**Carcanet Oral History Interview [11 August 2018]**

**Respondent: Robyn Marsack (RM)**

**Interviewer: Lise Jaillant (LJ)**

LJ: Ok. So perhaps we can start with your arrival in England, so when did you arrive?

RM: 1973. So, I came to do a degree, at Oxford. And I was going to the BA, a second BA, which you can do in two years if you’ve done one beforehand, in New Zealand, but I switched to the BPhil. So, I did a BPhil – that was then, that degree doesn’t exist now, but it was a graduate degree, so I did that. My dissertation was on [Philip] Larkin’s poetry. I was supervised for that by Jon Stallworthy who was a great man. And then I stayed on to do a DPhil and I worked on the poetry of Louis MacNeice. Again, started off with Jon Stallworthy, but then he left to go to Cornell and I was supervised by John Fuller, the poet. So, I got that degree in ’79. I then got a JRF, a Junior Research Fellowship at Wolfson College. I was going to – a:, turn the thesis on Louis MacNeice into a book, and b: – I can’t tell you how different the academic pressures were then, but anyway – and b:, I was going to work on the modern pastoral. And when I was starting to do my reading for that, I realised that Edmund Blunden, a poet who was writing, well, first book out in 1916, known as a war poet but also wrote a lot about the country and the countryside. And I realised that he wasn’t in print anymore.

LJ: Oh, really? I’m surprised, because he was so famous.

RM: So, I yes, well, all his memoir, *Undertones of War*, was always in print. But the poetry, not necessarily. So, I just, completely blindly, wrote to Carcanet and said have you ever thought of publishing Blunden, just as a curiosity, are you going to do that? And Michael very typically wrote back to me and said, ‘No, but I often have thought of publishing him, so would you like to work on a *Selected Poems*?’ And he didn’t know me from Adam or Eve, my name is not always a giveaway, so people don’t know whether I’m a man or a woman. He just suggested that I do that. It then took a little while to work out, because Blunden’s widow Claire really wanted a *Collected Poems*, which would be very large. His production, he wrote an enormous amount. Both Michael and I felt that that would be a kind of tombstone, and nobody would ever open it. It would be much better to start off with a *Selected Poems*, and if it worked, then to go to a *Collected*. So, there was some to-ing and fro-ing with the estate, and then they finally agreed that that was ok to do a *Selected*. So I made my selection, a very… the selection was good, but the presentation was beyond amateur, it was terrible you know. I photocopied pages, I cut them out, I clipped them together with paper clips. I wasn’t told how to do it; I had no idea how to do it.

LJ: Because the poems were at Oxford?

RM: Oh, well they were easily, you could easily pick them out at the Bodleian, because -

LJ; Oh, because they had been published, but they were out of print.

RM: Yes. So that was all fine. I then, Michael said, come up, I hadn’t met him: we’d corresponded. He said, come up to Carcanet, so this was probably in ’81, and deliver the manuscript. So, I went to Carcanet, I had a day in Manchester at the offices in the Corn Exchange.

LJ: Do you remember when it was?

RM: What time of year?

LJ: Yes. What year?

RM: 1981, and the time of year… no, not sure. I want to say summer, but I’m not absolutely sure. So I went up there, and I had a wonderful day, I had never been to a publishers before. Michael was very, very charming.

LJ: Was it your first time in Manchester?

RM: It was my first time in Manchester. And so it was – he was there. Peter Jones was there, and Pam Heaton, who was their office administrator. So, it was the three of them. There might have been somebody else, but I don’t remember. Michael was then setting the poetry himself on a machine. Either on that visit or on a subsequent visit, I tripped over the cord, and it came out of the plug on the wall, and [they] lost that morning’s work. But he was very forgiving about that. But we had a great day talking about all sorts of things, poetry obviously, and so on and so forth. As I left the building, as I left Carcanet, I said ‘Oh, if ever you’ve got a spare job going here, you know, that would be great.’ Just a throwaway remark. And about three months later, Michael wrote to me and said, ‘We have a job. Would you like to join us?’

LJ: As an editor?

RM: Well…no. So, that was the difficult part. They had at that stage, as you’ll know, a London office. I’m putting that in quote marks, because really it was Helen Lefroy’s spare bedroom. And Helen was looking to retire, and so Michael was looking for somebody to do what she did, which was Sales and Marketing. But he said, ‘Oh, there might be some editing work that comes with that.’ And gradually –

LJ: And at that time, you were living in Oxford?

RM: I was living in Oxford and I had absolutely no training. So he was taking on somebody completely unknown, on the strength of the fact that he knew that I knew quite a lot about poetry.

LJ: Do you think that the fact that you were associated with Oxford, and of course, you know, he graduated from Oxford, so it might help in a connection?

RM: Yes, and he obviously knew John Fuller, the poet, he knew Jon Stallworthy. So, he would have known that I’d been well-trained by them in textual or writing terms. And the Blunden connection was interesting for him because Michael himself had been at Christ’s Hospital, the school, and Blunden had been there, and Blunden was also an Oxford man, briefly. He didn’t get a degree there. So all of [those] things, maybe contributed. Maybe the New Zealand thing was interesting to him because - I’ve never asked him - because it gives you a slightly oblique angle towards the English literary scene.

LJ: You mean, in a way, you might have seen the English literature from an outsider’s point of view?

RM: Slightly, although, in fact, I myself was devoted to English Literature from when I could first remember reading, so I was very much… I wouldn’t have said I had an outsider’s perspective, but I hadn’t come up through the British education system. I did, at the end, at Oxford, but I hadn’t to begin with. So, maybe that was an advantage, or -

LJ: Do you think that the connection with Michael was the fact that he grew up in Mexico, and then he moved to that States, and then to Oxford, and of course, he comes from an American family, so I see some kind of connection here, perhaps.

