

= Brunette Coleman =

Brunette Coleman was a pseudonym used by the poet and writer Philip Larkin . In 1943 , towards the end of his time as an undergraduate at St John 's College , Oxford , he wrote several works of fiction , verse and critical commentary under that name . The style he adopted parodies that of popular writers of contemporary girls ' school fiction , but the extent of the stories ' homoerotic content suggests they were written primarily for adult male titillation .

The Coleman oeuvre consists of a completed novella , *Trouble at Willow Gables* , set in a girls ' boarding school ; an incomplete sequel , *Michaelmas Term at St Brides* , set in a women 's college at Oxford ; seven short poems with a girls ' school ambience ; a fragment of pseudo @-@ autobiography ; and a critical essay purporting to be Coleman 's literary apologia . The manuscripts were stored in the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull , where Larkin was chief librarian between 1955 and 1985 . Their existence was revealed to the public when Larkin 's *Selected Letters* and Andrew Motion 's biography were published in 1992 and 1993 respectively . The Coleman works themselves were finally published , with other Larkin drafts and oddments , in 2002 .

At Oxford Larkin underwent a period of confused sexuality and limited literary output . The adoption of a female persona appeared to release him from his creative inhibitions , as in the three years following the Coleman phase he published under his own name two novels and his first poetry collection . Thereafter , although he gradually established his reputation as a poet , his career as a prose writer declined , and despite several attempts he completed no further fiction . Critical reaction to the publication of the Coleman material was divided between those who saw no value in these juvenilia , and those who considered that they cast useful light on the study of the mature Larkin .

= = Origins = =

In October 1940 Philip Larkin began studying English at St John 's College , Oxford . A prolific writer since childhood , his primary ambition as an undergraduate was to be a novelist rather than a poet . As well publishing articles and poems in *Cherwell* and *Oxford Poetry* , he wrote additional unpublished material that included fragments of semi @-@ autobiographical stories exploring homosexual relationships among groups of undergraduates . According to Larkin 's biographer Andrew Motion these writings , while of no literary value , give an indication of Larkin 's confused sexuality at that time , and his growing distaste for what he terms " this buggery business " .

From 1942 the character of much of Larkin 's private writing changed , as a result of his friendship with a fellow undergraduate from St John 's , Kingsley Amis , who arrived at the university that summer . Amis , a much more confident and assertive character than Larkin , disguised his serious concerns behind a facade of jokes and comic ironies . Larkin soon adopted that style as his own , joining with Amis in composing obscene rhymes and parodies of the Romantic poets they were required to study . In time they extended their efforts to soft @-@ porn fantasies in which , typically , " girls roll [ed] around together twanging elastic and straps " . After Amis 's departure for the army in early 1943 , Larkin made his first attempt at writing from a specifically feminine perspective in a story called " *An Incident in the English Camp* " , which he subtitled " *A Thoroughly Unhealthy Story* " . Lacking any salacious content despite its subtitle , the work is written in a pastiche of sentimental women 's magazine prose . It depicts an undergraduate girl 's parting from her soldier lover , and ends : " She walked in exaltation through the black streets , her heart glowing like a coal with deep love " .

= = Writing = =

From his general reading , Larkin had acquired a considerable knowledge of girls ' school fiction , and had formed definite views on the authors of such works : " stupid women without a grain of humour in their minds " , who lacked " erotic sensibility " and treated the lesbian perspective " too casually " . His intention to write in this genre is expressed in a letter to his friend Norman Iles , dated 5 June 1943 , just before Larkin sat his degree Finals : " I am spending my time doing an

obscene Lesbian novel in the form of a school story ". The novel was *Trouble at Willow Gables* , a school adventure story in the manner of Dorita Fairlie Bruce or Dorothy Vicary , which Larkin completed at home while awaiting his Finals results . That was the prelude to a busy summer 's writing : " Leaving Oxford was like taking a cork out of a bottle . Writing flooded out of me " , Larkin later told his biographer .

