**Carcanet Oral History Interview [16 August 2018]**

**Respondent: Roger Garfitt (RG)**

**Interviewer: Lise Jaillant (LJ)**

LJ: Ok, so you studied at Oxford in the 1960s, so perhaps we could start here and perhaps you could describe your student experience at Oxford?

RG: It’s worth saying that part of it is in my memoir, *The Horseman’s Word,* published by Jonathan Cape and now in a paperback from Vintage. I’m a little bit older than Michael, so I came up in 1963. My first three years were quite straightforward and I talk in the memoir about being a young poet there, and the other young poets I admired, and about the impact, for example, that Ted Hughes made when he came to read. The 1960s of everyone's imagining didn't happen until the mid-60s and I was a bit ahead of the curve. I discovered cannabis in 1966 and fell in love with a beautiful Dutch girl who was travelling through. I followed her to the south of France and there were all sorts of misadventures that you can read in the memoir. The result was that I never completed the final year of my four-year course. I started it twice, but each time I went manic and didn’t finish it. In 1968 I was convicted of the possession and supply of cannabis, though the supply was only for a friend. The university wanted to send me down but the college insisted that I should be allowed to sit finals, so I did finally come out with a degree.

LJ: Which College was it?

RG: Merton. I hadn’t had a tutorial or a lecture for two years but, thanks to the college's insistence, I sat finals and got a straight Second.

LJ: I just have a quick question about the Poetry Society, because you were the president of the Poetry Society –

RG: Yes, I was the president of the Oxford University Poetry Society, and I do talk a bit about that in the memoir. We used to meet every week and, because it was Oxford, very well-known poets would come, just for expenses. We used to take them out for a Chinese meal before the reading but they only got expenses. I remember Roy Fuller coming and buying us all a drink in his hotel after the reading. At that time, Cleanth Brooks, who was a poet and critic, was the cultural attaché at the American Embassy and let us know of any visiting American poets. I remember M. L. Rosenthal, who had been Poetry Editor at *The New Yorker*, telling us of getting submissions from Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath both clearly typed out on the same typewriter. He saw it as a kind of competition, though we know now that it was more a question of Sylvia organising Ted and sending his work out for him.

LJ: And of course, Ted Hughes came to Oxford because I read one of your interviews and you said that Ted Hughes made quite a big impression on you at that time.

RG: That’s right, yes.

LJ: So, you met him as part of the event that you organised for the Poetry Society, right?

RG: He came in my first year so I wasn’t on the committee then and I didn’t share a Chinese meal with Ted Hughes. I got to know him later. But after the reading, we use to gather in *The* *Lamb and Flag* and I remember Ted Hughes leaning against the bar and a nervous half-circle of us sitting at little tables around him, asking questions. I describe that in the memoir. We also had Robert Graves, who was Professor of Poetry when I came up, so I did have a Chinese meal with Robert Graves. And I met him before that at one of his lectures. I was a bit of a dandy at Oxford, I wore a wing collar and carried a silver-topped cane. I happened to arrive at the Examination Schools, where the lecture was held, just as Robert Graves was crossing the hall and I stopped and made a deep bow. That was just the kind of thing that Robert Graves liked and he was waiting for me after the lecture. He singled out me and Sally Purcell, who was also a poet, and led us off to have sherry with Enid Starkie. He said to Enid, ‘Look, I knew these two young people were poets!’ and Enid said, ‘How can you tell - just by the way they walked?.’

I reminded Robert Graves of that meeting when I wrote to invite him to read at the Poetry Society, signing the letter as Roger Garfitt, ‘The Man with the Cane’. He wrote back as Robert Graves, ‘The Man with the Hat’.

LJ: So you mentioned Sally Purcell and I’m actually very interested in Sally Purcell, so could you just say a few words, when did you first meet her?

RG: Yes, we were contemporaries and I met her at the Poetry Society in 1963. We were great friends and, although I dropped out of the university, I stayed in and around Oxford until 1974 and I saw Sally in those times as well. And of course, she was part of the early group of poets around Carcanet.

LJ: And could you just describe her. I mean, what did she look like, what was her personality at that time?

