

U DX416

**Correspondence of Philip Arthur Larkin
and Peter Yates**

24 Feb 1965

Accession number: 2023/01

Biographical Background: Philip Arthur Larkin

The Young Writer, 1922 - 1947

Philip Arthur Larkin was born in the Coventry suburb of Radford on 9 August 1922, the only son and younger child of Sydney and Eva Larkin. His father was City Treasurer of Coventry from 1922 to 1944. When Philip was five the family moved to a large detached house called 'Penvorn' on Manor Road, close to the city centre, and from the age of eight he attended King Henry VIII School. The school reports which survive from this time show that Larkin was a solid rather than an outstanding student with a flair for English Literature and a loathing of rugby [U DPL2/3/63c]. Equally intriguing are the reading lists which shaped his study and prepared him for the first class English Literature degree he was to receive from Oxford University in 1943. Of more importance to him at this time were his friendships with fellow pupils including James Sutton, Ernie Roe, Frank Smith and Colin Gunner. In his introduction to Colin Gunner's book *Adventures with the Irish Brigade* (1975) Larkin describes the pleasure he and his schoolfriend had in investing schoolboy reality with the glamour of fiction. He recalled 'the grins exchanged when the master in charge innocently made some remark that chimed with the Dickensian, or Rowlandsonian, lifestyle we had devised for him'. Similarly, the evidence of the Larkin/Sutton letters, held elsewhere in the Library's archives, suggests that modern writers, such as Woolf, Mansfield, D.H. Lawrence, and W.H. Auden, and the American jazz scene fed these young Coventry schoolboys' cravings for exciting, imaginative existences [U DP174/2].

D.H. Lawrence was an influence which was to stay with Larkin throughout his life. Evidence in the second deposit, U DPL(2), suggests that one of the reasons Larkin was drawn to Lawrence was due to the parallels which he saw between his own life and that of his mentor. In an unpublished essay 'Lawrence and Miriam' he tells us how he 'hurled himself upon the corpus of literature available' in the public libraries, just as Lawrence had done [U DPL2/1/3/3]. At Oxford he tried writing an undergraduate essay on an early Lawrence novel, *The Trespasser* [U DPL2/1/2/14]. Additionally, despite refusing many requests to talk publicly about Lawrence Larkin did eventually agree to give an opening address for the D.H. Lawrence Exhibition mounted for the writer's centenary celebrations at Nottingham University. Yet there is equally substantial evidence to show that Larkin resented Lawrence's power over his juvenile talent. The typescript essay 'A note on the freedom of DHL' (July 1950) complained bitterly about Lawrence's isolation from the economic realities of the world [U DPL2/1/4/23]. Its theme was later repeated by Larkin in his address on receiving the Shakespeare Prize in which he questioned the state's wisdom in providing grants for writers and insisted on the need for writers to take jobs in order to subsidise their writing [U DPL2/1/55/5].

Whilst at King Henry VIII School, Philip Larkin became joint editor of the school magazine *The Coventrian* (1939 - 1940), to which he was also a contributor. The school attempted to instil a sense of loyalty in its pupils, many of whom kept in contact after they had left for university. Throughout his life masters from the school (rebuilt after being badly bombed in the wartime German Blitz) wrote to Larkin requesting written and financial contributions. Larkin kept press cuttings about teachers who retired and in an early manuscript book of selected juvenilia he devised points towards a good education in the manner of T.S. Eliot. Unsurprisingly, many of his early attempts at writing prose take school themes or imitate

typical schoolboy reading matter such as *Treasure Island* and *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. 'Vampire Island', 'Incidents from Phippy's schooldays', 'The Eagles are gone', 'Last man in or how Allan saved his side' (a tale about cricket) are all such short pieces of schoolboy prose. Another prose piece beginning 'The small, cross channel steamer packed with humanity rose high' may be Larkin's attempt to capture the mood on a school excursion to Belgium (in 1939) [U DPL2/1/1/7].