Larkin 's letter to Iles does not mention a female pseudonym , although the idea of using one had been in his mind for months . The previous March he had begun writing the imagined autobiography of a supposed lady novelist , " Brunette Coleman " , adapting the name of a well @-@ known contemporary female jazz musician , Blanche Coleman . Larkin tentatively titled the autobiography " Ante Meridian " ; he soon abandoned it , but held on to the Coleman name . According to James Booth , who prepared the Coleman texts for publication in 2002 , the adoption of a female persona was in line with the pose of " girlish narcissism " that Larkin was affecting in the summer of 1943 : " I am dressed in red trousers , shirt and white pullover , and look very beautiful " . In his letters to Amis , Larkin maintained a straight @-@ faced pretence that Coleman was a real person . Thus in one letter he wrote " Brunette is very thrilled " with a poem written in her name , and in another , " Brunette can stand healthy criticism " .

As he waited for offers of employment through the summer and autumn of 1943 , Larkin added more works to the Coleman oeuvre . He began a sequel to *Trouble at Willow Gables* , set in a women 's college at Oxford and entitled *Michaelmas Term at St Bride 's* , but did not finish it : " All literary inspiration has deserted me " , he informed Amis on 13 August . Nevertheless , a week later he told Amis that Brunette was helping him to write a novel , provisionally entitled *Jill* , about " a young man who invents an imaginary sister , and falls in love with her " . With this letter Larkin sent a Coleman poem , " Bliss " , the first of seven written in the girls ' school idiom . As late as 19 October he reported to Amis that " Brunette is working on a little monograph about girls ' school stories " . This is a reference to the putative literary manifesto " *What Are We Writing For* " , which became the final Coleman work . Thereafter , Motion records , she disappeared , " to be mentioned only fleetingly in later accounts of his university life ... She ended up as an occasional comic reminder of lost youth " .

= = Works = =

The works which Larkin attributed to Brunette Coleman comprise a short piece of supposed autobiography , a complete short novel , an incomplete second novel , a collection of poems and a literary essay .

= = = " Ante Meridian " = = =

This fragment of spoof autobiography is distinct from the rest of the Coleman oeuvre in having no relation to girls ' school fiction . It records Brunette 's early life as the daughter of an eccentric priest , brought up in a tumbledown Cornish cliff @-@ top house . Apart from descriptions of the house and its contents (some of which may be drawn from Larkin 's own childhood home in Coventry) , much of the narrative is taken up with a comical description of an attempt to launch the local lifeboat . Larkin 's biographer Richard Bradford is struck by the distinctive tone in the fragment , different from anything else written under Coleman 's name . The text breaks off suddenly ; Motion surmises that Larkin abandoned it because he was eager to begin work on the first Coleman novel . Booth describes the prose as " a mix of Daphne du Maurier nostalgia and surreal farce " .

= = = Novel : *Trouble at Willow Gables* = = =

= = = = Synopsis = = = =

Marie Moore , a junior pupil at Willow Gables , receives a birthday present of £ 5 from an aunt .

After the banknote is retained for safe keeping by the headmistress , Miss Holden , Marie slyly recovers it but is quickly found out , and is coerced by Miss Holden into giving the money to the school 's gymnasium fund . When later the banknote goes missing from the fund 's collection box , Marie is suspected , but protests her innocence despite a savage beating from Miss Holden with assistance from two burly school prefects . Only her friend Myfanwy believes her . Confined in the school 's punishment room , Marie manages to escape with the help of a domestic servant , and runs away .

Hilary Russell , a prefect and predatory lesbian , lusts after Mary Beech , the school 's cricket captain . On a night expedition in pursuit of Mary , Hilary catches Margaret Tattenham , a junior , in the act of replacing the £ 5 note in Miss Holden 's room . Margaret says she originally took the money as a prank ; Hilary agrees not to report her to Miss Holden in return for sexual favours , to which Margaret reluctantly consents . The following morning , Hilary denounces her anyway ; Margaret responds by revealing Hilary 's sexual harassment but is not believed , and is taken to the punishment room where Marie 's absence is revealed .