RM: Maybe so.

LJ: Interesting. So, you started in 1982, you said?

RM: I did. It was difficult for them because I had a New Zealand passport, and still do. The business of getting the job, they had to advertise it and it looked as though it was going to be very difficult, and as though I couldn’t do it. But in fact, we managed to get through that. I started in ’82, so that was at the end of my JRF, as an understudy to Helen. So I lived with a New Zealand friend who had just – an old friend from New Zealand, who had just bought a flat in Haringey.

LJ: Where in Haringey?

RM: It was called the Avenue.

LJ: Not sure where it is, do you remember the nearest tube station?

RM: I should, but I can’t. I’ll come back to you on that.

LJ: [redacted] So, that was the new London office, anyway.

RM: Yes. So that was, I lived there, I went into Helen’s to work, but I also worked from home because it was her house. It was quite a difficult, we had a difficult relationship, in fact.

LJ: With whom?

RM: Myself and Helen Lefroy. Whom I was understudying.

LJ: So, what was the problem with her?

RM: Well, there were two things, I suppose. Part of the problem was me, I’m sure. I was completely untrained, and she had to tell me everything. I was quick, but still untrained, and I really wanted to be an editor. So, I didn’t know anything about Sales and Marketing. I was doing some editing and proofreading for a start, on the side. But I hadn’t been trained to do that. So Helen, who was immensely experienced, her method was to let you do a thing, and then tell you afterwards it was wrong. Instead of telling you before, how to do a thing. So, it was really quite difficult.

[redacted]

RM: But I went along. I loved the firm. Helen was… a recycler before that was fashionable. She understood that Carcanet had no money, it was operating on a shoestring. And she herself never wasted money, and I appreciated that, I thought that was right. So, for example, she lived in Doughty Street. So, for example, if I was walking along the road and I saw a long length of string, or some discarded cardboard that looked completely usable, then I would pick that up and take it into the office with me.

LJ: So that’s recycling!

RM: That’s how we would wrap the parcels, because I was often the one who was sending books off to – not sending off to bookshops but sending off review copies for example. Which we hand-delivered if they were close by.

LJ: Did you contact journalists for example, for reviews?

RM: I mean, well, we had a reviewing list that we’d send things to. When I think of it, Carcanet books have always been pretty widely reviewed. And at that stage, we would get a lot of reviews, so Spectator, obviously the *Times*, *TLS*, the *Observer*. The *Tablet*, and then of course the local papers which don’t exist now in the ways they did then. So, you know, you were really pleased if you got one in Bradford, you know, the Belfast papers, the *Irish Times* of course. There was a huge reviewing culture there that would take books by Carcanet, which after all, we’re quite a specialised interest in many ways, in a way that they never would now.

LJ: Did you meet journalists in person, at events, or readings?

RM: No. It was part of my job to help arrange readings. Did I know the literary editors? No, that was Michael’s job. Michael’s job was very much, he put himself about, he really did. So he knew loads of people, and he would talk to them.

LJ: So, you would say the networking aspect was more Michael –

RM: Oh absolutely, it’s his thing, it’s his name, always, that carries things. I mean I was fortunate that we had these readings and events, so I met wonderful people, authors – but it was very much up to him to woo people.

LJ: I see, ok.

RM: And he did. So, he would come down to London, I don’t know how often, twice a month or something. And he would always have lunch with somebody, or go and have coffee with somebody, have a drink with someone, going and seeing people, telling them about the books, talking to them about authors, all that kind of thing. So he did that.

LJ: Why did he need an office in London, if he already went to London on a regular basis?

RM: Well, because he, as much as they’re told to organise events, if you’re on the spot – and don’t forget there was no email. Well, only just starting to be. When you knew the end, when you knew the people who might hold such events, I suppose, you could deliver the books, you could – it started not because he set out to have a London office, but because – you’d have to ask him about how Helen was recommended to him. But because Helen lived there, and she was based in London, and she was willing to work out of her spare room, to let him a Carcanet office as it were, that was historically the reason. Then during that time of course, ‘83 was it? When Bob Gavron bought the firm. So, I must have been with… Helen must have still been in the firm for about a year after I joined, maybe a little bit longer. And then, forthree months of that year, I was in Manchester, working directly with Michael because Peter Jones had gone to India, I think. For three months. And so I lived in his house. So, after Bob bought Carcanet, and Helen was going to retire, he arranged for Carcanet to have a room in the Folio Society building in Southwark. So then we had our office in Southwark.

LJ: I see, ok. It’s interesting, the connection with Robert Gavron.

RM: Yes, so they had this old, little building in Southwark, and we had a room in it.

LJ: And did you notice any changes, you started in 1982 and Robert Gavron bought Carcanet in 1983, so was there any big changes, or not really?

