

The Coventry Factor: Philip Larkin and John Hewitt

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In the late 1960s I doubt if many grammar school boys like myself would have been able to name more than one or at best two living British poets; one of those would probably have been John Betjeman (at least today's average sixthformer can offer Seamus Heaney). Of course there were always the Liverpool poets, and sales of *The Mersey Sound* doubtless exceeded the entire print run of the preceding nine selections of Penguin Modern Poets.¹ But surely its authors were not *real* poets like those modernist icons Eliot and Pound? Henri, McGough, and Patten acted more like rock'n'roll journeymen than serious maestros of *vers libre*, with the Liverpool Scene perceived as everybody's favourite festival opener, and not as an advance guard of post-modernist irony: Adrian Henri appeared little more than a raucous Scouse alternative to Viv Stanshall. For those of us observing events on the West Coast, albeit from the safe vantage point of the West Midlands, there were of course the Beats. Yet Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti and Corso, however successful in extending their shelf life courtesy of Dylan and the Dead, were American and – to a late adolescent – ancient. The instruction remained unheeded: name a living *British* poet.

Close scrutiny of school library shelves, and the English department's tiny record collection, could reveal Faber's not so young Turks, Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes, but in my class the only contemporary poet who sprang readily to mind was Philip Larkin. We may not have read *The Whitsun Weddings* in its entirety, but most of us were familiar with the title poem, 'An Arundel Tomb', and 'MCMXIV'.² Enthusiastic teachers in tweeds or corduroy would mutter something about the Movement, or recall heady days in wartime

Oxford, or simply point out that the great man was one of us – native of Coventry, and distinguished old boy of King Henry VIII School. For some reason, learning that Larkin was a librarian and not a full-time man of letters only added to his appeal, suggesting an attractive eccentricity in a way that Eliot's *alter ego* as banker and publisher never did. Having read so little of his work, it never crossed our minds for a moment that Larkin's schoolboy memories were no more than lukewarm, and that his feelings towards the city were at best mixed – that in fact he was anything but a fully paid-up 'Old Coventrian'.³

Early in 1970 I commenced work as a museum assistant, and even after going to university would return to my humble post every vacation. The then Director of the Herbert Art Gallery appeared a remote and austere figure who rarely emerged from his office other than to appease the more cost-conscious councillors on the Recreation Committee.⁴ John Hewitt, bespectacled, white-haired, and with trim goatee beard, had a gravitas and air of professorial authority which left me in awe of him, even though I had no idea he was one of Ireland's premier poets – perhaps in a pre-Heaney era *the* premier poet. The Director appeared to leave running the gallery to his two young assistant curators. I now know he was devoting much of his time to writing about the resurgent 'Troubles', and preparing for retirement in Belfast. Hewitt and his wife Roberta finally left Coventry in 1972, but three years earlier they had acquired a house back home and commenced a gradual re-engagement in the cultural life of the province. In the winter of 1970 Hewitt joined John Montague in a series of poetry readings across Northern Ireland which quietly announced he would soon be back for good. Not that he had ever really been away, as each year since their departure in 1957 the Hewitts had visited Ireland, and for the first eight years had retained their cottage at Cushendall. Thus, during only three of the fifteen years 'on the mainland' – were John and Roberta not resident in Antrim or 'hill-hooped Belfast'.

Given Hewitt's growing preoccupation with events at home, as reflected in early 1970s collections such as *Ulster Reckoning* and *Out Of My Time*, and his obvious influence upon a later generation of Northern Ireland poets, the truth is that he had bade farewell to Coventry long before he finally left.⁵ Seemingly eager to leave, Hewitt's overriding preoccupation with poetry and polemics was further fuelled by a growing unease over the paths pursued by modern art during the previous decade. His 1969 'Variations on a Theme', a lighthearted mixture of prurience and Puritanism prompted by musings on the miniskirt and worthiness of James Hogg, is explicit in section 6 that abstraction has its boundaries. The unashamedly non-metropolitan collector and critic, who 'never braved the oceans' of 'Panofsky, Gombrich, Berenson' but 'safe in shallow rock-pool waded', clearly 'had little time for pop art, or indeed any other fashion of the day':

I'm not the only one who wants
the popping of each non-event,
and hopes it drops where Dada went.⁶

Doubtless Larkin would have said 'Amen' to that. Yet it is hard to envisage the two men agreeing on very much else, other than the importance of Auden in influencing their early work. Larkin for example would have been delighted that the Conservatives finally controlled the city council in Coventry, whereas for Hewitt this was almost certainly another reason why it was time to go. No doubt there was mutual agreement on the stifling atmosphere of postwar Belfast: in the early 1950s the assistant director of the city's museum and art gallery very occasionally invited Queen's colourful English librarian home for tea, Bushmills, and gossip.⁷ Of course, simply by virtue of both being poets Hewitt and Larkin had plenty in common, not least their mutual suspicion of academics prying into their public let alone their private lives.⁸ But the two men clearly felt very differently about their respective native and adopted city; and it is their contrasting perceptions of Coventry at a crucial period in its history with which this essay is concerned. Born and raised in the city, attending the same school as Larkin, and working alongside Hewitt, albeit briefly, the writer offers a fresh insight into two men who while still alive enjoyed, in their respective countries, that rare combination of popular appreciation and critical acclaim.

II

The popular assumption is that Larkin cut loose from Coventry in the autumn of 1940 when he went up to Oxford, and that thereafter he was clearly indifferent towards 'home': he never railed against narrow provincialism (living literally at the end of the line, and being the man he was, this was scarcely an option), but he rarely displayed anything more than polite interest in a city which was to experience profound changes throughout the remaining forty-five years of his life. Evidence to support this view naturally includes 'I Remember, I Remember', but also John Kemp's cathartic visit to the blitzed Huddlesford in *Jill* (again the train journey marks a break with the past), and Larkin's remark to an interviewer in 1965 that his biography could easily begin when he was 21.⁹ There are of course plenty more direct and indirect references to support this view of Larkin tacitly disassociating himself from the place of his birth. Larkin's biographer encourages the popular view of 1940 as a watershed year but, to be fair, Andrew Motion focuses upon the family and not the community, while also emphasising a clean break with schoolboy poesy.¹⁰

Clearly it would be absurd to advance a revisionist view of Larkin as a life-long 'Coventry kid' skilfully camouflaging wistful nostalgia. In 1964 he con-

fided to a friend that 'There is not much to be proud of in being English', and one can assume a similarly dismissive view of civic pride. He had no filial ties, and scant interest in news from either Highfield or Coundon Road – this was a man with better things to do at teatime on a Saturday.¹¹ Thus, it would take a remarkable re-reading of Larkin's published work to depict him as a writer firmly rooted in the centre of England, and forever toiling in the long shadow of the three spires. On the other hand, to assume that Coventry is of little relevance to any understanding of Larkin's life and work is to ignore the friendships he retained from schooldays, and the extent to which mention of the city occurs in both his published work and his private correspondence. Larkin will forever be associated with Hull, and rightly so, but the journey from Parkside to Humberside was by no means one-way.¹²

Conversely, Hewitt should not be seen as an Ulsterman first and last. Like Larkin, his affection for Coventry scarcely attracts the attention it deserves: the Detroit of the Midlands can never appear as enticing as the Glens of Antrim, nor its politics as exciting as those of Belfast. Yet, contrary to the impression given in the introduction to his collected poems, Hewitt wrote a good deal about and indeed *for* Coventry.¹³ If Larkin's references were all too often oblique, Hewitt's fascination with a city rebuilding and rediscovering itself after the trauma of war was overt and overwhelming, particularly in the late 1950s when enthusiasm for creating a genuine people's gallery had yet to wane.

