**Carcanet Oral History Interview [ 10 May 2019]**

**Respondent: Alison Brackenbury (AB)**

**Interviewer: Victoria Stobo (VS)**

'Alison Brackenbury, who has checked this transcript, would like to apologise for the syntax of her interview, which is as tangled as a bramble bush! She would like to thank Victoria, her interviewer, for her patience, and Carcanet (as always!) for untangling the briars within her poems.'

VS: Could you tell us more about your relationship with Carcanet Press, and when you first met Michael Schmidt, what your impressions were of him?

AB: Well, I heard about Carcanet on the radio one dark night. This is pre-internet, and this is somebody living out in the sticks, as it were. It was clear that Carcanet was a force in the poetry world, and was looking for new poets, wonderful words when you’re in your twenties. And of course, Carcanet was quite grown up by then, it was ten years old, but people who’d been very important early, like Donald Davie were still around, and Donald would very kindly send messages to Michael, if he liked work and so on. So, I think it was a kind of formed but early stage.

To give you an idea, Michael was doing the typesetting for the books, which was very, very useful, because obviously Michael is a very good writer, and some of Michael’s errors - he did make a few!- were actually better than my originals. So, there’s the odd preposition and so on, in my early books, which is a result of Michael’s typesetting. If I went up to see Michael in Manchester it was in the old building with the books going along the walls which I used to stare at with admiration and fascination. He’d usually give me a few to take home. I met Michael in London. The relationship between Michael and me has really been based on publishing rather than social meetings, although we always have a great time when we meet. I’ve quite frequently been bought cake! But Carcanet’s really a deeply serious thing, and I think it really goes on because of connections people have to words and poetry. Michael and I disagree about many things, but we have agreed very fervently about certain things about poetry and I think that’s been helpful. The firm has changed so much over the years. Do you want me to do a quick outline of some of the changes in Carcanet’s size and so forth?

VS: That would be fantastic.

AB: Well, obviously we start with one man doing his own typesetting, and things do evolve, obviously ownership changed, I didn’t see Michael so much in later years. I think it’s time, actually, to say what I think are the terrific things about Carcanet. One is loyalty. Every poet’s story will be different, but I was a tricky poet to deal with in the sense that I had a child, I worked in a small business, I couldn’t get time off, I was a marketing nightmare! I could get work in the *TLS* [*Times Literary Supplement*], or even on the BBC, but I couldn’t go out and do readings. I think a lot of publishers would’ve quietly ditched me in the 80s and 90s. I was writing but I wasn’t marketing, and Michael was completely loyal, very understanding, and so all this time, the editing, the proof-reading, the things that Carcanet are so good on, went on. Someone commented to me recently how standards have slipped in these areas with surprisingly big publishers, and I don’t think they ever have in Carcanet. I think there is some real steel in the way Carcanet is run, in the sense the good things going on. I’m happy to say, when we got into the new century, I think both Carcanet and I went through a bit of a revolution. which involved social media. I think now, if you’re prepared to engage with that - and I like the internet a lot - I think it’s a space poetry should go out into. There are possibilities – you don’t always have to be in London, you don’t always have to be available, so I’ve seen Carcanet become very, very good in the areas of social media, often due to people much younger and more inspired than I am. So, a whole new era has come along.

It struck me from the first, as I stared at those books on the wall, what a variety of work there was there. I think we’ll probably talk later, about poets, won’t we? But yes, I think part of this enterprise with so many different people, even when things were personally quite difficult for writing, has always been inspiring. I feel Carcanet has always been there – not in a kind of sentimental way, but in a very useful and practical way, and its probably time to say thank you for the cake I acquired at meetings. I hope for a few more bits of cake!

VS: What were your impressions of Michael when you first met him?

AB: Michael is such a mixture, I mean, I think behind him really are continents of literature, I don’t know where to start with this. Michael, for me, is a link to the world. I come from a very remote bit of England, I’m very interested in the traditions of England, English song - that’s a very mixed bag too! But we can – there’s no doubt about it – we can be terrifically insular. We’re not good at languages, often. I try to read German and I stumble through it, and I think Michael brings a lot of the things we are very, very bad at in English poetry culture. I’m endlessly grateful for that. But as a person, when you meet him, he is a delightful surprise. He can be a ferocious controversialist, but he’s funny, he’s kind, he tells the worst jokes I’ve ever heard in the world, and I love really bad jokes. So, he’s a very surprising person to meet, but I think it’s all part of the mixture, I don’t think publishers should be entirely predictable. It’s always a pleasure to meet Michael, and it’s always unexpected as well, even from the very first of those London parties that are, for me so terrifying.

