CHAPTER I

THE MAKING OF LAUREATESHIP
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Philip Arthur Larkin, popularly known as Philip Larkin, is a remarkable name in English literature. He has been identified as a “Visionary”, “Movement”, “Hardyesque”, “The man next to door,” “Dark Poet”. His reputation rests on his image of a rational, vigilant, emotive and responsive mind to the changing physical and mental landscape. Like every famous poet laureate, Larkin too had a making period. His above-mentioned mindset helped his making.

Philip Arthur Larkin was born on the 9th August, 1922, in Coventry. His father Sydney Larkin, was the Treasurer of the City Corporation of Coventry and his mother Eva was the daughter of a First Class Excise Officer. Larkin was the second child of Sydney and Eva, the first having been a daughter named Catherine (or Kitty) who was about ten years old when Larkin was born. Larkin was given the name of Philip after the famous Renaissance poet Philip Sidney, and he was given the name Arthur after his mother’s brother. As a child he suffered from a little stammer, and this stammer also persisted throughout his life, though in a considerably diminished form.

Larkin studied in King Henry VIII Grammar School in Coventry. His school days were, according to him, almost completely uneventful. His family resided in Coventry from 1922 to 1940. The aerial bombardment of the city made it unsafe to continue living there. They had a cultured, middle-class home, ‘comfortable and stable and loving’ but ‘I wasn’t a happy child, or so they say.’ (Required Writing: miscellaneous pieces, 1955-1982, London, Faber, 1983, 66). In spite of that Larkin enjoyed the usual
interests of small boys of his background—cars, Hornby trains, collecting cigarette cards of famous cricketers and footballers.

At about the age of ten he was writing ‘for his own pleasure, short poems and articles. They were always humorous and included family jokes.’ (Letter from Mrs. C. E. Hewett to Maeve M. Brennan, 6th December 1986). He also drew and painted from an early age. He used this talent throughout his life to illustrate poems, letters and even committee agenda during moments of boredom.

Larkin was a precocious reader. He devoured his father’s library which represented most of the mainstream English language writers, such as Butler, Hardy, Huxley, Bennett, Lawrence, Mansfield, Shaw and Wilde. In an article contributed to short-lived Coventry arts magazine, Umbrella, on the subject of his years in Coventry, he refers to the times he had spent at school as ‘tiresome interruptions’ of his reading. ‘I was very stupid’, he reflected, ‘until I could concentrate on English’. In a letter to Maeve M. Brennan, J.B. Sutton, Larkin’s school friend, wrote that he was “unexceptional academically except at English at which he always excelled.” His enthusiasm was accelerated by the master who taught him to School Certificate level. L.W. Kingsland, his teacher, wrote in a letter to Brennan on the 24th November 1986:

I recall Philip clearly enough... I can see him sitting at the back of the class as clearly now as then.... His English was quite remarkable: he had for his age a quite outstanding appreciation of and insight into literature and especially poetry. ...... He was uncommunicative, aloof and
reserved, not the sort of boy one could approach, and I was loth to appear intrusive. I could not decide whether he was shy and reticent or whether he despised, or at least discounted, the more academic mind. .... He left school as quietly as he had sat in it.

Larkin’s speech impediment tormented him for many years. He cured himself of it by his mid-30s but was never at ease addressing an audience. His hands got wet with tension. He was nervous about public occasions.

Larkin used his stammer in Self-defence too. He had a brilliant ability to mimic which was heightened by his stammer, and a strong sense of humour, traits he developed throughout his life. He entertained his class-mates by mimicking the teachers. His classmate W. Rider wrote to Brennan on the 5th December 1986: “our chemistry master ... was very cross-eyed .... and had a blistering line in sarcasm which Philip could do well’. “He was popular with the boys because he mocked the staff, and with the staff because he was invariably polite towards them.” [Hughes, N.; ‘The Young Mr. Larkin’, in Thwaite, A. (ed.), Larkin at Sixty. London, Faber, 1982,19]

Larkin devoted undue attention to hair from boyhood and in teens, he cultivated a precious dress sense. J. B. Sutton recalls: ‘He Brylcreemed his hair from very early years and was rather a natty dresser’. In the sixth form, when the wearing of uniform was relaxed, W. Rider wrote, “Philip wore a green sports jacket with a red tie which was envied greatly. He also had yellow knitted gloves
which were considered _de rigueur_ particularly when worn with a hacking mack which sported. He wore brogue shoes when no-one else had ever heard of them. .... He was then possessed of a lot of hair which he combed very assiduously”.

