Philip Larkin

by Andrew Swarbrick

English Association Bookmarks
No. 17
Scope of Topic

Philip Larkin is widely regarded as the foremost poet of his generation. His modest output - two novels and four slim volumes of verse - found a large and loyal readership, and he seemed to speak very directly to an audience who found in Larkin the representative voice of contemporary England. But since his death in 1985, his reputation has become less assured and his status is today a controversial issue. This Bookmark examines his life and works.

BOOKS TO READ

Philip Larkin: *Collected Poems* (Faber paperback, 1990)
Philip Larkin: *Jill* (Faber paperback, 1975)
Philip Larkin: *A Girl in Winter* (Faber paperback, 1975)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Philip Larkin was born in Coventry in 1922, the son of the City Treasurer. He attended King Henry VIII school in Coventry and in 1940 went to read English at St. John's College, Oxford. Declared unfit for military service in the Second World War, he was allowed to continue his studies uninterrupted, and graduated in 1943. His first job was as the Librarian in the Public Library in Wellington, Shropshire. In 1945 his first book of poems, *The North Ship*, was published, followed in 1946 and 1947 by his two novels, *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*. By the time his second novel appeared, Larkin was working in the Library at University College, Leicester, and he moved from there in 1950 to Queen's University Belfast. This was a difficult period of rejection for Larkin; a collection of poems was turned down by publishers, and Larkin was forced to print at his own expense his volume of *XX Poems* in 1951.

In 1955, Larkin returned to England as Librarian at the University of Hull, where he remained for the rest of his life. In the same year, the Marvell Press, then a new publisher near Hull, issued *The Less Deceived*, which finally brought Larkin the critical acclaim he craved. His next collection followed in 1966: *The Whitsun Weddings* confirmed him as one of the most respected and widely-read poets of his time. His final book of poems, *High Windows*, sold 6,000 copies in its first three weeks when it was published in 1974. By then, Larkin had become something of a national institution, receiving the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry; had he wished, he would have been appointed Poet Laureate after the death of John Betjeman in 1984. His other books included his anthology *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973), *All What Jazz* (1970), his collected jazz reviews, and *Required Writing* (1983), a collection of miscellaneous book reviews and interviews. He died of cancer on 2 December 1985, aged sixty-three.

After Larkin's death, his friend Anthony Thwaite assembled the *Collected Poems* (1988), which included some eighty previously unpublished poems from throughout Larkin's career, and which also showed the chronological development of his work by dating the composition of the poems as accurately as possible. Many readers were surprised to see how much Larkin had written in comparison with the small number of poems he actually published during his lifetime. A few years later, Anthony Thwaite's volume of Larkin's *Selected Letters* appeared (1992), and readers suddenly found themselves confronted by surprising and
sometimes shocking aspects of Larkin’s private life. More revelations followed in 1993, with Andrew Motion’s important biography of Larkin. Larkin’s admirers were faced with a man who was often tormented by misery and unhappiness. A kind of witty ruefulness in the face of life’s inevitable disappointments had long been the hallmark of Larkin’s poetry, but Larkin had always taken care to protect his private life from public gaze. Now, the often painful personal circumstances of the poems were exposed, and Larkin’s critics could point to further evidence of the questionable values - bigotry, misogyny, narrow-mindedness - which they felt had always underpinned his work. Other readers remained grateful for Larkin’s triumph in transmuting personal experience into poems which remain moving and memorable as poems rather than personal confessions.

THE NOVELS

One of the more surprising features of Larkin’s letters and biography is how intensely Larkin wanted to become a novelist rather than a poet. His two novels have continued to attract interest as precursors of the poems, but in fact Larkin achieved fame as a poet only when he had given up hope of success as a novelist.

Larkin’s first novel, Jill, was begun whilst he was a student at Oxford and grew very directly out of his own observations there. Its central character is John Kemp, a scholarly boy from a northern, working-class background who wins a place at Oxford but finds himself isolated and unhappy amongst his apparently more sophisticated middle-class contemporaries. In this sense, the novel is an interesting example of social comment, written at a time when changes in education meant that university places were available to a broader section of society. But social comment was not Larkin’s primary purpose in the novel; he is much more interested in the psychological portrait of solitariness and in the fantasy life to which Kemp is increasingly drawn. In an effort to make an impression on his public-school roommate, Kemp invents a sister for himself, “Jill”, whose letters to himself he pretends to write. This develops into an imaginary correspondence with her, which allows Kemp in his letters to give her a glamorised version of his life at Oxford. In real life, however, Kemp remains unsuccessful, and his fantasy-life alarmingly invades reality when Kemp meets Gillian, the cousin of an Oxford acquaintance, who resembles exactly the imaginary “Jill”. Thrown into confusion, Kemp tries to forge a relationship with her, only to be rejected and finally humiliated.