The most substantial records of Philip Larkin's young talent, however, remain handmade booklets of juvenilia and the manuscript book which included material typed out and selected for posterity by the writer. Larkin was quite prolific at this stage, and began gathering his poems into collections at an early age. In this first deposit we find poems from the collections Larkin called 'The Happiest Days' and 'Poems in War' (heavily influenced by W H Auden). Interestingly, an annotation tells us that the poems in 'Happiest Days' were 'written on a cycle tour'. This was probably the same tour that Larkin took with his father around Somerset and which Sydney Larkin recorded in his holiday diary of 1938 [U DLN/1/7]. There are also seven handmade booklets of poems in which the poet declares his debt to influences such as Christopher Isherwood. One of these, 'Poems, August 1940' with foreword and postscript by Larkin, has the note 'written August 1940: revised September 15 1942. Coventry, Warwick. This is the first instance of a poem being revised' [U DPL/2/4].

The exercise book which was simultaneously used as a diary for the years 1939 - 1940 contains an invaluable record of Larkin's early attempts at writing prose, drama and poetry [U DPL2/1/1/10]. It also illustrates the poet's concern with the way in which posterity would judge him. As well as editing out poems and prose pieces which he did not want to keep Larkin carefully typed out those pieces he did wish to include. At a later date the poet pencilled in his scorn for his attempted imitations of major writers such as Isherwood, Auden, and Evelyn Waugh as well as more popular ones such as Frank Richards (founder of the schoolboy magazine *Magnet*). Yet, although satirising his own attempts at schoolboy fiction, the genre proved an integral part of the young Larkin's imagination. For years he believed that he lived in the same road as the school girl novelist Angela Brazil and her brother. The suburban setting of an early dramatic piece 'Behind the Facade', with its 'Winifred Avenues' and 'The Hollies' mimics the Coventry he grew up in [U DPL2/1/3/1] and he even kept a newspaper cutting about a poisoning which happened in Warwick Avenue [U DPL2/1/3/5].

Larkin left King Henry VIII School for St. John's College, Oxford in October 1940. A year later, following the German bombing of Coventry, he returned to find his parents and discovered that many of his childhood landmarks had been destroyed. Picking over the rubble of King Henry VIII School he salvaged pieces of a burnt textbook, and a poem by Keats. In 1941 the family moved to Coten End, in Warwick. Suburban life continued to be a theme. Another dramatic piece, 'The Unfinished Marriage', parodied the values and expectations which were to be found in places such as Coten End. 'The Unfinished Marriage' focuses on middle-class newly weds Dick and Sally. They have an accident on a bridge and climb a hill to a house. In the play the house is set in the middle of nowhere. The situation seems heaven sent. All Sally wants is 'to lie alone and be good in a little house on the edge of a serious wood'. Her husband however, insists on thinking about finding a job, and providing for a family. In the end Sally takes off with an unnamed third man (an officer) and Dick dies tragically young. This drama encapsulated Larkin's fear that the real world deadened the idyll of youth [U DPL2/1/3/13].

'The Unfinished Marriage' was written in September 1942 when Larkin was twenty. Already he was haunted by the disappearance of a juvenile talent which had begun to be recognised by his Oxford compatriots. Viewed from this perspective two rapidly written draft novels can

be seen as a desperate attempt to remain in the world of juvenilia. Under the name 'Brunette Coleman' he created his own public school world. According to Andrew Motion in his 'Philip Larkin: a writer's life', Larkin began the creation of Brunette Coleman by writing her autobiography, *Antemeridian*. The novels 'Trouble At Willow Gables' and 'Michaelmas Term at St. Bride's' were written soon afterwards (all were completed in 1943) [U DPL2/1/12-13]. The fluidity and speed with which he completed these stories is evident from the lack of revisions and annotations to the manuscripts. Brunette Coleman did not only write fiction, she also turned her hand to criticism and poetry. The essay, 'What Are We Writing For?' contained a defence of the essential innocence of the school novel against George Orwell's insistence that it was symbolic of the rigidity of the British class system [U DPL2/1/1/13]. Her poems, bound in black sugar paper and given the collective title 'Sugar and Spice', were written to amuse Larkin's fellow undergraduates [U DPL2/1/11]. However, one of them, 'Femmes Damnees' was eventually published in 1978 as *Sycamore Broadsheet* number 27.