VS: ] Could you tell us a bit more about this book? And about the reaction when it was a PBS recommendation?

AB: Of course. Briefly, it’s a first book – it has all the hopeful passion and the terrible faults of a first book. I have looked at it recently as I now have a new *Selected Poems* out, called *Gallop* with Carcanet. I was relieved to find that I still like these poems – they’re probably better than I remembered in some respects. Because first books, without question, have that drive. They have that passion. I had quite a strange childhood among the woods and fields of Lincolnshire. I had ancestors who’d been ploughboys and village bell-ringers, and there was a sense of darkness, and time, and a lot of cold, a really savage sense of season in that book. So, I think it did have matter in it. The technique I’ll come to in a minute.

Michael and I are still very fond of the long poem in it, Michael can be a very indulgent publisher! It has great faults, but it has the passion of youth and a really interesting story, which should be filmed, of Arbella Stuart, the woman who dressed up as a man to escape, to get to her lover, went across the Channel, stopped a ship, got caught, died in the Tower. A terrific story, which I didn’t tell as well as it deserves. But it was worth doing it just for that. Stylistically, I think my first book misled a lot of people. Probably not Michael, but I’d been reading American poems and poets, with more enthusiasm than knowledge, and I had some rather experimental spacing on the page which I’d picked up from people like Paul Blackburn. I didn’t really understand rhythmically what I was doing with that, but the real key to the future was one poem, a ballad about John Clare.

That’s really the way I was going. I was going for something tighter and more traditional. So, after that book, I lost some of my readers when they realised I wasn’t going to be a new Paul Blackburn, but I think I may have gained more! On the Poetry Book Society Recommendation, well, I can’t quite now believe how ignorant I was of the poetry world. I don’t know if this was a good thing or not. I think my reaction when Michael rang me up to tell me was something like, ‘Oh, that’s nice,’ and I think often with first books still, it’s a bit easier. People are nicer to your first book and you don’t realise how lucky you are being. But the world of poetry was smaller then. I possibly wasn’t the only person bumbling around ignorantly in it, but I was very pleased that people had liked something in those poems, and I still am.

VS: You mentioned earlier that you weren’t always able to give readings and things like that, in terms of promoting your work. So, were there any events, readings or launches that you were able to attend that were organised by Carcanet?

AB: Yes, I mean that in the middle of my life, my poetry life, there was a twenty three year long black hole where I was working for the family business - which is a great subject but a terrible obstacle to going out into the world. But there was a period before that, in the early 80s, when I didn’t have a child, I was in a public sector job, and that’s where I would trot off to these terrifying London parties and see people like Michael. And then later, I had my daughter, but I was still working in the public sector, and at that time Carcanet had a London base, and I think it ran more London events than it did later. Now, amongst poets of my era, especially drinkers, which I’m not, there is a nostalgia for the launches of that era. Now, I have to say Carcanet’s were not particularly awash with alcohol as I remember, but these events weren’t hard-to-sell launches. To be fair to Carcanet, I think Carcanet events always have a softer edge than a lot of launches. People actually had a good time, they talked to each other and so on. I know eminent poets who are really regretful for those days, so those were quite good events to go to. And I did go along and meet people there whom I liked and admired. It was a different era, meeting people like Marghanita Laski, who was a great supporter of Carcanet, now she might seem to belong to another age.

But that all stopped, for me, about 1990, when I joined my husband’s family’s metal-finishing firm. I did make it to one rather large-scale Carcanet London party in the mid-90s. John Ashbery was there. It’s good to pay deserved tribute to people, isn’t it? John Ashbery, such an eminent man, a man whose work I love and admire in equal quantities, had met me once at an event in Cheltenham, and at the end of the evening, this Pulitzer Prize-winning poet – yet, a shy man, I think - crossed the room with his beautiful formal manners and shook my hand. I was very touched. It’s almost worth going to these things to realise the decency of people like Ashbery. So, I went to the odd thing like that, but perhaps I could say really that my relationship to Carcanet’s list isn’t meeting people at launches, and in fact, a lot of my poetry friends like Jenny Joseph and Anne Stevenson weren’t or aren’t Carcanet poets. I think I’ve been a very humble part of a list that’s European. The German poets in the Carcanet list are immensely important to me and have been a real inspiration. From the very start, it was obviously a very special list. These are clumsy words, but it was obvious that there were people here exploring sexuality, nationality, ethnicity – these are cold words, but what you’ve got, what I used to see in those offices, is an extraordinarily rich and brave list. So, I think I didn’t really have to meet these writers in the flesh. I was reading their words, and some of them, such as the German poets, I would never have read without Carcanet, and that’s a huge thing for a publisher to give to their writers.

