

Andrew Motion met Philip Larkin, the greatest of postwar English poets, in 1977, the year Motion went to teach at the University of Hull, where Larkin had been librarian. Motion had defended Larkin's verse in numerous essays, a book, and in a 1982 memoir, "On the Plain of Holderness," in which he said of Larkin: "He's certainly helped me more than anyone else to clarify the kind of poetry I want to write, and been marvellous company—often profound, and sometimes extremely funny."

Motion, who was named one of the executors of Larkin's estate, also wrote a poignant poem for the *Times Literary Supplement* in the days following Larkin's death of esophageal cancer in December 1985. The poem was important because Larkin's amusing side can be found almost everywhere in it. Furthermore, it repudiated a caricature popular among the free-verse dogmatists and the chic radicals who have been governing English cultural life since the 1960s: that Larkin was a bitter misogynist and child-hater who cared for nothing except himself and his work. It comes as a shock, then, to find Larkin's former friend retracting in his new biography many revisionist claims he spent the better part of a decade formulating.

Granted, even politically incorrect readers of *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* and *The Selected Letters of Philip Larkin, 1940-1985*¹ may be surprised by Larkin's occasional private deriding of blacks, immigrants, Jews, and women. In one letter Larkin includes mock policy recommendations in a poem:

*Prison for Strikers,
Bring back the cat,
Kick out the niggers,
How about that?*

¹The *Letters*, edited by Anthony Thwaite, have appeared in England, and will be published in the U.S. later this year by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

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PHILIP LARKIN:
A WRITER'S LIFE

Andrew Motion

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reviewed by ROBERT RICHMAN

And in a 1946 letter to Kingsley Amis, whom Larkin often tried to outdo in epistolary outrageousness, he writes:

Don't you think it's ABSOLUTELY SHAMEFUL that men have to pay for women without BEING ALLOWED TO SHAG the woman afterwards AS A MATTER OF COURSE? I do: simply DISGUSTING. It makes me ANGRY. Everything about the ree-lay-shun-ship between men and women makes me ANGRY . . . It's all a f---ing balls up. It might have been planned by the army, or the Ministry of Food.

But Larkin's sporadic lapses of taste, which have renewed the cries for his head in the literary world, are nothing compared to Motion's distortions and deceptions, his blatant lack of balance, his determination to give as little weight as possible to people and events that might cast Larkin in a better light.

Philip Larkin was born in Coventry in 1922, the second child of Eva and Sydney Larkin. Sydney, the Treasurer of Coventry, was, Motion claims, "autocratic" and given to "extreme political views."

Motion holds that Sydney was a Nazi sympathizer during the 1930s. (His documentation: one essay by Noel Hughes, from which Hughes retracted the assertion, and another essay by John Kenyon—which, Motion tells us in a footnote, is unpublished and in his sole possession.)

Sydney certainly valued the intellect. His home was filled with books, and Sydney impressed on his son that reading should be an autonomous activity divorced

from school. Eva, for her part, was, in Motion's words, "mousy," "whining," and "scared almost into hysterics by thunderstorms." Their marriage was "bloody hell," Philip himself said, and instilled in him permanent doubts about the institution.

A sister, Kittie, was eight years older than Philip, so he grew up feeling like an only child. His eyes were weak, he was ungainly, and at age

four he developed a stammer that wasn't cured until he was an adult. His parents bequeathed to him their own diffidence and social awkwardness. "You don't know what shyness is," Sydney once said "very crushingly" (Larkin's words) to his son when he complained about his own. The result was few friends for Philip, and no friends at all of the opposite sex.

Larkin was exempted from war service because of bad eyes, and attended Oxford from 1940 to 1944. His troubles with girls continued, but one male friend he met remained close for life: Kingsley Amis, the novelist and poet, whose *Lucky Jim* is dedicated to Larkin. Amis, whose father was an export clerk for Colman's Mustard, shared Larkin's love of jazz, and both men hated public school boys and all forms of social pretension. (Larkin later distanced himself from the Symbolist-styled poems that appeared in his first collection, *The North Ship* (1945), but never tried to disown the two fine novels he published fresh from school and in amazingly quick succession: *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947). The former had as its subject the very social dislocation he had felt at Oxford.)

Larkin's reputation grew slowly, with four volumes of poetry coming out roughly one a decade. *The Less Deceived* (1955) got a slew of favorable reviews, and orders inundated the Marvell Press, the tiny husband-and-wife outfit that had published the book. (Weeks after signing his contract, an editor at Faber & Faber—T.S. Eliot's house and the pinnacle of British poetry publishing—asked Larkin if he had a manuscript to consider. Larkin told him he was too late.) *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), in Motion's words, "did

more than confirm Larkin's reputation; it turned his voice into one of the means by which his country recognized itself." *High Windows* (1974), Larkin's last book of his own poems, sold 18,000 copies—a feat given the anti-formalist esthetic climate of the time—and made Larkin "a national monument."