Larkin, at eleven years, wrote in his first published piece, ‘Getting up in the Morning’: ‘seizing brush, comb and hair oil, I fervently divided my locks’.(_The Coventrian_, 143, Dec. 1933, 965).

From 1936 to 1940 Larkin regularly contributed articles, parodies and verse to the school magazine, _The Coventrian_ for which he won the junior prize in 1937 and the senior prize in 1938. From 1939 to 1940 he was its joint editor with B. N. Hughes. They celebrated the relinquishment of their office in verse:

> First, our corporeal remains we give
> Unto the science sixth-demonstrative
> Of physical fitness—for minute dissection.

_[The Coventrian, 162, Sept, 1940, 734]_  
(‘Last Will and Testament’)

‘Summer Nocturne’ published in _The Coventrian_ in 1939 bore an unconscious Yeatsian stamp:

> And from the silver goblet of the moon  
> A ghostly light spills down on arched trees  
> And filters through their lace to touch the  
> Flowers Among the grass._([The Coventrian]_, April 1939, 593)

Larkin wrote extensively during his years at school. His writings appeared in the school magazine, _The Coventrian_, but these were apparently a small part of a greater output. The poems and stories that appeared in the school magazine were interesting. David
Timms in his *Philip Larkin* (Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1973) wrote:

As a schoolboy, Larkin seems to have made a speciality of the prose dramatic monologue, and we might note that some of his best known, and best, poems are dramatic monologues. *(Philip Larkin, 4)*

Various incidents revolve around the inept performance of some routine domestic job, which causes increasing exasperation in the speaker as he bungles it. In the novels of Larkin’s friend of later years, Kingsley Amis, objects seem to be malign forces, conspiring to frustrate the hero, and their intractability provokes violent anger. They are certainly controlled from what Amis was to call ‘Bastards’ H.Q.’ David Timms again wrote in that book:

Obviously, we should not take these juvenile pieces too much into account in an assessment of the outlook and style of the mature poet, but they do indicate that Larkin had early formed some conception of the frustrations and disappointments of everyday life, and this informs much of his poetry. Amis’s novels see its comic aspect, and so do these school pieces of Larkin’s. *(Philip Larkin, 4-5)*

The early poems of Larkin seem to follow the natural curve of development described by T. S. Eliot in *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism*: ‘the usual adolescent course with Byron, Shelley, Keats, Rossetti, Swinburne’. This is shown in their titles: ‘Fragment from May’, ‘Summer Nocturne’, ‘Winter Nocturne’. 
Larkin later discovered Eliot's poetry for those Eliotic great cats begin to stalk a familiar townscape of 'bare, windy streets'.

'Spring Warning,' the last poem Larkin published in The Coventrian is very similar to 'Ultimatum', the first he published in a national periodical. Both the poems follow closely the example of Auden in his 'In Time of War' sonnets. 'Ultimatum' had been sent to the Listener with three other poems. J. R. Ackerley accepted 'Ultimatum' and it was published soon after Larkin went up to St. John's college, Oxford, just when he was ready for an injection of self-esteem.

In October 1940 Larkin went to St. John's College, Oxford with which King Henry VIII School has historic links. Because he failed his army medical on account of poor eyesight, unlike most of his contemporaries he was able to complete his studies uninterrupted and graduated with First Class Honours in English Language and Literature in 1943.

In the Introduction to Jill, his first novel, Larkin gives some account of his Oxford days. Initially he shared rooms with his school friend Noel Hughes, and met Kingsley Amis in the summer of 1941. In the 'Introduction' he wrote: 'For the first time, I felt myself in the presence of a talent greater than my own'. He did not meet Bruce Montgomery until the spring of 1943, when both of them were in their final year. Larkin described Montgomery as an 'intellectual epicurean' at this time, and this fully borne out by the frequent references to literature, music and the other arts in Montgomery's novel, The Case of the Gilded Fly. Montgomery seemed to have acted as a catalyst to Larkin's own writing at this
stage. The poet said that during the time of their closest friendship, some three years in the mid-forties, he wrote continuously as never before or since. Certainly these years were the most productive in terms of quantity of published work, of Larkin’s career: 1945 saw the publication of *The North Ship* (poetry); 1946 *Jill* (Novel); 1947, *A Girl in Winter* (Novel).