RM: He was never going to interfere with the intellectual or editorial profile of Carcanet. That was not his interest. He and Michael had a very good relationship from the beginning, and that was never going to be an editorial relationship. So I wouldn’t have expected anything different from that point of view. I suppose, at a level I wasn’t so conscious of, there was a financial stability which we hadn’t had. And the only time that I can remember him making any… not intervention exactly, with the books, was in about 19 – you’d have to look up the publication date [1986]. We published a book called *Portraits of Poets*, I don’t know if you know that book but it’s very beautiful. The photographs are by Christopher Barker, and it was edited by Sebastian Barker, they are the sons of George Barker, the poet. And Christopher had amassed these photographs over several years, they were of Carcanet authors – well, some Carcanet authors, but some not, and there’s a famous portrait of Betjeman, there’s a great picture of Larkin, there’s a wonderful snap of Ted Hughes which was all he was allowed to take, not a posed portrait. But I think that Hughes himself was maybe sorry afterwards, because Christopher’s photographs were so good, that a good photo wouldn’t have been a bad thing. Anyway. So, and then opposite the photograph was a poem. And then underneath the poem was a reproduction of the poet’s signature. I was involved in collecting signatures. And then it was designed by a man called Richard Hollis who’s a famous book designer and print designer, a lovely man. So it was a much more elaborate thing than we normally did, and it was expensive to produce. It was lucky that we were at the Folio Society then, because I by that time was doing a lot of editorial work, I could consult the Folio Art Director who was really, really fantastically experienced and so forth. And we had it printed somewhere separately than where we normally had printed, and Bob was not happy with the expenditure on the book. And the whole, kind of, I don’t think he thought that we should be doing that kind of book.

LJ: So, you mean like a limited edition –

RM: No, it wasn’t limited, it was a big paperback, but it was a very expensive production.

LJ: Not a limited edition, but a luxurious book in the end.

RM: Yes, a luxurious book, and he was, I remember him being very angry about that, with me personally, down the phone once. And that was the only incident, that I experienced, of him having any negative opinions about what we were doing.

LJ: What was his vision for Carcanet then, because poetry has often been associated with luxurious books. It’s not like –

RM: Yes, it has, but I suppose he felt that we were going to be stepping outside our comfort zone in terms of sales. People used to buy Carcanet books for, as it were, £3.95 and then, they were going to have to pay £12.95 for this. Is it going to a different kind of market, less for a real poetry reader and more an illustrated books market? Could we really manage to do that, could we sell it?

LJ: So, you would say that the market in the 1980s was more – ok, poetry books but for a larger audience, in a way? Because if we are thinking of luxurious books, obviously they are expensive, so the market is usually quite small, right?

RM: The market for Carcanet books is small, but this was expensive, it made a hole in the year’s budget, I suppose. I can’t remember how it sold, or whether it sold well. But it was a wonderful book, and I’m glad we did it. We had a party to launch it, at Sotheby’s or somewhere like that, with a lot of people who were actually in it were there, it was a great evening. That’s the only time I remember [Bob]him saying anything to me, of a negative kind. I think on the whole, he was very supportive of what we were doing, and what Michael was doing. But the hinge relationship was his and Michael’s personal relationship.

LJ: Ok, that’s interesting. Now of course in the 1980s, there were big mergers, you know, corporations buying up independent publishers, so what was your reaction to that within Carcanet?

RM: I think people were a little bit anxious. I mean, anxious about – but really, once Bob had bought us, we weren’t anxious because that was safe. And it was interesting to have some of the expertise available from Folio, so there was a chap that advised Folio called… what was his name?[Victor Ross]. He was a marvellous man, he was a German or Austrian Jewish refugee, who’d come over, like a lot of –

LJ: Oh yes [redacted]

RM: Like a lot of the publishers, I mean like the Phaidon publisher, but he was behind Reader’s Digest, he knew loads of things about selling, and how you sold, and he advised Folio, and he knew about how to sell by subscription and all those things, so he occasionally would call in, or come to a board meeting and give advice about selling. Because we weren’t so good at that – we improved in our production and we had wonderful people on the list, but we were not always strong about sales.

LJ: So one thing that I find a bit strange in a way with Carcanet, you know, in the 1970s there were very few women, because obviously the press was created by Michael Schmidt and Peter Jones. I mean for me, I was trying to find examples of women associated with Carcanet, from the beginning, and there are very few, just a few. I’m just wondering about your experience as a young woman, you know, joining this firm in 1982.

RM: You know, I was thinking about that last night. Peter was a very gentle soul, a very gentle person. Perfectly - great to deal with. Michael… was intellectually challenging because he’s so quick. And so… and he knew so much. I mean, I knew quite a lot, but he knew so much, and also internationally. He had a global view of things, and he took advice from really interesting people – like George Steiner and so forth, he had a breadth of reference that was very impressive, but I can’t say that I felt [intimidated] you know, he doesn’t set out to trip you up or make you feel inadequate in any way. His method is, on the whole, encouragement, not huge amounts of criticism. But still, that was my experience. So, [I didn’t feel very alert to my position]as a woman in Carcanet, because there were loads of women in publishing at my level, so other people I would meet, if I met editors or publicists, they were often young women. So, at that level, not at the directorial level.

LJ: It seems to me that poetry publishers, if you take the example of Bloodaxe as well, it’s the same situation, it’s very much associated with men.

RM: Yes, it is. So, I think that my – well, often when I was writing to people then they’d be surprised when I turned out to be woman. Because of my name. Even though - so I always slightly wondered whether sometimes I – people treated me, on paper anyway, without thinking about what I was. And then you could, sometimes, see people’s eyebrows go up, or a certain amount of astonishment when they met me, that I turned out to be a woman.

LJ: That’s interesting.

RM: But publishing was full of women. And, it wasn’t so much that we were, well, we had nothing to with Bloodaxe really, at that point, or at least not at my level. I didn’t have anything to do with Neil [Astley]. So, I think I was very – and you know, Virago was under way. And Bob Gavron was the backer of Virago.

LJ: Oh yes, of course. Another connection here.

RM: Yes, another connection, and so I loved the Silver Moon bookshop on Charing Cross Road, I think we did a couple of things at Silver Moon. I remember meeting somebody from there[[1]](#footnote-2), I remember –

LJ: So, you knew the people from Virago?

RM: Yes, I think I did.

LJ: Carmen Callil.

RM: Oh, from Virago, no. They were stars in the firmament. [Laughter]

LJ: Even in the 1980s?

