**Carcanet Oral History Interview [31 May 2019]**

**Respondent: Jim Keery (JK)**

**Interviewer: Victoria Stobo (VS)**

JK: I’m Jim Keery, I’ve published a couple of books with Carcanet Press.

VS: I thought we’d start with your relationship with Carcanet and how that’s developed over the years. When did you first meet Michael Schmidt?

JK: I first met Michael Schmidt a few years after first contributing to the magazine, because first thing, I found my way to the magazine actually by submitting poems to Carcanet. Which I did… to the address on the back of a book by Ashbery. Who was a poet I really liked. Michael replied, he rejected the poems but suggested I subscribe to *PN Review*, which I did, and found this double-column, sixty-page magazine I didn’t know existed. So I was out of touch except with some poets – I mean, their poetry, not the poets. Other than that, I didn’t know the magazine scene at all.

VS: Would that have been in the mid-eighties?

JK: That was in the early eighties, 1982 I think. It was *As We Know* by Ashbery, Carcanet published that. I continued to submit poems, he published some in 1984. Towards the end of the eighties, I began to review. There were a couple of letters engaging with other critics in *PN Review* who annoyed me. He gave me an Irish volume of anthology poetry to review, and I did quite a lot of reviewing then, for a quite a while. Much less recently. I’ve had one come out a year or so ago, but I do much less reviewing, I do other things.

VS: How does that fit in with the rest of your life? I know that you’re an English teacher in high school?

JK: Well, I was, I retired. I was 36 years at Fred Longworth High School, retired two years ago. I’m supply teaching, so I’ve done – I’ve worked in 25 different schools in the last three years, but one school since Christmas. You can do a day or you can do two terms. I certainly haven’t been anything remotely like a professional poet. So, the book that came out, I was thirty-eight, and it was more like a mini *Collected Poems* if you like, because it was my one book. And I’d already really stopped writing poetry, it just stopped coming, which I was perfectly happy with. Do you know [Philip] Larkin’s phrase, ‘Happiness writes white’? It was true, unfortunately. It’s a bargain I would happily strike, but it does have that consequence. Although I found my way into criticism, but the poet Burns Singer was somebody I’d found as a student. And then found a *Selected Poems* by Carcanet, and also found that Michael had written a chapter about him, Michael Schmidt was one of his very, very few admirers. Still the case, really, although the *Collected Poems* came out. People have written and anthologised him a little, but he certainly didn’t – there wasn’t a breakthrough.

VS: I was reading about him this morning because I hadn’t come across him before.

JK: Well, I hadn’t when I first came across him, and I didn’t again for years, until I saw the *Selected Poems* on Carcanet’s list.

VS: And that happened when you were a student?

JK: Well, I bought the book when I was a student. But it was 1998 or 99 when I wrote an article on him in *PN Review*. Michael Schmidt suggested I get in touch with Anne Clusenaar who was a Carcanet poet, but also had recently acquired – she’d been given it by the poet’s widow – the entire Burns Singer archive, she had all his papers. He suggested I get in touch with her, do a bit more research, I can’t remember at what point he suggested doing a *Collected* edition, but that’s what came out of it. I went to see her in the Black Hills in Wales, it was terrific. I was there late, because I went to Hay-On-Wye on the way, had a nice meal, she got me this literally out from under a bed, a suitcase, stuffed with Burns Singer manuscripts. She laid it out and we looked at a few. She went to bed and when she came back I was still there the next morning. I watched dawn come over the Black Hills. This was amazing stuff, which certainly – more than confirmed – I felt it belonged with the poetry of the forties, and to an extent he did, because he was a teenager in the forties, in London in Fitzrovia and all that. Dylan Thomas, W. S. Graham fanatic, huge amounts of very early poetry from the mid-forties. I loved him, it was unfashionable stuff, apocalyptic poetry was my particular thing. Through him, partly. So I found my way back to that stuff partly through him, and then he orientated me as a critic and a reader, as a reviewer, in terms of looking at what’s followed, links to the poetry I like now, like Prynne and [inaudible 00:06:23] through Carcanet in a way although I made the initial discovery of Burns Singer just through buying the remaindered book.

VS: I didn’t realise there was a connection with the apocalypse poetry and the Scottish renaissance.