On the other hand, Larkin did not conceal how his excitement for jazz was quickened by fellow enthusiasts at St. John’s. He and Jim Sutton had brought with them to Oxford their joint collection of records which drew other devotees to what was then still an esoteric interest. In Introduction to *Jill*, Larkin wrote: ‘Pee Wee’ Russell, ‘Clarinet and saxophone player extraordinary, was *mutatis mutandis*, our Swinburne and our Byron.’ Kingsley Amis in *Oxford and After* echoes this:

‘The art-form I associate with Philip at Oxford was not any sort of literature but jazz .... Philip was passionate about it. ..... I cannot improve on his descriptions. ..... of the part it played in our lives’, *(The Modern Academic Library Essays in Memory of Philip Larkin)*

Amis elaborated on Larkin’s taste in literature. Anglo-Saxon, taught by Gavin Bone and J. R. Tolkien, was generally unpopular. ‘Nobody had a good word to say for *Beowolf, The Wanderer, The Dream of the Rood, The Battle of Maldon*. Philip had less than none’. Except for Shakespeare, he did not enthuse about later writers either until he came to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Among his favourites were Auden, Betjeman, Hardy, Isherwood, Lawrence, Sassoon, Waugh and, last but not
larkin described how, in his last months at Oxford, he came under the spell of the Irish poet through Vernon Watkins who ‘swamped us with Yeats’. (Vernon Watkins: an encounter and re-encounter, Required Writing, 40-4.).

Between 1941 and 1943 Larkin had several poems published in the undergraduate magazine, Cherwell, Arabesque and the Oxford University Labour Club Bulletin. In the month he left, three poems were published in hard cover in Oxford Poetry 1942-1943 – an appropriate valediction to his student days.

The most important friendship Larkin had, with Kingsley Amis, Jill is dedicated to Amis, as is XX Poems. ‘Born Yesterday’ was written for Amis’s daughter, Sally. In his turn, Amis dedicated the brilliantly comic Lucky Jim to Larkin, and it is said that Jim Dixon is like Larkin in some respects: Jim’s diatribe against filthy Mozart echoes Larkin’s then dislike of the composer. Amis’s rather underrated poetry is sometimes like Larkin’s in tone, though he lacks Larkin’s scope as a poet, both in technique and subject matter. His novels reflect a similar world to that of Larkin’s poems, though Amis concentrates on its comic aspects rather than its tragic ones, which engage Larkin more.

On returning to the family home – in Warwick – in the summer of 1943, Larkin made two unsuccessful attempts to get into the Civil Service and then settled down to write Jill, the novel which had been germinating in his mind for some time. A Ministry of Labour enquiry in November as to what he was doing alerted him to the fact that if he did not find employment himself, he could be directed to compulsory war work. He therefore speedily and
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successfully applied for the vacancy of Librarian at Wellington in Shropshire at the princely starting salary of £ 220.10.0 per annum! In an interview with The Observer reprinted in Required Writing, Larkin recalled:

I started at the bottom. I had to do everything in that Shropshire library ... I stoked the boiler ... served the children, put up the papers ... And in evenings I took a correspondence course to get my professional qualifications.

Thus, quite fortuitously Larkin embarked on the career to which he had given no forethought.

Wellington was a sharp contrast to Oxford. Larkin was lonely there. He was living miserably in digs, in a cultural desert. Fortunately, his undergraduate friend, Bruce Montgomery, was at nearby Shrewsbury school and they met frequently. These meetings gave a 'creative stimulus' to Larkin.

Ten poems were published in 1945 in Poetry from Oxford in Wartime edited by William Bell. The Fortune Press had published the Bell anthology, and it was as a result of his appearance in this volume that Larkin was asked to submit a collection of his own work. The North Ship, which contained all the anthologized pieces and some others, was published in 1945. The work of some well known poets had appeared under this imprint, Dylan Thomas and Roy Fuller among them. L. S. Caton, the owner of the Fortune Press published Jill Larkin's first novel, one year later in 1946. Larkin also completed his second novel, A Girl in Winter in May 1945: 'I distinctly remember racing away at the final revision just
about VE day'. [Interview with The Observer, reprinted in Required Writing, 49]. A Girl in Winter published in 1947 by Faber and Faber, had several reviews. In Times Literary Supplement, (2355, 22nd March 1947, 125) one reviewer prophetically observed: it 'gives many indications of promise'.