During his lifetime Hewitt did little to discourage the belief that in 1952–3 he was a victim of Unionist bigotry and reaction in not being promoted to Director of Belfast Museum and Art Gallery.¹⁴ Indeed, he actively promoted an image of himself as a man of the left, scornful of sectarianism and Unionist hegemony, forced to pursue both his career and his ideals in a more congenial environment across the water. Only when faced with his imminent return home did he first feel uneasy about being seen as a victim, let alone a martyr. Once back in the bosom of the Belfast literary establishment, the by now grand old man of letters conceded that leaving for a new life among the 'civilised people' of the West Midlands was the best thing that could have happened to him.¹⁵ Nevertheless, admirers of Hewitt, radical and self-proclaimed 'regionalist', perpetuate the myth that he and his wife were forced into exile for espousing views which a generation later would bring the Unionist monolith to its knees.¹⁶ Roy McFadden, close friend and fellow poet, poured scorn on this interpretation of events three years after Hewitt's death. More recently, Richard Kirkland, and in particular Sarah Ferris, have challenged the view of Edna Longley, Declan Kiberd and others that the champion of 'open and open ended' regionalism was 'made a political scapegoat for his socialist and literary allegiances', thus stifling forever a liberal, non-sectarian alternative vision to the Stormont *status quo*.¹⁷

Hewitt, his career ambitions thwarted, nevertheless retained complete control over the municipal art collection. Aggrieved and disillusioned, he and

Roberta were to remain in Belfast a further four years before decamping to Coventry. As early as September 1957 Hewitt was waxing lyrical in the *Belfast Telegraph* about life in 'this remarkable city ... of surprises and contrasts'. In a scarcely veiled message to the burghers of Belfast that he had landed on his feet, Hewitt delivered his paean of praise to a 'triumph of municipal planning' and urban renewal – a seamless harmonising of past and present, secular and spiritual, privilege and opportunity, country and city. The denizens of east or west Belfast must have found such a model of cross-community cooperation and civic pride scarcely credible. But then most citizens of Coventry would have expressed surprise, to put it mildly, at learning of their involvement in, 'the adventure of social democracy and the Welfare State, of British urban civilisation in the second half of this century, the blueprint of the future society'. Learning that Britain's first traffic-free precinct was 'like a piazza in Venice', and on Saturday mornings a 'country fair', would have been hard enough to swallow, let alone being challenged to create a 'true community, not out of work or habitation merely but of the good, the abundant life'.¹⁸

It is easy to sneer, and to be fair Hewitt rightly identified a dangerous overdependence upon the motor industry, let alone the urgent need to assimilate freshly established Asian and Caribbean communities. Historians such as Tony Mason and most notably Nick Tiratsoo have in recent years identified serious social tensions already evident in Coventry by the time Hewitt arrived, as well as pointing out that for all its success in supervising the city's reconstruction Labour's power base in the 1950s was surprisingly fragile.¹⁹ Given that, under the formidable dual leadership of George Hodgkinson and Sidney Stringer, Labour had ruled since 1937, it was understandable that Hewitt took control of a half-constructed Herbert Art Gallery confident that Coventry was a bastion of social democracy.²⁰ The party was to cling on to power for another decade, but the 1960s confirmed its 'inability to communicate with those groups at the centre of social change'.²¹ For all its naivety, Hewitt's letter home demonstrates his initial faith in Coventry as a social experiment: an urban industrial *community* reconciling the needs and pressures of living in an advanced industrial society with those 'ideas for a just organisation of human needs and fulfilments' espoused by an early and enduring influence, William Morris.²²

Morris's romantic verse may have influenced Hewitt's early poetry, but his 1880s lectures on art and revolution left a more lasting impression. Hewitt embraced the idealism of *News From Nowhere* fusing in later life the socialist utopianism of Morris's workshop – of truly purposeful labour – with the urban vision of Patrick Geddes, and more especially, of Lewis Mumford.²³ Writing from Coventry in 1957, Hewitt celebrated a city whose wealth was rooted in a craftsmanship unblighted by the darker side of the Industrial Revolution, and where skill and beauty could still be appreciated: the new cathedral offered a unique fusion of applied art and 'the technical resources of this age', with evangelical outposts rooted on new estates 'not imitation-

this or revival-that, but made of the materials and in the style of this century'.²⁴ Nine years later, in a short but revealing history of Coventry, Hewitt devoted almost as much space to local decoration of Basil Spence's three 'utility churches' as to the impact of Epstein, Sutherland and Piper on 'the premier place of pilgrimage for an anxious, searching, hoping generation'.²⁵

Not surprisingly, Hewitt's first formal proposals for assembling and exhibiting a permanent art collection embraced a gallery monitoring urban regeneration in Coventry, including construction of the cathedral. His foremost aim was to establish a unique assembly of contemporary work – 'British Life and Landscape' – intended to reflect everyday life and thus attract, 'the factory worker and his family whose thoughts will seldom if ever be caught up in the complicated tangle of aesthetic theory'. This was no green light for socialist realism, despite a deliberate policy to exclude 'abstract and non-representational work', merely confirmation of Morris's insistence on rendering all facets of artistic endeavour available *and accessible* to all. It was also a blueprint for selling modern art to a sceptical council.²⁶

Coventrians had always known how to enjoy themselves, but the general consensus by 1945 was that the city was a cultural desert. Thus, a postwar alliance of industrial grandees such as Sir Alfred Herbert and Lord Rootes, council power-brokers and veteran autodidacts like George Hodgkinson, and a culture-starved professional middle class, ensured the presence of the visual and performing arts at the heart of urban regeneration. To appease the less high-minded, provision was made for a multi-floor dance hall – the Locarno – in the centre of the Precinct. From its opening in 1958 the Belgrade Theatre pioneered community, youth, and schools-based work, as well as premiering challenging new plays, notably the Wesker trilogy. Yet Bryan Bailey, the Belgrade's first Director, always ensured that a popular and familiar repertory would appease the more culturally-challenged burghers of the city.²⁷ Hewitt appears to have found a similar formula for reconciling a personal vision and a populist appeal. Morris, the definitive philanthropic entrepreneur, would surely have endorsed Hewitt's later description of his 'diapered-brick' home as a:

... token of our mixed economy, of private benevolence and public enterprise, the Museum with its cars and ribbons and antiquities, the Art Gallery with the challenge of its changing exhibitions.²⁸

Hewitt's 1966 celebratory essay, commissioned by the council's public relations department to preface a photographic record of a city basking in the warm glow of postwar prosperity, is well researched, beautifully written, and cleverly constructed (narrative history complemented by a tourist-friendly 'easy-paced stroll' around 'this complicated community'). Larkin appears on the first page, the most neutral lines from 'I Remember, I Remember' ('... watching men with number-plates / Sprint down the platform to familiar

gates'), juxtaposed with an earlier traveller's more favourable impression of the city: Tennyson's 1840 visit to the railway station inspired him to write 'Godiva'.²⁹ Unlike Tennyson, Larkin in 'I Remember, I Remember' is totally disorientated, finding no familiar landmarks (yet, as Hewitt proudly – and ironically? – announces, the 'strikingly-new' station did not open until 1962 – seven years after Larkin's poem first appeared in print):

Things moved. I sat back, staring at my boots.
'Was that,' my friend smiled, 'where you "have your roots"?'
No, only where my childhood was unspent,
I wanted to retort, just where I started.³⁰

Larkin's detachment and disappointment – his inability to fix Coventry in place and time – is further compounded by a counterfactual map of childhood memories and images. We must consider again mention of '... that splendid family/I never ran to when I got depressed'; but for now contrast Larkin's irritation at even considering a necessity for roots in both place and past, with Hewitt's enthusiastic embrace of 'this changing, enduring city ... symbol for the undefeated determination of men of goodwill'.³¹

