 *The Less Deceived* was published by The Marvell Press, an independent company in Hessle near Hull. At first the volume attracted little attention, but in December it was included in *The Times*' list of Books of the Year. From this point the book's reputation spread and sales blossomed throughout 1956 and 1957. During his first five years in Hull the pressures of work slowed Larkin's output to an average of just two-and-a-half poems a year, but this period saw the writing of some of his best-known poems, such as "An Arundel Tomb", "The Whitsun Weddings" and "Here".

In 1963 Faber and Faber reissued *Jill*, with the addition of a long introduction by Larkin that included much information about his time at Oxford University and his friendship with Kingsley Amis. This acted as a prelude to the release the following year of *The Whitsun Weddings*, the volume which cemented his reputation; almost immediately after its publication he was granted a Fellowship of the Royal Society of Literature. In the years that followed Larkin wrote several of his most famous poems, followed in the 1970s by a series of longer and more sober poems, including "The Building" and "The Old Fools". All of these appeared in Larkin's final collection, *High Windows*, which was published in June 1974. Its more direct use of language meant that it did not meet with uniform praise; nonetheless it sold over twenty thousand copies in its first year alone. For some critics it represents a falling-off from his previous two books, yet it contains a number of his much-loved pieces, including "This Be The Verse" and "The Explosion", as well as the title poem. "Annus Mirabilis" (Year of Wonder), also from that volume, contains the frequently quoted observation that sexual intercourse began in 1963, which the narrator claims was "rather late for me": this despite Larkin having started his own sexual career in 1945. Bradford, prompted by comments in Maeve Brennan's memoir, suggests that the poem commemorates Larkin's relationship with Brennan moving from the romantic to the sexual.

Later in 1974 he started work on his final major published poem, "Aubade". It was completed in 1977 and published in the 23 December issue of *The Times Literary Supplement*. After "Aubade" Larkin wrote only one poem that has attracted close critical attention, the posthumously-published and intensely personal "Love Again".

Larkin's poetry has been characterized as combining "an ordinary, colloquial style", "clarity", a "quiet, reflective tone", "ironic understatement" and a "direct" engagement with "commonplace experiences", while Jean Hartley summed his style up as a "piquant mixture of lyricism and discontent".

Larkin's earliest work showed the influence of Eliot, Auden and Yeats, and the development of his mature poetic identity in the early 1950s coincided with the growing influence on him of Thomas Hardy. The "mature" Larkin style, first evident in *The Less Deceived*, is "that of the detached, sometimes lugubrious, sometimes tender observer", who, in Hartley's phrase, looks at "ordinary people doing ordinary things". Larkin's mature poetic persona is notable for its "plainness and scepticism". Other recurrent features of his mature work are sudden openings and "highly-structured but flexible verse forms".

Terence Hawkes has argued that while most of the poems in *The North Ship* are "metaphoric in nature, heavily indebted to Yeats's symbolist lyrics", the subsequent development of Larkin's mature style is "not ... a movement from Yeats to Hardy, but rather a surrounding of the Yeatsian moment (the metaphor) within a Hardy-esque frame". In Hawkes's view, "Larkin's poetry ... revolves around two losses": the "loss of modernism", which manifests itself as "the desire to find a moment of epiphany", and "the loss of England, or rather the loss of the British Empire, which requires England to define itself in its own terms when previously it could define 'Englishness' in opposition to something else."

In 1972 Larkin wrote the oft-quoted "Going, Going", a poem which expresses a romantic fatalism in its view of England that was typical of his later years. In it he prophesies a complete destruction of the countryside, and expresses an idealised sense of national togetherness and identity: "And that will be England gone ... it will linger on in galleries; but all that remains for us will be concrete and tyres". The poem ends with the blunt statement, "I just think it will happen, soon."

Larkin's style is bound up with his recurring themes and subjects, which include death and fatalism, as in his final major poem "Aubade". Poet Andrew Motion observes of Larkin's poems that "their rage or contempt is always checked by the ... energy of their language and the satisfactions of their articulate formal control", and contrasts two aspects of his poetic personality—on the one hand an enthusiasm for "symbolist moments" and "freely imaginative narratives", and on the other a "remorseless factuality" and "crudity of language". Motion defines this as a "life-enhancing struggle between opposites", and concludes that his poetry is typically "ambivalent": "His three mature collections have developed attitudes and styles of ... imaginative daring: in their prolonged debates with despair, they testify to wide sympathies, contain passages of frequently transcendent beauty, and demonstrate a poetic inclusiveness which is of immense consequence for his literary heirs."

In 1980 Neil Powell could write that "It is probably fair to say that Philip Larkin is less highly regarded in

academic circles than either Thom Gunn or Donald Davie". But more recently Larkin's standing has increased. "Philip Larkin is an excellent example of the plain style in modern times," writes Tijana Stojkovic. Robert Sheppard asserts that "It is by general consent that the work of Philip Larkin is taken to be exemplary". "Larkin is the most widely celebrated and arguably the finest poet of the Movement," states Keith Tuma, and his poetry is "more various than its reputation for dour pessimism and anecdotes of a disappointed middle class suggests".

Stephen Cooper's book *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer* suggests the changing temper of Larkin studies. Cooper argues that "The interplay of signs and motifs in the early work orchestrates a subversion of conventional attitudes towards class, gender, authority and sexual relations". Cooper identifies Larkin as a progressive writer, and perceives in the letters a "plea for alternative constructs of masculinity, femininity and social and political organisation". Cooper draws on the entire canon of Larkin's works, as well as on unpublished correspondence, to counter the image of Larkin as merely a racist, misogynist reactionary. Instead he identifies in Larkin what he calls a "subversive imagination". He highlights in particular "Larkin's objections to the hypocrisies of conventional sexual politics that hamper the lives of both sexes in equal measure".

In similar vein to Cooper, Stephen Regan notes in an essay entitled "Philip Larkin: a late modern poet" that Larkin frequently embraces devices associated with the experimental practices of Modernism, such as "linguistic strangeness, self-conscious literariness, radical self-questioning, sudden shifts of voice and register, complex viewpoints and perspectives, and symbolist intensity".

A further indication of a new direction in the critical valuation of Larkin is S. K. Chatterjee's statement that "Larkin is no longer just a name but an institution, a modern British national cultural monument".

The Art of Philip Larkin, the writer Richard Palmer quotes a letter Larkin wrote to Betjeman, as if it exposes "all the post Motion and post-Letters furore about Larkin's 'racism' as the nonsense it is":

"The American Negro is trying to take a step forward that can be compared only to the ending of slavery in the nineteenth century. And despite the dogs, the hosepipes and the burnings, advances have already been made towards giving the Negro his civil rights that would have been inconceivable when Louis Armstrong was a young man. These advances will doubtless continue. They will end only when the

Negro is as well-housed, educated and medically cared for as the white man."

LIST OF POEMS

The North Ship

XX Poems

The Less Deceived,

Church Going

Toads

Maiden Name

Born Yesterday(written for the birth of Sally Amis)

Lines on a Young Lady's Autograph Album

The Whitsun Weddings,

The Whitsun Weddings

An Arundel Tomb

A Study of Reading Habits

Home is So Sad

Mr Bleaney

High Windows

This Be The Verse

Annus Mirabilis

The Explosion

The Building

High Windows

Thwaite, Anthony

Aubade(first published 1977)

Party Politics (last published poem)

The Dance (unfinished & unpublished)

Love Again (unpublished)

Thwaite, Anthony

The North Ship

The Less Deceived

The Whitsun Weddings

High Windows

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