A Girl in Winter was written when Larkin was working in Wellington, Shropshire. The central character is Katherine Lind, a European girl exiled in England during the Second World War. The novel reconstructs her pre-war adolescent association with an English family whom she had visited after a pen-friend correspondence with the boy, Robin Fennel. Amidst confusing emotional entanglements, her first visit had ended in an unsatisfactory advance from Robin. Now, some years later, she has just heard from him again, and the novel tells the story of the day she is due to meet him. It ends with her indifferently submitting to his seduction.

Larkin tried to write a third novel, but though he wrote substantial drafts he could never complete them satisfactorily. The novels have their own interest as explorations of loneliness and unfulfillment. They announce what were to become abiding themes in Larkin’s poetry: the thwarting of our deepest desires; the futility of human aspiration; the self-delusions which have to be exposed. At the same time, they reveal a novelistic command of character and situation which was to become central to Larkin’s poetic achievement.
THE POEMS

The four collections published by Larkin during his lifetime were *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). These may be found in *Collected Poems* (1990).

**The North Ship**

*The North Ship* is the work of a young man determined to be a writer. The poems are rather self-consciously “poetic”: they deal in moods of melancholy and gloomy introspection. Running through the collection is the theme of failed love and a sense of individual futility. We think we choose, but life has a habit of choosing for us.

The language of these poems is more difficult and opaque than Larkin’s readers were to become used to. At the time, Larkin was enthusiastic about the musical qualities of other poets such as the Irish symbolist W.B. Yeats and the famous Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. He also admired the English poet W.H. Auden, and *The North Ship* has something of Auden’s self-analysing qualities. Another interesting aspect of the collection is its historical background: these poems, after all, were largely written under the shadow of the Second World War, and although there are few explicit references, their sense of foreboding and of life’s precariousness could be attributed to Larkin’s experience of reaching maturity in a country at war.

Later, Larkin seemed to be rather embarrassed by *The North Ship*, and when it was re-published in 1966 he wrote a wryly amusing introduction. There, he describes the disappointment surrounding the book’s first publication. It was promised for February 1945 but did not finally arrive in Larkin’s eager hands until July. “Then, as now, I could never contemplate it without a twinge, faint or powerful, of shame compounded with disappointment. Some of this was caused by the contents but not all: I felt in some ways cheated. I can’t exactly say how. It was a pity they had ever mentioned February.”

Disappointment, failure and resignation, all treated with an edgy comic ruefulness, a shrug of the shoulders: this was the Larkin readers came to know in the two collections which established his reputation.

**The Less Deceived**

*The Less Deceived* grew very specifically from the years of failure and rejection which Larkin encountered in trying to finish a third novel and publish a collection of poems called *In the Grip of Light*. Many of the poems are quite precisely about failure: the “padlocked cube of light” to which in “Dry-Point” access is barred; “fulfilment’s desolate attic” in “Deceptions”. A few poems resemble the style of *The North Ship*, but *The Less Deceived* presents the themes and language which were to become familiar. “I Remember, I Remember”, for example, is a witty deflation of all the romantic myths which in literature tend to surround childhood and adolescence. Stopping in Coventry on a train journey (and train journeys figure significantly in a number of Larkin’s poems), the poem’s speaker is jolted into reminiscence of childhood and adolescence. Stopping in Coventry on a train journey (and train journeys figure significantly in a number of Larkin’s poems), the poem’s speaker is jolted into reminiscence of childhood, but finds it can only be remembered in terms of what did not happen. Elsewhere, childhood is described as “a forgotten boredom”. If the future beckons us, it is only because, as “Next, Please” puts it, we delude ourselves about its “Sparkling armada of promises” which never anchor. For only one ship is seeking us, “a black-/Sailed unfamiliar”, in whose wake “No waters breed or break”. Death is a frequent if often unspoken presence in these poems: “Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs” (“Wants”), and in “Going” something frighteningly unidentifiable “loads my hands down”. But rather than arguing with the futility of life, these poems begin to joke with it. “Toads” expresses the universal desire to throw over responsibility and the obligations of routine, but finally recognises that the toad of cowardice,
or whatever it is which means we can never escape from ourselves, “will never allow me to blarney/ My way to getting/ The fame and the girl and the money/ All at one sitting”.

But there are more positive moments in The Less Deceived, whether it be the celebration of ordinariness in “Born Yesterday” or the tender nostalgia of “Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album” and “Maiden Name”. The most serene moments, however, come when Larkin imagines his own absence, as in the poem “Absences”, which rapely describes an empty seascape. “I am always thrilled by the thought of what places look like when I am not there”, Larkin once wrote.

