

Monica Jones (English Language and Literature, 1941)
1922-2001

Profile written by Dr Sue Brown (Modern History, 1963)

Margaret Monica Beale Jones was born in Llanelli on 7 May 1922 and grew up in Stourport attending the Kidderminster Girls' High School. Her father was an engineer and she an only child. Her headmistress commented that both parents had "a breadth of outlook often rare in such provincial towns". Her school career was characteristic of the upwardly mobile scholarship girl: elocution lessons, the school choir, St John's Ambulance Brigade certificates, attendance at the Methodist Church, helping to edit the school magazine and ultimately becoming Head Girl. She excelled in arts subjects winning a State Studentship after Higher School Certificate. Though St Hugh's was not her first choice of Oxford College it offered her an exhibition. Under the discerning tutorship of Ethel Seaton and thanks to her own hard work she developed quickly there with Lord David Cecil and Helen Gardner amongst her other tutors. Cecil commented, "Sensitive and industrious. I like her work." Gardner was more cautious: "intelligent and quick" but needing more apt illustrations while Seaton wrote, "She has written spirited essays, and always has a point of view." Carefully she guided Jones away from hasty generalizations. In her Schools in 1944, when Cecil was one of her examiners, she won alphas on all her literature papers and was awarded a complimentary First, a rather better degree than the scrambled First of her contemporary, Philip Larkin.

By insisting on taking a full three-year degree in wartime she incurred a responsibility to spend her first two years after graduation teaching and began her career as a teacher close to home at Brereton Hall School in Sandbach. She abandoned her post after two years in hopes of getting another in an Oxford school and studying privately with Ethel Seaton. Miss Gwyer, the Principal, spotted an advertisement for an assistant lecturer post at University College, Leicester and encouraged her to apply. Quizzed by the English Department Head there about Jones's ability to teach older students returning from wartime service, Gwyer was rightly confident of her "ability to communicate to them her own lively attack and clarity of judgment."

Strikingly good-looking in her younger days, Jones was a hard-working, eloquent, flamboyant lecturer, delighting in colourful hand-made clothes. She was an energizing presence for her ablest students, of whom John Sutherland, who has written a compelling memoir of her, is now the best-known but took less interest in more pedestrian undergraduates. She was also a close colleague and friend of Dipak Nandy, the founder of the Runnymede Trust, but was generally impatient with departmental politics and refused to produce the academic papers, which are now even more essential to career progress than they were in her day. For all her gifts, Monica Jones never progressed beyond the rank of lecturer. She took early retirement at the age of 59. By then her life revolved almost exclusively around Philip Larkin.

They had not met at Oxford and did not get to know each other well until his last months at Leicester where he was about to swap his appointment as Deputy Librarian for a similar one in Queen's University, Belfast. Alongside his various other relationships their intimacy developed through her occasional visits to N Ireland and a correspondence that revealed an instinctive personal and intellectual sympathy. Early on they adopted the personae of rabbit and seal, affectionately illustrated in Larkin's skillful line drawings in his letters and cards. Their relationship would last for thirty-five years until his death in Hull where he became Principal University Librarian in 1955. Jones was the only person to whom he dedicated one of his poetry collections, *The Less Deceived*. She was not, however, to everyone's taste. Larkin's great friend, Kingsley Amis, drew an unkind portrait of her in *Lucky Jim*, the best-selling novel he dedicated to Larkin, who did little to soften its now dated misogyny.

Larkin was never able to commit to marriage and compounded the hurt with the concurrent affair he began with a colleague in Hull shortly after the unexpected death of Jones' parents. In a subsequent crisis he started yet another affair with his secretary, a relationship Jones viewed with more equanimity. She remained loyal to Larkin and the single most important influence on his development as a writer. They wrote often, saw each other regularly and went on annual holidays together, never venturing further than the Channel Islands. In his later years when he had become the nation's most popular poet, she accompanied him to Buckingham Palace for his CBE, Hamburg for the Shakespeare Prize and Oxford, for "the big one", his Honorary Doctorate. With both of them in poor health, Jones moved in with Larkin in spring 1983 eighteen months before his death from oesophageal cancer in December 1985. The main beneficiary of his will, she was also one of his four literary trustees. Broken though she was by his death (and unable to attend his funeral), she ensured that his final wish was honoured by arranging for the destruction of his private diaries. She also chose the simple description on his tombstone, "Philip Larkin, Writer", collaborated with Andrew Motion on a revealing biography of the poet and helped to preserve his literary papers and correspondence. Her last years in Larkin's house in Hull were reclusive and unhappy. She died on 15 February 2001.

Andrew Motion, who knew both Larkin and Jones well, concluded that Monica Jones "suited his selfishness in virtually every respect". Resilient and companionable, she shared his quotidian tastes and, increasingly, his literary preferences. Both were determinedly provincial, she in Leicester and he in Hull, committed to middle-brow culture with the *Archers* on the radio and snooker on TV, concerned about animal welfare and passionate devotees of cricket. They became increasingly right wing, sharing, as John Sutherland's memoir shows, racist sentiments in private. Nor did Larkin hide his taste for pornography from her: bawdy games were one of their shared pleasures. And both were heavy drinkers. Their letters are full of the daily trials of petty bourgeois living. But they also write about what they were reading. Larkin had confidence in her literary judgment. He drew on her wide knowledge of English literature when preparing his articles and sought her confirmation of his controversial choices for *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse*. Above all, he shared drafts of his poems with her, taking her advice on the wording of some of his

finest including "Churchgoing" and "The Whitsun Weddings". She was particularly proud of supplying the missing word "blazon" in the final verse of "An Arundel Tomb", his eloquent reflection on the (im)permanence of love whose first draft he composed in her company after a visit together to Chichester Cathedral. She was less happy with the poem most obviously associated with her, "Talking in Bed", on the equivocations of intimacy. In an age when at least lip service to the proprieties was required, she got straight to the point: "What do you think yr Mother & relatives will make of it?"

Fittingly, she was buried just a cricket length's distance from Larkin at Cottingham.