

# Exhibition of Larkin's ephemera shines light on poet's dark side

Hannah Ellis-Petersen

Philip Larkin is many things to many people; to some the bleakly beautiful poet with a razor-sharp wit, to others the womanising misogynist whose casual racism is unforgivable.

It is into this morally complex minefield that a new exhibition has waded, offering a fresh perspective on one of Hull's most treasured cultural figures.

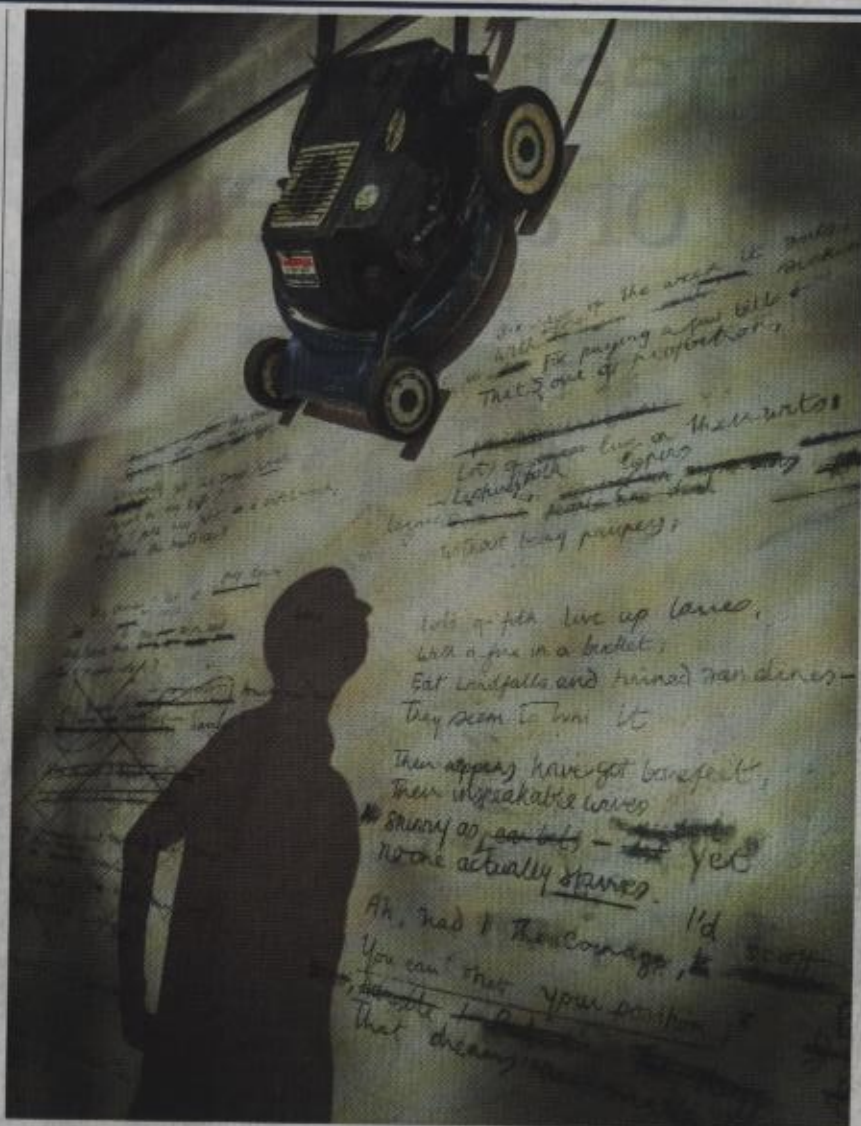
The show in Hull University's Brynmor Jones library, where Larkin was famously the librarian, has gathered together hundreds of personal items from across the poet's life - from his book collection to his clothes, ornaments from his office and home, unseen photographs, notes and doodles and objects belonging to his many lovers - in order to piece together a fascinating picture of his life.

Most of the objects were originally in Larkin's home and have never been seen in public before. The exhibition, part of the Hull City of Culture celebrations, does not shy away from the complex, darker sides of his personality. On display is the figurine of Hitler, given to the poet by his Nazi sympathiser father who once took Larkin to a Nuremberg rally.

The women in his life, particularly Monica Jones, Maeve Brennan and Betty Mackereth, feature prominently. The show addresses the often despicable way Larkin treated them - how he struggled with intimacy his whole life - but also how biographers and historians have often dismissed them simply as "mystic muses", rather than acknowledging the roles they played as his editors.