JK: Yes, very much so because Norman MacCaig was popular, Hendry – who’s not made much of by the Scottish renaissance, but he’s a Scottish poet, obviously. Tom Scott was in the apocalyptic camp, George Fraser. So the apocalyptic poems are forty percent Scottish. I made the figure up but it’s a very substantial Scottish presence for sure. And of course, being unfashionable, like MacCaig routinely – I think the tide’s turning, a little. MacCaig published two books in his mid-thirties, which he dismisses as juvenilia. And that’s what it is – if something’s unfashionable, and that’s a real stigma. Poetry at the moment is becoming fashionable, but they don’t often acquire a stigma associated with them, that’s how it was, for whatever reason, a combination of reasons. Right-wing reaction, not here to get into it!

VS: What is your background? Where did you study and what subjects?

JK: I did English at Churchill College, Cambridge. When I met Michael Schmidt, I remember him being really disappointed. Just another Cambridge graduate! He would much rather I was gritty, Manchester, ‘Manc’, raised in Moss Side. But I was a real disappointment in terms of absolutes – school, college, school. My life in biographical terms is school, college, school, married, 2.4 kids if you count the dog. Events, headlines, really next to nothing.

VS: You mentioned your book there, how that ended up being a Collected edition –

JK: It was for me really, because I was thirty-eight for a kick-off. I’d always had a sense that a spring was running dry, because it was never flowing, but it would bubble up. But each poem felt like the last, for some reason I can’t really explain. And then one day the poem was the last. Got married, had kids – the last one was called ‘Dream Children’, as I said to my missus, the dream children came true. That was the end of the blues. It isn’t quite as simple as that, I’m sure, but it felt like something complete. I was so delighted to get the opportunity to publish that collection, because it did feel…

VS: And how did the opportunity to publish come about?

JK: I think after submitting poems, I submitted a collection, again Michael rejected it at least a couple of times, and then – I think he invited me then, to submit one, that was the way it was, because it came not out of the blue exactly, I was writing for him and editing collections, but the actual opportunity was a request to submit a collection. There was a New Poetries Anthology came out before that, I think it was before the anthology, there was a request to submit a book, which I did do, then a request to publish a few of them in that New Poetries Anthology. So the invitation to submit the book preceded that. I was delighted, to say the least.

VS: And how did the actual editorial and publication process work at Carcanet, at that time?

JK: It was great, actually. He’s a very hands-on editor. One of the things I like most about him is, there’s no one between him and his mail. I used to get letters, rejections would come from P. Heaton, and then acceptances would come from Michael Schmidt – but it’s the same person. P. Heaton is his secretary, so they just signed – it took me a very long time to work this out. At least I never wrote back saying, ‘Dear P. Heaton, you are an idiot!’ But he reads his mail, at least. If you get as much as he does, that in itself sets you apart. Everybody knows you submit poetry and you get a reply from a whatever, an employee, let’s put it in perfectly neutral terms. ‘Mr Motion thanks you for your submission’ and so on and so on. He’s never read them, he has somebody who knows what he’s looking for and takes it to him on a silver salver if it’s the kind of thing he’s looking for. Well, that’s very possibly unfair on Andrew Motion in particular, but I mean it is a modus operandi – not too many editors edit. To the extent that Michael Schmidt definitely does and having somebody picked out of a brown envelope – he knew so little about me, he was actually disappointed to learn, the very few biographical facts came as a great disappointment. It was nice. All I wrote was, ‘Dear Michael Schmidt, I have some poems for your consideration,’ that’s what I’ve always put. So I know there was nothing whatsoever in the poems, but he took them. And of course I’m grateful that he did. And impressed that he did, you always think your own poetry’s good even if no one else does.

VS: And what was the editing process like for the Collection?

JK: I do remember it. I sent a load, I think he said, ‘Send me, not everything but a fair few,’ and then he’d put ticks by the ones he liked, but he also said something like, I didn’t quite understand it but I got the gist of it, ‘Wishes must be respected but something else are…’ I can’t remember it, but the gist of it was, ‘I’ll give you your way with any you particularly want in, I suppose, unless, he particularly hated them. So there was ones he liked, ones I liked – I think I pretty much went with his ticks, because I was perfectly happy with, the book meant a lot to me, I did care a lot, but the shape of the book that came from the process, I liked.

