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Selected Letters of Philip Larkin

At the time of his death in 1985, Philip Larkin was regarded by the English as a national treasure, his poems appealing to critics and lay readers alike. Now, following the publication of this volume of letters in England in 1992 and of a biography this year, Larkin's reputation is in tatters. The letters, according to Larkin's harshest critics, reveal him as a foul-mouthed, right-wing bigot, a racist and a misogynist with a continuing taste for pornography. While some of this may well be true, it gives a distorted impression of the man, quite apart from making the dubious assumption that a poet whose themes were never political should be judged on the basis of his political and social views. The letters in fact reveal a many-sided character, by turns warm, funny, bellicose, acerbic, uncharitable, consoling, complaining, bemused, unhappy, sympathetic, encouraging. If Larkin's correspondence with his lifelong friend, the novelist Kingsley Amis, is vulgar and sometimes obscene, his many letters to Barbara Pym are a model of courtesy and friendliness.

The overall impression given by this collection is that Larkin was essentially a disappointed man, troubled by his meager output of poetry, and often seeming to regard himself as a failed novelist rather than a successful poet. But his habitually lugubrious, look-what-a-mess-it-all-is attitude to life was relieved by a self-deprecating, characteristically English, sense of humor that makes many of these letters very entertaining reading. (Larkin on his own appearance: "my sagging face, an egg sculpted in lard, with goggles on—depressing, depressing, depressing.")

Larkin rarely comments on his own poetry ("I think the writer is the last person to know what he is doing"), but his many thousands of readers, if they can withstand the pressure to make adverse moral judgments about the man, will find their appreciation of the poems enriched by knowledge of the flawed and troubled life out of which they arose.

Sources for Further Study

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