RG: Well, she had very long, straight, blonde hair, and a very high forehead, which was the first thing that struck one of my friends who was in love with her because it was the medieval ideal of beauty. So that was unusual [redacted].

LJ: I see. And you mentioned Michael Schmidt, so I’m just wondering, when did you first meet him?

RG: Well, I first met him very briefly – it was 1967, the second time I started my final year. My friends in the Poetry Society had kindly re-elected me as president, though I only lasted three weeks before I went mad again. On the last of those three weeks, a young woman came up called Helen Troy [in fact, the name of the co-editor of *Carcanet* magazine was Diane Troy], who had been editing a magazine called *Carcanet*. Now, *Carcanet* was a magazine which just published student poets from Oxford and Cambridge. There were several magazines like that, *Solstice* was another one. The editorship used to pass backwards and forwards between Oxford and Cambridge, depending on who was willing to take it on really. I had had poems in *Carcanet* earlier on, before Helen's time [Diane’s time]. The message was that ‘*Carcanet* is up for grabs if anyone wants to come and take it on.’ So, I made the announcement, and I remember this earnest young American from Harvard coming up and asking for the details, and that was Michael. So that was 1967. Then I dropped out of the university and had no more contact with the Poetry Society. I was only allowed back to sit my finals and retreated after that to my grandparents' old house in Norfolk. I didn’t reappear in Oxford until the very end of 1968.

LJ: So what were you doing then?

RG: I was the caretaker of a house of student lodgings in Wellington Square, with my own flat in the basement. And by great good luck, one of my student lodgers was Grevel Lindop, who was a poet and, I think, a contemporary of Michael. He told me that Michael was running the magazine and that he was actually starting a pamphlet series. He didn’t know me, of course, but he mentioned me to Gareth Reeves, who had been a contemporary of mine and who was still in Oxford at that point as a postgraduate. And Gareth said, ‘Oh yeah, Roger, he used to be good.’ So, then I sent some poems to Michael for Carcanet, mostly beatnik poems, which he didn’t really go for. But there was one of my older poems which was more formal, and he liked that, so I thought, ‘Oh, he likes those, I’ve got a trunk full of those.’

LJ: And you mention that the magazine was a collaboration between Cambridge and Oxford, and I’m just wondering, at that time, was it still a collaboration, or was it mostly based in Oxford?

RG: I think it depended, who took it on. I think when I was aware of it, it was mostly based in Oxford, but I think it did take poets from Cambridge as well. The other one I mentioned, *Solstice*, was mostly based in Cambridge, but that did also take poets from Oxford. You’d be able to check that up by going through early copies, I don’t know how far back the Carcanet archive goes –

LJ: It seems to me that when Michael Schmidt became the editor, it became an Oxford enterprise, basically. But before that, it was more like a collaboration.

RG: I think, possibly so. I mean, I wouldn’t like to be sworn to that. But you could check it out.

LJ: Yes, sure. So, you published several poems in the 1969/1970 issue of Carcanet magazine, do you –

RG: Yes, I sent five poems I think, which Michael took, and that’s when he said, ‘Well, we must do a pamphlet,’ and he did *Caught on Blue,* which came out in 1970.

LJ: Oh yes, ok. So, that was your first collection of poems, right?

RG: By then, my life had changed a bit. When I was living as the caretaker in this block of student flats, I was driving a Co-op delivery van, which was the Robert Graves technique. You earned your living by something that didn’t tax your brain, and then you could be free in the evenings to write. But unfortunately one evening I was going to a party and I went down to the off-license to get some drink. Being all too aware that I shouldn't have had the van out after hours. I went through some back streets that I didn’t know very well, ran across a junction and a car went into me. So then I was in all sorts of trouble. I thought, by the time this comes up in court, I better get myself a teaching job, and then I’ll look like a teacher who didn’t understand the rules about van driving. And it worked like a charm, the magistrates treated me very leniently. I had gone to the University Extensions Office, as I think the Careers Office was called then, and there was a secondary modern school at Newport Pagnell desperate for an English teacher, half-way through the Summer Term. And that was a doubly lucky break because they had a set of anthologies, *Touchstones,* in which I first read a poem by Seamus Heaney.