As a student in Oxford Larkin kept a record of dreams from October 26 1942 to 4 January 1943 and wrote 'Biographical details: Oxford', a recollection of his time at St. John's College, Oxford [U DPL2/1/2/12 and 4/3]. Annotated at a later date, these pieces provide an intriguing insight into the type of literary world the young writer aspired to and invites comparison with the other record of Larkin's time in Oxford, the introduction he wrote for the Faber and Faber re - publication of *Jill* and the Overlook Press' version of the same novel. Whilst at Oxford it seems that Larkin modelled himself on the example of his friends Bruce Montgomery and Kingsley Amis with whom he corresponded long after they had gone their separate ways. The few poems which he had published at this time appeared in *The Cherwell*, *Arabesque*, *Labour Bulletin* and *The Listener*. All show the influence of WH Auden, another writer whom Larkin admired and referred to throughout his life [U DPL2/1/3/12].

In 1943 Larkin left Oxford having gained a First Class Degree in English Literature and with a vague notion that he would join the civil service. However, on 13 November 1943 he travelled to the Shropshire town of Wellington having applied for the post of librarian at the public library there. He accepted the job and stayed in Wellington for three trying years before moving to another library post at University College, Leicester in 1946. The collection contains diary papers relating to Larkin's time spent as librarian in Wellington as well as the minutes and papers of the 'Wellington public librarian'. Miscellaneous pages torn from Larkin's 'Wellington Journal' provide a brief interrupted narrative about his appointment to the post of librarian, his relationship with his sometime fiancée Ruth Bowman and his attitudes towards the users of the library [U DPL2/1/4/19]. Letters from Bruce Montgomery and Kingsley Amis also survive from this period which was a productive one for Larkin. Ten of his poems were included in *Poetry from Oxford in Wartime* (1945). All of these were then included in *The North Ship* published by the Fortune Press later that year. Then in 1946 his novel *Jill* was also published by the Fortune Press and his second novel *A Girl in Winter* appeared on the Faber list to good reviews.

The adult professional and poet, 1948-1985

Philip Larkin's father, Sydney Larkin, died on 26 March 1948 aged 63. According to Andrew Motion, the poet later admitted that 1948 was an important year for him: 'there came a great break in about 1948 when I finished - I thought I'd finished writing. I knew I'd finished writing novels, and I thought I'd finished poetry'. The second deposit holds drafts for poems that have been torn from a poetry workbook, most likely workbook number one. Many have been dated and annotated by the poet. Of these the drafts for the poem 'On Being Twenty Six' are particularly poignant. Larkin's belief that 26 was 'the time when the personality which has been forming below the surface begins to break into might' is one that runs through the entire collection [U DPL2/1/1/14].

In 1949 Larkin moved to 12 Dixon Drive, Leicester to live with his mother. He stayed here until he was offered the job of sub-librarian at Queen's University, Belfast in 1950. It was whilst he was in Ireland that he had one of his most productive periods as a writer starting two unfinished novels and many of the poems which were to be included in *The Less Deceived*, such as 'Church Going'. He had a small collection, *XX Poems*, privately produced by a Belfast printer in an edition of 100 copies in 1951. DPL contains the original workbooks in which Philip Larkin drafted his poems, whilst U DPL(2) includes much correspondence with friends he made in Belfast and kept in contact with later, such as Arthur Terry. In addition there is correspondence relating to the honorary degrees which Larkin received from Queens University and the New University of Ulster.