VS: You didn’t feel like anything significant had been missed out?

JK: Well, there are poems that I liked they didn’t put in, even I would say better than the ones that are in, because they kind of duplicated, and weren’t . . . there’s a story, or a narrative to it. And a shape to it, and it came perfectly well out of the mutual selection. There was no argument, nothing like that. It was a painless process, but quite a thorough one. He doesn’t just publish a collection, it is edited. In my case anyway, I’m sure it goes for everybody else.

VS: Absolutely yes, one of the themes that’s come out of the interviews that we’ve done with the poets published by Carcanet is how important that relationship is, but also how much they trust Michael as an editor.

JK: Yes, definitely trust him. Trust his judgement, but also trust him as an operator.

VS: Did you do any events, readings or launches that were organised by Carcanet?

JK: Yes, there was a launch for three – Sophie Hannah, Iain Crichton Smith and myself at Waterstones. Burns Singer, not a launch as such for the Burns Singer. I’m very much, not [inaudible 15:10] on any kind of circuit. It doesn’t mean I don’t like doing it – I do, but it’s not something I’ve done much of.

VS: You haven’t engaged in networking, so much?

JK: No, I’ve always happily gone anywhere somebody sends me to go, but I’m – what’s the word, stingy with time, for a kick off. I wouldn’t have wanted to do too much. I’ve never turned anything down because it’s nice, you know, but I’ve not sought more of it.

VS: When you have a family and you work full-time, you have to be judicious with what you agree to do.

JK: Yes, mean with it. Not with money, but with time. I’ve got more it is terrific, it’s just great. I’m still working full-time but I finish about three. I don’t at this place, actually – because I’ll teach and prepare marking, I’m there till about five. But I used to be, the last couple of years in school, I was there till six, seven o’clock gone, it was awful. Just getting too much. But I did find teaching, I loved it, but I did find it very, very time-consuming.

[Discussion of teaching workloads]

JK: I’ve always enjoyed readings and going to readings. Even when the bill isn’t that great, necessarily, I enjoy the evening.

[Mention of recent Carcanet reading at the Portico]

VS: How did you end up discussing Burns Singer with Michael?

JK: He suggested I contact Anne Clusenaar because I’d written an article for *PN Review*. She, after I’d read his stuff, the next morning we were discussing him, she’d edited a *Selected Poems* for Carcanet and hadn’t gone too far into the archive – she was an academic. I think she was, not pleased to be shot of it, but perfectly happy to hand it over to somebody how was happy to get his hands on it. So it worked very well, and I involved her, I did a bibliography and so on. They were in bits, it was like doing a jigsaw puzzle. Weeks and months, it was enthralling, a brilliant apprenticeship in editing. Here’s a suitcase full of stuff, it had never been collated. Of course, there were runs of typescripts and things, but there were also, I got into watermarks and handwriting, a lot of it was manuscript. It was absolutely enthralling, it was like proper editing.

VS: And detective work. Working as an archivist there as well!

JK: Oh definitely. I’ve still got it! It needs to go – I’m supposed to be doing a *Collected Prose*, and it needs to go to the National Library of Scotland, for the record. Which it will do, but I’ve still got it in my loft. I photocopied a lot in the Carcanet office, that’s in the loft as well. So if my house goes up… I really should do something about that.

VS: I was going to ask, what happened – I’m sure several institutions would be interested.