LJ: Ok I see, so you started teaching at that time. I just want to come back to what you said about your first collection of poems, *Caught on Blue*. So, it was published by Carcanet in 1970, and I believe it was very cheap, it sold for thirty-five pence.

RG: All those pamphlets were, yes.

LJ: Yes, and I wonder if you organised any poetry readings for this collection of poems?

RG: I don’t remember any as such. There were poetry readings held in Oxford, not always by the Poetry Society. For example, John Wain was a poet and novelist and later the Professor of Poetry. He was living in Oxford but not on the university staff, he was freelance by then, and I talk about him in the memoir. There was John Wain, there was Peter Levi, and there was C. A. Trypanis, who was Professor of Byzantine Greek and published by Faber. They used to run informal workshops once a term and every so often they would put on a reading and I can remember John Wain inviting me to read. *Caught on Blue* was out by then and I read some of the poems that later appeared in *West of Elm.* Peter Levi came up and said how much he liked 'Spring Grazing', which was encouraging. Later on, when I had done my year in this secondary modern school in Newport Pagnell, and a year teaching half-time in a comprehensive school in Bicester, I did two years teaching evening classes at the Oxford College of Further Education and I was able to organise readings at the College myself. Jon Stallworthy was the Poetry Editor at the Oxford University Press and he came to read.

LJ: Ok, and I have a question about the cover designs for Carcanet, because I believe that your wife Priscilla at that time, she was doing some designing for Michael Schmidt, right?

RG: Priscilla, yes, Priscilla Eckhard. We got together at the very end of 1969, so by the time I was in touch with Carcanet, we were living together. She dropped out of Somerville after her first year and she was a very talented artist and designer, as well as a poet and prose writer. She did a number of the early cover designs for Carcanet and the Carcanet logo, the cat, was our tom cat. By then, Michael was running Carcanet from South Hinksey on the Oxford by-pass. He had a couple of rooms at Pin Farm, which was owned by a rather eccentric Don called Stella Aldwinkle. She had been a philosophy tutor at St. Anne’s and she was on half-pay while she wrote a long poem to prove the existence of God. Originally, it had been a philosophical treatise, and somebody read it and said, ‘Really this ought to be a poem.’ And so she was turning it into a poem, and that’s the point at which Michael became one of her tenants, Michael and his partner, Peter Jones.

LJ: Ok, I see, yes, I’ve read a few letters in which you say that you visited Michael and Peter Jones on a regular basis, so you were close friends, right?

RG: Yes.

LJ: And did you go there with your wife?

RG: We used to drop in quite often. By then, we were living on a farm too. From the basement flat we had moved to a house in North Oxford, in Davenant Road. One of Priscilla’s tutors, who thought very highly of her, was anxious to help her when she dropped out of Somerville. His parents were teaching in the West Indies, the house was empty, and we had the use of the house rent-free, a kindness for which I thank them in the acknowledgements to *West of Elm*. When they came back from the West Indies, a friend of ours, an artist who had been haymaking for a farmer at Northmoor, out beyond Eynsham, and knew he was living all alone in a big, stone farmhouse, took us out there and said, ‘Look, these people need somewhere to live.’ He rented us two rooms for two pounds a week and that was what enabled me to start writing more or less full-time. Because the other part of story that I’ve left out, but which was just as important, was that when I was teaching half-time at the comprehensive school in Bicester and we were living at the house in North Oxford, Michael and Grevel Lindop edited a book of critical essays, *British Poetry since 1960*, and Michael commissioned me to write about The Group, which was quite influential then and included poets like Alan Brownjohn, Peter Porter, and George Macbeth. I knew some of them because in 1967, the second time I dropped out of the university, when I was back living with my parents in the London suburbs, I had gone to the Poets' Workshop, held at the Poetry Society in Earls Court. The Poets' Workshop was the successor to the Group and many of the same people came. Alan Brownjohn chaired the evening my poems were workshopped, and Peter Porter and George MacBeth were both there. That’s why Michael commissioned me to write about The Group and Michael and I interviewed Peter Porter to get more of the background. I sent Michael the sections of the essay as I wrote them and I remember him phoning the house in North Oxford to say how much he liked them. By the time the book came out, Priscilla and I had moved to the farm at Northmoor and I had the freedom to freelance. I saw Peter Porter at the launch at the Poetry Society and he had just taken over from Ian Hamilton as Poetry Editor of the *TLS*. ‘What are you doing now?’ he asked, ‘Well, I’m doing a bit of teaching and I’m looking for reviewing.’ ‘Right, I’ll put you on the reviewing list for the *TLS*,’ and so every so often he would ring the farm and give me a review to do. Michael suggested that I should also write to Alan Ross at the *London Magazine*, which I did. Alan liked the trial review he gave me to write and I became Poetry Critic of the *London Magazine*.

