**Carcanet Oral History Interview [12 April 2019]**

**Respondent: Janet Allan (JA)**

**Interviewer: Victoria Stobo (VS)**

JA: My name’s Janet Allan and I worked for Michael in the 1990s.

VS: Could you tell us more about your relationship with Carcanet Press, so for example when did you first meet Michael Schmidt?

JA: I’m sorry I don’t keep records that far back! But I had been working at the Portico Library as a librarian, and I had left that or was about to leave, when Michael met me and he asked me if I would join Carcanet as a marketing manager. And as I hadn’t done any marketing before, and we are – you know, it’s a different age we’re talking about in the 1990s. It wasn’t the digital age really, the Amstrad was still something that people used. I said I wasn’t sure whether I would be any good at it, but he decided he wanted me anyway, so I got the job!

VS: So, that would have been the early 1990s?

JA: It was the early 1990s, yes.

VS: Could you describe your role at Carcanet?

JA: Well, as I said, theoretically I was the marketing manager, so I was responsible for trying to publicise our books as they came out. It was usually about four titles a month, maybe more, we also had to organise the mailing list - unfortunately my predecessor had left with the mailing list. We didn’t have an up-to-date one, so that was quite an interesting activity. We did manage to get that sorted, and this was absolutely key to Carcanet’s activities, because poetry books, especially at that time, didn’t have a very high profile in bookshops. But there was obviously an eager audience for poetry, as individuals. This is how we did it. We mailed out, and this was before email, we mailed out the Carcanet seasonal lists and so on.

VS: And how big was the mailing list?

JA: I can’t remember, but I know that because we had an out-of-date version for it, we had to have quite a long time when we were pruning it. We mailed out everything with an envelope which said, if undelivered, return to sender. And that, of course, helped us to discover the people who were no longer with us, or had moved on somehow.

VS: And what sort of people were represented on the mailing list?

JA: We didn’t have any analysis of that sort at that time. Nowadays, I’ve no doubt if you join the mailing list, a publisher will be anxious to know more about you, but that sort of request was not part of the organisation.

VS: Would a record of the mailing list possibly exist in the archive?

JA: It might do, I don’t know. It would be on a floppy disk, I should think.

VS: That’s worth following up on, thank you for that. And aside from the mailing list, what would your publicity activities consist of?

JA: We had a lot of review copies to send out every month. We had to organise poetry readings, press releases, talk to our reps, and later on when I was working more on the production side, liaising with authors about the design and production of their books.

VS: Yes. Over the period of time that you worked at Carcanet, so you started off as Marketing Manager, but did you gradually go into editorial work?

JA: I wasn’t involved in editorial work but I was involved in production work, because I had come from a publishing background from – earlier in my life I’d been the assistant production manager of a big London publisher.

VS: What publisher was that?

JA: It was called Matthew Williams originally, and it then became part of a bigger conglomerate, which was Associated Book Publishers. So we published anything from Winnie-The-Pooh to the *Dictionary of Organic Compounds*. We didn’t do much poetry! Apart from an edition of the lyrical ballads, that I can remember.

VS: Could you say a few words about your colleague at Carcanet, Robyn Marsack, and what it was like working with her?

JA: Well, she was a joy, working with Robyn, if you know her, I’m sure you will find her very much today, from my recent correspondence with her, she seemed to me very much as she was when I first met her. She was so knowledgeable, and so – what can I say about Robyn? A very, very interesting person. And as I say, with a deep knowledge of poetry, which I personally didn’t pretend to have. I’m sure over the years she certainly helped to hold Carcanet together and helped to ensure that poetry and Carcanet is poetry in a way. Robyn’s work both at Carcanet and later when she became the Head of the Scottish Poetry Library, was something which I’m sure she did impeccably. She and I worked together on, to a certain extent, when I was doing production. To begin with, I worked in the Corn Exchange where Carcanet had an office, and later on I worked from home as a freelancer. She was also engaged as a freelancer working from her Scottish home.

VS: Was that ever difficult to manage, or did you find a routine, in terms of managing the freelance aspect, and the fact that Robyn was in Scotland for part of the time?

