**Carcanet Oral History Interview [28 March 2019]**

**Respondent: Judith Willson (JW)**

**Interviewer: Victoria Stobo (VS)**

JW: I was the managing editor at Carcanet from 2002, for ten years.

VS: Could you tell us more about your relationship with Carcanet Press? How did you first meet Michael Schmidt, and how did you end up working for Carcanet?

JW: That’s very straightforward. I first met Michael when he interviewed me for the job. The job was publicly advertised in *The Bookseller*, I applied and I had an interview, I was offered the job. I’d never met Michael before that. I’d had quite a lot of experience in a fairly wide range of publishing, but I’d never worked in poetry publishing. So I came into it as a publishing professional really, rather than as a poet or somebody who’d worked in the poetry world. I’d always worked in arts publishing, humanities, social sciences; mainly academic publishing, some trade books.

VS: So which publishing houses would you have worked for before you came to Carcanet?

JW: I did a lot of work as a freelancer at one time, mainly for OUP [Oxford University Press], Routledge, OneWorld. Some books for the Open University; all sorts of smaller presses that I don’t now remember – even a few books for the Royal Armouries at one point. I worked full time for Sheffield Academic Press for a time. For a few years I worked on educational publications, within a college of further education. We worked with trade unions, banks, the NHS, various professional and industrial bodies, to produce training materials. I managed a team of four editors. For four or five years I was an editor for the *Journal of Semitic Studies* and their monograph series. I was based here at the university.

VS: Did your work with educational publishers arise out of your background in teaching? Did I read that right, about your –

JW: Yes, I had been a teacher in an FE college for a few years, so I had some understanding of how to structure course content. But actually I came into publishing as a result of having done an MA in Middle Eastern studies, which was how I ended up working on the *Journal of Semitic Studies*, at first in a very small, part-time role and then copyediting and managing production. I began to go on publishing industry training courses, and it went on from there really – gaining more experience through freelance work and then in-house.

VS: Could you describe your role as an editor at Carcanet?

JW: Yes, I was the managing editor, overseeing the whole process from the point at which a manuscript was accepted for publication through to the delivery of the finished books. Because Carcanet’s a small press, I probably worked in a wider range of roles than I would have done in a big press, but the core of the job was copyediting. I also did substantive editing in some cases, and probably more of that as I became more experienced. Liaising with the printers was an important part of the role, and I learnt a great deal about that very interesting aspect of publishing, which I probably wouldn’t have done as an editor in a bigger publishing house. Liaising between all the different professionals at each stage of production was absolutely key: the typesetter, the proof-reader, the cover designer, the printers. I also did quite a lot of picture research for covers, which again, in a large company probably wouldn’t be an editorial role. That often involved negotiating permissions and fees for pictures, and for some books, particularly the non-poetry books, I was responsible for clearing rights for text, so I learnt a lot about copyright. But essentially, I considered my role to be that of an editor, the intermediary between writer and reader who is a writer’s advocate and critical friend during the publication process. I think that’s what has always mattered most to me in publishing.

VS: I’ve got that sense, not just from the interviews that I’ve transcribed so far, and also speaking to Helen [Tookey] yesterday, but generally looking at material, particularly correspondence files, the care that Carcanet takes of their authors and of their work, I think really comes through in the records.

JW: That’s good, I’m pleased about that.

VS: [Poets published by the Press] You edited two collections of poems by nineteenth-century women writers for Carcanet, did you also work with contemporary poets published by Carcanet while you were editor?

JW: Oh yes. All of them, for those ten years.

VS: Could you describe your relationship with them? Are there any particular examples?

JW: Well I think the relationship I had with Carcanet poets was really no different to what I had with any author. Publishing a book can be quite pressured, the writer may have invested years in this book, both the author and the editor want to get it right but may have slightly different priorities, there’s a deadline involved, so occasionally it can become tense. And part of your job as an editor is to be tolerant and supportive – and still get the book out on time. You’ve got your schedule worked out, you’re working on half a dozen books at different stages, you want it all to run like clockwork, but you have to allow for the fact that most writers have another job, they go on holiday, they have other things going on, and you have to work round that. And as an editor you can only do that if you work closely with the other people involved in the process. I had the most wonderful colleagues in the typesetter Grant Shipcott and Short Run Press, the printers. Both Grant and SRP were vastly experienced and calmly managed missed deadlines, editorial mistakes and last-minute changes. Between them they saved the day on many, many occasions.

VS: For the most part, you were in charge of the manuscript from the point is was accepted. Did you have a role in terms of selecting or considering submissions? Before it gets to that acceptance stage – did you recommend particular poets? Or encourage submissions from particular poets? Or was that more the role that Michael fulfilled?