This was no transfer of allegiance – Hewitt never compromised his non-conformist Ulster roots. Nevertheless, in his early years of 'exile' Coventry matched up to his high expectations, its history running parallel with his own radical agenda, rooted as it was in the Putney Debates, 'English Jacobins' from Paine to Cobbett, Chartism, ethical socialism, and an early flirtation with dialectical materialism.³² Morris, the Bible, and Marx all helped mould Hewitt's understanding of history. Certainly, his portrayal of life in late medieval and early modern Coventry suggests a recent re-reading of A. L. Morton, if not Christopher Hill. Similarly, Hewitt is unlikely to have let *The Making of the English Working Class* pass him by. Yet, whether or not he read Thompson, it is easy to understand Hewitt's enthusiasm: not only did the 'common people' foster Lollardy and shelter John Ball, but succeeding generations rebuffed a Royalist assault, and rang out 'Lillibulero' on the cathedral bells to welcome their Protestant heroes, first William of Orange and then the Governor of Londonderry. Nineteenth-century Coventry witnessed Cobbett contest its Commons seat, Joseph Squiers coin the phrase 'Christian Socialism', Feargus O'Connor rally a flagging Chartist cause, and the polymathic Charles Bray encourage a young Mary Ann Evans to advocate reform and defy convention.³³ No wonder 'the Planter in Hewitt could savour a good humouredly romantic sense of homecoming' when he discovered the family name prominent in the city records (including the 'lavish menu' for Alderman John Hewitt's mayoral banquet in 1755). In the words of Frank Ormsby, his posthumous editor, 'the constants and continuities of Hewitt's philosophy had found a natural home'.³⁴

Leading his reader around the centre and suburbs of contemporary Coventry, Hewitt develops at length the ideas and impressions encapsulated in his 1957 article for the *Belfast Telegraph* Again the optimism – and the naivety – shine through. With the grim benefit of hindsight there is much black humour – Bell Green's 'bold shopping centre' was bleak, grey, and abandoned long before rioting broke out in the summer of 1992, and who today lingers long in Hillfields admiring 'airy blocks of bright flats ... justice being done and being seen to have been done'? To be fair, Hewitt could scarcely have anticipated the full impact of deindustrialisation, not least upon those 'great estates and the other municipal and housing deltas in the suburban segments'. On the other hand, had he not assumed only Labour could be synonymous with effective planning and design, he might perhaps have anticipated the ruling party's imminent demise. He had witnessed enough 'ingrown parochialism' at home not to welcome a destabilising of the municipal *status quo*.³⁵ Yet is it not understandable that a man so indebted to the idealism of Morris *and* to the social democratic values of 1945 might fear dealing with an incoming Tory administration:

The strength of purpose which this great undertaking evinces has been obviously informed and directed by a bold social idealism. It is clearly this which has given emphasis to such concepts as the comprehensive principle in education, the insistence on contemporary design in structure and lay-out, the use of the most up-to-date methods in construction; but above all, to a watchful awareness of human needs and aspirations, for childhood, maturity and age. For, while the working out of these ideals in practical form has been in the hands of professionals and experts, the drive has come from the elected representatives of the ordinary people.³⁶

Only two years later Hewitt was voicing a suspicion that the art gallery and museum had been built largely to satisfy aldermanic egos: 'Devotion to the arts among politicians is rare, but they do feel that they should be saluted. In my view a gallery exists to make men proud of being men.' The publication in August 1968 of Hewitt's first collected poems had prompted an interview and a review in the local evening paper. Hewitt was surely right to insist that, 'In Coventry writers are invisible men'. Yet, aged sixty and with high hopes of belated recognition as a major force in contemporary Irish verse, 'I can now afford to assume the posture of a poet.... [and] I never want to lose the capacity for rage and compassion'.³⁷ However, the 1968 collection attracted remarkably little critical attention beyond Belfast: the disappointed, increasingly detached civic official soldiered on for a further four years, his rage and compassion fuelled by 'each convulsion of that fevered state', that 'island, maimed by history / and creed-infected'³⁸

Hewitt claimed culture shock upon his arrival in England cost him a year of silence, and he does appear to have written no poetry prior to his 'Lines on the Opening of the Belgrade Theatre' in February 1958.³⁹ Ever eager in his early days to refute the notion that, 'this city breeds prosaic men / without tradition, sceptic of the arts', Hewitt not for the last time assumed the post of *ex officio* poet laureate, this role climaxing in a glorious piece of doggerel to mark the opening of the Whitefriars monastery as a museum in May 1970.⁴⁰ Hewitt was publicly engaged in the life of the city, and – contrary to popular assumption – privately too. By comparison with Larkin, Hewitt was a prolific poet (and of course by no means as ruthless in discarding inferior work). His immediate circumstances and surroundings were a natural inspiration, witness the number of poems with a local theme in *Out of My Time*. The Warwickshire countryside may be contrasted with 'another country', but it has its own Protestant martyrs, Civil War heritage, and 'labouring folk / humble, enduring', all duly and dutifully acknowledged.⁴¹ Often oblique references to Coventry occur unexpectedly, and even when the subject is Ireland the reader is sharply reminded that this is a view from a distance.

Perhaps Hewitt's first major poem after breaking his silence, the much anthologised 'An Irishman in Coventry', casts too long a shadow over his subsequent work. Critical attention focuses upon the second half of the poem, with the writer engulfed by a tide of mixed emotions when suddenly surrounded by fellow countrymen – despair at their collective failure to put 'eight hundred years' disaster' firmly in the past, elation at this brief relief from the still unfamiliar, and keen but quiet anticipation of eventual return. Yet this is a refugee still exuberant at arriving in an 'eager city', tolerant, aggressively modern, visionary, and free from:

... all that flaws the glory and the grace
which ribbons through the sick, guilt-clotted legend
of my creed-haunted, godforsaken race.⁴²

This is as much a poem of escape as of exile, powerfully expressing the same cultural and ideological certainties which rendered Hewitt's 1957 article and his 1966 essay so persuasive, and yet with hindsight so sad. In an interview to accompany the *Standard's* 1959 publication of 'An Irishman in Coventry' he confirmed the appeal of a city which, on his arrival from a 'conservative and provincial setting', he found delightfully open-minded and cosmopolitan. Nine years later he was still saying the same thing: unlike Ulster, 'People are so casual'.⁴³

For planter Hewitt prosperous, parliamentary Coventry was not so alien a city, as he readily acknowledged in one of his finest poems, 'The Search'. And yet:

It is a hard responsibility to be a stranger;
to hear your speech sounding at odds with your neighbours';
holding your tongue from quick comparisons;
remembering that you are a guest in the house.⁴⁴

For all the unexpected familiarity and common [Protestant] heritage, 'this is not your abiding place'.⁴⁵ Reference to 'the western island' hints at the mode adopted in some of Hewitt's most effective commentaries on Ulster's summer of '69.