RM: Oh yes. I mean, it was a fantastic, it was a wonderful thing. I didn’t - when I think about it, I wonder, did I have aspirations to join a feminist or female publishing firm? But I didn’t. The poetry was the important thing for me. And also, we started doing fiction, translated fiction, I did quite a lot of the editing of that, and I loved it. So, I -

LJ: So, translated fiction? And of course, translation was really very important from the start, right?

RM: Yes, so I loved doing that. So, I thought our list was, on the whole, wonderful. It’s [not so much who you were working with but the list itself]– and I always got on really well with Michael. So -

LJ: Did you feel recognised? Because sometimes, you know you start in publishing and you know it’s very, very difficult to make the transition from assistant to more senior roles.

RM: Yes. Well, I did, in two ways I suppose. One is that, authors would often mention me in their acknowledgements, which I found I was really touched by and I really appreciated that. I think I grew as an editor. And that was, again, you know, but without any training at all. I learnt as I read. And after a few years there… so we went to Scotland in ’87.

LJ: So, why did you decide to go to Scotland?

RM: Oh, I got married by then.

LJ: To a Scottish -

RM: To a Scottish person and he got a job at Glasgow University.

LJ: Oh, I see.

RM: Yes.

LJ: At first I thought you were Scottish.

RM: Yes, I was married in ’84, and we lived in London for three years. So, at around that point, Michael asked me to join the Board.

LJ: It’s a more senior move.

RM: Yes, and he made me an editorial… I think I was called editorial manager. Even though I was only managing myself. But I was manager in the sense that I put things out to other people to proofread and that kind of thing, and I had involvement with *PN Review* as well.

LJ: Which is more or less team leader perhaps, working with several people and putting things together.

RM: Yes, in a very minor way, yes.

LJ: And did you, I mean, obviously you had several leadership positions afterwards, including as Director of the Scottish Poetry Library. But at that time in the 1980s, did you really aspire to a leadership position, or not really?

RM: No… I had to know about finance, in so far as I looked at sales sheets and that kind of thing, but I wasn’t interested in that side of things. I was really, really interested in the editing. That was my main interest. And that’s always a very – and I was never a commissioning editor. I did bring Michael a couple of books, but it was very [definitely] his taste, that was formative formed – he had a lot of advice from people who recommended books to him and so forth. But it was, the publishing decisions were very much his.

LJ: So, would you say he had total control over Carcanet? He was making the decisions -

RM: Yes, I would.

LJ: Which is, you know, if you want to work on this, it might be a problem, right, because sometimes publishing companies, they start with one founder, but then there’s always this transition when the founder has to work with other people, right?

RM: And he did work with lots of other people, who were very, often very talented, but some people, I think, probably felt more frustrated than I did. About perhaps the degree of independence they might have.

LJ: Frustrated in what sense?

RM: Well, they thought that the covers should be different, or that they - or that we should publish X or Y, or that we might do things differently in some way.

LJ: Because Michael wanted to make the decisions?

RM: In the end, he made the decisions.

LJ: Ok, like he took advice, but at the end of the day, he was making the decisions. And you say that was not a problem with you, really.

RM: Not really.

LJ: So you can’t remember one situation where perhaps -

RM: That I would have said no? Oh well, I mean, I didn’t love all the books. But that’s bound to be the case, and I always thought that we published too many, because it was such a tiny team. And it meant an enormous amount of work, and sometimes you didn’t feel that there was time for the book to, kind of, brew and get it out there.

LJ: So, for a typical week for you, would be like, forty hours, fifty hours, more than that?

RM: Yes. Well, it depends whether there were events. [When I] was in London and there were events in the evening, that kind of thing. A reading or whatever. I can remember a couple of times when people - but you see this is a pleasure, I’m saying it’s a pleasure… When authors came from abroad for example, because Michael wasn’t in London, say they were going to read on Monday and they came over on the Sunday and then sometimes I would go out with them, or take them to lunch, or you know, that kind of thing. And I would take work home, for sure, because… yes. Proofreading or editorial work, in the evenings.

LJ: Was it difficult to manage, to have private life, to manage it with your work?

RM: Well, my husband’s an academic and he was, at that stage, teaching at Oxford and Birmingham and London. So, he was, sometimes he wouldn’t be there anyway because he would be travelling to one or the other of the universities, and then of course because he was an academic, he would have essays to mark at the weekend and all that kind of thing. So, it was, the fact – it wasn’t really a problem, it might have been a problem if he’d been doing a different kind of thing. But not that thing. And also, he was absolutely thrilled, he loved the idea of Carcanet, it had a very strong Scottish list, of course. And when we were first going out, and I was going up to Manchester… he knew that we published Edwin Morgan, for example. He was thrilled about that, so you know, it had a kind of glamour for him.

LJ: That’s a bit surprising in a way, that Carcanet published all the Scottish poets in the 1970s, I mean you mentioned Edwin Morgan, just because, of course, Michael is not Scottish, and Carcanet is based in Manchester, so why did they start publishing so many Scottish poets? I’m just wondering about this connection with Scotland, which is definitely there.

RM: It is, but one brings another. And some people had been let go – other poetry lists were closing too. So they –

LJ: Edinburgh University Press used to publish poetry.

RM: They did, and in fact they published *The Second Life*, which is Morgan’s breakthrough book. Beautiful book, wonderful book. I mean, beautifully produced, just a great, great book anyway. But they stopped doing poetry. Eddie wrote to Michael, and so I think he was - Maurice Lindsay did the anthology[[2]](#footnote-3), and the anthology then brought in various people.