Larkin's return to England in 1955 to his new appointment as librarian of Hull University coincided with the publication of his first collection of poems *The Less Deceived*, issued by the Marvell Press, of Hessle, near Hull, owned by George Hartley. U DPL(2) contains extensive correspondence between Hartley and Larkin. Most of this relates to issues of copyright and the possibility of the publication of a Selected or Collected edition of Larkin's poems. Hartley was a fierce champion of Larkin and demanded high rates of payment for the use of his poems in anthologies and magazines. Enraged by these rates, indignant editors frequently wrote to Larkin to complain. Hartley was also involved in negotiating various recording deals with Argo and Decca. A proposed deal with the American Watershed Foundation failed to materialise. Numerous 'editions' of *The Less Deceived* appeared over the years and of all his poetry publications of Larkin's misprints in this work were to cause him the most anguish, which he voiced forcefully to George Hartley [U DPL2/3/29].

Throughout the 1950's and 1960's Larkin kept writing poetry and the drafts for all the poems which were to be collected in his next book of poetry, *The Whitsun Weddings*, can be found in the workbooks. He constantly received requests for poems from editors of magazines and newspapers. Although he refused most of these requests, filing the letters away in refusal files, many of these people become good friends. Claire Tomalin, Clive James, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Blake Morrison, Alan Ross all regularly wrote speculative letters hoping for poems or reviews. Anthony Thwaite was the most successful, persuading Larkin to appear in *The Listener*, *the New Statesman*, and *Encounter*, whilst he was poetry editor, and in various BBC radio productions whilst he was a producer. Larkin responded to most of the requests for material he received, even if just to refuse. He kept a sheaf of suitable replies and instructed his secretary accordingly with the number of the reply he wanted sent [U LIB/2/354]. The most intriguing aspect to emerge from the collection of magazines and journals which published poems by Larkin is their wide political spectrum. Larkin had no problem allowing poems to appear in the right wing *Spectator*, the left wing *New Statesman* or less mainstream journals such as the *New Humanist*.

What is clear is that he liked to cultivate the 'poet of the people' impression which continued to grow with his increasing fame. Thus, he gave interviews, judged local poetry competitions as well as national ones, and answered most of the many fan letters he received. At the same time, he cultivated a stylish image, entering into serious discussions with *Vogue* and sending the poem 'Homage to a Government' to the men's magazine *19*. The interview with the *Paris Review* was also a mark of his acceptance into a classy literary scene of world proportions as were the increasing numbers of invitations to read, lecture, and be a librarian, from American universities. Image was extremely important to the man who complained that one of Fay Godwin's photographs of him made him look like the Boston strangler and who checked the credentials of every artist and photographer who approached him for a sitting.

In 1964 *The Whitsun Weddings* was published by Faber and Faber to excellent reviews. The whole process from inception through production to publication is recorded here. Charles Monteith, of Faber & Faber, was the prime mover who persuaded Larkin to join the Faber list. The correspondence between the two men reveals a close friendship as well as a successful publishing partnership. They shared a love of Ireland, and met socially outside London in Oxford. Larkin had an equally successful relationship with Matthew Evans and Craig Raine at Fabers, however this correspondence is not marked by the same personal understanding.

Larkin's first novel, *Jill* was re-published by Faber and Faber at the same time as the publication of *The Whitsun Weddings*. Sadly, no manuscript version of *Jill* has survived. Barry Bloomfield tells us that 'the original ts [of *Jill*] was later thrown away by the author' [BC Bloomfield (1979), p.24]. Larkin was not as careless with drafts for *The North Ship*, another Fortune Press publication which Faber also republished at this time. A detailed workbook containing drafts of the poems which appeared in *The North Ship*, survived. Indeed, it was this workbook which Larkin later donated to the British Library as part of the Arts Council's initiative in 1963 to keep contemporary literary manuscripts in Britain. Pages torn from this workbook by Larkin have also survived, enabling us to piece together the whole creative process. There are clear parallels between a draft novel, 'Michaelmas Term at St.Brides' and several short stories which Larkin wrote whilst a student at Oxford but nothing more substantial remains of *Jill*. However, the huge body of correspondence between Larkin, Faber & Faber and his American publishers (St. Martin's Press and The Overlook Press) provides invaluable insight into *Jill*'s re - publication history.