LJ: Ok, before that, you also met other people at Oxford including Peter Jay, so I have a question about Peter Jay because obviously he founded his own press.

RG: Yes, Peter Jay was another man who started a magazine which was called *New Measure*. And from that he founded Anvil Press, so he followed the same path as Michael, but he was a couple of years ahead of Michael, because Peter and I are exact contemporaries, three or four years older than Michael. Peter Jay had already set up Anvil Press before Michael appeared on the scene. But it was a similar pattern of starting a magazine and then a press.

LJ: Ok, so what did you think of Anvil Press, I mean, did you admire the press, or were you quite critical, or what was your attitude towards Anvil?

RG: Peter and I were on very good terms, personally. We didn’t have quite the same outlook, poetically. Also, at that time I wasn’t really writing that well. If I wrote well in my undergraduate years, it was a bit hit and miss. I talk about that in the memoir, relating a conversation with Michael Hewlings, who was one of the poets that Peter Jay did take on. I said to Michael Hewlings, ‘I think there’s something wrong with my poems,’ and he said, ‘Well, what one feels about your poems is that you don’t work on them enough.’ I said, ‘What do you mean, work on them?.’ Because, you know, I just kind of wrote them in the back of my head as I was walking around. And he said, there was a poem of his that I really admired, it was only sixteen lines long, but he said, ‘I worked on that poem for three months, and to get those sixteen lines, I covered seventy pages of drafts.’ Then I understood what working on a poem was. Then I started to work at it much more seriously. So by the time I was out at the Farm at Northmoor, for example, I was then writing very, very seriously. And that’s when the poems became good -

LJ: Yes, so you knew many people who actually created – sorry to interrupt – but I just have a question about you know, the kind of circle that you had. Because obviously you knew Michael Schmidt, who founded Carcanet Press, and then you knew Peter Jay, who founded Anvil Press, so obviously you were surrounded by people who were very entrepreneurial, you know, they created their own enterprises, and I’m just wondering, if you considered at some point perhaps, you know, becoming a publisher yourself?

RG: No, I didn’t. Oddly enough, I was very aware of the dangers. For example, before I had blotted my copybook, one of my tutors who thought highly of me had offered me a lectureship at a Canadian University, because he’d been asked to recommend people, and I said, ‘No, I want to be a poet, and I know that if I do anything else, I will get side-tracked and the energy will go into that.’ I was quite single-minded in that way. And I wouldn’t have wanted to be a publisher for the same reason. And actually, I think, Michael, for example, was a very talented young poet, very inventive and in fact, while I was waiting for you to call, I was looking again at his second collection, *Desert of the Lions*, and I was looking at some of the reviews of his first book, Alan Brownjohn saying, ‘A rather unnervingly confident and promising first book,’ and then John Fuller saying ‘What impresses most about the volume is the natural enthusiasm and chancy drama of the way he writes, its melancholy precision and imagination.’ Michael was a very talented young poet, very inventive, but I don’t think he ever got the recognition he deserved because he was treated as a publisher. And of course a lot of his energy had to go into that. He’s continued to write and he’s still good but I don’t think he’s ever been given the credit he deserves as a poet. And in a way, the same thing happened to Peter Jay, although I don’t think Peter Jay had anything like Michael’s intellectual energy. And as a poet, Peter faded out earlier on. But those are the dangers of a poet becoming a publisher.