JA: That never presented a problem, because we knew what we were doing.

VS: [Publishing industry in general] Because Manchester is further away from traditional literary centres like London and Oxford, when you were working for Carcanet, did you have any links with publishing professionals? So editors, for example, based in the South East?

JA: Not really, no. I did go down to London occasionally for book launches and one or two meetings for publicity purposes, but we didn’t have those links. I’m sure that Michael knew much more about that than I did. Provincial publishing is always a difficulty. I have worked for other provincial publishers including Manchester University Press, but if you’re an academic press, you have a ready-made, as it were, market and it’s much easier to have a profile. Carcanet had its own profile, as you no doubt will realise, quite different from anybody else’s.

VS: Do you think it made a difference that Carcanet was based in Manchester?

JA: Well, I think it was a very good thing that we had this really important Northern poetry publisher. And of course, quite a few poetry publishers were outside London, which was one of the wonderfully interesting things about the poetry publishing business. They weren’t all London-centric like mainstream publishers, and there was Bloodaxe, and there was various other people who were not, some of whom were in the North as well. I know that today there is a movement to, there is already a group of Northern publishers that are being supported by the Arts Council, although of course, Carcanet itself was supported by the Arts Council. But this is a more collaborative group that’s looking for a home in Manchester at the moment.

VS: That’s interesting, do you know the publishers involved?

JA: I don’t have a list of them, but there are quite a few, because publishing has changed so much, especially since it’s possible to publish things online. And so, there are a lot more publishers out there, but they’re working in a different manner from how we did it in the nineties, obviously.

VS: And did your time at Carcanet overlap when digital and the internet started to have more of an effect on production?

JA: Not really, no. When I joined Carcanet, they had just been given a grant for Apple Macs. This was before email had really taken off, but we did have these little tiny, I think they were called Apple Mac Classics. That was the nearest we got to the digital age; I think. And that was fairly forward looking at that time. Michael has always been very good at harnessing what means there are to publish poetry. You know, he used to typeset all the poetry books himself, did you know that?

VS: Yes, I’ve transcribed two interviews with him now, and that comes up!

JA: The printers wouldn’t have it otherwise! Absolutely amazing man!

VS: He sounds like an absolute powerhouse. Just willing to work every hour in the day.

JA: Yes, it’s amazing what he can get done.

[Discussion of Manchester Poetry Library; irrelevant to project]

VS: I thought that was really interesting, that Manchester sees the value in a library that’s specifically dedicated to poetry.

JA: Well, that’s very interesting because the Portico Library is currently working with this group of Northern publishers, there’s a potential that they might have a home within part of the Portico building. But I don’t know about the poetry library.

VS: I wonder if they’re linked or collaborating in some way.

JA: Well I would think so, it would be worth our while finding out.

VS: How did you find the publishing industry when you first started your career? What has changed since then, in your own experience?

JA: Well, I first started my career in the fifties. And it was the tail end of, among the big London publishers, they were still very much run by individuals, and they were comparatively small firms, and they relied upon the personality of the people who were running them. Since then, of course there have been great amalgamations and international collaborations and all the rest of it, and the face of publishing has changed completely.

VS: It’s interesting that you say that they tended to be quite small and personality was key to how they were run, because that reminds me of Carcanet.

JA: Oh, absolutely. And how! That is one of the keys to Carcanet.

VS: Yeah, Michael’s personality, his sensibility is what informs Carcanet.

JA: Indeed. Yes. Publishing has become – it has always been big business, but it’s been big business in a different way in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, I think.

[Discussion of academic publishing, meeting Robyn Marsack, Carcanet’s fiftieth publications; not relevant]

JA: As I said, working not only with Carcanet, but with Manchester University Press and Liverpool University Press, it’s completely different. Both of them can be very exciting, very interesting, and what I’ve always enjoyed is working with authors. I was very lucky when I started on my career at Matthew Williams, that the production manager who’d come to us from Faber and Faber, believed that individual people in the production department were responsible for seeing a certain number of books through the press, so we had our authors to look after – obviously the editor was the chief person involved in getting the book, but it’s always interesting and really reassuring for authors, if they have a person who is their advocate through the production process. And it makes the production person’s life infinitely more interesting. And you have to understand that even though the book may be a text book, a school text book or something like that, it’s still so much of the author’s efforts and enthusiasm and insight have gone into it, that it matters very much to them – you think that something on algebra would be a fairly dead concept, but no, not at all. Very important that the publisher maintains this individual contact with his authors at every stage, it helps them enormously. Provided they all get on!