The Whitsun Weddings

Published in 1964, this probably remains Larkin's best-known collection. The title-poem, “The Whitsun Weddings”, takes us on a train journey from Hull to London, and the collection as a whole takes us on a journey through a post-war England still familiar to us all: an everyday world of supermarkets, advertising hoardings, housing estates and municipal parks. Seen from the perspective of the 1990s, the collection as a whole seems vividly to capture not only the physical details of its time, but also its historical moment of increasing consumerism and relative affluence: the lists of supermarket goods in “Here” and “The Large Cool Store” testify to post-war economic recovery and a society pursuing its fantasies and illusory satisfactions in material possessions.

Hence Larkin's interest in images drawn from advertising: the enticing girl advertising a holiday resort in “Sunny Prestatyn”, and pictures of domestic contentment in “Essential Beauty”, represent society's collective desires and aspirations. Larkin uses them in part to measure the disparity between the appearance of a fantasy world in advertising images, and the real world of death and disappointment which surrounds them. But Larkin's poems do not simply reject the advertiser's images as illusory; Larkin recognises too that their fantasy does indeed represent a kind of “essential beauty”. Thus, his poems make us aware of the interpenetration of fantasy and reality.

The appeal of The Whitsun Weddings, though, lies in its accessible language which comments, often tenderly and compassionately, on human failure, on love and death. Whilst recognising the inevitability of death, poems such as “Ambulances” and “An Arundel Tomb” also want to pay homage to human qualities of sympathy and persistence which resist the passage of time. The volume's closing poem, “An Arundel Tomb”, begins, like so many of Larkin's poems, in flippancy, but seems drawn despite itself into a moving contemplation of the monument which memorialises a long dead couple. “What will survive of us is love”, it ends, and even if it confirms only “our almost-instinct almost true”, the poem, like The Whitsun Weddings as a whole, succeeds in finding values it can affirm.

High Windows

Even though it appeared eleven years before his death, High Windows was to be Larkin's last collection. He wrote little after 1974, and it is interesting, and even rather moving, to read High Windows whilst asking why it was that Larkin wrote so little in the years following.

There is no doubting its harshness. “The Old Fools”, for example, is a terrified and terrifying confrontation with impending old age. “Do they somehow suppose/ It's more grown-up/ when your mouth hangs open and drools,/ And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember/ who called this morning?” In “Going, Going”, Larkin offers an angry warning about England's future: “greeds/ And garbage are too thick-strewn/ To be swept up now”. “This Be The Verse” sums up the mood of bitter misanthropy: “Man hands on misery to man./ It deepens like a coastal shelf./ Get out as early as you can./ And don't have any kids yourself”. It seemed that Larkin, who had lived his life as a rootless bachelor, dreading the
limelight of publicity and cultivating the impression of reclusiveness, had written himself into vituperative sterility.

But there are at least three great poems to counter this impression of High Windows. “To the Sea” celebrates the communal ritual and kinship of the yearly seaside holiday. “Show Saturday” similarly celebrates an annual country fete as “something people do ... something they share/ That breaks ancestrally each year into/ Regenerate union. Let it always be there.” And “The Explosion”, which imagines a mining disaster in a pit village, affirms a vision of the men’s survival in a poem as tender and moving as any Larkin ever wrote.

From the beginning of his career, Larkin was portrayed in some quarters as a poet of determined pessimism with “a tenderly nursed sense of defeat”. Critics attacked his “genteel bellyaching”, his drabness, his artistic unambitiousness, and, more recently, his ideological unsoundness. His claim to pre-eminence is now under attack. But Larkin was a more ambitious poet than his critics, and some of his admirers, have supposed: ambitious, that is not only in terms of his style of writing but also the kinds of questions he addresses, questions to do with individual identity and existence. Whatever critical view prevails, Larkin should remain important to us.

FURTHER READING

Selected Letters of Philip Larkin, ed. Anthony Thwaite (Faber, 1992)
Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life (Faber, 1993)

Of more recent critical studies, items of interest include:

James Booth, Philip Larkin: Writer (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992)
Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin (Methuen, 1982)
Stephen Regan, Philip Larkin (Macmillan, 1992)
Janice Rossen, Philip Larkin: His Life and Work (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989)
Andrew Swarbrick, The Whitsun Weddings and The Less Deceived (Macmillan, 1986)
Terry Whalen, Philip Larkin and English Poetry (Macmillan, 1986)
Philip Larkin by Andrew Swarbrick is Number 17 in the Bookmark series, published by

The English Association
University of Leicester
University Road
Leicester LE1 7RH
UK

Tel: 0116 252 3982
Fax: 0116 252 2301
Email: engassoc@le.ac.uk

Potential authors are invited to contact the following at the address above:

Series Editor
Victor Hext

Shakespeare Bookmarks  Primary Bookmarks  Secondary Bookmarks
Kerri Corcoran-Martin  Louise Ellis-Barrett  Ian Brinton