The poems that appeared in the booklet *An Ulster Reckoning* were written in the immediate aftermath of the sectarian riots of August 1969, the month British troops were first deployed on the streets of Derry and Belfast. 'The Coasters' is a powerful indictment of a complacent Protestant bourgeoisie for too long salving its liberal conscience with token gestures across the sectarian divide.⁴⁶ Like Tom Paulin a decade later, albeit with less subtlety, Hewitt deploys classical allusions and parallels. Thus, Ulster becomes an Hellenic hotspot, its discredited oligarchy belatedly appeasing mistrusted Thebans long settled within the city walls: suspicious of compromise, the mob smell blood. Allegorizing Thucydides, which in 'Parallels Never Meet' Hewitt concedes is a fruitless artifice ('Reality is of a coarser texture'), nevertheless echoes an earlier poem, 'The Colony', published in 1953.⁴⁷ Here Ulster becomes a wild outpost at the edge of the empire tamed by Caesar's legions and an expatriate 'rabble' of land-hungry *cives*, camp-followers, and clerks, their children and grandchildren ever fearful of a wrathful and revenging dispossessed:

I think these natives human, think their code,
though strange to us, and farther from the truth,
only a little so – to be redeemed
if they themselves rise up against the spells
and fears their celibates surround them with.⁴⁸

Yet, after centuries of cultivating and adapting to a once harsh and barren land, now 'we would be strangers in the Capitol; / this is our country also; and we shall not be outcast on the world'.⁴⁹

Hewitt returned to the colonial experience in 1971, in 'The Roman Fort'. The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum's major archaeological project in the 1960s was the excavation and partial reconstruction of the Lunt Fort at Baginton, a village just within the city boundaries, adjacent to the then aspiring 'Coventry Airport'. Field archaeologist Brian Hobley made his name digging the Lunt, enabling him to move on to more ambitious projects at the Museum of London. Hobley persuaded the Royal Engineers to help recon-

struct the wooden gateway to the fort, with latter-day legionaries using replica tools and techniques:

Like the Romans also, they may shortly receive
further experience in a beleaguered colony,
for, daily, public prints and moving pictures
bring evidence of the stubborn barbarians.⁵⁰

Admittedly, engineers rarely find themselves 'Shielded, vague soldiers, visored, crouch alert', but Hewitt makes his point neatly and emphatically.⁵¹ It's a rare occasion when his preoccupations back home and at work are at one; and the poem is arguably as effective and polemical as its much longer, laboured, and ever so slightly priggish antecedent, however laudable 'The Colony's' lesson of understanding and reconciliation.

Belfast may have been 'irredeemably home', and the Glens of Antrim beyond a mere R and R refuge from the exposure of the municipal frontline, but Coventry clearly meant far more to Hewitt than has previously been appreciated. There appears to be an orthodoxy of exile, of Hewitt – in Heaney's words – setting 'his lonely present against a rooted past, in terms of a lost community and family'. Hewitt's final editor sees the Coventry poems reflecting, 'the exile's yearning to adapt and an echo of loss that is more than mere nostalgia'.⁵² Well yes, but is there not a danger of writing off fifteen years of Hewitt's life, a time when much of his most important work was being produced, as being a mere transitory phase? Am I being unfair and over sensitive in interpreting most critical commentary as, 'In body he was in the West Midlands for 10 months of the year, but in spirit he was *always* back here with us'? The Ulster identity is clearly paramount, and yet what is fascinating about John Hewitt is the degree to which in a quiet unfussy way he really did adopt his adopted city. Here is a familiar story of the outsider cultivating a much greater civic pride and a far deeper knowledge of the locale than most of the natives. The irony is that, beyond his immediate circle of colleagues, councillors, and confidants, precious few were aware of Hewitt's efforts to promote the virtues of Coventry *redux*; nor indeed of his qualifications to be a poet wholly appropriate to the 'Phoenix city', fuelled as he was by an intensely personal, secular vision of social justice, community/regional values, and *citizenship* ('... these were the King's horse going about the King's business, never mine.')⁵³

III

Like Hewitt, Larkin was at heart an unequivocally protestant writer, but of a largely formal Anglican mode far removed from Presbyterian dissent and respectable sedition. Unlike Hewitt, whose values and politics drew heavily

on those of his father, Larkin could never recall his parents with that same mixture of awe and affection.⁵⁴ Andrew Motion explored at length the young Philip's uneasy relationship with Sydney and Eva Larkin, his hero seeing himself by the age of 18, 'as someone both dependent upon and dragged down from his whining mother and autocratic father'.⁵⁵ Not only is Larkin seen as escaping in 1940 from what some today would see as a disturbingly dysfunctional family, but his insistence to Kingsley Amis that growing up in Coventry was singularly uneventful is tacitly endorsed. Larkin of course always encouraged this impression, maintaining that life behind the baize curtains at Manor Road was 'very normal'. Any hint that this might not be the case, such as the suggestion that Sydney was a member of the pro-Nazi, pro-Appeasement organisation The Link, was peremptorily dealt with.⁵⁶ Slightly in awe of the supremely confident young Amis, Larkin may have dismissed his upbringing in a sentence; but two holidays in Germany suggests that, by comparison with most Midland schoolboys in the late 1930s, life was anything but uneventful.

'As for school, I was an unsuccessful schoolboy', and yet even before his death the more assiduous student of Larkin would have viewed such a statement with some scepticism: in *Larkin At Sixty* journalist and publisher Noel Hughes questioned his old schoolfriend's unhappy recollection of life at King Henry VIII, offering a bland if nevertheless revealing insight into young Philip's extra-curricular activities.⁵⁷ One-time artist Jim Sutton's posthumous essay on the adolescent Larkin has far more resonance and *joie de vivre*, particularly regarding the role of jazz in his fellow sixthformer's rite of passage.⁵⁸ Even before Motion's biography appeared it was clear from *Collected Poems* that Larkin had written literally volumes of poetry while still at school.⁵⁹ More importantly, for all the heavy debt to Keats, and by 1939 to Eliot and Auden, Larkin's early verse is fresh, evocative, and – with the benefit of hindsight – signals what is to come.

The influence of Auden is most obvious in 'Last Will and Testament', drafted with Noel Hughes in Larkin's final term at King Henry VIII. The model is Auden and Louis Macneice's 'Their Last Will and Testament' in *Letters From Iceland*, a rambling, shambling, slightly surreal, and just occasionally very funny series of private jokes and witty aperçus rightly overshadowed by the same volume's more muscular 'Letter to Lord Byron'.⁶⁰ *Letters From Iceland*, ostensibly despatches from beyond the Arctic Circle, provides today's reader with a shrewd and often cruel commentary upon prewar England. Larkin would surely have noted Auden's affectionate acknowledgements of his Midlands roots scattered throughout the book:

It's the most lovely country that I know;
Clearer than Scafell Pike, my heart has stamped on
The view from Birmingham to Wolverhampton.⁶¹

Appropriately, the next stanza recounts an early train journey through the Black Country. 'From a corridor' the infant Auden gawps at:

Tramlines and slagheaps, pieces of machinery,
That was, and still is, my ideal scenery.⁶²

Larkin the sixthformer was already writing about railways (see 'Ultimatum' and 'Out in the lane I pause'), and appropriately King Henry VIII lies adjacent to a main line – the short journey to and from school entailed passing the station.⁶³ He and Hughes had already journeyed south once for interviews and entrance exams by the time their final bequest appeared in the *Coventrian*, the official school magazine they jointly edited and in which Larkin's verse first appeared in print. Motion rightly describes 'Last Will and Testament' as 'relentlessly light-hearted, yet unavoidably elegiac', and the poem clearly signals Larkin's bitter-sweet feelings towards his schooldays: uninspired by dingy science laboratories and dank playing fields, and trapped within a system of rigorous streaming and compulsory sport, he trod water until entry to the sixth form brought liberation and opportunity.⁶⁴ Although Larkin and Hughes range widely in wreaking gentle revenge for past indignities, the war is never far away, 'On this 26th of July 1940':

Next (now the troops have taken their departure)
With ever-grateful hearts we do assign
To our French master, all the Maginot Line.⁶⁵

Larkin's defeatism is well documented, although a generous interpretation might be that much of the time he was simply out to shock. As late as April 1942, admittedly at a time when defeat in the Far East and North Africa had severely dented national morale, Larkin was insisting that, 'England *cannot* win this war; there's absolutely no *spirit* in the country [his italics]. I feel everything is in a mess ...'.⁶⁶ Personal experience from even before September 1939 had encouraged a feeling of organised chaos, whether it be his father's half-hearted involvement in municipal ARP planning, or King Henry VIII's ill-fated endeavour to maintain business as usual. During the 'Phoney War' Larkin observed the complement of staff and pupils slowly diminish, adding fire-watching and shelter supervision to his list of prefectorial duties.⁶⁷ Never a pillar of the school establishment, the unattractive prospect of participating in King Henry VIII's finest hour could only strengthen a great feeling of release when in July 1940 he crossed the Warwick Road railway bridge for the very last time. However, more than once that summer he must have speculated on whether the Germans would in fact get to Oxford before him. They didn't, and arrival at St John's signalled a break – but by no means a clean break – with the past.