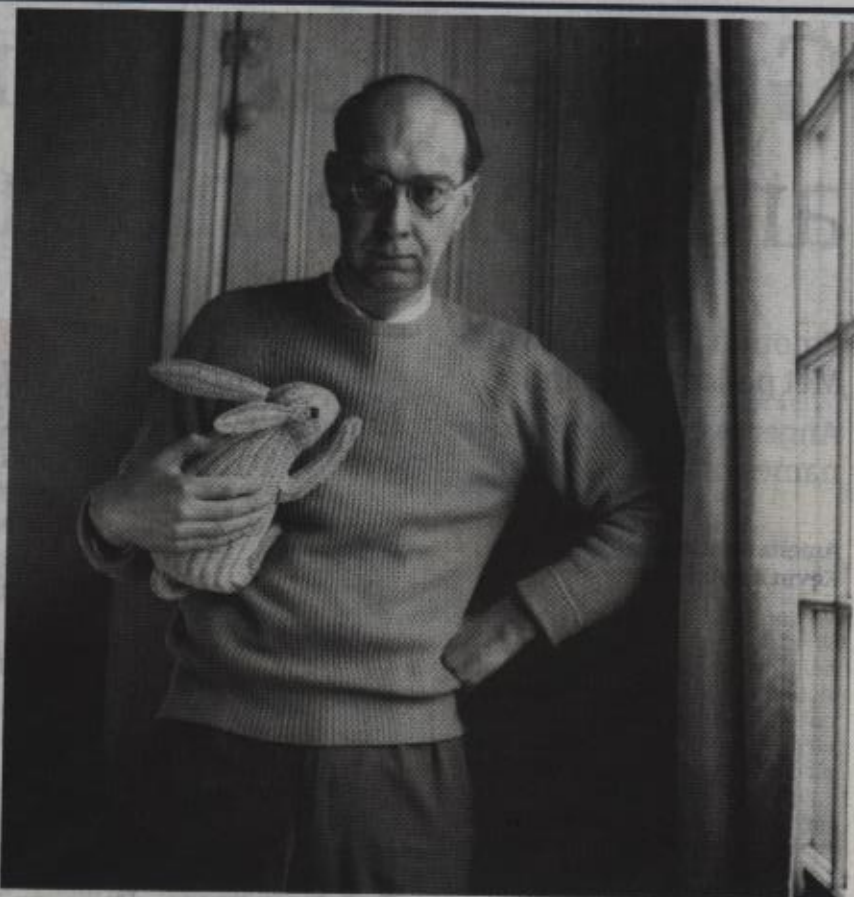
"The challenge is always to not judge and to present the story in a way with lots of perspectives and hooks so people can make their own minds up," said exhibition curator Anna Farthing. "I've had lots of different reactions to him as I've started to get to know him, from complete respect to being appalled."

Larkin's own library is on display, and Farthing emphasised how fascinating it had been to look through the books, all filled with scribbles, newspaper cuttings, pressed flowers and dedications. She described each as a "casket in its own right".



Clockwise from top left: a projection at the exhibition of Philip Larkin's poem *Toads*; a photograph of the poet with a

of hers that were in Larkin's house are also on display, as well as what Farthing described as one of the most "heart-breaking" finds: unused dress patterns for small children, suggesting she may have held out hope that she would be able to get Larkin to commit to her fully and start a family.



ably an elephant' or 'I staggered away from the table dreading my next encounter with the scales'. Those are not the words we expect to hear from Larkin."

Larkin's love of jazz is widely known and the show's soundtrack nods to this passion and gives it a slinky rhythm.

"The thing about libraries is that all sorts of things happen in the stacks," said Farthing. "So we want people to go into the small corners and the nooks and crannies of this exhibition and have an experience with another human - that sounds suggestive, but what I mean is, have a little chat, ask questions. I mean, Larkin found all his lovers in libraries."

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They also prove revealing. A copy of his novel *Jill*, given to Jones, who was his longtime lover, is inscribed at the front: "To Monica, with love and thanks for helping make it decent, ie literate."

Farthing pointed out the significance of these words. "There is so much about the women in Larkin's life being his muse - well, they were human beings in their own right," she said. "Yet here you can see, she wasn't his muse, she was his editor. All the evidence suggests he sends her drafts of his work, he's constantly asking for her opinion. In her copy of *Whitsun Weddings*, he writes a dedication in the front of it for her and inside the book there's a draft of a poem, which has Tipp-Ex all over it."