LJ: Yes, that’s very interesting. I’m also interested in Creative Writing as an institution, and I was reading some of your letters about the Arvon Foundation, and you know, you also got an Arts Council fellowship, so I’m just wondering if you could tell me about your experience, you know, working for the Arvon Foundation in the 1970s.

RG: To fill in that little gap, reviewing for the *TLS* and the *London Magazine*, and reviewing novels for *The Listener*, which I did for six months, enabled me to become a man of letters and I was able to cut back on the evening class teaching. I only did a couple of evening classes a week and the rest of the time I was reviewing. So I became quite well known as a reviewer, that’s why later on I was offered the editorship of *Poetry Review*. Now in 1974, I was given the Gregory Award, and I got the top award, a thousand pounds, which was quite a lot of money then. And by sheer luck, one of the novels I’d had to review for *The Listener* was by John Moat, who was one of the founders of the Arvon Foundation. I really liked the novel and I gave it a good review. As it happened, John Fairfax, who was the other co-founder of the Arvon Foundation, lived at Newbury, which wasn’t far from Oxford, and he knew me because by then I was on the Literature Panel of Southern Arts. So, he was the man who invited me to teach the first couple of courses at the Arvon Foundation. It only had the one centre at that time, which was Totleigh Barton in North Devon. John Moat and his wife Annie wanted to travel for six months, their last chance before the children started school, and they were going off to the United States and Mexico. They would be away from the end of September 1974 and they suggested that Priscilla and I could go and live in their house in North Devon, because it was better for the house to have someone living in it. So this was brilliant because I had the Gregory Award, which gave me a bit of financial security, and I had a house rent free to live in for six months. The other story that came out of Arvon was that, on the first course I taught with John Fairfax, John Moat came as guest reader and Ted Hughes came over for John’s reading. We had sherry with Ted before dinner and then after dinner, because Ted and his wife Carol were going to be in the audience as special guests, John Fairfax and I thought, we must do something for Ted. So we invented this old poet called Faxfitt, a name taken half from Fairfax and half from Garfitt, and we wrote a poem that he was supposed to have written and we got one of the girls on the course who had a rather good voice to sing it. And before she sang, I gave a speech on the mythical history of this poet called Faxfitt, starting with Catullus and coming up through the Celtic poets and the Anglo-Saxon poets to the flea in Dr Johnson's wig – a free-wheeling, comical invention, all in Ted's honour because he was in the audience.

LJ: And do you remember the organisation of the course, I mean, was it lectures in the morning or was it more like informal discussions, or how did it work?

RG: Well, I suspect it’s much the same now. I haven’t taught an Arvon course for many years but in those days it was very much about giving the students the time and the space to come up with their own ideas. On the opening evening the tutors would give a reading, just to get some poetry into the air, and they might make one or two suggestions, but the idea was that then the students had the whole day to go into their own space, to go for walks around Totleigh Barton, which is a beautiful place, and let the ideas surface naturally, just out of having the space and the time. We were available for them to come in at any point and get some feedback from us, but there were no actual set tasks, it was a matter of what came spontaneously out of the experience of having space and time. Obviously we would give critical feedback and try and shape a poem, once they brought it to us. And then we would have a workshop in the evening, a friendly and supportive workshop with everybody joining in. One evening we would have a guest reader and he would inject some fresh energy and on the final evening the students would give their own presentation of the work they’d done on the course. And often we would get a booklet printed from the poems they brought us, a cyclostyled booklet we could produce then and there.

LJ: Yes, but obviously creative writing was not a common thing at that time in England, so do you -

RG: There were no creative writing courses in England at all at that time. I suppose that by about 1974, when I became involved with the Arvon Foundation, it’s possible that Malcolm Bradbury at UEA was just starting –

LJ: Yes, it was just starting, he created his first course in 1970, so it was just the beginning, basically. But it was just a small programme, so –

RG: We had heard of creative writing courses from Iowa, because Paul Engel, who was one of the course directors at Iowa, happened to be an alumnus of Merton College, Oxford, which was my college, and he came over on a recruiting drive, staying as a guest of Nevill Coghill, the Merton Professor -

LJ: Do you remember the date for his visit?