Introducing the 1964 edition of his first novel, Larkin emphasised how, although *Jill* is rooted firmly in the Michaelmas Term of 1940, it is only autobiographical in so far as it draws heavily upon general recollection rather than direct experience: John Kemp, the definitive naive working-class boy up at Oxford, is most definitely not Philip Larkin. Trawling the novel for obscure autobiographical references, which only someone familiar with Larkin's school and birthplace might recognise, proved a frustrating and rather pointless exercise (with the exception, as we shall see, of the climax of the book). Kemp and Whitbread are acutely aware of being grammar school boys, but ironically it transpires that Warner and his circle only attended a minor public school (yet, like Old Etonians, they play football, as it's the grammar schools which in practice forge the rugby tradition – Warner acts like a 'rugger bugger', but literally and metaphorically he is neither).⁶⁸ In 'Not the Place's Fault', Larkin confirmed that 'no pipe-lighting dominie' played a similar role to Joseph Crouch, although the latter's descent into mediocrity clearly reflects young Philip's view of his own teachers.⁶⁹ Mrs Warner presumably owes something to Jim Sutton's mother, the schoolboy Larkin appreciating the 'natural hospitality' of a family prosperous, relaxed, and visibly at ease with one another. In other words, an atmosphere and environment wholly at odds with Sydney Larkin's understanding of domestic bliss.⁷⁰

The one occasion when John Kemp comes near to being Philip Larkin is of course when he goes back to a now devastated Huddlesford ("What you mean a real air raid – like Coventry?").⁷¹ There are significant differences in that Kemp travels by train and alone, whereas Larkin hitched home with Noel Hughes on Sunday, 17 November, 48 hours after Coventry had been subjected to what was up until then the most concentrated aerial bombardment of the war.⁷² Once in the city the two friends remained together, first searching for Larkin's family in the environs of Manor Road, and then bisecting the centre to secure news of Hughes's parents. With a prearranged return lift, they were back in Oxford by early evening.⁷³ However, Larkin did draw directly upon this brief but traumatic visit when describing Kemp's attempt to cross the centre of Huddlesford and find out whether the family home is intact. The Kemps live in "King Edward Street – by the Stadium", and Larkin would have known King William Street, leading up to Highfield Road football ground, had, like so much of the Hillfields district, suffered severe damage.⁷⁴ Kemp's home seems very similar to terraced houses in Hillfields, although the back garden has more in common with 1 Manor Road. His dread as he approaches the front door matches that actually felt by Larkin if Hughes is to be believed. Kemp finds a note giving an address in Preston, an experience more akin to that of Hughes, who learnt from a cousin his parents were safe, than to Larkin for whom reassurance came in the form of a belated telegram from his father. The description of a blitzed Huddlesford echoes so many accounts of Coventry on that desperate weekend of 16–17 November as a half-empty city came to terms with the scale of what had

taken place. For Kemp, 'The town had been so familiar and so intimately wound into his boyhood that its destruction became fascinating. Dozens of places he knew had been wrecked ...'.⁷⁵

Motion has written of how profoundly unsettling the Blitz was upon Larkin, abruptly bringing home to him the realities of twentieth-century warfare, and destroying for ever the suburban stability which, for all the mockery, he still at this time needed.⁷⁶ Nothing would ever be the same again, and indeed by June 1941 the Larkin family had left Coventry for good, Sydney commuting from Warwick for the last three years of his working life. For John Kemp his hurried trip to Huddlesford is a truly cathartic experience, as he himself recognises when safe and secure on the train heading back south.⁷⁷ In late 1940 Larkin himself traced this change of mood in 'New Year Poem', two stanzas of which capture the still, chilling atmosphere of shattered suburbia:

These houses are deserted, felt over smashed windows,
No milk on the step, a note pinned to the door
Telling of departure: only shadows
Move when in the day the sun is seen for an hour,
Yet to me this decaying landscape has its uses:
To make me remember, who am always inclined to forget,
That there is always a changing at the root,
And a real world in which time really passes.

For even together, outside this shattered city
And its obvious message, if we had lived in that peace
Where the enormous years pass over lightly
– Yes, even there, if I looked into your face
Expecting a word or a laugh on the old conditions,
It would not be a friend who met my eye,
Only a stranger would smile and turn away,
Not one of the two who first performed these actions.⁷⁸

Contemplation of death and afterlife necessitates, '... The bells / That we used to await will not be rung this year', yet '... life will again move forward / Implicating us all; ...'. With 'the voice of the living' calling in chorus for an individual and collective reaffirmation of hope and love, the poem ends on an unusually positive note, at variance with the unbridled cynicism ever present in Larkin's letters at the time – a time when he was still, for all intents and purposes, in late adolescence, and surprisingly immature.⁷⁹

For all the intermittent correspondence with Old Coventrians, and sporadic exchange of memories, Larkin was gone for good. Via Wellington, Leicester, and Belfast, he finally found a new home, and in many respects a new identity. Ageing masters at King Henry VIII might keep the flame alive, but for the rest of the nation – including most well-read residents of his

native city – Larkin was synonymous with another community rebuilt from the ashes of the Blitz, Hull. Coventry forgot about him, and he appeared to have forgotten about Coventry. Was Larkin privately flattered, or was he genuinely irritated, when in early 1978 the city council awarded him the newly instituted ‘Coventry Award of Merit’? Although he conveyed the impression to Barbara Pym that the award ceremony was tacky, parochial, and a bit of a bore, Larkin found himself in distinguished company: a high profile former bishop, a pioneer of comprehensive schooling, and the general secretary of Britain’s largest trade union.⁸⁰

IV

I suspect that, for all the curmudgeonly remarks about his fellow recipients, and having to take a day off work, Larkin was actually rather flattered. What better way to have one’s ego massaged than to sit in civic splendour enjoying a good lunch, and have compliments showered upon you by the leader of a council which had employed your father for twenty-five years?⁸¹ Many memories must have come sharply back into focus that day, even if the physical environment appeared so very different from that of his childhood – the Larkins’ cheerless, gloomy abode had long since been bulldozed in the interest of rapid traffic flow, and the centre of the city wholly rebuilt. Only in the narrow streets behind the Council House, Sydney Larkin’s second – or perhaps even first – home, were there remnants of the compact medieval community which had grown up around the cathedral and had survived remarkably intact until November 1940. Briefly, as he entered St Mary’s Hall to receive his bauble, Larkin could recall passing along those same streets to visit his father or to plunder the central library.⁸² But everything else had changed, just as he knew it had to after that symbolic return in the aftermath of the Blitz: the *Luftwaffe* wiped out the heart of the city, and in so doing conveniently wiped out uncomfortable childhood memories. The student Larkin had no time for nostalgia, and anyway, in his mind there was precious little to be nostalgic about. The adult Larkin had even less time for family sentiment and ‘the good old school’, hence his reluctance to gain a wider audience for ‘Not the Place’s Fault’, a rare occasion on which he had let his guard drop.