LJ: So, there was a gap. No publishers were -

RM: There was. There was nothing in Scotland that was publishing in a concentrated way. MacDonalds had gone, those old firms from the ‘50s, they’d gone. And so people who were still writing then, in the ‘70s were not automatically on anybody’s list.

LJ: Do you think that the fact that Carcanet was based in Manchester was a bit better perhaps for Scottish poets? As opposed to, you know, Oxford or London?

RM: Definitely, yes, I think so. Because that also gave them the idea that they were slightly at an angle to those who might say – and more hospitable in certain ways, to going north. Yes.

LJ: So you mention that your husband was very interested in the Scottish aspect of the list, so is it something that you developed in the 1980s?

RM: Well, because I was on the spot, I think it allowed a couple of things to happen. So, the fact that we got Sorley MacLean, I think partly happened because I was there. I met him myself, and knew people who knew him, and I knew Eddie by then. But I mean, Michael knew [Eddie]really well. But, I used to, you know, go and collect his proofs and have sessions with him and so on and so forth. Those personal connections were good. And, so I think we got [Sorley MacLean] through that really. And I think that, to some extent… when Michael was thinking about the MacDiarmid, then some of that was facilitated by my being in Glasgow, and knowing [MacLean’s] daughter, getting to know [MacDiarmid’s] daughter-in-law and so forth. I think that for some people, it was reassuring, yes, pleasant to have somebody who was immediately in touch with the firm. But I didn’t, for example, I didn’t have anything to do with Michael getting the younger lot, so Richard Price, or David Kinloch, Peter McCarey, I know them all quite well actually, but It wasn’t me that gave, that put them to Carcanet.

LJ: And in the 1980s, did you have any connection with Bloodaxe for example?

RM: No.

LJ: No? Not really? Because obviously they were a direct competitor, right?

RM: Tense relationships.

LJ: Oh really, interesting. Did Michael mention that?

RM: Well, one knew that he and Neil didn’t get on. It’s really not been ‘til the last… ten years, maybe? That they have, and now they do.

LJ: So what happened in the beginning? Was it because they were competing directly?

RM: It was because they were competing directly, I think, yes. I think so. Maybe some of it was the fallout from the Oxford list, you know, when the OUP stopped publishing and we took on -

LJ: But that was later, 1999.

RM: Was it as late as that? Oh Gosh!

LJ: There was this controversy beforehand, but they closed the list in 1999. Twenty years ago, basically.

RM: Gosh, I would have thought it was longer ago than that.

LJ: Yes, well I’m sure there were talks beforehand of closing the list. They made the decision later.

RM: Yes. So it may be there was some, at that stage, maybe there was a competitive feeling about who would, which poets would drift which way, or approach which publishers and so forth. Maybe their personalities were not compatible, but there was certainly a feeling of competition, yes, undoubtedly.

LJ: Ok, interesting. So you moved to Glasgow in 1987, and what did you do before taking up the Directorship of the Scottish Poetry Library?

RM: I was a freelance editor. So I went on editing for Carcanet, as a freelance editor, until I was around… late ‘90s. Well, I had my daughter in 1994. I went back to work as an editor pretty quickly afterwards, I was just working from home. But then, I can’t remember who the editor was, but then it was Judith, and after Judith, Helen much more recently. No, it’s Janet Allan[[3]](#footnote-4), before Judith, she was fantastic. And so, they actually had an in-house editor. Which was great, it was really great.

LJ: And of course, there were many problems in the 1990s, you know, with the bomb in Manchester.

RM: That was so awful. That was so strange, because it was on the Saturday wasn’t it? And on the Monday, I suddenly thought, oh my god, it was in the Corn Exchange, and I rang them up, it was absolutely – I can’t tell you how lucky it was that Michael wasn’t in the building, because he often went in on a Saturday morning.

LJ: Obviously you were very relieved.

RM: Yes, but then of course, all the stuff that was there, they couldn’t go in and rescue it.

LJ: Did you, was anybody frightened that Carcanet would not survive such a blow?

RM: I suppose they were. I was at just a little bit of a remove by then, because I was not doing all their editing and so forth, but because I knew them all so well, I was very anxious for them. But I think that was the advantage too, of having Bob there. I’m sure that, in some way, he did provide a kind of stability for them. But of course, he couldn’t reproduce the files that were lost, correspondence and all those things.

LJ: It’s lucky that the archive has been at John Rylands Library.

RM: Yes, absolutely.

LJ: And of course, Robert Gavron, he died in 2015, right? So, do you think that changed quite a lot of things for Carcanet?

RM: Kate was already the Chair of the Board.

LJ: Kate Gavron, his wife?

RM: Yes. She’d been Chair of the Board for… was she already Chair when I took over Director of the Poetry Library? I think so. So maybe around 2000, she was already there.

LJ: So when you got the Directorship –

RM: Maybe, you would have to ask her. It handed over seamlessly as it were, from Bob to her.

LJ: That’s quite lucky. And in terms of financial support, how does it work?

RM: You would have to ask Michael and Kate, but it was more like a guarantee against loss, I guess. There were loans, to and fro, between Folio and Carcanet.

LJ: And one thing I wanted to ask you, you know, the Arts Council, obviously, they’ve been very supportive, they gave quite a lot of grants to Carcanet from the beginning, and one thing the 1980s they were quite a lot of political changes in the 1980s, so, do you remember any, perhaps, problems with the Arts Council at that time, or challenging situations?

RM: I never did the applications, so again, Michael always had a relationship with the Arts Council [redacted]. I’ve only become much more conscious of the relationship with the Arts Council I suppose since being [on the Board], when the Arts Council was altered so that it was much more regional. And when, therefore the Manchester aspect of it became much more important. There’s a Manchester officer, and she often comes to the Board meetings and so forth, and that never happened, to my knowledge, in the earlier days. So, I don’t think they were so closely scrutinized maybe, in the early days. Well anyway, the relationship was with the literature officer on the arts council, whereas now it’s in your region, your regional officer. Did we worry about losing the grant? I’m sure we did, but I wasn’t really involved in that.