J. B. Sutton has furnished some interesting information about the novels. Besides identifying the setting of the Fennel’s home in A Girl in Winter as ‘my family’s house, 127 Beechwood Avenue, Coventry, which Philip knew very well, mostly before the war,’ he discloses that a third novel, subsequently abandoned, was intended to complete the trilogy. Each novel was meant to illustrate Larkin’s early theory that life consisted of three stages; the first representing innocence; the second its loss, resulting in devastation; the third the struggle, after the desolation, to return to a truer and more mature self: ‘a sort of soul history – his own’. (Letter to Maeve M. Brennan, 5th April, 1987). This philosophy recalls that contained in Blake’s Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience. Larkin bitterly regretted his inability to write further novels. In an interview with Paris Review reprinted in Required Writing, Larkin said: ‘I wanted to be a novelist in a way I never wanted to ‘be a poet’. After 1950 or so he realized that poems came more easily than novels. He said in the interview: ‘I didn’t choose poetry: poetry chose me’. (59)

Larkin left Wellington in September 1946 for an Assistant Librarian’s post at the then University college of Leicester. For a graduate returning to an academic environment after working in a public library in those days was like a home-coming, and the chance of promotion in relation to one’s qualifications was far
greater. Larkin was specifically in charge of the issue desk and responsible for the acquisition and circulation of periodicals. As the staff was so small Miss M. Bateman, his colleague, wrote in a letter to Brennan in 1986: “We all had to knuckle to and tackle all the jobs, issuing as well as Cataloguing, Shelving as well as classifying we wrote every catalogue card by hand [which] seems incredible in these computerized days’. (The Modern Academic Library Essays, 7)

Larkin completed his professional studies course and became an Associate of the Library Association in 1949. His next appointment was a Sub-Librarian at Queen’s University, Belfast from the 1st October 1950 where his official responsibilities included the issue desk, reading room and stacks, the inhouse bindery and photographic department, involving supervision of some eighteen staff. His colleagues emphasized his good humour, ready wit and flair for handling staff and readers.

Belfast marked a resurgence of Larkin’s poetic activity after the rejection of a collection of poems, In the Grip of Light, in 1948. In an interview with Paris Review, reprinted in Required Writing, 68, Larkin said: ‘I wrote some poems:..... and had that little pamphlet XX Poems printed privately. I felt for the first time I was speaking for myself’. In 1954, the Fantasy Press published a pamphlet containing five poems and others appeared in various periodicals. Listen a little magazine famous for its publication of new poetry, published ‘Toads’ and ‘Poetry of Departures’. In October 1954, its proprietor, George Hartley, enquired if Larkin had sufficient material for a hard-cover book. Larkin submitted a collection, then called Various Poems (later The Less Deceived) which included XX Poems and those published by the Fantasy Press
While the process of publication was going on, Larkin was appointed Librarian at the University of Hull, a remarkable coincidence which brought him to his new publisher’s doorstep.

Larkin left Belfast in mid-March 1955 with very mixed feelings. In a letter to his colleague Miss E. Madill, Posted on the 21st March in 1955 Larkin wrote:

I’d only been at Queen’s for four and a half years but it was extraordinary, how at home I felt there and how much I disliked leaving …… Queen’s is a perfect little paradise of a library and I am profoundly grateful for the demonstration of how harmoniously a library can run. ([The Modern Academic Library. Essays in Memory of Philip Larkin] 8)

Larkin’s professional success also coincided with increasing literary recognition, initiated by the publication of The Less Deserved in October 1955. From virtual obscurity it brought him instant acclaim. In a review, ‘Poetic Moods’, of Times Literary Supplement 2807, 16th December, 1955, 762, it was hailed that the work “should establish Mr. Philip Larkin as a poet of quite exceptional importance; he has mature vision and power to render it’s variously, precisely and movingly”. It’s inclusion in The Times review of the literature of 1955 guaranteed a sell-out of the subscription issue and an early reprint. Although Larkin’s output was never prolific, his renown grew as new poems appeared in the established weeklies and poetry magazines. Suddenly he was also in demand as a reviewer of biographies, works, and criticism of other poets. ‘Hounded’, a sympathetic review of a life of Francis Thompson and ‘What’s Become of Wystan?’, a critical approach to
Auden’s Homage to Clio are examples of Larkin’s penetrating style and delightful prose to read.

