[James Booth](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/james-booth)

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**Ruth Siverns,** who has died aged 85, was engaged to the poet [Philip Larkin](https://www.theguardian.com/books/philiplarkin) from 1948 until 1950 and inspired some of his most significant early poems. When he took up the post of librarian in Wellington, Shropshire, in 1943, Larkin was 21 and Ruth Bowman, as she then was, was a schoolgirl of 16. She recalled that, with his nervous stammer and the glamour of an Oxford degree, he dazzled her. They roamed the town and Ercall wood, reciting poetry to each other. The relationship was cemented when she stole a copy of Yeats's poems from her school for him.

At Oxford, Larkin had run the imaginative gamut of sex and gender: from DH Lawrence to Théophile Gautier; from WH Auden to Dorita Fairlie Bruce. In the months before his move to Wellington, he had written a girls' school story, Trouble at Willow Gables, under a "lesbian" pseudonym. Now, still a virgin, he found himself entangled with a real, serious-minded schoolgirl, whose vulnerability was accentuated by a slight limp. For all his complexities, ingenuous empathy was fundamental to his character, and he became deeply involved.

Their first sexual encounter was prompted two years later, in 1945, by Ruth's imminent departure to read English at King's College London. But the example of his own parents made Larkin reluctant to marry. The following year, after accepting a deputy librarianship in University College, Leicester, he attempted to persuade himself into commitment through poetry.

Wedding-Wind, a dramatic monologue in the voice of an ecstatic farmer's wife on her wedding morning, is a key poem in his oeuvre, and one of the earliest-written of the works that would be published in his first mature collection, The Less Deceived (1955). As therapy, however, it failed. Ruth feared she had become pregnant, and he retreated into stubborn misogamy. Following his father's death in 1948, Larkin made a bid for maturity by proposing marriage. But he was unable to abandon the "glittering loneliness" which he needed in order to write. The final break came after much anguish in 1950 when he moved to a post at the library in Queen's University Belfast.

In Belfast, he wrote the poignantly regretful No Road. Leaves drift unswept, grass creeps unmown, but the road still stands clear: "... *so little overgrown. / Walking that way tonight would not seem strange, / And still would be allowed."* The pain of the failed relationship can still be heard in 1962, in the sulky self-recrimination of Wild Oats: "... *I was too selfish, withdrawn, / And easily bored to love. / Well, useful to get that learnt."*

Ruth's grandfather persuaded her to destroy the letters Larkin wrote to her – there were more than 400 of them. Today we hear the voice of the young lover only refracted in letters to his male friends: ribald comments concerning "Misruth" or "the school captain" to Kingsley Amis and scathing self-criticism to James Sutton.

With the engagement ended, Ruth's life still lay ahead of her. She married John Siverns, only to be widowed before her son, also John, was born. She converted to Catholicism and never remarried, spending many years as a teacher in Wolverhampton.

Her spirit was resilient and creative. Her book for children, Barlow Dale's Casebook (1981), featuring a Blue Persian cat detective, is delightfully ebullient. In later years she re-established contact with Larkin, who helped pay for the hip operation that technology had by then made possible. Her final years were spent in Romsey, Hampshire, where she became friends with Winifred Dawson (nee Arnott), Larkin's colleague in the library at Belfast, who was immortalised in his Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album in 1953.

Ruth is survived by her son.

• Ruth Siverns, teacher and writer, born 15 May 1927; died 31 December 2012



[John Sutherland](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/johnsutherland)

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By the stern rules of her profession, Monica Jones, who has died aged 78, should perish. An academic for four decades, she published nothing. Yet she merits commemoration on two grounds: she was the career-long companion and aide (occasionally muse) of Britain's most acclaimed postwar poet, Philip Larkin. She was also, in her own idiosyncratic style, an outstanding teacher.