LJ: It seems to me that poetry publishing in the 1980s must have been very challenging, just because, you know, all the political talk about cutting grants, you know, so, it must have been a very stressful situation for Michael.

RM: I think so. I think so. And, I mean, [Carcanet] never made much [of a profit] either. Yes, one was very conscious of financial constraints. But we, well, we had Octavio Paz, he won the Nobel Prize when we were publishing him. Milosz won the Nobel Prize when we were publishing him. It didn’t lead to enormous, it must have led to some additional sales, but it didn’t suddenly mean we were selling thousands and thousands of copies again. Yes. I’ve never been in an organisation that had a lot of money, so I’m used to the idea that you’re very careful about everything.

LJ: Yes. If you look at the long history of Carcanet, what do think has changed and has stayed the same, you know? From your experience, in 1982 to the present day, and that’s quite a long experience really.

RM: So when I began…there’s always been a kind of tension which I think, to some extent, doesn’t exist now. So when I began, on the one hand you might be publishing Edwin Morgan’s translations of Mayakovsky into Scots, it seems pretty to - and I remember John Cornford’s [writing] about the Spanish Civil War. So, sort of left-leaning if you like, on the other hand, you had C. H. Sisson and Donald Davie, and you had conservatism with an old, I mean an intellectual conservatism. That Michael did his special number of *PN Review* on the *Book of Common Prayer*, that was about to be changed and there was all this stuff around language of the common prayer book, and so forth. So, you know, a bit sort of elitist, Anglican, conservative and so forth. So on the one hand he had that reputation, on the other hand he was also publishing, I think I was there when we published the second Ashbery collection. So on the other hand there was this hospitality towards people who were not in the kind of centre of things, in British intellectual terms. On the one hand you had a close relationship with Roger Scruton, for a while, a very right-wing philosopher, on the other hand we got – I can’t think who to set against him. Always this, it was seen often, often objected to, as a very right-wing publisher, but on the other hand, we were publishing all this really interesting stuff, often translated, that you could by no means characterise as right-wing. And that, with the kind of fading of the Davie-Sisson generation, though Michael’s personal attachment to both people is very solid, and his intellectual attachment. I mean, now you think of who we publish, I think of Kei Miller, and Vahni Capildeo both getting - Kei being the first black person to win the Forward Prize, then followed by Vahni. So, hospitable to young poets, it reinvents itself, you know, in an extraordinary way. And I don’t think now, anybody thinking about Carcanet would immediately think it’s a right-wing press, that it would arouse that feeling.

LJ: Oh definitely, yes.

RM: And [in earlier times there was] some hostility towards it for that reason. So, the thing that I really admire I suppose, is Michael’s openness to new voices, and he once said something like, ‘When I was young, I was rediscovering the older voices, and now I’m old, it’s the new voices I’m discovering.’ So, that’s quite extraordinary – you often think of people getting more conservative as they get older, but in a way, that’s gone the opposite way for Carcanet. And I think that’s very impressive. Because it’s a kind of intellectual energy that a lot of us don’t feel as we get older, you know.

LJ: Many people have told me that Michael, you know, he has a lot of vanity, and he’s always been like that, do you have this experience?

RM: No, absolutely, no. I edited or proofread, I can’t remember, I proofread one of the first big books he wrote, *Lives of the Poets*, was it? I think, yes, and I know he was writing that at six o’clock in the morning for two hours before he came into the office, or eight o’clock until midnight or whatever, you know. Endless. Doing *PN Review*, it’s huge amount of work, and if you look at the Carcanet Archive, which is at the Rylands, then you see there’s a huge amount of correspondence - I’m very struck by it, it’s a kind of - you have a real relationship with your authors.

LJ: So, do you think they will be able to sustain this level of energy?

RM: And he does that as well, you know, [overseeing the publication, sales,etc.]. But he had really good help from Janet. I mean, I was a good editor but not always... I think things were produced on time, but it was by the skin of my teeth, kind of thing. But you know once you got to Janet, and then Judith and Helen, hugely efficient. They were also in the office, which makes a difference. Hugely efficient. So, he had a certain - and also, all those three women, I can include myself actually, all the four women editors -

LJ: Ok, so they were Helen…?

RM: So first of all, it was, so after me, it was Janet Allan. I think. And after Janet it was Judith Willson, and after Judith Willson it was Helen Tookey.

LJ: In charge of editorial?

RM: Editorial and production, yes. We all had intellectual interests – Janet had historical interests maybe, Judith – I mean, Michael has now published her first book of poems, which is really fascinating, she’s gone on to teach, Helen’s gone on to teach as well. Oh, Judith’s freelance I think, and Helen’s gone to teach creative writing, so we all had an interest in writing ourselves, I suppose, in various ways.

LJ: So, you’re a poet as well?

RM: No. Just critical writing and translated books as well. And Janet did critical writing as well, so we were all, I would say, intelligent people who could also have a relationship with the authors, where they would feel that somebody knowledgeable was looking after them. Which I think is really important.

LJ: What you’re saying is really important, of course, Michael was not alone, there was a team –

RM: Eventually, yes.

LJ: Very knowledgeable people, able to contribute.

RM: Yes, and to keep things, because he might – because he was so busy that an author mightn’t hear from Michael and then get anxious and wonder what was happening. We could keep a, kind of, a continuity of contact and reassurance.