The publication history of *Jill* conducted in letters between Larkin, Faber & Faber, The Fortune Press, St. Martin's Press and the Overlook Press illustrates Larkin's interest in the way his texts were marketed and promoted by Fabers and consumed by critics and readers. Once Charles Monteith at Faber had made positive noises Larkin wrote, as was to become usual, to his 'trades union', the Society of Authors (he also went to them for advice about literary executors, copyright, and so on). In this case, he needed advice on how to handle *Jill*'s previous publisher the Fortune Press.

Faber were not sure of the precise nature of the contract Larkin had agreed with the Fortune Press: they needed the correspondence between Larkin and R A Caton. On 19 April 1963 Larkin wrote to Charles Monteith at Faber and Faber giving a narrative history of *Jill* and including five 'laconic' letters from Caton to him between 26 September 1945 and 23 May 1947. Additionally, he went back through his diaries and gave Monteith snippets of information from them - thus this correspondence helps to fill vital gaps in Larkin's biographical narrative. Once Monteith had heard from his lawyer that there was nothing to stop Faber and Faber going ahead with the publication of *Jill* he asked Larkin to write a preface to the novel. Larkin continued the personal narrative which the novel's publication had unearthed by giving an autobiographical account of what Oxford had been like in the 1940s. Written in 1964 and revised for the Overlook Press edition of 1976 it was to cause him a degree of headache, since he worried that the Oxford friends mentioned would take offence. He entered a correspondence with Kingsley Amis sending him a copy and seeking his approval [Rebecca Johnson, 'Philip Larkin and the case of the missing manuscript', *Paragon* review, 6, 1997, pp.8-12].

The first Faber paperback edition of *Jill* (1975) was less problematic than the first and elicited little further correspondence. Brought out this time shortly after *High Windows*, the contrast is again remarkable. Larkin howls with anguish every time he finds a proof or printing error in the production of *High Windows*, whilst the republication of *Jill* went by smoothly without a hitch. The only corrections he requested for *Jill* in the paperback reprint were typographical,

whereas he demanded changes to punctuation and words in the next edition of *High Windows*. This book was the pinnacle of Larkin's published work. Robert Lowell, another poet on Faber's list, even requested a privileged preview of the collection before its official launch. Reviews were universally favourable and for the first time Larkin achieved success in the American market.

Larkin was interested in every aspect of the publishing process. He corresponded with copyright editors, permissions editors, and about royalties for all his Faber projects. The same is true of his dealings with Donald Mitchell, the Faber music editor responsible for the production of *All What Jazz: a record diary 1961 - 1968*, and Jon Stallworthy and the team of editors at the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* between 1970 and 1971. The latter project was dogged by errors, omissions and controversy. Firstly, there was the complicated business of getting permission to include poems by George Orwell and WH Auden. Then there was the matter of assuring poets that the poems chosen really were appropriate. Finally, there followed a considerable correspondence in response to the public's eagle eyed observations of omissions in the book. The most embarrassing of these was the lack of two stanzas from Thom Gunn's poem 'The Byrnie's'. The most difficult was the explanation to other contemporaries such as Norman Nicholson as to why they had not been included. The vast collection of press cuttings relating to the launch of the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* record widespread dissatisfaction at Larkin's selection as does the correspondence he received at this time. The publication of the book also led to many radio discussions and debates. By way of compensation, the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* earned Larkin more revenue than any of his other books, although it would have been difficult for him ever to have contemplated living comfortably from his writings alone.

If Larkin's poetry took time to find its proper ground in Britain the tale of the unsuccessful and successful publication of his prose in America is also preserved in the estate collection. First published by the St. Martin's Press in 1965 *Jill* was not successful enough to warrant republication until in 1976 the Overlook Press wrote to Faber & Faber proposing an American paperback edition of *A Girl in Winter* and *Jill*. This press was run by Peter Mayer in his spare time (he was editorial director of the mass market paperback operation Avon Books). Not usually a fan of the small press or limited edition (Larkin refused all offers to do his poetry) Larkin trusted to Faber's judgement and allowed them to make the deal. He was pleased with the results, writing in a letter to Peter Mayer: 'such a handsome version of this youthful indiscretion' (28 May 1976) and pointing out two small errors.