Born in Llanelli, an only child, her father was an engineer; her mother was from the north-east of England. When Monica was seven, the Jones family moved to Stourport-on-Severn, Worcestershire. Her parents (at a period well before the 1944 Education Act) arranged for her to go to the girls' high school at Kidderminster. From there she won a scholarship and went up to St Hugh's College, Oxford, in October 1940, to read English. She was the first member of her immediate family to go to university.

Wartime Oxford left an indelible mark on Jones. Her distinctive accent and abrupt manner of speech were evidently acquired in these three years. Throughout life she would give herself (as during the dark days of the early 1940s) regular "holidays" from reading the newspapers (that meant cancelling the Telegraph). Drab "utility" uniformity inspired her - as an act of resistance - to a flamboyant extravagance in dress (her mini-skirts in the 1960s were shorter than those of many of her women pupils). Food rationing induced a lifelong detestation of tinned milk and margarine.

Oxford, depopulated of its able-bodied male population (which did not include her then unknown contemporary, Philip Larkin, at St John's), fitted Jones for the role (or at least the outward appearance) of a Zuleika Dobson, 1940s-style. She had fine bone-structure, a good figure, a mane of blonde hair, and wore dark-rimmed glasses which (pace Dorothy Parker) did nothing to diminish her looks. Her face, in composure, was striking. But, when she smiled, a row of magnificently crooked (and in later life, tobacco-tanned) teeth would give a suddenly vulnerable look to her face. Garbo became Grenfell.

At Oxford she took a first. The temporary absence from the university of its men probably meant that the clever Miss Jones got closer attention from teachers than peacetime "sweet girl graduates" might expect. The lack of male competition certainly made it easier for her to get an assistant lectureship at the University College of Leicester, in 1946 (after graduation she was a schoolteacher for a year or two).

On arrival in Leicester, Jones took up a small flat on the corner of Stoneygate's Springfield Road and Cross Street. There was a tiny farm nearby and the congenial Clarendon (a Bass pub), which she and her drinking friends favoured at Sunday lunchtime. This flat would be her home for 25 years.

In the postwar period came the events and changes which would condition the rest of Jones's life. After an unpleasant internal feud, the Leicester English department was taken over in the mid-1950s by a new head, AR Humphreys. The most courteous and deeply learned of scholars, Humphreys got on well with Jones personally. But, in contrast to his predecessor (AS Collins), he embodied new standards of professionalism for an expansionist era of British higher education. Little new was to Jones's taste. And nothing new in universities.

Her position in the department was the traditional one of Miss Bluestocking - with the difference that she was smarter, wittier, and (not infrequently) better read than many of her colleagues. She was, to complicate things, an object of male desire. Many undergraduates, well into the 1960s, fantasised - hopelessly - about an affair with her.

The ambivalent reactions she provoked are evident in the two representations of her in fiction. Margaret Peel in Lucky Jim is a malicious portrait which, inexplicably, Larkin allowed his best friend Kingsley Amis to put into print, with the proviso that he change the character's name from the libellously close "Margaret Beale" (two of her first names). Malcolm Bradbury (a former student) offers a friendlier, but equally cross-grained, depiction of Jones in his Leicester roman à clef , Eating People Is Wrong.

Jones's position in the department, where she would work until 1981, was tricky. She surrounded herself with a small coterie of trusted friends in whom she could confide - often scathingly, always wittily. Her colleagues were uneasily aware that, behind their backs, they were, perhaps, being mocked. Meanwhile, her public demeanour was inscrutably demure. It was dangerous to patronise or condescend to her.

In 1947 came Jones's first meeting with Larkin - who had just taken up a position in Leicester's library. They became lovers in 1950, just before he went off to a post at Belfast. He would eventually find his career berth at the library of the University of Hull. The intricate history of the relationship is told authoritatively (and sensitively) in Andrew Motion's 1993 life of Larkin.