JK: Oh definitely, I don’t think there’s any question about that. I mean, I’m not retentive – the *Selected Prose* is something Michael put on the backburner. I mean, the Selected Poems didn’t go like hotcakes. And there wasn’t a clamour for a Selected Prose. And its bloody good prose. I’d like to be able to at some point. When Michael says it’s on the cards I’ll do it. And in the meantime, I should – obviously I need the archive to do it, so it’s not that keeping the archive on my part, I’d just really like to do the Selected Prose. I suppose, I should say at some point, well… the trouble with photocopies is, the archive as I first got it is a jigsaw all over again, it’s no use to anybody. Well, it is, but it’s extremely limited compared to the actual archive, which is organised. So, I should at least, just give the photocopies as they are, explaining not to spend time editing it, but here they are just in case. In fact that’s not a bad idea – it never occurred to me to do that. They have very good Burns Singer collections, there are collections there in the National Library of Scotland. I had a great tour of Scotland researching for this *Collected Poems*. I went to see Bet Low, an artist who painted him in Glasgow, Jack Webster’s a journalist in Glasgow who knew him as an evacuee child in Aberdeen of all places, and had become an absolute fan. He drove me around Burns Singer habitats in his Daimler. And I went to see a Professor he worked with as a marine biologist in Aberdeen. And stayed a night with Gael Turnball, in Edinburgh, who again knew him, was a good contact. And I think that was it – the gallery in Perth where the painting is. Which isn’t a great painting, unfortunately. We put it in as an inset on the back, Burns Singer in a flying jacket in 1946. It should be a great painting, but it isn’t. And it wouldn’t have supported a cover. We found a lovely cover by Prunella Clough, who’s a great artist he knew, and fitted well because he was into fishing, so it’s a fishing scene. That *Collected Poems* was 2001. The other one you have on there, that was the Anne Clusenaar. I saw it, oh Burns Singer, and literally, although I’d read him, I’d never come across his name. And you wouldn’t. From about ‘64, when he died, I suppose 1970 the *Collected Poems* had first came out, gathered some reviews, it’s a long story, but he alienated an entire generation of Movement poets and so on and so on.

VS: He died very young?

JK: 36, he did. He was taken up by the London critics, he was writing *TLS* leaders, they had leaders in those days, and he was writing them, which was insiders, insiders. But he was also an outsider, alienating and offending people by scorning their poetry, which is not a very clever thing to do if you want to be flavour of the month, clearly.

VS: What I’ve noticed from Michael’s correspondence with other poets, what you were saying about the Selected Prose being on the backburner – he does genuinely keep things on the backburner, and it can be several years, five, ten years, and then suddenly it’s back in the frame again.

JK: I think that’s the case, Yes. I’m sure he’s sacked the odd one, but he’s very loyal to poets. He’s asked me a few times, have I got any more, but unfortunately I don’t! Not that he’d automatically publish them if I did; they’d have to meet his standards, obviously. But he is… people you think are long gone pop up with a *Collected Poems*.

VS: In terms of your contributions to *PN Review* over the years, from what I can tell, you started off by submitting poetry and then graduated to articles and reviews – how did that process start happening? Have you always written criticism?

JK: No, not really. I was basically a poet in my twenties roughly speaking, almost to the day, oddly enough. My first poem January 1980, I think the last was 1991. But I was very… I’ve had a best friend I’ve argued about poetry with since we met at University and ever since. And I am argumentative and opinionated, and began just… I liked *PN Review* immensely because there was a direction a couple of the critics were taking, what’s the word… there were attacks on the poets I really liked – [00:26:13 two inaudible names], Prynne, Crozier. Yes, well the Prynne gang if you like, with the apocalypse, the Dylan Thomas gang, the Larkin gang, it would be the Prynne gang, and there was some scornful attacks from people like Michael Grant, Grevel Lindop, called them the empty telephone boys, pick up the telephone and there’s no one there, that sort of thing. The noise to signal ratio. He’s not stupid by any means, they just didn’t get it, in my opinion. I’m opinionated, but also perfectly prepared to recognise other people’s – at least that’s what I think, and I think that’s all right. But I did write to - and to the great credit of everyone involved, it was extremely un-hostile, if you like. And I ended up reviewing for them, so you can’t say fairer than that really. I wasn’t a Carcanet insider at any point. I never met Michael Schmidt when I was submitting my poems. I think it was probably the nineties before I met him – I’m sure it was, because I didn’t write criticism for them, and that brought me a bit closer because you’d correspond a bit more. I used to write a letter about each issue of *PN Review*. And it was a while later that I met him, it was during the, we must have been discussing the blurb. It’s when I was a great disappointment to him. A complete bookworm. And it was a very diverse operation, it’s an understatement isn’t it. He would have published Prynne, he would have loved to publish Prynne. Prynne had this extreme thing going on where he’d contribute to this anthology but not that anthology. He wouldn’t contribute to a wonderful Oxford anthology, because Oxford had sacked their Poetry List. Fair enough. And he went to Bloodaxe rather than Carcanet. But the point being, he’s brought Michael to publish Les Murray, and Ashbery of course. I wrote to Carcanet first of all, just as the publisher of Ashbery. That’s all I knew about it. Obviously, if they publish Ashbery… that actually was my reasoning! [Laughter]

[Discussion of teaching poetry in high school]

VS: What marks *PN review* out from other journals that you’ve written for?