'Aubade', Larkin's last great poem, was published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1977. Drafts of the poem appear in workbook 8. With the poetic muse gone, Larkin devoted his time to his correspondence and to four major events in particular. The first was a celebration of John Betjeman, an exhibition held at the National Gallery. The second was the centenary of the death of Thomas Hardy. Renewed interest in Hardy led to Larkin's involvement in several radio broadcasts, his reviewing of several books on Hardy and the post of honorary president of the Thomas Hardy Society. A third major event was Anthony Thwaite's planned festschrift in 1982. *Larkin at Sixty*, published by Faber & Faber led to sustained correspondence between Thwaite and Larkin and Larkin and Noel Hughes, whose essay he disliked. Throughout 1982 Larkin was also making selections from his criticism for *Required Writing: miscellaneous pieces 1955 - 1982*, for which he was to win the WH Smith Literary Award in 1984.

Throughout much of his adult life Larkin proved an attraction to the media. He appeared regularly in the columns of the *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Observer*, and *Sunday Times*. He

was also a frequent contributor to radio. Television on the other hand he avoided if at all possible. The 'Monitor' and 'South Bank Show' programmes are the exceptions to this rule. The correspondence with the teams of producers involved in both ventures suggests that this was due to the friendly perseverance of those involved, in particular Melvyn Bragg's willingness to travel to Hull to explain the South Bank Show feature in detail. For a man who shunned being photographed and filmed it is somewhat surprising that there is substantial evidence of interest in the filming of Larkin's work. In 1981 Alan Brownjohn wrote to Larkin suggesting a film version of Jill in tandem with the BBC. Larkin was far from enthusiastic and discouraged him. Later, in 1983, Annie Clough wrote to Mavis Pindard at Faber and Faber seeking to purchase the television rights to Jill. The Cloughs eventually bought the film and television option for one year for £500. The film was never made and the agreement lapsed. In 1984 there were two more approaches to Fabers for the film rights to Jill. One of these was from Motown Productions (of Los Angeles). In the course of Mavis Pindard's investigations into the copyright situation in America it emerged that Jill had not been registered for copyright by either St. Martin's Press or The Overlook Press.

Larkin received numerous awards, including the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry (1965), seven honorary doctorates, a CBE (1975), the Companion of Literature (1978) and, most significantly, the Companion of Honour (1985). Furthermore, he played an important part in helping to decide which of his fellow writers were to be supported. As Chairman of the advisory panel of the Arts Council (1973 - 1979) Larkin was actively involved in the allocation of grants to young writers. As chairman of the Poetry Book Society's Board of Management (1981 - 1984) he presided over some major changes.

Despite serious illness, Larkin's labours continued practically to the end of his life, with his former library secretary employed to do the typing. His death from cancer on 2 December 1985 produced an enormous outpouring of grief from friends, colleagues, and lovers of his poetry. He remains widely recognised as one of the most significant writers of modern poetry in English, and as an extremely successful university librarian.

Custodial history: In the possession of the depositor since receiving the reply from Philip Larkin in 1965. Sent by depositor via post from Seattle 7 Dec 2022 but not received by Hull University Archives at HHC until 4 Jan 2023 due to Christmas holidays.

Description: Collection contains a letter sent by Larkin to Peter Yates discussing jazz.

Extent: 0.016 linear metres

Related material: U DPL; U DLV; U DLN

Access conditions: Access will be granted to any accredited reader

Copyright: Estate of Philip Arthur Larkin

Language: English

Hull History Centre: Correspondence of Philip Arthur Larkin and Peter Yates

U DX416/1

Letter. Philip Larkin to Peter Yates
Discussion of Larkin's opinions re Rollins and modern jazz, includes analogy to modern art, notes that in his reviewing he tries 'to be fair and give some idea of the records I mention without entirely blanketing them with my own views'.
Written from 32 Pearson Park, Hull. Envelope present, postmark Hull 25 Feb, addressed to Yates at Intersean Ltd, International Buildings, 71 Kingsway, London. Typescript and signed.
1 item

24 Feb 1965