Hilary is sent with a search party to find the missing girl . Meanwhile , Margaret makes a daring escape via the window , and rides off on the school horse . She finds Marie , who is miserable and frightened and wants to return to the school whatever the consequences . Margaret confesses that she borrowed the £ 5 to bet on a horse , and has won £ 100 . She means to leave Willow Gables for good , and apologises to Marie for the trouble she has caused her . This conversation is overheard by Hilary 's search party , and after a scuffle the truants are captured . On the way back to school they hear cries from the river ; it is Myfanwy , who has got into difficulties while swimming . Margaret frees herself from her captors ' clutches , dives in and saves her drowning friend .

Back at the school , Miss Holden overlooks the theft in view of Margaret 's heroism , although she confiscates the £ 100 winnings and donates the money to a new swimming pool fund . Marie is exonerated , and her £ 5 is returned . Mary Beech comes forward to corroborate Margaret 's accusations against Hilary , who is summarily expelled . Marie and Myfanwy enjoy an emotional reunion in the school sickroom , as life at the school returns to normal , with friendship and forgiveness all round .

== == Commentary == ==

The typescript begins with a dedication page " To Jacinth " (Brunette Coleman 's imagined secretary) . There follows an untitled poem which later appears , slightly altered , as " The School in August " in Sugar and Spice , the Coleman poetry collection . In the story the surnames of the headmistress and principal girls have been altered in ink throughout the typescript ; some of the original names belonged to Larkin 's real @-@ life acquaintances at Oxford . The presence of a publisher 's inkstamp on the wallet containing the typescript indicates that the story may have been submitted by Larkin for publication .

Booth argues that , whatever Larkin 's motive in writing it , the story follows the parameters of schoolgirl fiction with some fidelity . Its main characters all have models within the genre ; Marie has much in common with Dorita Fairlie Bruce 's recurrent character " Dimsie " , while Hilary is likewise based on Dorothy Vicary 's villainous " Una Vickers " in Niece of the Headmistress . The usual themes of friendships , rivalries and injustices are explored , and the ending in reconciliation and future hope is entirely true to type . Some scenes ? the savage beating endured by Marie , the lingering descriptions of girls dressing and undressing , Hilary 's smouldering sexuality ? may , Booth asserts , be written with " the lusts of the male heterosexual gaze " in mind but , he continues , the reader looking for explicit pornography will be disappointed . Bradford notes three prose styles combining in the narrative : " cautious indifference , archly overwritten symbolism ... and ... its writer 's involuntary feelings of sexual excitement " . Motion finds the tone of the prose frivolous on the surface , yet fundamentally cold and cruel : " Once its women have been arraigned for pleasure they are dismissed ; once they have been enjoyed they are treated with indifference " .

== == Novel : Michaelmas Term at St Brides == ==

== == Synopsis == ==

In this incomplete story Mary , Marie , Margaret and Myfanwy , friends from Willow Gables , are new undergraduates at St Bride 's College , Oxford . Mary is disconcerted to find that she is sharing her rooms with Hilary , her old adversary from the school . However , although Hilary still has a roving lesbian eye , she has lost most of her predatory instincts and the two become friends . Mary falls foul of Mary de Putron , the aggressive and authoritarian college games captain ; in the hockey trials de Putron makes Mary play out of her normal position , so that performs badly . Hilary subsequently avenges Mary 's humiliation by seducing de Putron 's boyfriend , a gauche Royal Air Force officer called Clive , whom she then dumps unceremoniously .