Larkin graduated with a First, but his stammer made teaching impossible. He was also rejected by the Civil Service. Motion doesn't speculate why, but Larkin's social standing may have had something to do with it. Larkin landed a library job in Shropshire where he did everything from stoke the boiler to serve the children. In an interview, Larkin later said about this job, in a broad Yorkshire accent for effect, "I'm fond of saying, 'I started at the bottom.'" It was here that Larkin finally met a girl who would sleep with him: Ruth Bowman.

In 1948, on the heels of his father's death, Larkin got engaged to Ruth, "making it clear," as Motion writes, "that marriage would not automatically follow." Larkin told a friend that he proposed because he didn't want to "desert the only girl I have met who doesn't instantly frighten me away." In the months to come, Motion writes, Larkin "slowly but surely . . . crushed Ruth's happiness beneath his own worries." Finally Larkin made an offer of marriage, only to withdraw it. Ruth returned the ring and refused to see him.

As a librarian at Leicester University, Larkin met Monica Jones, a teacher of English. The independent-minded Jones, who would become the poet's closest friend, claimed to have no interest in marriage. Nor did she mind the distance between her and Larkin after he took a series of jobs in remote areas, beginning in 1950 at the library of Queen's University in Belfast. "She suited his selfishness in virtually every respect," Motion writes. From this point on, in fact, and until Jones moved in with Larkin in 1982, they saw each other only on weekends and holidays. "I wasn't much trouble," Jones says, "and then I'd go and cook the supper."

At Belfast, Larkin had the best writing conditions of his life, working every weekday evening from 8 to 10 p.m., then going out for drinks and cards until 1 or 2 a.m. Four years later, when he was about to take a new job at the University

of Hull, he told Robert Conquest: "I feel terribly regretful at leaving Belfast."

Larkin's first impression of Hull, written on a postcard to his mother, was dour: "It's a bit chilly here and smells of fish." Situated at the junction of the Hull and Humber rivers, Hull not only reeked of fish, but was less interesting and less attractive than Belfast, and even more remote: "on the way to nowhere," as Larkin wrote. But for someone who was fast becoming the laureate of the dismal side of England, Hull was perfect. He stayed until his death thirty years later.

At Hull, Larkin started to see Maeve Brennan, a co-worker at the library. Motion is tough on Larkin about this "affair," and its supposedly calamitous emotional impact on Monica, but his anger seems misplaced. For one thing, Larkin did not sleep with Maeve for seventeen years. ("I'm extremely faithful by nature,"



Larkin wrote to Maeve, and nothing here disputes that.) Both women knew about each other almost from the start, and Larkin was more honest with them than most men in his position would be. And anyway, if this seventeen-year "triangle" was as unbearable as Maeve and Monica now claim, they are as much at fault for perpetuating it as was Larkin.

In 1961 Larkin began corresponding with—and championing—the novelist Barbara Pym, who had fallen out of favor after publishing a string of acclaimed books in the 1950s. It was his unselfish devotion to her novels in fact, that succeeded in resuscitating her reputation.

Pym and Larkin also saw eye to eye politically. When planning to meet for the first time at an Oxford hotel in 1975, Larkin told Pym that he would be able to deduce who she was by "progressive elimination—i.e., eliminating all the progressives."

After a Labour victory in 1964, Motion writes, Larkin began to air his "political prejudices more and more freely." After students locked a campus building, Larkin complained to Conquest: "We're off the boil at present, having licked the blacking off the boots of all students in sight." And to Amis he wrote: "F--- the whole lot of them, I say, the decimal-loving, nigger-mad, army-cutting, abortion-promoting, murderer-pardoning, daylight-hating ponces."

His sagging spirits were lifted briefly by Margaret Thatcher's victory in 1979: "Oh, I adore Mrs. Thatcher," he remarked. "At last politics makes sense to me. . . . Recognizing that if you haven't got the money for something you can't have it—this is a concept that's vanished for many years." Motion, for his part, calls the Larkin of these years "narrowly defensive and nationalistic," impugns him for supporting the Falklands war, and reproves him for venting his ire in letters to Amis after finding scrawled on the walls of an elevator: "F--- OFF LARKIN YOU C--T."

In 1982 the essay collection *Required Writing* was published, in Motion's words, "to universal acclaim." Two years later Larkin declined Thatcher's offer of the Laureateship, in part because he had more or less stopped writing poetry. But when Ted Hughes was chosen instead, Larkin wrote to Amis that "the thought of being the cause of Ted's being buried in Westminster Abbey is hard to live with. 'There is regret. Always, there is regret.'"