VS: Absolutely, and I’ve got that sense from previous interviews that I’ve conducted for the project, is the level of care and attention that Carcanet have been able to give to their authors.

JA: Well, we did our best, we were very short on facilities. Michael of course is wonderful at that.

VS: I’m reading some of his correspondence with Laura Riding Jackson at the moment, and that reassurance, care and respect that’s given to the final work is definitely there.

JA: Yes, and there’s nothing more exciting, if you’re working in publishing in the production department, than being given a new book to deal with, to see through the press. It’s like being given a big present.

VS: You edited books such as *The Portuguese Empire* by A. J. R. Russell Wood?

JA: I didn’t edit anything. I saw that one through the Press – we did a number of translations as well, we did quite a lot of translations from the Portuguese, which were funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation. Don’t ask me to pronounce the Portuguese authors names!

VS: Those books that you saw through the production process, particularly ones that might have been translated, what was your relationship with the authors and translators of those books like?

JA: It depended on each book and what Michael wanted to do and what was happening. Some of them I had quite a lot of input with, and some of the translators, because translation is a skill of its own, and the problem with Carcanet was that they really didn’t have the money to pay the translators what they should have been paid. That’s the same with all authors, and all books, according to the authors! But I’m sorry I couldn’t pick out individual titles for you in that. Too long ago I’m afraid.

VS: Did you also see contemporary poets’ books through the production process?

JA: Yes, of course.

VS: Could you describe your relationships with them?

JA: Les Murray, we had. And he came over from Australia, so we worked quite a lot with him, which was very nice, he was a… give me some names. I haven’t got an old Carcanet catalogue. If I had, it would instantly spur my recollections, I’m afraid.

VS: Eavan Boland?

JA: She was an Irish writer, I didn’t actually meet her. Certainly, I helped see some of her books through the press. There was Mimi Khalvati, and Gillian Clarke, who I got to know reasonably well.

VS: Ruth Christie?

JA: No.

VS: The questions were really just to see what your relationship was like with the poets, and whether there were any challenges that you faced during the production process, and how you overcame them. The sorts of things that the poets – the changes they might have required, or their particular working process, and then how that affected the production process at Carcanet.

JA: Yes, of course it did to a certain extent and you know, how their books were laid out was something which some of them felt very, very keenly about. Quite rightly too, of course.

VS: And that was a negotiated process?

JA: Oh yes.

VS: One of the areas that Lise is looking at in her research is to do with women and Carcanet. So, women on the Carcanet list, but also the fact that so many of the people that have worked at Carcanet have been women, so what was your experience as a woman working for Carcanet Press?

JA: I had no problems with it. We all worked together as a team. If you work with Michael, nothing stays the same for very long. But we had a sense of what had to be done, and between us we did it. But we didn’t have anything like strict job specifications or contracts or anything really. You would sort of morph around what other people were doing, and it was a collaborative, team effort.

VS: Going back to your work on the production process just quickly – I know that Michael drives the selection process for Carcanet and editorial decisions are his, but were you ever involved in recommending or bringing poets to Carcanet?

JA: No, that was him. No, not at all. Robyn may have done, but that is part of the editorial process, it’s not something that I was involved with at all.

VS: Do you feel that women have been marginalised on the Carcanet list?

JA: No, not at all! It never occurred to me. There are quite a big number of women poets. Reflecting as far as I can. No, I don’t think – I don’t think Michael marginalised women, but I also think he probably employed women because they were cheaper than men! There was never any money.

VS: I guess it’s a stereotype of publishing, but there are a lot of women who work in publishing.

JA: Oh yes, and lots of other places as well.

VS: Exactly. [Arts Council] Could you say a few words about the relationship between Carcanet and the Arts Council, what you know of it?