Of Myfanwy 's doings we learn relatively little . Margaret , still fascinated with horse @-@ racing , sets up her own bookmaking business . Marie discovers psychoanalysis and tries to cure her sister Philippa 's leather belt fetish . After various efforts prove unsuccessful , the sisters seek solace in alcohol . The later stages of the story introduce Larkin 's real @-@ life friend , Diana Gollancz , and recount her preparations for a fashionable party . In the final scenes the narrative becomes surreal , as on their alcoholic quest Marie and Philippa are confronted by the knowledge that they are characters in a story , while " real life " is going on in the next room . Marie takes a peep at real life , and decides she would rather stay in the story , which breaks off at this point with a few pencil notes indicating possible ways in which it might have continued .

== == Commentary == ==

Only the first dozen pages of the manuscript are typed ; the remainder is handwritten . The surnames of the characters , which were changed in *Trouble at Willow Gables* , are unaltered . The script carries a dedication to " Miriam and Diana " : Miriam was an acquaintance with whom Larkin had discussed lesbian relationships , while Diana Gollancz (" Diana G. " in the story) , the daughter of the publisher Victor Gollancz , supplied him with many anecdotes from her schooldays . According to Motion , " St Bride 's " is recognisably based on Somerville College , Oxford .

In his analysis of the Coleman fiction , Stephen Cooper notes that , as with Willow Gables , the narrative voice switches from character to character so that different thoughts , attitudes and perspectives can be expressed . Cooper argues that as the narrative progresses , Larkin 's concerns (in his Coleman voice) move beyond sexual titillation ; he is no longer interested in describing lesbian encounters in voyeuristic detail . Hilary emerges as saviour rather than seducer , as a campaigner against male oppression , and as a figure who " deviates from the cultural norms [yet] can triumph over those who adopt conventional attitudes " . The scenes with sexual content or innuendo are largely confined to the earlier parts of the story . The later parts , which introduce the male characters " Clive " and Hilary 's other admirer , the contemptible " Creature " are , according to Motion , overlaid with male self @-@ disgust , a theme apparent in Larkin 's two published novels and in his later poetry . Motion suggests that the loss of erotic impetus , and Larkin 's apparent fading of interest , are the main reasons why the story peters out .

== == Sugar and Spice : A Sheaf of Poems == ==

The typescript of *Sugar and Spice* consists of six poems , which in sequence are : " The False Friend " , " Bliss " , " Femmes Damnées " , " Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis " , " Holidays " and " The School in August " . A seventh poem in pencil , " Fourth Form Loquitur " has been loosely inserted into the typescript . " Femmes Damnées " , which was printed by John Fuller at the Sycamore Press , Oxford , in 1978 , is the only Coleman work published in Larkin 's lifetime . This poem , and " The School in August " , were included in Larkin 's *Collected Poems* published in 1988 ; " The School in August " was omitted from the 2003 revised edition of the collection although , according to Amis , it is the poem that best gives the flavour of the Coleman pastiche . " Bliss " was

included in Larkin 's Selected Letters (1992) , as part of a letter to Amis .

Motion describes the Coleman poems as " a world of comfortless jealousies , breathless bike @-@ rides and deathless crushes " , mixing elements from writers and poets such as Angela Brazil , Richmal Crompton , John Betjeman and W.H. Auden . Larkin 's own attitude to these poems appears equivocal . He expresses pleasure that his friend Bruce Montgomery liked them , especially " The School in August " . However , to Amis he writes : " I think all wrong @-@ thinking people ought to like them . I used to write them whenever I 'd seen any particularly ripe schoolgirl ... Writing about grown women is less perverse and therefore less satisfying " . Booth finds the poems the most impressive of all the Coleman works , in their evidence of Larkin 's early ability to create striking and moving images from conventional school story clichés . They are an early demonstration of Larkin 's talent for finding depths in ordinariness , an ability that characterised many of his later poems . Booth draws specific attention to the elegiac quality of the final lines of " The School in August " : " And even swimming groups can fade / Games mistresses turn grey " . In Booth 's view the Coleman poems are among the best Larkin wrote in the 1940s , well beyond anything in his first published selection *The North Ship* (1945) .