In 1985 Larkin's health deteriorated. He had no appetite: his tongue, he said, felt "like an autumn leaf." When inoperable cancer was discovered, Monica chose not to tell him. Just days after surgery, while still at the hospital, Larkin drank some whiskey someone had smuggled in, vomited, flooded his lungs, and almost died. On returning home, he rewrote his will, leaving his \$500,000 estate to Monica, the Society of Authors, and the Royal Society for the Prevention of

Cruelty to Animals. A bequest to Maeve Brennan was cancelled. In late November, he collapsed in his bathroom with his face pressed against the heating pipes. Monica called an ambulance. When it arrived "he looked up at her wildly, begging her to destroy his diaries." (He always intended to do this himself; his final wish was carried out not by Monica but by Betty Hesketh, his secretary, who fed the thirty-odd books into the university shredder.) Three days later Larkin died, turning to a hospital nurse to say: "I am going to the inevitable."

"The obituaries generally agreed," Motion writes, that Larkin

had been "the greatest living poet in our language," the writer who spoke most intimately to an enormous range of people, and the personality who for all his reticence "cared most for what we all care about." . . . He had produced poems that spoke exactly as he—and Samuel Johnson—believed art should: helping people endure life, as well as enjoy it. . . .

This was a cold comfort to Monica, [who didn't attend the funeral]. Isolated . . . ill, virtually unknown to the outside world . . . she felt her life disintegrate. She had no existence without Larkin. She was a widow without even the consolation of that title. . . . Drinking heavily, not bothering to change out of her nightdress and dressing-gown during the day, she surrendered to her sorrow.

Motion has relied on three main sources: Monica Jones, Maeve Brennan, and the cache of letters that became available under the terms of Larkin's contradictory will. And it is doubtful that Monica Jones is worthy of the total trust Motion places in her. Her irritation with Larkin is expected, and some of it may even be warranted, but that doesn't mean that Motion should accept everything she says. "He cared a tenth as much about what happened around him as he did what was happening inside him;" is a typical remark. Maeve Brennan, too, has an axe to grind, and Motion accepts everything she says: "I wonder whether I really knew him at all," Maeve observes at one point. "He had feet of clay, didn't he? Huge feet of clay." And Motion is not content simply to iterate her claims:

The indecision, lies, and contradictions which often characterized his life with Maeve and Monica . . .

He was too self-absorbed to respond to [Monica's] grief.

The modesty of Larkin's letters to Maeve [modest, that is, because they "conceal" the "true" vicious self Larkin reserved for Conquest and Amis] makes them seem—in their well-meaning way—deceitful.

In a letter Larkin sent to Maeve . . . it is clear that he was not so much a reformed character as a more [sic] self-tormenting liar.

Motion relies heavily on the letters, but the ones he quotes showing the poet's smutty and repellant side are atypical—an effort, it seems, to "prove" that Larkin was a creep all along. Larkin wrote his mother two loving letters a week; at one point, when she was sick, he wrote every day. All except one are ignored by Motion. Motion's reason for slighting this important group of letters? Because they are "doting," "trivial," and show an "amiable banality." (Larkin's letters to his mother are also completely ignored by Thwaite in the *Selected Letters*.) The letters to Monica showing warmth and affection, and there are plenty, are kept to a minimum; the same goes for the hundreds of congenial letters to Maeve. The dozens of extant letters from Maeve to Larkin—and they are, by Motion's own admission, "affectionate, tender, enthusiastic, and gossipy"—are also disregarded. The correspondence with Pym gets short shrift.

Such letters are downplayed to make room for those that show Larkin at his most lascivious ("I agree *Bamboo & Frolic* are tops, or rather the bottoms; do pass on any that have ceased to stimulate"), juvenile ("Sod and bollocks anyway. Not to mention c--t and f--. Omitting buggar and s--t"), or right-wing ("Term starts soon; you can guess how I look forward to it. Little subsidised socialist sods. See you on the breadline").

Another low blow is Motion's equating of the bigotry found in a handful of letters written mainly when Larkin was drunk, and only to those who wouldn't be offended, with a real, substantive politics. Larkin organized no marches, campaigned for no candidates, wrote no editorials, joined no racist clubs, and was above reproach in his dealings with people. (The only time he voiced any political views was in two interviews done late in

life and in a couple of poems.) As a full-time librarian he spent countless hours with women, "Pakis," and Jews, and not a single incident of intolerance, obnoxiousness, or political rancor is reported. The great affection Larkin's female colleagues at Hull felt for him belies Motion's claim that his "hostility to women would sometimes soften but never entirely disappear." Without real meanness or real political activism to bash Larkin with, Motion is forced to equate juvenile opinions expressed by a half-soused poet in a few private letters never intended for public consumption with political activity itself. It is one of the more disgraceful deeds in the history of literary biography.