Larkin did not invite literary personalities to Hull, preferring to meet them occasionally in London. Nevertheless, he was certainly not the ‘hermit of Hull’ of later popular image. Although initially lonely (he wrote to Miss E. Madill in August 1955: ‘Yes I do have my low moments here. I’m afraid I miss all the Queen’s staff very much’), he gradually overcame his solitude, the result of diffidence rather than indifference, by joining in the social and professional activities arranged by the staff.

Larkin’s circle of friends outside the library was also increasing. He was comfortably installed in the University flat he had occupied since 1956. Holderness, the remote and thinly populated hinterland between Hull and the coast, which he discovered on weekend cycling expeditions, appealed to him greatly. Suddenly he was at home ‘Here’----

Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-crowded water.

(The Whitsun Weddings, 9)

Of the many committees on which Larkin served, either as an officer of the University, or as a member of its staff, none, after the Library Committee, benefited more from his guidance and experience than the Publication committee. He played a significant role in its inauguration in 1957, acted as its secretary from the launch of the University’s Press in 1958 until 1980, and remained a member of it until his death. During that time he steered over
hundred books, inaugural lectures and occasional papers through publication and gave advice to many authors.

The issue which attracted most national prominence – a cause to which Larkin was very personally committed was the purchase of manuscripts of contemporary writers by foreign, usually by American Libraries. He first brought the problem to the notice of the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries in 1960 and in so doing attracted the attention of the Arts Council. Consequently in 1962 the latter body formed the National Manuscript Collection of Contemporary Poets (later writers). Larkin served on its Advisory Panel from 1963 to 1979, from 1973 to 1979 as its chairman.

Membership of the Arts Council brought him into contact with other writers, notably Cecil Day-Lewis, whose appointment as Poet Laureate on the 1st January 1968 coincided with his engagement as the first Compton Lecturer in Poetry; an endowed post in the gift of the Arts Council, awarded to Hull from 1968 to 1970 in recognition of Larkin's now well-established literary reputation.

Between 1961 and 1974 Larkin demonstrated convincingly that he had fulfilled the promise of The Less Deceived. His famous collection, The Whitsun Weddings, published in February 1964, was received with even greater acclaim. In a review, "Undeceived Poet", of Times Literary Supplement, 3237, 12 March 1964, 216, it was written that ten of the poems in the collection were "among the best poems of our time ....... the expressed distillations of a remarkable poetic personality". The Poetry Book Society made it their spring choice for 1964 and the Arts council awarded it the
Prize for the ‘best book of original English verse by a living poet published between 1962 and 1965’. (The Times, 30th September 1965, 14). Larkin’s most prized honour for this book was the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry, also awarded in 1965.

In 1970 followed All What Jazz: A Record Diary, 1961-1968, a collection of monthly jazz – record reviews written for the Daily Telegraph. Its introduction attracted much attention because of its scathing attack on the absurdity of modernism in all forms of art as represented by Parker, Picasso and Pound, counterbalanced by its Brideshead –like evocation of student days:

... memories of vomiting blindly from smaller Tudor windows to Mugsy Spanner’s “Sister Kate”, or winding up a gramophone in a punt to play Armstrong’s “Body and Soul”

(Introduction to All What Jazz, [8])

Larkin was also working on The Oxford Book of Twentieth-century English Verse for the Clarendon Press. The offer of a Visiting Fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, for the Michaelmas and Hilary terms of 1970/71 was doubly welcome.