JW: That was Michael’s role. He sometimes did pass a manuscript to me and ask what I thought. I didn’t commission books, no.

VS: And what was your experience as a woman working for the press?

JW: As I mentioned to you, I was quite surprised by this question. Because publishing is probably of all industries one in which women have had significant roles for a long time, particularly editorial roles. Certainly at Carcanet, when I started work there the finance director, the marketing manager, the sales manager, the administrator were women, and that wasn’t unusual, either for Carcanet or other publishers I’ve worked with. The chair of Carcanet’s Board is a woman. There’s never been any question of women not having powerful voices in the press.

VS: And your collection of poems recover the work of neglected woman poets such as Charlotte Smith. Do you feel that women have been marginalised on the Carcanet list?

JW: No, that’s something I feel very strongly – if that impression is around, it needs to be corrected by looking at the press’s output. When Carcanet was started in 1969, I don’t think there were really any publishers who could claim a proud record of publishing women. You’ve only got to look at the poetry anthologies of the time to see how few women poets were being published. But actually, Carcanet very, very quickly was publishing women. Elizabeth Jennings was an important poet for Carcanet from the beginning. Poets such as Elaine Feinstein, Eavan Boland, Gillian Clarke, Lorna Goodison, Sujata Bhatt were absolutely central to the list from its early days, and remain so, along with many others. And there’s a younger generation of women - Sinéad Morrissey, Vahni Capildeo, for example - who are now continuing that. Elaine and Eavan have been formative to Carcanet’s list, both as poets and in the influence they have had on its direction. I think it’s important to make the point, as well, that going back a long way, Carcanet was publishing women writing in other Englishes, women of colour, which I think was fairly unusual in English poetry publishing of the seventies. So right from the start, the press was looking outwards building an outward-looking kind of list. American writers were there from the beginning. Christine Brooke-Rose was published early on by Carcanet, an experimental writer whose work still seems innovative. So I do think that women writers have always been a great strength of the Carcanet list.

VS: Having looked through the author list that’s on the Carcanet website I’m not struck particularly by the absence of women. Just having a quick look through the list. [Arts Council] Could you give an impression of the relationship between the Arts Council and Carcanet, during the period that you worked –

JW: My impression is that Carcanet saw the Arts Council as a partner, and took advice from them, involved them in what was being planned, responded to the Arts Council’s priorities, and I think that made it a successful working relationship. It wasn’t simply a question of submitting applications for funding. There was an ongoing working relationship. That is certainly my impression, but I wasn’t ever involved in any sort of formal discussions with the Arts Council.

VS: There’s a formal reporting process that Carcanet goes through with the Arts Council – were you ever involved in the compilation of data or information for those reports?

JW: I don’t think I was, no.

VS: [Judith’s own work] *Crossing the Mirror Line* was published in 2017 - what was your experience then as someone who had worked for Carcanet? As an editor you had all that experience with poets and then suddenly you’re on the other side of the equation and you’re a poet, being published by the press.

JW: Well, I made a conscious decision that I was going to let them do it. I wasn’t going to be the person coming in saying, ‘I never did it that way.’ There had been two editors since I had left, so obviously ways of doing things would have changed. And I was actually very happy to let someone else do the heavy lifting.

VS: The way Helen [Tookey] told me about it yesterday was that you’d hid your light under a bushel to a certain extent – that you were writing poetry?

JW: I was so immersed in other people’s books, and for ten years in other poetry books, there was no way I could have written at the same time. I really admire anyone who can do that, but I have heard other editors say the same – that your head is just full of other people’s words. I needed to get away from it. Essentially, I just needed more space in my head to be able to write. I certainly didn’t go back to Michael saying, ‘I’ve written some poems, would you be interested in publishing them?’ The only reason I sent them to him was because he was the person I knew, and I wanted feedback. I was just asking him a favour really, to look at them. I genuinely never expected him to publish anything. It was simply that he was someone I knew very well, I knew I could trust his judgement, and that he’d be honest.

VS: Helen said the same thing about being published by Carcanet. She’d published a few things with *PN Review* before she started working for Carcanet, but she did talk about, you know, ‘I already had this relationship with Michael, I trusted him, I knew what his feedback was going to be like, the style of delivery rather than what he would actually say’. And I think that trust relationship is crucial. How long did it take between finishing work at Carcanet and starting – how long did you need to get all of those other people’s words out before you could start writing your own?

JW: Probably about a year, a bit longer. There were some family things that happened that I also needed to deal with, so it was about a year, and then I wrote quite fast, which I think is a common experience when people haven’t written for a long time. It’s all waiting somewhere.