RG: I remember he gathered a number of us student poets together –

LJ: Do you remember the date?

RG: - and he liked what I’d read, so I did actually apply to Iowa, but by then, you know, I was beginning to go a bit crazy, and I don’t think I sent him my best work.

LJ: So, was it in the 1960s when you were still at Oxford?

RG: Sorry?

LJ: When Paul Engle went to Oxford, was it in the 1960s, or…?

RG: That would have been in ’64 or ’65.

LJ: Ok. And you said he wanted to recruit students to come to Iowa, right? That’s very interesting, because obviously as you said, creative writing was very much a new thing.

RG: That’s right.

LJ: Ok, so you didn’t apply to Iowa, right?

RG: I did, I did apply, but I just sent him a letter and one poem, that was all. It wasn’t a formal application, and it wasn’t one of my best poems, anyway. And he politely turned me down.

LJ: And did you keep in touch with him?

RG: No, I didn’t. I sent that letter towards the end of my crazy years and by the time I got myself sorted out, I was reviewing for the *TLS* and the *London Magazine*, and I had plenty of opportunities in England, so I never pursued anything in the States after that.

LJ: But you got an Arts Council Fellowship in 1975 and you went to Wales, right?

RG: Yes, I went to the University of Bangor in North Wales, that’s right.

LJ: So what was a typical day as an Arts Council Fellow?

RG: Well, there was no academic requirement, so I was not teaching creative writing in a formal way at all. I was supposed to stimulate writing, so I held a writing workshop once a week, and I organised a series of evening readings, and again those were once a week. We found a pub down by the station called the Railway Arms, a good building but not much happening there, so once a week we took it over and it became ‘Writers at the Railway’. And because there wasn’t much else happening in Bangor, it was quite isolated, poets and writers would find themselves reading to a large room absolutely packed with students. It was good for the pub, because the bar was busy, and we got good people to come. I got Seamus Heaney to come because the only Arvon course Seamus ever gave, with the novelist John McGahern, happened to be 1976, when I was back in Devon for the summer vacation. That was a lucky coincidence because I had reviewed *North*  for the *London Magazine* and I had written a critical essay on John McGahern for *Two Decades of Irish Writing,* which Douglas Dunn edited for Carcanet in 1975, and reviewed *The Leavetaking* for *The New Review.* So, we had a very friendly meeting, the three of us, and we became friends from then on. I used to go and visit Seamus and John in Ireland, and both of them came to read for me in Bangor.

LJ: Yes, and you also met Angus Wilson, right? Who was at University of East Anglia at that time and had just set up this new creative writing programme with Malcolm Bradbury. So I read one of your letters in which you said, ok, we had those very distinguished visiting scholars, including Angus Wilson, so I’m just –

RG: I wasn’t involved in inviting him. He was invited by the English Department of the University. So I was just one of the people talking to him over wine after the reading. I did get William Golding to come and read at the Railway, that was off my own bat, because he knew me as a reviewer from the *London Magazine* and I was able to get his address from Alan Ross. He was working on *Darkness Visible* then and couldn't understand the terrorism of the Bader Meinhoff group and The Angry Brigade, couldn't see where it had come from, and he felt he needed to meet some young people, so, he was happy to come and read.

In those days Bangor had a strong Drama Department, attracting some talented students, Danny Boyle among them. I read the choruses for a studio performance he directed of *The Family Reunion.* Another student asked me for Ted Hughes's address and that resulted in a performance of *Gaudete*. The students also performed a play by Jennifer Rankin, an Australian poet who was spending a year in Devon at Ted's invitation, and we timed that performance so that Jenny could attend Seamus's reading. I also arranged for Ted to read at the Theatr Gwynedd in Bangor, though I'd left by the time the reading took place.

LJ: That’s interesting, and I have a question because you mentioned *PN Review*, so obviously you were a contributor, you were also the editor of *PN Review* at some point?