Larkin’s last collection of his own poetry, High Windows, appeared in 1974, incorporating some of his most bitter protests to date against old age, death and disillusionment. The volume’s success guaranteed his position as Britain’s leading poet. Kingsley Amis wrote in ‘A Poet For Our Times’ in Observer Review 2nd June, 1974,32: ‘Larkin’s admirers need only to be told that he is as good as ever here, if not slightly better’. 
Five Universities conferred honorary doctorates on Larkin between 1969 and 1974. The first to do was Belfast, followed by Leicester, Warwick, St Andrews and Sussex, and in 1973 St. John’s made him an Honorary Fellow of the college. When Day-Lewis died in 1972, Larkin’s standing in the literary world was such that he was widely tipped to be the next Poet Laureate. The honour, however, went to Betjeman.

Larkin’s prediction that his creative talent would dry up after his fiftieth birthday was not unfounded. After the publication of *High Windows* the catalogue of his published writings is short. There are a dozen or so uncollected poems, the most important of which ‘Aubade’, appeared in 1977. To the poems should be added *The Brynmoor Jones Library, 1929 –1979: A Short Account* and *Required Writing*.

Larkin wryly referred to the history of the Library, written to commemorate its golden jubilee as his ‘last book’. It was not commercially distributed but now it has been updated and reissued as a memorial pamphlet. His last book, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955 –1982*, a collection of essays and reviews, ‘with one exception, produced on request,’ was published in November 1983. It won the W. H. Smith Literary Award for 1984.

In 1984 he was elected to the Board of the British Library, and after the death of Betjeman that spring Larkin was the clear choice to succeed him as Poet Laureate. But he felt unable to accept this honour because he felt that he was writing very little poetry
then and he could not sustain the ‘Mr. Poetry’ image which Betjeman had so successfully created.

However honours came thick and fast. Some of the more prestigious included the CBE in 1975 and the German Shakespeare Prize in 1976. Larkin was elected chairman of the Booker Prize Panel in 1977. He was made a Companion of Literature in 1978 and from 1980 to 1982 he served on the Literature Panel of the Arts Council. The Library Association made him an Honorary Fellow in 1980. The University of Hull gave him the honorary title of Professor in 1982. The last honorary degrees were conferred by the New University of Ulster in 1983 and, the most valued of all (what Larkin referred to as ‘the really big one’) by Oxford the following year.

Larkin was a man of retiring habits. He shunned publicity; he even disliked holidays either. It seemed to him a wholly feminine conception, based on an impotent dislike of everyday life. He certainly had a weakness for women, though it did not come into the open for a very long time. He took pleasure in looking at pornographic pictures; and for a long time he was a hard drinker. He developed a strong liking for a woman by the name Ruth Bowman, and even got engaged to her but failed. Then he became very intimate with two other women, Maeve Brennan and Monica Jones, and wanted to choose one of them to be his wife. This time also he married neither of them. His general outlook on life was very gloomy and bleak; and his poetry is deeply coloured by this pessimistic outlook.
The last and most highly esteemed tribute, the Order of the Companion of Honour, was announced in June 1985. Sadly it coincided with the onset of his mortal illness. After major surgery he had a short remission between August and October and died on the 2nd December of cancer at the age of 63, thus fulfilling his 40-year-old premonition that he would die like his father at the age of 63 of cancer though by contrast, his mother lived to be 91 and died on the 17th November, 1977.

So far as the influence of other poets is concerned, Larkin himself listed three specific influences on his poetry. As an ex-school boy Auden was the only alternative to ‘old fashioned’ poetry. During undergraduate period he was influenced by Dylan Thomas with his own sentimentality and the immediately Post Oxford self, isolated in Shropshire with a complete Yeats stolen from the local girl’s school. Later Larkin was deeply influenced by Thomas Hardy. He wrote to Judith Anne Johnson, an American student, “I looked to Hardy rather than to Yeats as my ideal, and eventually a more rational approach, less hysterical and emphatic, asserted itself”. Hardy seems to have assisted a change in Larkin rather than prompted it. Speaking in a radio broadcast later transcribed and published in the Listener in 1968, Larkin said that Hardy was not a young man’s poet; when he began to read Hardy himself, he realized that ‘here was somebody writing about things I was beginning to feel myself’. Yeats gave the young poet a verbal model, a distinctive tone of voice to imitate but Hardy gave him a change in the thematic thought.
Philip Larkin is associated with the Movement Poets who had been publishing their works in the Spectator, and in the pamphlets published by Oscar Mellors's Fantasy Press. The Movement Poets – Robert Conquest, Philip Larkin, Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, D. J. Enright, Kingsley Amis, John Holloway, John Wain and Elizabeth Jennings – all contributed to Robert Conquest's anthology, New Lines in 1956.