Monica was doggedly faithful to Philip - despite the opportunities available to a single woman of her gifts and attractions in the 1950s and 1960s. Philip was serially unfaithful to Monica: unable, apparently, to be creative as a poet without the tensions of infidelity and uncertain commitment in his emotional life. He would visit her - usually at weekends - en route to and from his aged mother, in Loughborough.

They would take annual holidays together. A stream of gossipy letters and phone conversations kept them in touch. Late in life she learned to type because she feared that arthritis (which had afflicted her mother) would interfere with the impetuous fluency of her letter-writing.

I encountered Monica Jones as a teacher in 1960. Her first lecture to the first year was on Wuthering Heights. She came in, dressed to the nines under her Oxford gown, slammed down a Timex alarm-clock on the lectern and tore into Emily Brontë for her incredible perversity in calling so many of her characters by the same names. Wholly inconsiderate. It was very funny (and meant to be).

At other moments in the lecture, Jones fixed on moments of what she took to be vindicating beauty in the novel. I can hear her now reading out the final lines about the moor's "unquiet sleepers" and (in full-blooded Yorkshire accent) the "blubbering" little boy's account of "Heathcliff and a woman, yonder under t' Nab". The essence of Jones's teaching was the personal relationship (as she conceived it) with the writers she admired. Those she admired most tended to be clubbable males: Scott, Thackeray, Trollope, Crabbe. These authors were, she would tell students who shared her enthusiasm, "gold in your pocket for life". A favourite modern writer was the American, Peter de Vries. His acid jokiness, streaked with dark, non-conformist pessimism, was congenial with her own view of things.

Jones despised the dour doctrines of Downing College, Cambridge, which were, during most of her career, dominant in the country's English departments ("lead us, heavenly Leavis lead us" was one of her favourite jibes). Her approach to her subject was marked by dislikes fully as passionate as her literary loves. She had a peculiar contempt for Yeats ("imagine - a grown man wanting to be a clockwork bird on an emperor's tree!"). She had as little time for Sylvia Plath (whose name she consciously mispronounced "Plahth") as did Larkin (privately) for Ted Hughes.

Of Larkin's harem, Jones was the woman with most claim to be his intellectual equal. To her friends, at that time, it was evident that many of Larkin's famous perversities chimed with hers, and may well have originated with her. She, like him, felt that "in this age, it is more distinguished not to publish". She, like him, was defiantly insular ("I'm sure I should not like to travel abroad - the dust !"). Larkin may well have been inspired by her in his championing of John Betjeman as the great living poet (unlike him, Jones did not have much time for Auden). It is appropriate that Larkin's best-known volume, The Less Deceived, should be dedicated to her.

As a mentor, Jones was inflexibly sensible. Women students who came to her with "personal problems" were quite likely to be told that scrubbing floors was a sovereign remedy (it worked for her). Men might be told to try the local pub. That evidently worked for her as well. She liked the company of the male undergraduates she trusted, drinking halves for their pints. At home, she favoured gin and tonic in goblet glasses the size of small goldfish bowls.

Her company, even where she was the only woman, was never inhibiting. Her political attitudes were paradoxical. When the brilliant Dipak Nandy was appointed to the department, she gaily told one of her confidants, "we've appointed a coloured communist". None the less, she became a close friend of her new colleague (friendly to him and about him). When, in the late 1960s, immigration from East Africa was transforming Leicester's urban population, she would shock friends by saying that she was contemplating voting National Front. This seems to have been a gesture of solidarity with Larkin's grumpy (and unlovely) xenophobia. Or perhaps a symptom of her own increasing anger with things.

On her favoured students, her influence was strong but, arguably, risky for those more ambitious than she was for the good things of academic life. She fostered a kind of marching out of step which guaranteed that - like her - one would not get on in career terms. To sign up with Monica Jones for the full duration was, in effect, to commit professional hara-kiri. Honourable, elegant, but suicidal.