= = = " What Are We Writing For " = = =

The typescript of the essay is headed by an epigraph , attributed to *The Upbringing of Daughters* by Catherine Durning Whetham . It reads : " The chief justification of reading books of any sort is the enlargement of experience that should accrue therefrom " . The text which follows is , in Motion 's words , " a homily on how and how not to write for children " . It argues for the need for well @-@ drawn heroines , and for unrepentant villainesses : " To be tenacious in evil is the duty of every villain ... Let her hate the heroine wholeheartedly , and refuse , yes , even on the last page , to take her hand in forgiveness " . The story should not be about schoolgirls , but about a school with girls in it . The school must be English ; foreign settings or trips abroad are disparaged . Larkin , in Coleman 's voice , pleads for " the Classic Unities " : Unity of Place , which is the school and its inhabitants ; Unity of Time , normally the term in which the action occurs ; and Unity of Action , whereby every recorded incident contributes in some way to the telling of the story . The essay is laden with quotations from many writers of the genre , among them Joy Francis , Dorita Fairlie Bruce , Elsie J. Oxenham , Elinor Brent @-@ Dyer and Nancy Breary .

Motion argues that aside from the sometimes facetious tone , the opinions expressed by Larkin in his Coleman persona , particularly the mild xenophobia that enters the essay , foreshadow his own mature prejudices . Bradford believes that the essay reads as a serious , well @-@ researched paper on the genre of early twentieth century boarding school literature , worthy of inclusion in F. W. Bateson 's *Essays and Criticism* had that journal existed in 1943 .

= = Critical reception = =

Shortly before his death in 1985 Larkin instructed his companion Monica Jones to burn his diaries . His instructions did not cover other writings , therefore the Coleman material remained in the archives of the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull , where Larkin had worked as chief librarian since 1955 . The existence of these papers was first made public in 1992 , when Larkin 's *Selected Letters* was published . In the following year extensive extracts from the Coleman works appeared in Motion 's biography of Larkin , and became the subject of literary analysis by M. W. Rowe , in his 1999 essay " Unreal Girls : Lesbian Fantasy in Early Larkin " . Rowe saw Larkin 's adoption of a female persona as an outlet , compensating for his sexual awkwardness and lack of success with Oxford women . The punishment scenes , in which women punish women , were a means of subduing Larkin 's feelings of anger and frustration with his personal sexual failures . More significantly , according to Rowe , Larkin 's invention of Coleman was the catalyst which broke the writing block that had afflicted him for most of his Oxford years . The few months of her creative life in 1943 were , Larkin later acknowledged , the prelude to " the intensest time of my life " ; in the three subsequent years his poetry collection *The North Ship* and his novels *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*

were published .

The complete Coleman material , in a collection edited by James Booth , was finally published in 2002 . Booth thought that the material would probably cause " a huge amount of confusion and smoke because the politically correct brigade will jump on it " . Anticipating the publication , Emma Hartley and Vanessa Thorpe in *The Observer* doubted the literary value of the works , citing Motion 's view that the stories were " little more than mild pornography " which the mature poet would never have wished to see published . On publication , Booth 's collection provoked a particularly hostile reaction from *The Guardian* 's critic Jenny Diski , whose review dismissed the Coleman writings as " drivel " and " sad ramblings " , unworthy of publication or critical attention , and not even valid pornography : " Not a breast , not a clitoris is seen or mentioned . " Unlike serious pornographers , " Larkin sketches a mere outline and then walks away with a snigger " . Diski mocks Booth 's reverential descriptions of the typescripts " as though they were slivers of the True Cross " , and concludes : " Let this be a lesson , at least , to anyone who hasn 't got around to chucking out the crap they wrote in their teens and early twenties . "