VS: How do you see that kind of networking, attending readings and launches and things like that?

AB: From my strange country background (my father was a lorry driver; my mother was a teacher) I got a scholarship to Oxford. I’m quite a good bluffer - I ended up with a First but I had a very rocky time there. And I say now, that people from state schools (and there were more people there then from state schools, at least the sort of state schools with mixed backgrounds) I say truly that we thought networking was something done by spiders – we didn’t do it. There were, I think, people there operating differently, and it was assumed later, I think by some people, that I’d been able to tap into some kind of magic Oxford network, a wonderful web. If there was one, I wasn’t even aware that it existed. So, I think you can tell that my ability to do this thing called networking, if I do it at all, has been an extremely late development. I think what has happened now, when I have more time, is that I do go around, I do see people that are congenial to each other in terms of poetry, then sometimes things happen. But I think that, still, a writer’s ability to do this may depend on their generation, class, and where they live.

It’s a thing, probably I should have done a lot more for the benefit of my poetry, but we’re all stuck in our own particular groove. I think the lives of young poets now - and I admire their work enormously, I like those individuals - are so different from mine. I think I won’t really try to pronounce upon them. But I think you can see from what I’m saying that you could, like me, lack virtually every social or networking skill in my era, yet (in my case, thanks to Carcanet), get into print. It may seem extraordinary to people now, and perhaps regrettable, but it’s the truth as I see it.

VS: [Literary festivals and prizes] In the 80s, literary prizes and festivals became increasingly popular, could you say a few words about your experience of festivals, and of being awarded prizes?

AB: I’ll do the prizes first. This is a huge change in poetry culture and one which I think is very two-sided. I’ve been very lucky - that’s a phrase that I repeat endlessly as I get older! As I pointed out, I was completely ignorant when I walked into the Poetry Books Society Recommendation. l later had two awards from the Society of Authors, who are really benign givers of prizes. I really commend their events, because they have a philosophy of telling the writers in advance that they’ve won. I don’t think these events should be run like cruel circuses. So, I’ve had an Eric Gregory Award from them. I belong to the Neil Astley generation, of the early 1980s, and I was the only woman with an award, in my year, by the way. I had a look at the list recently. My arithmetic may be questionable, but I think, roughly, I was about the thirteenth woman to get an Eric Gregory award. And I think, again, I’m speaking from memory, I think those awards run from the sixties, and it’s not unusual now to see a very large number of women on those lists, so it’s quite startling to look back.

With a sort of naïve over-confidence, I didn’t really think about this, although a friend of mine made a rueful remark about us being token women! I don’t think I was a token woman for the Gregory Awards. The judges were people of principle. But it hadn’t quite occurred to me, but it’s true, for my generation, as a woman poet, you were often the only woman on a shortlist. So, there was that prize, and then later, a Cholmondeley Award in the 90s, which was a terrific boost, because I think middle-age is really rough on poets, actually. Your style tends to go a bit ragged; your life can be bogged down in all the problems of family life. There was a wonderful panel, including Wendy Cope, who gave me a substantial sum of money at a time when I was pretty hard-up. So, I have really good memories of that award. Now, I can be quite detached about the new prize culture. It’s not really my generation. I’ve passed on. It seems to me the new poets might feel under pressure to win, or at least be on the shortlists for prizes. On the plus side, you can get big audiences for these prize-givings, and that’s a big thing. I would like to see poetry meet more people, as modern art has done. And when you think of what the Turner Prize has done for modern art, I think prizes are helping, and so I’m glad about that. I’m just very glad I’m not one of the people having to jump those hurdles.

So, that’s prizes. Shall I say a little about festivals? Well, I managed to completely miss two decades of festivals, but I began to come out of retirement, as it were, because personal life got easier, my daughter was older, and I discovered the late-night bus back from London! So, I began to get into things more in the beginning of the century. And I ended up helping to judge the National Poetry Competition, and this gave me a reading at the Ledbury Poetry Festival, which is within driving distance of where I live. And I was entranced by Ledbury. I think it has all the ingredients of a good festival. It’s very rooted in its town, but it’s also friendly. The programme is very international, and they have younger poets as well. It’s pretty exemplary.