Yet, even if one did not sign up, one felt she was "right" in her conviction that good books were more important than dreary writing about books; and that the industrialisation of literary studies in the interest of academic careerism was wrong.

"Wanted, good Hardy critic" was Larkin's famous call. Jones's view was that most of our great writers wanted good critics - and they were increasingly unlikely to be found in the ranks of the modern British university system.

Shamefully, she was never promoted beyond the rank in which she entered the profession. To be merely a superb lecturer was insufficient grounds for the modest promotion to senior lecturer. This, to be fair, was not the fault of her departmental (and rapidly promoted) colleagues, but the administration at Leicester.

Jones, after the death of her parents and in growing disillusion with the profession (never the subject), lived principally for her relationship with "Philip" and its highpoints: the remote Scottish holidays and the annual mid-June jaunt to the Lord's Test match. Since it clashed, invariably, with the wrap-up of final-examination meetings, the getaway to the members' stand added the enlivening excitement of truancy to the end of each teaching year. She was, it should be recorded, a conscientious examiner. It was a matter of pride that "her" questions were often lifted by other English departments.

Jones retired early, on grounds of ill-health (and, doubtless, private disillusion) in 1981. She at last moved in with Larkin, who had rationalised his love-life sufficiently for her to be an acknowledged consort. She none the less kept the small house near Hexham which she had bought in 1961 (since she never learned to drive, it was increasingly difficult for her to get to). Larkin died, prematurely, in 1985, leaving the bulk of his estate to Jones.

She lived on in his house, for 15 reclusive years. On Larkin's death, Jones took it on herself to interpret her partner's final wishes, and destroyed his 30 volumes of diaries and private papers. Larkin's will was, as Motion points out, ambiguous on this matter. She was not. Her own voluminous correspondence with Larkin (and his with her) is deposited, under time restriction, at the Bodleian Library.

When the archive is opened and put into print, she will, to a certainty, be revealed as one of the great comic correspondents of her time. None of her contemporaries, alas, will be alive to read this posthumous publication. It is an irony that would have pleased her. It is, as she might have said, more distinguished to publish after death.

 Margaret Monica Beale Jones, academic, born May 22 1922; died February 15 2001

Maeve Brennan

The woman Philip Larkin nearly married, and a profound influence on his work

Jean Hartley

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Maeve Brennan, who has died aged 73, was a colleague, close friend and muse of the poet Philip Larkin.

I first met her in the early 1960s, when Larkin brought her to tea at our house. Since 1955, when my husband and I, who ran The Marvell Press, had published Philip's book of poems, The Less Deceived, he had become a good friend and a regular visitor. I remember thinking how lucky Philip was to have found a woman who was so pretty, warm-hearted, sensitive and open-minded. Over the years, as we met at parties, dinners, plays and poetry readings, it was clear that Maeve and Philip were very much in love.

Maeve was born in Beverley, East Yorkshire, the eldest of three children. Her mother converted to Catholicism when she married Maeve's father, a dental surgeon from Kilkenny, south-east Ireland.

[](http://googleads.g.doubleclick.net/pcs/click?xai=AKAOjssBYM3xpHLRdiQamrmjdvi5JP8zBx5ljIuTsEPh0Uvki5Q7-HFqvPDoUG_UOezH7nSg35S9C9wLrmV8G9Lnkum8ssE50Wd2gN0vaORUm5tzkQ29xSIChp2qj7mX9TT7M924o3rdSYMBQnbOjqilA0H9ecVLfLywv2Nvw67FpinYgGC1RGHFkQ0LUi6UjyEa272rPj_YLbUt-OeEI5gXB3bTYQDS1W9DLoKWCCsExxpTNZQbzqN1fLV-V7A4BLeKvfMOIzNenw&sig=Cg0ArKJSzI6lBdm6O8Tj&adurl=http://www.theguardian.com)

Evacuated to a nearby village during the second world war, Maeve returned to Hull to attend St Mary's high school for girls. Here she became head girl, a distinction she shared with Ruth Bowman and Winifred Arnott, earlier women friends of Larkin to whom Maeve became very close following his death.