Monica and Maeve are not the only ones whose facts are suspect. The third-hand testimony of Patsy Murphy, who died in 1977 of alcohol poisoning, appears unreliable, yet Motion reports it without so much as a raised eyebrow. Evidently Murphy told her ex-husband, the Irish poet Richard Murphy, that she had read portions of Larkin's diaries years before and without permission while at Larkin's house. Paraphrasing the Murphys, Motion describes them as a

sexual log book . . . full of fantasies . . . a repository for his rage against the world. . . . Patsy opened the secret drawer in Larkin's life and glimpsed his grimmest, sexiest, most angry thoughts. . . . Even his most candid letters only hint at their intensity. To gauge them we might think of some of the seethingly bitter things he wrote to [school friend Jim] Sutton as a young man, then multiply them.

Poor Larkin: he is rebuked for shrinking from action, for denying his mother an active role in his life, for being unable to write love poems when young, for criticizing his parents in a youthful memoir, for being controlled in his letters to Maeve but uncontrolled in those to Amis, for being a "prisoner of the past," for being motivated solely by the "cold drops of self-interest," for being jealous, rude, self-deprecating, self-absorbed, self-promoting, and lazy. (The last is my favorite: Larkin oversaw the transformation of the Hull library from a tiny backwater collection into one of the great provincial libraries.) "His moment had passed; his life was ending," writes Motion near the end of his narrative, and one can't help but read into the line a certain degree of relish. □

MEXICAN AMERICANS: THE AMBIVALENT MINORITY

Peter Skerry

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reviewed by TIM W. FERGUSON

This Independence Day, the *New York Times* revived the idea that Hispanics might be shifting to the GOP. The peg for this story was the 43 percent of the Mexican-American vote that helped Richard Riordan win the Los Angeles mayoralty. The notion is premature at best. For one thing, the circumstances were unusual—Riordan, a Catholic Republican, was opposed by a Chinese-American Democrat who banked his hopes on black precincts and took Latinos for granted. More important, the turnout among Mexican-Americans was even lower than usual; the *L.A. Weekly* figured them at 10 percent of the electorate, barely above what they'd been in 1973, before their numbers in L.A. tripled.

Near the end of the *Times* story was a discordant quote from Peter Skerry, director of UCLA's Washington program, who observed that the group in question was basically working-class and Democrat. Skerry could have said more—and has. In *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority*, he paints a complex picture of an ethnic bloc whose history of being exploited now includes a skillful appropriation by the political left.

The Spanish-surnamed elite that is now steering this group toward "racial claimant politics" must overcome the deep-seated conservatism of the masses, Skerry says, but manipulation by

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the professional and intellectual few is frequently successful. Comparing San Antonio (where Mexican influence is relatively ingrained and stable) with Los Angeles (where the foreign-born percentage of population is four times that of San Antonio), Skerry argues that the latter environment invites ideological misrepresentation. Among the villains are an electoral machine that virtually anoints representatives for L.A.'s Latino areas, grievance-oriented national organizations such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF); and activism on campuses that are still a "safe haven" for 1960s-style militancy.

Fundamentally, however, he believes the problems stem from an acceptance of mass illegal immigration (by libertarians and neoconservatives as well as the left) that has disrupted, in places like Los Angeles, the natural development of



what might broadly be called citizenship.

Turning to San Antonio, the author sympathetically describes the Saul Alinsky-trained organizers, led by Ernesto Cortes, who galvanized Mexican-American residents to demand, as a constituency like any other, their share of city services. Comparisons are drawn with the ethnic politics of Boston, which is cast on the whole as a positive model. Skerry admires Willie Velasquez's Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, and favorably describes home-grown politicians such as former mayor—and now HUD secretary—Henry Cisneros, whom he regards as genuine agents of their people even as their stars have risen. He finds it paradoxical that in Texas—the "Mexicans' Mississippi," according to L.H. Gann and Peter J. Duignan in *The Hispanics in the United States*—Mexican Americans have developed a greater sense of belonging. Texas was also the birthplace of the various national groups—MALDEF, LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens), the American GI Forum—that have identified themselves with concerns of the community.

"Community" is an awful term, but it is an alternative to "minority," whose use begs a question Skerry calls central. Are Mexican Americans a minority, entitled to special "rights"? Or are they "ethnics," assimilating themselves as so many of the nation's other cultures have done and are doing? Skerry clearly prefers the second course, but he is apprehensive that, outside of San Antonio, the story is not unfolding that way.

The Los Angeles model is a disaster, and for that Skerry places considerable blame on wide-open immigration policies:

The hundreds of thousands of immigrants arriving in Los Angeles have brought with them the traditional values of rural villages and small towns left behind in Mexico. But in Southern California such values have few places to take root and sustain themselves. Moreover, they stand in stark contrast to the pervasive, even intrusive American mainstream. Thus, in Los Angeles these newcomers face a choice between two quite disparate alternatives, with very