The Movement did not receive its name, however until 1954, when an anonymous writer published a piece in the Spectator entitled 'In the Movement'. The writer recognized that composition of the group was unstable, but mentioned by name Donald Davie and Thom Gunn among poets, and Amis, Wain and Iris Murdoch among novelists:

The Movement, as well as being anti-phoney, is anti-wet, sceptical, robust, ironic, prepared to be as comfortable as possible in a wicked, commercial, threatened world which does not look, anyway, as if it's going to be changed much by a couple of handfuls of young English writers. (Philip Larkin, 11)

Besides enumerating some of the features of the Movement this short quotation illustrates them. Movement writers tried to return to a diction that eschewed the high-flown in favour of the colloquial. Robert Conquest suggested George Orwell's influence on the Movement about clarity and straightforwardness of statement. There was also slyness about some Movement verse, which was the unpleasant side of the ironic mode. Besides, there was a general lack of sympathy with the different that one sometimes feels in Movement verse. But Larkin did not share these
lincoln, partly because he was a man more able to sympathise with others, and partly because he wrote his poetry not from a preconceived set of principles, but as a direct and personal response to particular experiences. Donald Davie’s poetry, for instance, changed radically as his theoretical concepts altered; but Larkin’s remained much more constant. Larkin never eschewed the great theme on principle, nor the heightened diction that was necessary for its statement. We need only look at the final stanzas of ‘Church Going’ and ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ to see this. He insistently wrote on those themes that were of perennial importance: the conflict between what we are and what we can imagine ourselves to be, the destructive effects of time, suffering as it hurts, and as it matures us, the endlessly complex relationships between people, the urge to slough off what Yeats called ‘all this complexity of mire and blood’.

Larkin was technically an extraordinary and accomplished poet, a poet who used the devices of metre and rhyme for specific effects. His language was never flat, unless he intended it to be so for particular reason and his diction was never stereotyped.

Larkin had a sympathy with the different that was lacking in the work of many of his Movement contemporaries. Amis would not feel what Larkin felt in ‘Faith Healing’ for the women who shook, ‘moustached in flowered frocks’. He would make brilliant comedy out of it, but he could not feel Larkin’s compassion. His attention would be riveted by the moustaches.

In ‘The Pleasure Principle’, Listen II (Summer – Autumn 1957, p-29) Philip Larkin said about poetry that poetry is ‘born of
the tension between what [the poet] non-verbally feels and what can be got over in common word-usage to someone who hasn’t had his experience or education or travel-grant’. In common with Dr. Johnson, Larkin saw in life ‘much to be endured and little to be enjoyed’. His forms are ‘traditional’ rather than ‘modern’, though they are various and unmistakably a full response to contemporary life.

The achievements and milestones of man’s life are relatively easy to chronicle. To understand his personality fully is much harder. Larkin particularly was a man of extraordinary complexity and contrasts; a man of many facets, all of which no one could claim to know. The public image was of the poet of deprivation, the hermit of Hull, the Churlish misanthropist, ‘a hopeless and inflexible pessimist’ as Andrew Motion said in Philip Larkin. The private persona refuted these impressions, but even the inner man was full of contradictions. In Philip Larkin: a biographical sketch, Maureen M. Brennan, Larkin’s intimate friend, wrote:

[Larkin was] “a compassionate man, his observations were often keenly acerbic. A modest man, he did not suffer fools gladly. A man of remarkable intellect, he loved the commonplace. He took refuge in solitude, but was dependent on close friends. He appeared detached, yet sought warmth and reassurance. Public speaking filled him with dread yet his delivery was confident, urbane, witty and extremely polished”. (The Modern Academic Library Essays in Memory of Philip Larkin, 17)
In spite of disillusionment with work latterly, he could not envisage life without its discipline and its contacts. He was a professed agnostic yet he envied those with religious faith. In spite of his life-long fear of death, he tackled it head-on in his poetry. The gloom was invariably punctuated by the ready wit. He was one of those rare people, larger than life, whose presence long after death remains palpable. He lies on the edge of

... unfenced existence:

Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

(The Whitsun Weddings, 9)
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