VS: What support did you receive to promote *Crossing the Mirror Line*?

JW: The marketing manager at the time was very helpful, she put me forward for festivals and readings and so on. She liaised with bookshops, helped to arrange readings, the usual things. In the end I think a lot comes down to doing it yourself because it’s often local contacts and events that are important. One of the most helpful things the sales and marketing dept do is just get books ordered for you and in place for events, and they were very efficient about that.

VS: What local readings would you have done around the time?

JW: Well, I had a launch at the bookshop in Hebden Bridge. (I actually had a launch at one of the Waterstones branches in London, but that was because it was a reading for people who’d been in the *New Poetries Anthology*.) It just happened to coincide with the book coming out, so it sort of became a kind of launch for the book as well. There are quite a number of poetry events organised round Hebden Bridge and Yorkshire generally, so I did the usual kinds of reading in pubs and at regular readings series at arts centres and so on.

VS: [Poetry publishing landscape] It’s the fiftieth anniversary, there are times when Carcanet’s been flying quite close to the edge, what is it about Carcanet that’s ensured its survival over that fifty year period, when so many other small presses have folded?

JW: Support from the Gavrons has been critically important. I think having a Board has been very helpful in providing good governance. On the other hand, you probably do have to have a bit of nerve and ambition, to sometimes take risks. And that comes down to Michael, who has had the nerve to do things, if they’re what he really believes in. It hasn’t always worked out comfortably, but if you don’t sometimes take risks and publish work you believe in, you miss opportunities, a publishing house stagnates. And I think the fact that the press has always looked outwards, has an international reach. Translations have always been important. And again, I think that has been something created by Michael from the beginning. I think a lot of the success of a small publisher does come down to personality: building the publishing house’s identity, looking ahead, being receptive to change, to new voices. But it’s a hard thing to put your finger on I think. And luck plays a part.

VS: Absolutely. A lot of things that have made it successful are things that make it unique within the publishing landscape. I think the international outlook is a very important part of that. Some of the other interviewees have said you’d be hard-pressed to identify a typical Carcanet author, because the list is so diverse. Whereas with other presses, arguably, you might be able to say this person might be associated with Bloodaxe, for example.

JW: Yes. I think that’s true, I’d agree with that.

VS: On the financial side, we’ve talked about the Arts Council, but we’re also focusing on how Carcanet has survived and thrived in the publishing marketplace. But some of that is necessarily about economics and how things are managed financially. How did Carcanet manage its finances? You mentioned there were various finance directors that worked for the press while you were there? Helen mentioned that a Geordie called Christine was very good at occasionally saying no to particular ideas on Michael’s part. If Carcanet has to be managed as a business, what did the financial management look like when you worked for Carcanet?

JW: I was there when Christine [Steel] worked at Carcanet, and her predecessor Joyce [Nield], briefly. There was always an understanding that things had to be done on a tight budget. I can’t talk about specific financial decisions because they weren’t discussions I was involved in, but yes, there was always some tension between things it would be wonderful to do, and things that were realistic. They were very strong women those finance directors, and I think you need that to ensure the survival of the business, for all the creative work to continue, you can’t be reckless. We had to work within very tight financial constraints, so we had to think how to find ways around constraints. The standard fee if you wanted to reproduce a painting from the Tate Gallery, for example, was about three times our budget. But you might find another picture that would do the same job or contact an artist or their estate directly. There was often a lot of goodwill if the artist was interested in the book. You can design books to be produced efficiently. You can tweak layout to fit text into a more cost-effective number of pages; you can save money with a different way of printing covers. These are the sorts of professional skills that printers and typesetters bring to a book.

VS: Having constraints imposed on you does force you to be more creative, in all sorts of situations, constraints can be very creative.

JW: Yes.

VS: [Discuss of production costs rising with books requiring extensive illustrations] Do you get the sense that Carcanet is moving more in that direction now? [i.e. more support in-house for design]

JW: I’m not closely enough involved to know how design is dealt with now. I think one of the big changes is that publishing on digital platforms is now integral to the press’s work. It was really only just getting underway when I was there, and it was fairly amateurish. The technology wasn’t as sophisticated and there were all sorts of problems with preserving the layout of poetry. But Carcanet was really in there quite early, not necessarily doing it well, because nobody was doing it well at that time, but aware that this was becoming important.

VS: From a management point of view, could you talk about the author contracts?

JW: Well, Michael was responsible for issuing contracts –all I did was make sure authors got contracts. I didn’t have anything to do with drawing them up.

[Pleasantries, interview ends]