Jones's lipstick, her dress and objects



**Clockwise from top left: a projection at the exhibition of Philip Larkin's poem *Toads*; a photograph of the poet with a wicker rabbit; his typewriter; longtime lover Monica Jones; Hitler figurine; Jones's lipstick and a black and white shot of her Photographs: PA; Philip Larkin archive**

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The show also offers a rare insight into Larkin's tortured relationship with his appearance. He was fixated on it, and the show displays his clothes - beige trousers, bright red shirts and thick black glasses - and the many pictures he took of himself. Larkin would weigh himself twice a day on two sets of scales and the exhibition displays quotes revealing the depth of his self-loathing.

Farthing said it was one of the biggest revelations in her research. "People presume that men don't care about their body image and it's a side of Larkin's character that has been neglected.

"And maybe it's because I'm a woman that I can see it instantly in his own neuroses. You just have to read his words: 'My trousers seem to have been made for a much bigger creature, prob-



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For Farthing, the exhibition is about exploring a side of Larkin that goes against expectation. The theme throughout is pink, Larkin's favourite colour, and it focuses in on the scribbles and scratched-out writings that are never seen in his sparse, clean poems. At the end of the show, visitors are invited to pen their own letter to Larkin, which will then be pinned on the wall.

"I think what I have taken away most from putting on this exhibition is that it seems extraordinary that he produced the work, because the poetry is so clean and clear and his life was such a mess," said Farthing. "He's clearly a narcissist with a borderline personality disorder, but to have achieved work that is so human and engaging and continually relevant, it seems that he did it despite his demons, not because of them."

## Gravitational waves could offer proof of other dimensions

**Hannah Devlin**  
Science correspondent

String theory makes the grand promise of weaving together all of physics into a single sublime framework. The only downside is that scientists have yet to find any experimental proof that it is right - and critics question whether its predictions are even testable.

Now, a new paper has claimed it could hold the key to whether string theory is destined to fulfil its lofty goals or be consigned to the dustbin. It suggests that the first observable evidence for the existence of extra dimensions, one of string theory's predictions, could be hidden within the ripples of gravitational waves.

"It would be amazing because general relativity and Einstein do not predict this at all," said the lead author, David Andriot, of the Max Planck Institute for Gravitational Physics in Potsdam, Germany.

The crux of string theory - although

there are many competing versions - is that all particles can be viewed as one-dimensional strings on which the fundamental forces of nature (gravity, electromagnetism and so on) act as different modes of vibration. The framework also requires there to be at least six extra-spatial dimensions, in addition to time and the three spatial ones of everyday life.

Scientists have looked for energy vanishing into these hypothetical extra dimensions, but their efforts have been inconclusive. One possibility is that the dimensions are coiled up so tightly that they are imperceptible; another is that they are not there at all.

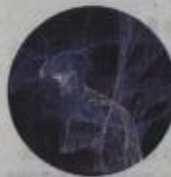
Andriot is hopeful that the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (Ligo) experiment could start to answer this question.

In 2015, Ligo made the historic first observation of gravitational waves, the compression and stretching of space that Albert Einstein predicted would occur as a

mass moves through the fabric of the universe. Ligo's detectors were picking up the ripples from the collision of a pair of black holes more than a billion years ago.

String theory predicts that, during such cataclysmic events, ripples should also be travelling through the extra-spatial dimensions and that there should be subtle interactions between the standard waves and those hidden from view. "Our study concludes that if there are extra dimensions it would lead to another mode of shrinking and stretching," said Andriot.

The paper, published in the *Journal of Cosmology and Astroparticle Physics*, said this would produce a "breathing" effect,



**The physicist David Andriot says evidence of extra dimensions - one of string theory's predictions - could be hidden in the ripples of gravitational waves**

superimposed on the main gravitational wave. The pattern might be measurable once a third detector, called Virgo, joins the twin Ligo detectors in gathering data next year or early in 2019.

"If we have extra dimensions we can get this effect, but there are other things that could cause it. It's not a smoking gun for extra dimensions," said Andriot.

Christopher Berry, a scientist working on Ligo at Birmingham University, said it was a priority to look for the kinds of subtle modifications to gravitational waves described in the paper.

"It's one of the classic tests that we would like to do," he said.

However, others remain unconvinced that such observations would provide the sought-after experimental proof.

Peter Woit, a theoretical physicist at Columbia University in New York and a critic of string theory, said: "The problem is that string theory says nothing at all about the sizes of these extra dimensions."