

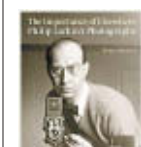
BOOKS

Larkin in the frame

A collection of the poet's photographs reveals a sharp talent. By *Duncan White*

THE IMPORTANCE OF ELSEWHERE

by *Richard Bradford*



208PP, FRANCES LINCOLN, £25

★★★★★

In the summer of 1957 the poet and historian Robert Conquest took Philip Larkin on a tour of the strip clubs of Soho. Larkin brought along his camera as there was a place on Greek Street that let you take pictures; afterwards Larkin wrote to Conquest to tell him he had "greatly enjoyed" their jaunt and enclosed one set of the photographs he had taken. He added an anxious note: "Hope the letter doesn't go astray!"

To his horror, Larkin subsequently received a letter from Scotland Yard informing him that he was to be prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act of 1921. He called in sick at the library and spent the day in sweaty

consultation with his solicitor. Only after much hand-wringing did they cotton on to the fact that the Obscene Publications Act of 1921 did not exist. The author of the letter was Conquest himself, aided and abetted by Kingsley Amis.

The story tells you something about Larkin – furtive, pervy, insecure – and a lot about the company he kept. It is also a reminder that wherever Larkin went, he almost always took a camera, and not just for the purposes of amateur pornography. The Hull History Centre preserves about 5,000 of Larkin's prints and negatives, an unfamiliar level of productivity for the poet who published one slim volume a decade. *The Importance of Elsewhere* mounts about 200 of these pictures, alongside snappy biographical background by Richard Bradford, author of the 2009 Larkin biography *First Boredom, Then Fear*.

Posterity has soured Larkin. To those of us who love his poetry, the posthumous disclosures from letters and biographies have made depressing reading: the casual duplicity, the seedy interest in schoolgirls, the railing about "wogs". There have been some modest efforts to revise his reputation (it was just racist horseplay), while others insist that we must separate the generosity, melancholy and wit of the poetry from the small-mindedness of his private world.

So it is a relief that the only revelation in this impressively handsome book turns out to be Larkin's talent behind the lens. His photography was more than a hobby. In 1947, he spent £7 on a Purma Special, an extravagant purchase he described in a letter to his friend Jim Sutton as an "act of madness". Still, the camera opened up new possibilities. "There are dozens of worthy compositions knocking around," he told Sutton. "It's a question of realising what's good even in black and white." That he described his pictures as "compositions" is revealing in itself.

Like poetry, photography was an enthusiasm inherited from his father. So much of Sydney Larkin was creepy (the model of Hitler on his mantelpiece; family holidays in Nazi Germany) that it can be easy to forget that it was he who introduced Larkin to poetry. He also bought his son his first camera, a Houghton-Butcher Ensign Carbine, and the first photograph in this collection is an unsettling portrait of Sydney, his face obscured by his own camera, taken by Larkin when he was 11.

While he used his camera, like most of us, to take pictures of friends, family and holidays, even these are marked by his dark humour and compositional flair. In one portrait of his mother, taken at a war museum in Loughborough, he carefully poses her between two racks of rifles – fitting for the author of "This Be the Verse".

The other women in his life come out better. The finest of Larkin's photographs are his portraits of Monica Jones, with whom he had his most serious and lasting relationship. There is a strange, understated eroticism



Larkin's finest photographs are those he took of his lover Monica Jones



THE ESTATE OF PHILIP LARKIN

to some of them (clad in striped tights; lighting up) and in others a surprisingly straightforward affection. He photographed his other lovers, too, often asking them to pose in similar ways to each other, but none of these pictures match the ones he took of Monica.

As one might expect from the author of that elegy for rural England, "Going, Going", there are plenty of bucolic landscapes, village signs and remote churches. Larkin, though, was no uncomplicated nostalgist and he also documented the looming cranes, bombsites and ruined timber ships of Hull. Perhaps the most quintessentially Larkinian of these urban pictures is a close-up of handwritten adverts taped to a shop front in Hull ("Wedding Dress for Sale", "Plenty of Cheap Coats").

Included in the collection are also photographs that have a very direct relationship with his poetry. In "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album," the narrator wonders whether the owner of the album would "spot the theft/Of this one of you bathing"; it turns out the Young Lady was Winifred Arnott and Larkin did indeed

Bucolic: Larkin in Hull, 1969; and, below, Monica Jones in Mull, 1971, captured by Larkin

have a picture of her swimming. There is also a colour photograph of two wrestlers grappling at the Bellingham Country Show, which inspired "Show Saturday", collected in *High Windows* (1974).

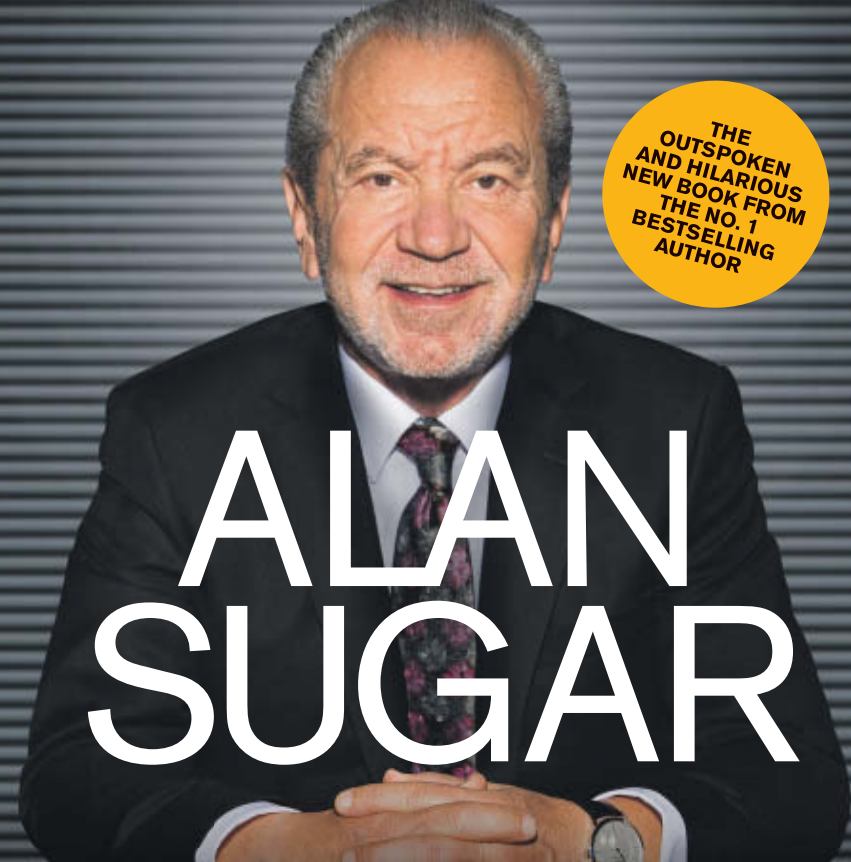
If the poetry could, on occasion, riff off the photography, it still does not fully explain why Larkin was so dedicated to it. Perhaps it gave him a creative outlet when he was struggling with his writing, which was a problem that became acute later in life. It may also have been a way of experiencing the world while remaining somehow outside it, framing and cropping reality.

Or maybe his pictures, like his poetry, were a way of dealing with mortality. Larkin took numerous self-portraits, and it is intriguing to think about those moments during which he held his pose, waiting for the camera's timer to trigger the shutter. Even in the moment of preserving his image, he was made aware of his own extinction's sure approach.

It is no surprise, given Larkin's taste for bleak irony, to discover that his favourite place in Hull for taking pictures was Spring Bank Cemetery.

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