Key themes for Larkin: NEEY speeches

In 1961, while filming the well known BBC Monitor documentary, Philip Larkin told John Betjamin that his oevre consisted of two novels, three slim volumes of poetry, and several volumes of Library Committee Minutes. One may argue whether he should have included his other published writings, not least on Jazz and on libraries. But whatever the final tally, by any reckoning his is a very modest output for one who has created such a lasting impact.

Philip Larkin’s work, and more recently the revelations about his contradictory personal life, have inspired billions of words from others - in biographies, literary criticism, articles, column inches, and interviews on radio and television. 32 years after his untimely death (aged only 63), interest in his life and work shows no signs of abating. Researchers are still tripping over each other. Two documentaries, one for BBC4 and the other for Sky Arts, are currently in production, (both of which will receive premier screening during the run of this exhibition) and there are several more editions of edited letters as well as biographies in the offing.

While we were creating this exhibition, this precipitous cloud of words was ever present. But curating an exhibition is not like writing a book on the wall. Curation requires material things, and fortunately we had many to choose from. From our partners at the Philip Larkin Society and the Hull History Centre, we were able to draw upon over 600 personal items and nearly 4000 books that had been conserved from his final home at Newland Park, together with 11,000 letters and postcards and numerous photographs. We have regarded all of these items as objects: items that speak through colour, texture, sometimes smell and traces of physical usage, that rather than merely as repositories of words. The books themselves have been found to contain further treasures, annotations, dedications, clippings, pressed flowers, doodles and collages.

In piecing together some sense of a life, we are grateful to Larkin’s biographers, particularly Sir Andrew Motion (who was in Hull making a documentary for Sky Arts just last week) Richard Bradford for his work on Larkin’s photographs, and of course, James Booth. As anyone who has read any of these will know, Larkin was a contradictory and contentious character who controlled how he was perceived by others both in life and posthumously. Interpreting his life through his possessions has required us to use imagination and creativity both to display objects, and to display significant absences.

Exhibition design, like poetry, and like the playing of jazz, is a process of elision. Some things have been left out, other things have been joined to highlight their connections. A good exhibition has structure, rhythm, resonance and meaning, but like landscape design, it is made from the juxtaposition of material things. We have paid attention to how placement affects the body’s senses in three dimensional space and created a contemporary garden from traditional library materials with the techniques from the C18th century – we hope you enjoy discovering our peeps and bursts.