

Philip Larkin, the Marvell Press and Me (an index)

Philip Larkin, the Marvell Press and Me was first published by Carcanet (with the financial assistance of The Arts Council of Great Britain) in 1989. It has never included an Index, either in the original hard-cover version or in the slightly extended paperback version published by the Sumach Press in 1993. This Index has been created as a tribute to Jean Hartley, the book's author, who played a vital role in both bringing Philip Larkin's work to worldwide attention, and helping to secure his reputation and legacy long after his death in 1985.

Jean had a great number of friendships, formed over a life-time of keen interest in a multiplicity of different subjects areas; I am one of many fortunate enough to have known Jean as a friend and colleague.

One of my first (and favourite) clients during the early years of running my own decorating business was Marjorie Raines, the widow of Philip Larkin's University doctor Robert Raines. Most of my new business came by way of recommendations from existing clients, and Mrs Raines was no exception: I had been recommended to her by one of her friends, and she, in turn, had recommended me to several of hers - including Ray and Kitty Brett.

My first job for the Bretts was in January 1992. At that time Ray Brett was professor of English at Hull University. It wasn't long before I realised how affable, gentle and friendly both he and his wife were, and this emboldened me one morning to hand him a clutch of my poems with the request that every professor of English must dread: "You're a professor of English; have a look at these and tell me what you think".

The following day, Professor Brett responded by making a few encouraging comments and concluded: "You need to speak with Jean Hartley". He gave me Jean's telephone number. I phoned Jean a day or so later, and in a quite lengthy conversation she asked me about my poetry, about my background and other hobbies; as well as enquiring which poets I admired. She was genuinely keen to know how and when I first became interested in poetry and what it was that inspired me to write it (I'm sure this will come as no surprise to anyone who knew Jean). Before the end of our conversation, she had suggested I send some of my poems to John Osborne, the editor of the literary magazine *Bête Noire*.

Our paths crossed occasionally over the next three or four years: I attended creative writing classes run by Jean's good friend Daphne Glazer, and Jean regularly supported Daphne by coming along to readings arranged by Daphne for her students. Jean never failed to show her enthusiasm, and always offered encouraging, supportive and constructive comments and feedback.

One or two of my regular clients lived opposite Jean in Victoria Avenue, so we would often bump into each other whenever I was working there. And Jean would regularly make a point of coming over to speak with me at readings and other events we both attended. For someone like myself - insular and insecure (both as a person and as a poet) - it was very confidence-inspiring to know that someone with Jean's experience, connections and judgement genuinely liked my poetry. One concrete measure of her support was that she published my poem 'Oath' in *About Larkin* (No.6 Winter 1998/9). And in one of her Larkin Society Study Day talks, she mentioned that her two favourite Hull poets at that time were "a decorator" [me] and "a postman" [my good friend, Dean Wilson].

One day in autumn 1999 (I was painting the exterior of a house opposite Jean's on Victoria Avenue), Jean mentioned that she and her colleagues on the Larkin Society committee were looking for

someone with computer skills to take over the membership database and, possibly, other computer related duties for the Society. In loyalty to Jean and the friendship and support she had shown me, I said I'd be happy to offer help and advice if she thought I could be of use. Within a couple of days Jean got back in touch, suggesting I take over management of the Larkin Society membership database, and that I also become a member of the Larkin Society committee. Thus my association with the Philip Larkin Society began. (Jean's sense of humour was such that, in the years that followed, she regularly apologised to me for her part in this).

For me, the great advantage of this new association with the Larkin Society was that I was able to see far more of Jean, and on a more regular basis; and, as a result, our friendship became more immediate. I was able to gain an insight into Jean's various areas of interest: from her relaxed and relaxing friendships with fellow Hull Art Circle members, to her long distant communications with Larkin enthusiast from Japan, Suzuyo Kamitani; from the loving, seasonal, ritual regularity of her unshakeable familial activities, to the sometimes frustrating, but occasionally exciting monthly meetings of the Larkin Society committee; from her great, fun-filled friendship with Maeve Brennan, to her frequent, often single-meeting, repetitions with journalist, radio presenters and TV producers; from her precious artistic and creative explorations with her granddaughter, Sarah, to her active support of Hull's cultural heritage (for example, as a member of Friends of the Ferens Art Gallery). Even this barely scratches the surface of Jean's spectrum of interests.

It was in Jean's kitchen at 82 Victoria Avenue that I was first introduced to many of her other friends, either in person or by way of an explanation about a card or letter she'd received; and where I was privileged, on numerous occasions, to witness the relationship between Jean and her granddaughter, Sarah: a relationship that was never anything short of a reciprocity of love, admiration and respect. And while Sarah's travels to South America in the year before Jean's death must have caused the occasional flutter of concern, Jean spoke of the adventure with the relaxed certainty of a woman whose confidence in the granddaughter she loved, and knew so well, was absolute (not to mention a heady mix of pride and excitement).

And even as Jean's own health deteriorated, she continued to enquire earnestly about the health of others: specifically my own wife and daughter: it never slipped her mind to ask for a progress report. Some months before Jean's death, my daughter's son had asked: "Mummy, are you going to die?" I mentioned this to Jean, and that I'd said to my daughter: "You should have replied: 'Archie, we're all going to die' ". Jean finished the sentence with me as I spoke. Death will come.

Jean Hartley's *Philip Larkin, the Marvell Press and Me* has become essential reading for literary scholars and sociological historians alike: recording, for the first, the hatching and fledging of one of the great English poets; for the second, the struggles and sufferings of an unmarried mother in mid-twentieth-century northern England; and the cultural opposition between the different worlds of an Oxford educated, middle-class poet and two hard working, young (and aspirational) working-class 'new-kid-on-the-block' poetry magazine publishers – and how their venture into publishing (and their total commitment to it) impacted on their relationship, their family and all their futures.

While this project has been a labour of love in remembrance of Jean Hartley, it has also reinforced my wonder and amazement at the astonishing achievements of Jean and her husband George, two working-class youngsters from the Hessle Road (working class fishing community) area of Hull in a pre-technological age; and, equally remarkable, Jean's strength of character and her determination to rise from 'wrong beginnings' to provide the bedrock for a cohesive and loving family of strong women.