After graduating from Hull University in 1951 with a degree in history, French and English, she worked at Hull city library, where she created a music library. Music was one of her abiding interests and Larkin's poem, Broadcast, describes the poet listening to a live transmission of a symphony concert from Hull's City Hall where Maeve was sitting in the audience. It ends with the poet "desperate to pick out/Your hands, tiny in all that air, applauding".

The hands were, of course, Maeve's and her profound influence on his work can be discerned in many of his poems. Philip invariably came to her room at the end of a library day to discuss work, and whichever poem he was currently working on.

In 1953, Maeve began working at Hull University's library, later the Brynmor Jones. In 1955 [Philip Larkin](https://www.theguardian.com/books/philiplarkin) took up the post of librarian.

After Maeve qualified she worked as sub-librarian in charge of periodical acquisitions until she took early retirement in 1985, to give more time to her elderly father. Her relationship with Larkin lasted until the writer's death, even though it suffered many difficulties and mutations in the 30 years since he had arrived in Hull. Maeve wrote in her memoir, The Philip Larkin I Knew (2002): "I had known him for more than half my life and for the past 25 years he had influenced me more than anyone else ... this friendship, with its unworldly dimension, was the most enriching experience of my life. I thought then, and still consider, how privileged I was to have shared the spiritual side of Philip Larkin's disposition".

But their relationship encompassed far more than the spiritual. It was loving, playful, romantic, social and companionable. She was the one he felt he could marry, if only ...

But caution, fear of failure, the inevitable loss of his precious writing time and the memory of his parents' unhappy marriage, stopped him. He described it to me as not allowing his heart to rule his head.

After Philip's death, Maeve and I formed a close friendship. There was lots of fun, and joint outrage at whatever constituted the current piece of Larkin character assassination by the press. It was from the lies and myths of the latter that we drew the motivation for our books.

From time to time, she would write, when asked, short articles about the poet's working life, and she made it possible for the Brynmor Jones library to acquire a large archive of Larkin's letters to Jim Sutton. She was a founder member, deputy chairman and bedrock of the Philip Larkin Society and also helped edit its journal, About Larkin.

Although reluctant to write a memoir, she was eventually persuaded as the person who perhaps knew him longest and best, to redress the erroneous image of him as a racist, misogynistic, misanthropic boor. The picture of Larkin that emerged from her writing was one that honoured his work as a librarian and showed him as the courteous, humane, witty and charming man she knew.

That, so many of us who were close to him knew, though of course Maeve's relationship to him was special and unique. She was, for him, a soulmate and his muse. "You know The Whitsun Weddings is your book, don't you", he told her.

Maeve was one of the few people I know who truly put their religion into practice. Recently she had drawn great spiritual sustenance from her visits to Ampleforth Abbey, where she came to know another group of people - church and laity - who will miss her.

Recently Maeve advised on the BBC2 drama based on the last 30 years of Larkin's life, Love Again (to be shown on July 26) and took part in a Channel 4 documentary, Philip Larkin: Love And Death in Hull (scheduled for June 22). She overcame her initial misgivings about these ventures and had a great deal of fun during the productions.

Maeve was kind, she made time for people, and could identify and sympathise with them, no matter how different their lives were from hers. Her most unusual quality was a kind of purity and innocence. I think that was the source of her great attractiveness.

The most important fact of her life is that she was part of a very close and devoted family. She drew much of her strength and warmth from that. Her brother and sister, Dermot and Moira, and their families, cared for her throughout her last illness.

Knowing Maeve has enriched my life enormously. I can't think of a more fitting epitaph for her than her favourite line of poetry, from the end of Larkin's An Arundel Tomb:"What will survive of us is love".

· Maeve Maureen Brennan, librarian, born September 27 1929; died June 11 2003