RG: After the first couple of years of Carcanet being based at Pin Farm, C. B. Cox arranged for Michael to be given a lectureship at the University of Manchester. And Brian Cox and Michael started *Poetry Nation* together. The first issue came out in 1973 when I was still living on that farm at Northmoor. And I had poems in that, so I appeared in *Poetry Nation* 1 and *Poetry Nation* 2, and then in one of the later ones. I think there were six issues of *Poetry Nation*, and then it became *PN Review*.

LJ: Yes, so obviously *PN Review*, or *Poetry Nation*, you know it was often seen as a very right-wing review, so I’m just wondering, what did you think of the politics, or you know, the kind of image that the review had?

RG: In terms of the literary politics of *PN Review* and *Poetry Nation*, I was very happy with that, and happy to review for them. Later on, when C. B. Cox joined up with… was it with Kingsley Amis? They wrote the Black Papers on education, really regretting the comprehensive movement and saying that they shouldn’t have done away with Grammar Schools. And I was less happy about that, and indeed, a number of my contemporaries were less happy about that. But in terms of the purely literary politics, I was happy to be part of *PN Review*. I was never an editor but I was a regular contributor, sometimes as a poet, sometimes as a reviewer. And I’ve continued to be, I still am contributing regularly to *PN*.

LJ: It’s interesting, and obviously you’ve been associated with Carcanet for a very, very long time. I mean they are celebrating their fiftieth anniversary next year, so I’m just wondering if you look back at the long history of Carcanet, what are the main strengths of the press, and perhaps the weaknesses as well?

RG: Well, I think one of the important things about the press, and this really goes back to the fact that Michael is a Mexican-American, and he grew up in Mexico, though obviously from a German-American family, and so he was Spanish-speaking as well as English-speaking, and he knew poets like Octavio Paz, who was a friend of his and remained a friend all his life. And indeed Michael published him in translation. So Michael has always had a much more international outlook. And I think that’s been one of the strengths of the press and of *PN Review.* It’s even more evident now but it was there from the beginning. As it happened, later on in my life I lived for seven years with a Colombian painter, going backwards and forwards to Bogotá, and became Spanish speaking myself. That strengthened the link with Michael, and he met the painter, Eugenia Escobar, and they got on very well. It’s one of her paintings that’s on the front of my *Selected Poems*. So, that was another reason why I was really happy with the international outlook of Carcanet and *PN Review*.

LJ: Ok, and obviously there have been many competitors, I’m thinking of Bloodaxe, you know, so do you remember any, perhaps, tensions between Carcanet and Bloodaxe?

RG: Well, not now. Neil and Michael are great friends and they see themselves as being on the same side. I think there was perhaps more of a rivalry in the early years but Neil was very helpful when Carcanet's offices were destroyed in the IRA bombing of Manchester in 1996. When my *Selected Poems* came out with Carcanet in 2000, Michael sent Neil a copy because the journals draw on the time in the North that I'd shared with Frances Horovitz. What he didn't know then was that I'd helped Bloodaxe to get their Arts Council grant in the first place. After my two years in North Wales at the University of Bangor, I had another Arts Council Creative Writing Fellowship at Sunderland Polytechnic, from 1978-1980, and I stayed on in the North East for two more years, becoming Chairman of the Northern Arts Literature Panel. In those days, the regional arts associations were completely independent of the Arts Council. They were dependent, it's true, on an Arts Council grant, but they ran themselves. Whereas now, Arts Council England runs everything nationwide. I knew Neil Astley as a young poet who wanted to become a publisher and I was very impressed by his commitment. When the Literature Director of Northern Arts, Philip Bomford, came to me and said, ‘There’s this young man, Neil Astley, wants to start up a publishing thing, what should we do?’ I said, ‘Back him for all you're worth. Because it’s one thing for poets or novelists to put all their energy into their own writing, everybody understands that, but to put all your energy into promoting other people’s writing, that’s a very rare thing and I’ve only seen it once before, and that was in Michael Schmidt who started Carcanet’. Armed with that endorsement, Philip Bomford went to the Arts Council and secured a grant for Bloodaxe, which they’ve received ever since. Neil has always been grateful for that endorsement and he sends me everything they publish.

LJ: Ok, fantastic. Well, perhaps we can stop here, but thank you so much for your time. I’m very grateful.

[Pleasantries, interview ends]