LJ: That’s interesting, and the other thing I was wondering, you know, the transition from print to digital, you know, he started using an IBM machine quite early on –

RM: Yes, he did. And what I’m noticing, because I’m also going back through and looking at the correspondence, because we’re going to try and do this book of correspondence for the fifty year anniversary, there’s already *Letters to an Editor*, which you know, which is a great book actually, but we’re going to try and do it with Michael’s replies.

LJ: Ah, fantastic, great.

RM: We’re having a bit of to and fro, there’s too much to choose from though, as you can see, as you can imagine.

LJ: Next year, for the anniversary?

RM: Well, maybe at the end of next year, or the year after, the anniversary, it’s a little bit of a moving target. But you notice the level of, especially in the 70s and 80s, the level of intellectual discussion that was going on by correspondence. Which is quite outstanding, I think. So that, you know, a lot of trouble was taken. When I say trouble, I don’t mean that, I mean – it was an exchange of ideas, it was stimulating for both sides, you know.

LJ: And in terms of production –

RM: Sorry, and so that was handwritten and typed letters, so once you get to email exchanges, they’re not nearly so satisfying. [Laughter] It’s not the same. The production, yes. That’s been hugely useful, obviously, because you could design things much more easily.

LJ: Did you have a computer at home, for example, in the 1980s?

RM: I did, yes. I did. I had an Amstrad. Yes, so we could send things to and fro. But slowly. The fax was very useful. Things were always being faxed. I definitely had to have a fax machine. I remember Eddie used to fax things; the fax machine was used all the time. So, I think that was really before you attached documents and sent them, I don’t know what, but we always used to fax proofs to people.

LJ: And of course, the telephone as well was useful, to communicate -

RM: Yes, there was much more phoning then, but [now] it’s all emails... and in marketing terms, obviously, the whole landscape’s changed in terms of what you can do about showing the poem online, and using newsletters, marketing newsletters, and all those kinds of things that we never had a chance [to use].

LJ: Did you get feedback from readers, you know, who might admire the books and perhaps write to the editor?

RM: Yes, absolutely, people wrote in. Well, also, *PN Review* acted a conduit for those a bit too, you could get reader’s letters and email. Yes.

LJ: Did you participate in the preparation of *PN Review*? Obviously it was created early on, 1973

RM: Yes, I used to proofread, that kind of thing. And sometimes, I suppose I might have suggested that somebody could write about somebody, that kind of thing. But not really editorially – six times a year, every two months, that’s a huge amount of work putting all that together and deciding what to run -

LJ: Yes, and of course, you mentioned that *PN Review* was very much seen as a right-wing review in a way, and did people tell you anything about that, like, when you started working for Carcanet, did you have any comments from colleagues saying ‘Why Carcanet?’

RM: I think that mainly people were - knew that I was interested in poetry, and thus it seemed like a great fit, you know. I would never have thought of writing to Faber for a job, for example. No.

LJ: Why?

RM: Because I had never thought of working in publishing. I had thought I would be an academic.

LJ: Ok, interesting.

RM: So, it was only going to Manchester, that I could – so that started my whole career.

LJ: You mentioned that your husband was an academic –

RM: Yes, so that’s where I thought I was headed. I’d done some teaching at Oxford, I’m terribly glad I didn’t become an academic. I think now I could do some teaching, I [have done] some teaching, but I did not love teaching. I loved reading and writing, and I liked – but the whole business of publishing was not something I had ever thought of.

LJ: So, it’s definitely thanks to Michael –

RM: It’s completely, yes. And then when I was at the Poetry Library, I published, over my sixteen years there, I published twenty-six books while I was there. I mean, you know, for the Library. So, I couldn’t help going on publishing. It’s my great pleasure.

LJ: And how did you get your job at the Scottish Poetry Library? Was it like an open competition?

RM: Yes, yes.

LJ: And obviously your experience with Carcanet was a plus.

RM: Was key, yes. I actually don’t know whether they knew what they were - it came down to quite a stark choice for them, I think. They could decide to appoint somebody who knew a great deal about poetry, had really good connections in the Scottish poetry world, but had very little administrative experience, and certainly had never run a building, which is a lot of work. And it was a brand-new building, so I thought it wouldn’t be any work but of course it was a huge amount of work. Or, being in charge of a staff, you know, responsible for staff.

LJ: How many staff were there?

RM: I had maybe six when I started and then eight… I’d never been - I’d sat on a Board, obviously, but I’d never done, been responsible to a Board, and I’d never been responsible for a budget of that size. So they could choose either somebody who knew all about poetry and could learn about the other stuff, or somebody who was a strong administrator and would learn about poetry. And they chose somebody who knew a lot about poetry. I think they made the right choice, because I could learn about the other stuff pretty quickly.

LJ: And was it challenging for you, at the beginning?

RM: Very challenging all the way through, but I loved it.

LJ: Did you get some advice from other people?

RM: Oh yes, and I had, eventually I got to have a really good Board, and so forth, and the Arts Council, the Scottish Arts Council was very interested in what I was doing, and I had good advice from them. But, you know, mainly I had, and I had built up a really, really good team of colleagues. So I was very lucky, I loved that job. But I still wanted to publish things.

LJ: Ok. And when you look back at your career, do you sometimes regret not having been an academic? No?

RM: I’m living with quite a disillusioned academic. With somebody who loves teaching, and loves writing, if only he could get on with it, but the administration is huge.

LJ: Especially at the senior level, I guess, yes.

RM: Yes, I’ve been on the REF Impact Panels, so I know about REF, and so I know about those kinds of challenges and trials. I love being able to help and direct influence on things, to be able to make some things happen. And I was really proud of what we did at the Library.

LJ: So why did you decide to stand down?