Other critics were more positive . The *New Statesman* 's Robert Potts found the stories " entertaining and intriguing for readers familiar with their background and with the genre " , and for the most part charmingly innocent , " especially when compared with the reality of boarding @-@ school life " . The evocation of adolescent homoeroticism was deliberate and playful rather than pornographic . In a similar vein , Richard Canning in *The Independent* found the Willow Gables fiction vibrant , well @-@ constructed and entertaining , and praised Larkin 's " sly Sapphic spin " . In a more recent analysis Terry Castle , writing in the journal *Daedalus* , disagrees profoundly with the notion expressed by Adam Kirsch in *The Times Literary Supplement* , that the publication of the Coleman works was damaging to Larkin 's reputation . On the contrary , argues Castle , " the Brunette phase speaks volumes about the paradoxical process by which Philip Larkin became ' Larkinesque ' ? modern English poetry 's reigning bard of erotic frustration and depressive (if verse @-@ enabling) self @-@ deprecation " .

= = Influences = =

The effects of Larkin 's Coleman phase are clearly evident in his first novel , *Jill* , in which he makes copious use of Willow Gables material . The novelist 's protagonist , a shy Oxford undergraduate called John Kemp , invents a schoolgirl sister called Jill , initially to impress his arrogant and dismissive room @-@ mate , Christopher Warner . Although Warner displays little interest , the non @-@ existent " Jill " comes to obsess Kemp . He imagines her at Willow Gables School , and writes long letters to her there . In the form of a short story he details her life at the school ? now located in Derbyshire rather than Wiltshire as it had been in the Coleman works . The girls ' names are different , but their speech and attitudes closely reflect those of the earlier stories . A lesbian element is introduced through Jill 's fascination with the cool , detached senior girl Minerva Strachey . Kemp 's fantasy is disturbed when he meets a real @-@ life Jill , or Gillian ; his attempts to match his flight of fancy to reality end in embarrassment and humiliation .

Reviewing the published Coleman material , *The Independent* 's Richard Canning suggests that the influence of these early works is often discernible in Larkin 's poetry . Likewise Stephen Cooper , in his 2004 book *Philip Larkin : Subversive Writer* , argues that the stylistic and thematic influences of *Trouble at Willow Gables* and *Michaelmas Term at St Brides* anticipate the poetry 's recurrent concern with rebellion and conformity . Among examples , Cooper cites Marie 's refusal in *Willow Gables* to compromise with an unjust authority as reflecting the sentiments expressed in Larkin 's poem " *Places , Loved Ones* " (1954) . The reader , says Cooper , " is invited to identify with Marie 's plight in a manner that foreshadows the empathy felt for the rape victim in ' *Deception* ' " (1950) . When Marie , having escaped from the school , discovers that her freedom is an illusion , she longs to return to the familiar paths . These sentiments are present in poems such as " *Poetry of Departures* " (1954) , " *Here* " (1961) , and " *High Windows* " (1967) .

The spirit though not the name of Brunette was briefly revived during 1945 ? 46 , when Larkin renewed his friendship with Amis . Among the stillborn projects planned by the pair was a story

about two beautiful jazz @-@ loving lesbian undergraduates . According to Booth , the " feeble plot [was] merely the excuse for lesbian scenes ... far indeed from the originality of Larkin 's Brunette works of 1943 " . Jill , completed in 1944 , was finally published in October 1946 by The Fortune Press , whose eccentric proprietor Reginald Caton reportedly accepted the book without reading it . Larkin was disappointed by the book 's critical reception , but by this time his second novel , A Girl in Winter , had been accepted by Faber and Faber , and was duly published in February 1947 . It received better reviews than Jill , and achieved moderately good sales ; Booth calls it Larkin 's " most original and adventurous experiment in fiction " . It is written from the viewpoint of its main female character , Katherine , but otherwise is unrelated to the Coleman phase . Over the following years Larkin began but failed to finish several more novels , in the last of which , A New World Symphony , he returned once again to the device of a female protagonist @-@ narrator . The novel was finally abandoned around 1954 .