JA: No, I knew that we had support from the Arts Council, but I had no direct contact with them at all. So I can’t really help you on that one.

VS: Carcanet has been supported through Michael’s relationship with his patrons –

JA: Yes, the Gavrons. Are they still patrons?

VS: Kate Gavron is, she’s still on the Board of Directors. I was just wondering if you had anything to say about that relationship, if you came into contact with the Gavrons.

JA: With Kate, yes. On a few occasions. But I think it was a question of negotiation between her and Michael. But I really had very li – I went once to see her in Highgate, I went to see her about something, but no, I didn’t really have any direct contact with her. On one occasion I did say something to her, which I hadn’t told Michael about, and I got into real hot water. Don’t know what it was I did, [laughter] you know.

VS: Maybe crossed wires.

JA: Crossed wires, definitely, yes.

VS: What we’re looking at in the research project is how Carcanet has managed to survive and thrive over such a long period. So, based on the fact that you’ve worked in lots of different areas of the publishing sector, what do you think it is about Carcanet that has allowed it to survive for so long?

JA: Well, it’s the personality of Michael. Absolutely. Apart from that, I saw, I was watching an old film, *Shakespeare in Love* a night or two ago, and it was all about the Shakespearean theatre, and one of the directors says, they had some problem and they thought the play wouldn’t go on and all this sort of thing. And this man said, ‘It will, but how it is is a mystery, but it will happen.’ The combination of the mystery and Michael is what keeps it going. And a passionate interest and involvement in poetry, really a complete dedication to poetry and to poets. And an amazing, you know, most publishers would, I can always remember that Michael wouldn’t pulp books. If a poetry book wasn’t selling, or if a poet’s early book wasn’t, he would try so very hard to keep them all in print. Very few publishers would do that, but he was so concerned that their books would still be around, you know? And that, especially in small publishers, is very unusual, especially as the number of titles increases and they bring new ones out all the time, books tend to get pulped within a few years of being published. Nowadays of course, because I haven’t been in Carcanet since the digital revolution, it must have been an absolute godsend for Carcanet. Because it enables you to preserve all your books without having to have physically large parcels of them taking up space and rent and all the rest of it.

VS: Just thinking about the space constraints, were you involved at all in the books going out to market essentially? Were there particular bookshops?

JA: Well, we did have our own travellers, our own salesmen. They were responsible for trying to sell the books around the country. They used to come in twice a year for sales conferences. One of the things I had to help to do was provide all the information. The A4 sheets which were called AI sheets, for the travellers. So that they had a pack with information about all the books which were forthcoming in the next six months.

VS: And how did that network operate, how was it set up, that network of sellers?

JA: Well, it was part of – I’m not quite sure how the publishing trade works nowadays, but it was very much part of how publishing in general was organised. Our reps, they were called reps, would be going round bookshops – this is really before Waterstones, when there were a lot of individual, separate bookshops, and the reps would be carrying not only our list, but also other publishers as well. So it was part of how the whole book trade was organised at that time.

VS: Sure, so that’s just a facet of the book trade. To finish, are there any questions that you would like to ask me? Is there anything you’d like to discuss in more detail?

JA: Yes, I mean, can you tell me a little bit about the project that this is part of? Is this for a record at Rylands?

VS: Yes, so the John Rylands Library and an academic called Lise Jaillant are collaborating on a project which looks at how Carcanet has survived over the last 50 years. Essentially, so it’s funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

JA: So, it’s academic?

VS: Yes.

JA: Well, I remember Michael telling me about the very beginnings of Carcanet, I don’t know whether he’s told you about this, but when he went up to Oxford, as a fresher, somebody said, we’re publishing these books, and handed it on to him.

VS: Yes, so initially it was a magazine that was run jointly between Cambridge –

JA: Yes, but he discovered that the books were not making any money, so he decided he’d have to publish another book to make some money! To keep the presses going! That’s the principle on which it has worked ever since… but only Michael would persevere and achieve what he has done.

VS: I definitely get that sense from the other interviews we’ve done.

[More discussion of project details, pleasantries, ENDS].