Larkin’s verse has a constant engagement with ‘the past’ – twentieth-century England’s ‘past’, whatever the postmodernist may wish to define that as actually being – but not in terms of shallow wistfulness. ‘I Remember, I Remember’ is more concerned with the process of recollection than the actual memories: ‘Coventry’ as a geographical and social construct, as a particular place at a particular time, had gone – in the case of Larkin’s most familiar landmarks, quite literally. A tarmaced, stressed concrete landscape of ring roads, precincts, and elevated walkways was both alien and anathema. Yet what Larkin walked away from, John Hewitt warmly

embraced as a realisable vision of urban renewal. Hewitt, by the time he returned to Belfast for the last time in 1972, had become disillusioned. Yet the commitment to Coventry, and more specifically its people, had never wholly flagged, even after control of the council changed hands, and the endless round of finance meetings and committee briefings became ever more arduous. The poetry confirms this continuing fascination with a radical past and with a future where rampant consumerism can at least be tempered by genuine *community* values of tolerance and social justice. Thus Hewitt had an affection and a *concern* for postwar Coventry which the native son rarely displayed. Larkin's qualified indifference contrasts sharply with Hewitt's fascination. But this should scarcely come as a surprise: Larkin left Coventry for Warwick/Oxford at the age of 19, while Hewitt spent his middle years at the heart of his adopted city's efforts to carve out for itself a new and distinctly contemporary identity and purpose. The 1960s were boom years, but signs of incipient decline were evident even before the end of the decade: like Larkin, Hewitt chose the right time to leave. Looking back across more than a quarter of a century it is equally clear that in 1957 Hewitt chose the right time at which to arrive. His public and private contribution to Coventry at a vital moment in postwar recovery was unique, but is still largely unrecognised – unlike, ironically, Larkin's identification with *his* adopted city. John Hewitt was first and foremost always an Ulsterman – and as such a key figure in modern Irish poetry – but for fifteen years he lived and worked in the heart of England, often writing about distinctively English topics and themes: the Warwickshire of Joseph Arch, but also the Coventry of Dick Crossman. 'Regionalism' could cross the Irish Sea: John Hewitt was a poet of his times *and* of his place, wherever that may be.

Notes

I am grateful to Sarah Ferris, Nicola McNee and Jeff Vent, and Noel Hughes for his 'insider's' comments on an early draft.

1 Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten, *Penguin Modern Poets 10: The Mersey Sound* (London, 1967), had been reprinted six times by 1971.

2 P. Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings* (London, 1964).

3 Larkin had little time for the old school tie, but even in middle age he couldn't resist a dig at the old rival, Bablake School; see P. Larkin to C. Gunner, 19 November 1973, in A. Thwaite (ed.), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940–1985* (London, 1992), p. 493.

4 F. Ormsby (ed.), 'Introduction', *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt* (Belfast, 1992), pp. lxii & lxviii; J. Hewitt, forward to a 1970 unpublished history of Cushendall, quoted in *ibid.*, p. lx. Hewitt's disenchantment with management by 1971 inspired a short and witty celebration of technocratic Luddism, which has a curiously 1990s feel about it ('that maze of programme budgeting / input analysis and cost effectiveness'): 'Executives Third Tier', *ibid.*, pp. 359–60.

5 J. Hewitt, *Ulster Reckoning* (Belfast, 1971) and *Out Of My Time: Poems 1967–1974* (Belfast, 1974).

6 J. Hewitt, 'Variations on a Theme', *Collected Poems*, pp. 320–1. As early as 1963 Hewitt's chosen theme for the annual John Shelton Memorial Lecture was 'The Continuing Crisis in Art'.

7 The Hewitts entertained modestly in their Belfast flat during and after the war. As well as Larkin, they hosted E. M. Forster when he visited Northern Ireland in October 1952.

8 See P. Larkin, 'Posterity', *High Windows* (London, 1974), p. 27, and J. Hewitt, 'Dissertation I & II', *Collected Poems* pp. 364–5. Both men also had in common their first poems being published in the *Listener*, Hewitt with 'Ireland', 18 May 1932, and Larkin with 'Ultimatum', 28 November 1940.

9 P. Larkin, 'I Remember, I Remember', 1955, in A. Thwaite (ed.) *Collected Poems* (London, 1988), p. 81, and *Jill* (London, 1946, second edn 1964), pp. 218–28; J. Horder, 'Poet on the 8.15', *Manchester Guardian*, 20 May 1965.

10 A. Motion, *Philip Larkin A Writer's Life* (London, 1993), pp. 33–5.

11 Philip Larkin to Charles Monteith, 30 Nov. 1984, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 4. Highfield Road and Coundon Road are the homes of Coventry City FC and Coventry RFC respectively. On the relationship between the two clubs, and on how native-born 'Coventry kids' perceived themselves and their city, see A. Smith, 'An oval ball and a broken city: Coventry, its people and its rugby team', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 11.3 (1994), 506–15, and "'Temporary Gentleman" My father and World War II', *Encounter*, 75.1 (1990), 28–32.

12 The Larkin family arrived in Coventry in 1919 when Philip's father Sydney was appointed Deputy Treasurer. Three years later he was promoted to City Treasurer, and by 1927 he could afford to purchase a house in the part-industrial, part-middle class residential Parkside, close to the Council House, and appropriately the railway station.

13 Ormsby (ed.), 'Introduction', in Hewitt, *Collected Poems* p. lxiv.

14 Most notably in J. Hewitt, 'From chairmen and committee men, Good Lord deliver us', *Honest Ulsterman*, 6, (Sept. 1968), 16–22, reprinted in T. Clyde (ed.), *Ancestral Voices: The Selected Prose of John Hewitt* (Belfast, 1987), pp. 48–55, and 'The family next door', *Threshold* 23 (summer 1970), 14–19, reprinted in *Evening Press*, 17 August 1970, and presumably quoted with Hewitt's approval in A. Warner (ed.), 'Introduction', *The Selected John Hewitt* (Belfast, 1981), p. 5.

15 Sarah Ferris provides several examples of Hewitt's growing uneasiness in 'John Hewitt's disciples and the "kaleyard provincials"', unpublished paper, University of Newcastle Department of English Literary and Linguistic Studies, p. 10; D. Casey, 'The doyen: a *Quarto* interview with the Belfast poet John Hewitt', 4 December 1980, the new University of Ulster', *Quarto*, 7 (1980–1), 1–14.

16 Heaney in 1969 was one of the first to describe Hewitt setting 'his lonely present against a rooted past, in terms of a lost community and family'; a view later developed by Edna Longley in arguing the significance of Hewitt's premature assault upon Unionist philistinism. S. Heaney, 'The poetry of John Hewitt', *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London, 1980); E. Longley, 'Writing, Revisionism and Grass-seed: Literary Mythologies in Ireland' in G. Dawe and E. Longley (eds), *Across a Roaring Hill: The Protestant Imagination in Modern Ireland. Essays in Honour of John Hewitt* (Belfast, 1985), pp. 11–21.

17 McFadden, 'No Dusty Pioneer', pp. 178–9. Kirkland's assertion that the overriding pattern of Hewitt's 'intellectual life ... is one in which methodology seeks to restrict the chaos of sensory impression' is quoted in Ferris, 'John Hewitt's disciples and the "kaleyard provincials"', p. 3; E. Longley, 'Progressive Bookmen: Politics and Northern Protestant Writers since the 1930's', *Irish Review* 1.1 (1986), 50–7, and D. Kibberd, *Anglo-Irish Attitudes* Field Day Pamphlet, 6 (Londonderry, 1984), p. 22 – my thanks to Ms Ferris for these references.