RM: I was sixty-two I think, sixty-two when I stepped down.

LJ: Still young, Michael is seventy-one!

RM: Yes, I had just finished the refurbishment of the building, which was incredibly stressful, raising the money for it and having some redesign for the building. The team was in place, and I thought, if I - I hadn’t run through all the money by changing the building, and I’d commuted almost every day for sixteen years from Glasgow to Edinburgh, and I didn’t want to do the next funding round.

LJ: Yes, it must be very stressful.

RM: Every three years.

LJ: Every three years?

RM: It’s really reinventing yourself, as it were, for the funding. And I had been very successful at that, but I just thought, I want to do other things.

LJ: And you’re still associated with University of Glasgow.

RM: I’m associated now with University of Glasgow as a Royal Literary Writing Fellow, that’s ‘til December. I’ve just redone Blunden, for Carcanet, so they’ve got a new edition of Blunden for the last year of the centenary of the war. And that was a very interesting, it was a very interesting contrast with my first edition, because of course, it’s fantastic what you can get on the web. In terms of, making your notes and so forth, it’s really marvellous, it’s changed everything. I did his War Prose for Carcanet, in 2014, for first year of the centenary. And things like getting notes about scraps of war songs that were mentioned, First World War songs that were mentioned, things like that. So, I love doing [the notes to the edition] So, I did that, I finished a translation, I’m giving a talk on First World War women poets, and I’m just researching that. And I’m the chair of a Board myself now. I’ve still got the Carcanet Board, and the Forward Arts Foundation Board, so I’ve got lots.

LJ: You keep very busy.

RM: Yes, but you know, I’m not responsible [in the same way as at the SPL]. And at Carcanet I wasn’t responsible, except I was responsible for the books, as they came out. You know, where they were the books I edited, I felt very responsible for them, but it was always great when they came through. It was very, very stimulating, it was a very stimulating job.

LJ: Intellectually –

RM: Intellectually stimulating, quite challenging, and I worked with people I respected. And I met some amazing people; - Ashbery, Paz and Milosz and those people. I made friends through Carcanet. I had the luxury at Carcanet, as at the Poetry Library, of believing in what I was doing. Believing in what I was doing. And that’s not what everybody manages to have, you know. And to feel that I’d made a really useful –

LJ: A difference.

RM: A difference. Yes.

LJ: And how do you see the future for Carcanet?

RM: I think that’s incredibly difficult. Incredibly difficult.

LJ: I mean, I don’t ask this question to Michael, you know, it would be tricky, but -

[redacted].

LJ: I mean, it’s tricky, because obviously it was created in 1969, so there’s such a long history, which for me it’s a fascinating history

RM: It’s quite rare.

LJ: Yes, and it has changed quite a lot, obviously. It’s lucky that it’s still here today, so we don’t want it to disappear.

RM: No, absolutely not, no. And I think it would be interesting for you to talk to – are you covering the whole period, or really the foundations?

LJ: The whole period, but I’m just starting from the beginning –

RM: I think it would be very interesting for you to talk to the other female editors, because I think that – see, I never worked on it, apart from three months in Manchester. I never physically worked in the Carcanet office, with Michael.

LJ: Ok, so you were in touch with Michael all the time –

RM: All the time, but I wasn’t working next to him on a day to day basis. And I think that helped to preserve our good relationship [laughter] because I think he’s very demanding - not in a nasty way, he wouldn’t shout at people or anything like that, but working with him day-to-day, I think it could be quite frustrating and challenging.

LJ: In what sense?

RM: Well, I think he would expect things to be done in a certain way, expect things to be done and you wouldn’t always know that. You would have to intuit some things, you know, and that… he has a great sense of humour, but… quite a mischievous sense of humour[redacted].,

[redacted]

RM: So I think that, in some ways, he was probably quite difficult to work for. Just because – because he wasn’t there, and he’d be working, you know, at the universities or coming down for meetings, and that kind of thing - because there’s no second layer at Carcanet.

LJ: Like he’s in charge and there’s no No.2.

RM: There’s no No.2.

LJ: So it’s him and then people who run the office –

RM: Very capable and competent, but if you’ve got that question to ask, he might – particular questions, he was the only one you could ask, and then you’re stuck if he’s not there. So, there’s no, kind of, yeah.

LJ: It’s a strange way to manage an office, because normally you have a No.2 who is able, a deputy director or something. I mean, it makes his life more difficult, probably, because you’re busy all the time answering questions. So is it because he wants control, or is it –

RM: Yes, but also, I mean, you’d have to have a different pay structure presumably too. There’s not much money around.

LJ: Yes, financial constraints.

RM: [redacted]

LJ: Because the funding at the moment is mostly the Arts Council, right?

RM: Yes.

LJ: Or, you mentioned a loan from -

RM: Yes, but that doesn’t exist, that’s all been fixed – so, the Arts Council money, it’s not absolutely gigantic, it’s only about… it is 60 or 62,000…59,000 –

LJ: I’ve had a look, it’s online – they have a spreadsheet with everything.

RM: I don’t think it’s gigantic. So, it’s…

LJ: Finding somebody who can live on this salary and have other activities, perhaps.

RM: Yes, or we have to think differently, or we have to go back to the Arts Council. And say, look, we can’t keep going at this level, you’ve got -

[redacted]

LJ: Well, hopefully you will find a solution, because no one wants Carcanet to die, right?

RM: No, absolutely.

LJ: So you mentioned that I should contact several people -

[Recording ends]

1. Probably Jane Chomeley - seewww.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/23/gender.uk2 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The anthology was a reissue and update of *Modern Scottish Poetry*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Janet Allan managed the production and wasn’t called an editor [↑](#footnote-ref-4)