JK: Jacket’s fantastic. *PN Review*, when I first got it, sixty - I was used to reading Peter Porter’s review in the *Observer* every week. And beyond that, as a student, I didn’t know anything about poetry magazines. I recalled, somebody said send poems to the *Stand*, but I pretty much hadn’t. I didn’t buy them in second-hand bookshops, and now I’ve got hundreds of the damn things. So, sixty double column pages all about poetry . . . I remember reading, the first number I got was twenty-eight, beautiful design with the green and red lettering on the white. I think that was one of the classic designs of the magazine. My favourite of all is the first one I was in, the blue and red lettering. I read it through, thinking how can they print this garbage next to, wow – there was an Ian Hamilton Findlay thins in that first issue I was in that was beautiful. Lot of good things, lots of bad things, of course. I think that’s still very much the case. And there’ve been times when I’ve thought, the proportion of things I like is less, and at times have been higher, recently it’s been higher because he seems to have welcomed in a lot of the kind of Cambridge School poets, we call them.

VS: Can you track the way *PN Review* has changed since the mid-1980s? Does it feel like it’s gone through changes?

JK: Definitely, I don’t know how I could track it– I read for pleasure. That’s why I read *PN Review*. Some things I don’t read, or I read a bit . . . it moved towards fiction at one point, and then away again from fiction. He lost me in terms of where he finds the hours in the day to do what he does, when he started writing encyclopaedias of fiction. He’s got Tardis hours in the middle of the night or something because it doesn’t compute. It’s not as if he doesn’t have a day job. So he obviously must be a quick reader. Although you can’t read poetry like that. I just don’t think it can be done. And as for the fiction, it isn’t really for me. It’s not what I value *PN Review* for, or Carcanet for, for that matter. Which is my loss, very probably. He has a whole list of Brazilian novelists, partly because he got funding from the Portuguese government. And again I don’t know anything about all that, that’s the extent of my knowledge. I know he gets funding, I went to a party once in the Gavrons, it’s a very nice looking London street, and then you go in off the street. You know, the garden is half of London! Donald Davie was there, Thom Gunn was there. That was amazing. And he deserves funding for what he does, he’s mentioned the Arts Council, I mean I don’t know… I can tell you how much money he made out of me! [laughter] Some things will sell, I hope, and make money – Ashbery, I guess. One of the few tart remarks I ever got from him about another poet was that he could go another year without Ashbery submitting the annual collection every year. But I hope Ashbery makes him money, and I hope other things do too, because I know the like of me don’t.

VS: Surviving as a small publisher for 50 years is remarkable.

JK: Well, you’ve only to look at how many do. I don’t know if he’s unique, but it’s a fascinating project. There are, *Stand*’s been around a while, but it’s nothing comparable to *PN Review*, Bloodaxe, came in in the late 70s, early 80s. I loved his first dozen or so, and I think Michael would have liked to have had David Constantine. It’s a rival, but not on the same scale, I don’t think. My sense would be Bloodaxe is a smaller approach.

VS: It would be interesting to see the book sale data on that, because I think Bloodaxe have done a lot with their anthologies that sell very well. I think there’s a perception that Bloodaxe is a bit more accessible than Carcanet. Or some of the poets that Bloodaxe publishes are more accessible, or whether that’s a fair assumption to make…

JK: I think it’s probably right. If you look at the, people like Jackie Kay –

[Discussion of reading poetry as children in School]

VS: But when I think of Carcanet, the scope is so much wider, not just in terms of the date range they publish, bringing very old material back into circulation, but also the fact that they’re so international as well.

JK: I’ve lost the operation for all that, although I’m very much a little track within it. I’ve got a single Carcanet file; Rilke? Celan? I’ve probably got a few more. It’s not just what I read. As you say, the range is just ridiculous within poetry. And then he started writing histories of poetry… God knows what next!

[Discussion of Michael’s time-traveling abilities]

[Pleasantries, interview ends]