18 J. Hewitt, 'Godiva Rides Again in a New Coventry', *Belfast Telegraph* 20 September 1957.

19 T. Mason and B. Lancaster, 'Society and Politics in Twentieth-century Coventry' in T. Mason and B. Lancaster (eds), *Life and Labour in a Twentieth-century City: The Experience of Coventry*(Coventry, 1986), pp. 355–9; N. Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics*(London, 1990), pp. 88–100.

20 For the city council's unease by the time construction of the new art gallery and museum began in 1954 over the terms of machine tool magnate Sir Alfred Herbert's £100,000 gift, see J. McG. Davies. 'A Twentieth-century Paternalist: Alfred Herbert and the Skilled Coventry Workman' in Mason and Lancaster (eds), *Life and Labour in a Twentieth-century City* p. 124. For profiles of Stringer and Hodgkinson, see K. Richardson, *Twentieth-century Coventry*(Coventry, 1972), pp. 204–6. Hodgkinson's autobiography, *Sent To Coventry*(London, 1970) has an introduction by another key figure in Coventry's postwar politics, local MP Richard Crossman.

21 Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics* p. 120.

22 J. Hewitt, 'Godiva Rides Again in a New Coventry' and 'Poets on Poetry: Hewitt', *Radio Éireann*, 18 Feb. 1975, quoted in Ormsby (ed.), 'Introduction', in Hewitt, *Collected Poems* p. xlii.

23 For Morris's continuing influence upon Hewitt, see: *ibid.*; introduction to *The Rain Dance: Poems New and Revised* for *The Poetry Book Society Bulletin* 99, (Christmas 1978) reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 610–11 (which also mentions recent 'nourishment in the English Philip Larkin ...'); and 'No rootless colonist'. On discovering Mumford and Geddes in the early 1940s, see Ormsby (ed.), 'Introduction', in Hewitt, *Collected Poems* p. 1.

24 J. Hewitt, 'Godiva Rides Again in a New Coventry'.

25 J. Hewitt, 'Coventry, the tradition of change and continuity' in Coventry Corporation, *Coventry: The Tradition of Change and Continuity*(Coventry, 1966), pp. 11 and 110. For the importance of the 'utility churches' to both the diocese and the architect, see L. Campbell, *Coventry Cathedral Art and Architecture in Post war Britain* (Oxford, 1996).

26 Hewitt quoted in 'Proposals for Coventry Art Collection', *Coventry Evening Telegraph* 1 November 1957.

27 Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics* pp. 46–52 and 100; Richardson, *Twentieth-century Coventry*, pp. 310–43.

28 Hewitt, 'Coventry, the tradition of change and continuity', p. 10.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 1

30 Larkin, 'I Remember, I Remember', *Collected Poems* p. 81.

31 *Ibid.*; Hewitt, 'Coventry, the tradition of change and continuity', pp. 13 and 9.

32 Hewitt, 'No rootless colonist'; K. Levine, 'A tree of identities, a tradition of dissent: John Hewitt at 78', *Fortnight*, 213, 4–17 Feb. 1985, 16–17. For a critique of Hewitt's insistence to Levine that his radicalism has 'strong British roots' ('my intellectual ancestry goes back to the Levellers') with little to draw upon from Gaelic culture, see S. Hillan King, 'The note of exile: Michael McLaverty's Rathlin Island' in Dawe and Foster (eds), *The Poet's Place*, pp. 215–17.

33 Hewitt, 'Coventry, the tradition of change and continuity', pp. 3–7. On why you can still tell Coventry was a parliamentary stronghold and a setting for George Eliot novels (that 'moral explicitness, an earnestness ...'), see Paul Barker's penportrait of the city that 'best embodies the postwar socialist ideal' in 'Observations', *New Statesman*, 17 January 1997.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 6; Ormsby (ed.), 'Introduction', in Hewitt, *Collected Poems* p. ixiv.

35 Hewitt, 'Coventry, the tradition of change and continuity', pp. 12–13; John

Hewitt interview in the *Standard*, 5 June 1959, quoted in Ormsby (ed.), 'Introduction', in Hewitt, *Collected Poems* p. lxiii.

36 Hewitt, 'Coventry, the tradition of change and continuity', p. 9.

37 Hewitt quoted in Evans, 'Profile of John Hewitt'. Larkin painted a similarly gloomy picture of Coventry twenty years earlier: 'I never knew anyone ... who was interested in writing. There may have been little groups who met and discussed each other's work, but I never came across them.' P. Larkin, 'Not the Place's Fault', *Umbrella*, 1.3 (1959), 112. In later years Larkin was unhappy about this 'rather rambling' essay on his childhood, which, 'said just a little more about myself than I really want known.' *Umbrella* was an obscure arts magazine circulating around Coventry in the late 1950s, and Larkin was insistent that his article should not become more widely known by being included in the 1983 prose selection *Required Writing* P. Larkin to B. Morrison, 22 October 1982, quoted in Motion, *Philip Larkin*, p. 500.

38 'An Ulsterman in England Remembers' and 'The Dilemma', Hewitt, *Collected Poems*, pp. 133 and 132.

39 'Lines on the Opening of the Belgrade Theatre', *ibid.*, pp. 513-15. The same year saw a further (not very impressive) example of Hewitt the public – yet this time discreet – poet: his anonymous 'To the memory of John B. Shelton, Antiquarian', *Coventry Evening Telegraph* 5 December 1958; *ibid.*, p. 196.

40 *Ibid.*, and 'Prologue for an Evening at the Whitefriars', *ibid.*, pp. 531-4.

41 'Suburban spring in Warwickshire', 'The Burnt Post', and 'Compton Wynyates, Warwickshire, 1968', *ibid.*, pp. 165, 175 and 166.

42 'An Irishman in Coventry', 1958, *ibid.*, pp. 97-8.

43 John Hewitt interview in the *Standard*, 5 June 1959, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 588; Hewitt quoted in Evans, 'Profile of John Hewitt'.

44 'The Search', 1966, Hewitt, *Collected Poems* p. 160.

45 *Ibid.* The poem contains an oblique reference to the Hewitt family in medieval and early modern Coventry, one of whom, 'I would like to imagine ... came with the Planters and settled in Co. Armagh'; Hewitt's notes on 'The Search' quoted in *Collected Poems* p. 600.

46 'The Coasters', *ibid.*, pp. 135-7.

47 'The Tribunes', 'The Well-intentioned Consul' and 'Parallels Never Meet', *ibid.*, pp. 138, 138-9 and 139-40.

48 'The Colony', *ibid.*, p. 79.

49 *Ibid.*

50 'The Roman Fort', *ibid.*, pp. 175-6.

51 'Bogside, Derry, 1971' *ibid.*, pp. 176-7.

52 Heaney, 'The Poetry of John Hewitt', p. 209; Ormsby (ed.), 'Introduction', in Hewitt, *Collected Poems* p. lxiv.

53 'The King's Horses', *ibid.*, p. 185.

54 For Hewitt's tribute to his schoolteacher father, 'a just and kindly man', see 'Freehold II The Lonely Heart', *ibid.*, pp. 373-9. Contrast with P. Larkin, 'This Be The Verse', *High Windows* p. 30.

55 Motion, *Philip Larkin*, p. 35.

56 *Ibid.*, pp. 54 and 11-12; P. Larkin, 'An interview with the *Observer*', *Required Writing Miscellaneous Prose 1955-1982*(London, 1983), p. 47. Noel Hughes insists that Larkin told him his father was a member of The Link, and that he never categorically denied it: 'He merely claimed that he had no knowledge of it and that search of his father's papers produced no evidence for it.' N. Hughes to the author,? April 1997. For a detailed study of The Link, see Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-39*(London, 1980).

57 N. Hughes, 'The young Mr Larkin' in A. Thwaite (ed.), *Larkin At Sixty* (Lon-

don, 1982), pp. 17–22. One wonders how Larkin felt about the repeated assertion that, ‘There is much in Philip that is reminiscent of his father’, *ibid.*, p. 21.

58 ‘He [Larkin] said once he despised people committed to music (meaning classical music). When I [Sutton] said, “What about jazz then?” he said. “That’s different!” J. Sutton, ‘Early Days’ in G. Hartley (ed.), *Philip Larkin 1922–1985 A Tribute* (London, 1988), p. 78. On Sutton and Larkin’s mutual passion for trad jazz, see Motion, *Philip Larkin*, pp. 21–2.

59 I [Larkin] wrote ceaselessly, however: now verse, which I sewed up into little books, now prose, a thousand words a night after homework ...

Larkin, ‘Not the Place’s Fault’, p. 112. Anthony Thwaite included 19 poems written prior to October 1940, of which 6 were published in the *Coventrian*, King Henry VIII’s school magazine and one (‘Ultimatum’) in the *Listener*; Larkin, *Collected Poems*, pp. 225–52.

60 Larkin [and N. Hughes], ‘Last Will and Testament’, *ibid.*, pp. 250–2. Peter Porter has suggested that Auden’s ‘love of gossip is put to therapeutic use’ in ‘this richly reverential poem’, but his alternative description of ‘Their Last Will and Testament’ as a ‘cod document’ seems far more apposite: P. Porter, ‘Wonder of Wistan’, *Guardian* (20 March 1997), G2, p. 10.

61 W. Auden, ‘Chapter V Letter to Lord Byron Part II’, in W. Auden and L. MacNeice, *Letters From Iceland* (London, 1937, pbk edn 1967), p. 49. A further West Midlands connection is Auden’s ‘Letter to R. H. S. Crossman, Esq.’, *ibid.*, pp. 89–96, Crossman having been chosen as Labour’s parliamentary candidate for Coventry East well before the outbreak of war.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 49. With characteristic crudity Larkin discussed the importance of Auden to his sixth form poems in P. Larkin to J. B. Sutton, 16 April 1941, in Larkin, *Selected Letters* pp. 11–12.

63 For a recollection of that twice-daily journey see Larkin, ‘Not the Place’s Fault’, p. 109.

64 Motion provides a very full portrait of the schoolboy Larkin, who as an undergraduate labelled pre-sixth-form generalist secondary education ‘Evil Incarnate’, Motion, *Philip Larkin*, pp. 15–22 and 28.

65 Larkin [and N. Hughes], ‘Last Will and Testament’, *Collected Poems* pp. 250–2. ‘French master’ F. J. Liddiard was still teaching (me) 30 years later, and advising Andrew Motion over 50 years later.

66 P. Larkin to N. Iles, 7 April 1942, in Larkin, *Selected Letters* p. 24; Motion, *Philip Larkin*, pp. 32–3.

67 In 1939 King Henry VIII was a ‘neutral school’ in that it was located within neither an evacuation nor a reception area. Attendance was thus voluntary once adequate shelter provision had been made. Larkin continued fire-watching at Oxford, where he was also obliged to join the Student Training Corps. G. L. Marson, F. H. Metcalf and A. A. C. Burton, *King Henry VIII School 1545–1945* (Coventry, 1945), p. 46; Motion, *Philip Larkin*, pp. 33–38.

68 P. Larkin, *Jill* (London, 1946, 2nd edn 1964), pp. 11–20, 52, 54 and 56–7.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 83; Larkin, ‘Not the Place’s Fault’, pp. 111–12.

70 Larkin, *Jill*, pp. 90–95, and ‘Not the Place’s Fault’, p. 110; Motion, *Philip Larkin*, p. 20.

71 Larkin, *Jill*, p. 203.

72 There had been 24 raids on Coventry since late August, but the 500 tons of high explosive dropped on the night of 14–15 November devastated the city centre, including the cathedral; destroyed or damaged 56 per cent of the total housing stock (42,904 houses); disabled 27 munitions and engineering factories; and killed or injured well over 2000 people (the official death figure of 506 is considered far too

low given that so many missing were never accounted for). Figures quoted in T. Lewis (ed.), *Moonlight Sonata: The Coventry Blitz, 14/15 November 1940* (Coventry, 1990), pp. 31, 80, 144 and 167.

73 N. Hughes, 'Going Home With Larkin', *London Magazine* 29:1/2 (April/May, 1989), pp. 115–19; Motion, *Philip Larkin*, pp. 48–9.

74 *Jill* suggests he and Hughes walked up King William's Street, as Kemp is instructed 'to go round Swanmill Park way', which must be a reference to Swanswell, the small park separating Hillfields from the city centre. Also, the civil defence workers, whose 'interest did not extend outside the particular district', tell Kemp that, "'They had it badly round the hospital'": the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital, badly damaged because of its close proximity to the Royal Ordnance Works, was/is adjacent to Swanswell. However, Noel Hughes insists they took a different route (Bishop's Street plus bus to Foleshill), and 'It would surprise me a great deal if he [Larkin] ever visited Hillfields. He was not interested in his fellow man.' Larkin, *Jill*, pp. 213–14; Lewis, *Moonlight Sonata* p. 121; Noel Hughes to the author, April 1997.

75 Larkin, *Jill*, pp. 213–15; Hughes, 'Going Home With Larkin', pp. 117–19; various descriptions of the centre of Coventry in the aftermath of the Blitz in Lewis, *Moonlight Sonata* pp. 131–41, 144, 148–9, 158 and 174. 'Did you ever read JILL? Frightful piss, but has a flashback to Coventry that might amuse you.': P. Larkin to C. Gunner, 13 October 1971, in Larkin, *Selected Letters* pp. 447–8.

76 Motion, *Philip Larkin*, pp. 49–50. Motion suggests that not just 'A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb' (1943), but even 'Church Going' and 'The Explosion', are poems directly or indirectly indebted in their imagery to Larkin's blitz experience.

77 Larkin, *Jill*, pp. 218–19. Crouch uses a strained train analogy when advising Kemp of the need to network, having first revealed that the grammar school sustained a direct hit in the Huddlesford raid. Although forced to close, King Henry VIII escaped damage on 14–15 November 1940, but the main building was gutted on the night of 8–9 April 1941. Larkin no doubt had this in mind later in the war when first drafting Crouch's description of the extent of the (almost identical) damage. Larkin, *Jill*, pp. 228 and 226; Mason *et al.*, *King Henry VIII School 1545–1945* pp. 46–7.

78 'New Year Poem', 31 December 1940, Larkin, *Collected Poems* pp. 255–6.

79 *Ibid.* For evidence of cynicism and immaturity, albeit tempered by the odd good joke, see P. Larkin to J. B. Sutton, 9 and 20 December 1940, in Larkin, *Selected Letters*, p. 3–10. The latter poem gives some insight into the gestation of 'New Year Poem'.

80 P. Larkin to B. Pym, 14 February 1978, *ibid.*, pp. 579–80. The other leading award winners were Bishop Cuthbert Bardsley, Chief Education Officer Robert Aitken, and TGWU General Secretary (and wartime union leader in Coventry) Jack Jones.

81 *Ibid.* Admittedly there was a down side for Larkin in that he had to listen to Jack Jones monopolise the speech-making.

82 *Ibid.*