So I used to make a pilgrimage to Ledbury in my busy life, once a year, more or less every year from 2006 onwards, and I think some of the things I thought about Ledbury hold good. To put it bluntly, poetry festivals are probably easier to market if they’re in beautiful places. Ledbury can be difficult to get to, but is a very strange and entrancing place, and I think draws people back. And I would never have thought that I would live to see poetry as a kind of - let me put this positively - as a kind of very serious occupation for people who’ve retired. I mean, for various reasons, my only excursions tend to be to poetry festivals, and so there is a real hunger amongst people of my generation, who’ve not been as lucky as me, in publishing poetry or meeting poets, to go to these things. So, there’s a very mixed audience of all ages.

I’ll just rattle through what I’m hoping to go to in the near future. The first is Verve in Birmingham, where I have the honour of headlining this year. It is terrific, and they have a truly mixed audience, in terms of age and everything else you might think of. I was very impressed by Verve last year, a city festival right next to New Street train station, with all the twenty-four-hour shops etc, a really lively festival, one I can recommend. Then there’s Ledbury, about which I’ve spoken. Then Kendal, which is running again next year, (I hope!) run by Kim Moore, again rather a long haul for some to get to, in a wonderfully Gothic hotel. I think Kim is especially good at getting younger poets there. She’s worked very hard on accessibility, so you’ll have a very good young poet in a wheelchair who’s able to go and read. Kim has thought very hard about that. It’s a big issue.

I also love going to Swindon, I hope that will get going again this year. I think their grant application is going through... That is in a Victorian farmhouse which was the home of Richard Jefferies, the nature writer, which one of the organisers thinks may be haunted and I think I tend to agree. The readings actually take place in a tent, a very nice tent, so that’s not haunted. And then in November, sometimes battling with the storms, there’s the Poetry in Aldeburgh festival, rather scaled down now, but very friendly, really worth going to, on the North Sea, which is my old friend from my childhood. So, I think with festivals, people combine their interests in poetry with a passion for place. It’s very important for me to get back to the sea every year. ... So that’s my personal calendar, now I’m older. I have to say I’m more affluent now. My relative affluence has nothing to do with poetry, it has to do with our tiny industrial firm and family politics and the vagaries of the property market, I’ve been very lucky. But you can see that anyone interested in poetry, even if they’re short of time, probably has something near them they can go to. So, I’m really enthusiastic about the festivals! I wish them well.

VS: [Latest book, *Skies*] You most recent book was chosen by the *Observer* as one of its poetry books of the year, do you think that you would have received less critical attention if you had not been a Carcanet poet?

AB: Well this is a difficult experiment to run, isn’t it, because you’d need a kind of parallel life. From talking to friends and so on, I think the answer is that it would have had less critical attention. And there is almost something like a crisis in reviewing isn’t there? I do some reviewing. There are so many excellent publications to cover. There’s a dilemma whether to review pamphlets, which I think are often excellent.

I would like to hit a sober note here. Reduced coverage for poetry in major outlets is something we should think about. I’m possibly known for almost Pollyanna-ish enthusiasm, but in some ways, I’ve got a streak of Lincolnshire bleak pessimism, and I think some very hard questions have to be asked about the popularity of poetry. I hope things will change in various ways but when you look at it through the lens of print media, my early books used to have a wonderful quote from Peter Porter saying I was a vivid new talent. That was a quote from a review from the *Sunday Times*. Well, I think all the broadsheet newspapers devoted a lot more space to poetry than they do now. Now, one reason is that they’ve given a lot of space to music, and I’m speaking as someone who spends most of their spare time listening to BBC Six Music, so I’m actually very interested in what they write about. It’s a very crude measure. If an editor thinks that an artform has an enthusiastic, big following, they’re going to give it a certain amount of space, aren’t they?

I don’t see that happening to poetry in the print media. I think we have to face the fact as poets, that we’ve somehow failed to keep our end up. Just as I have to face the fact that I go to many good poetry readings where I think virtually everybody in the audience is a poet. This is a very attentive audience, it’s a pleasure to read to, but there does seem to be a division between a kind of specialised poetry world, producing excellent work of different varieties, and that elusive general audience. I do know from experience that the general audience is still there because I have worked most of my life in industry, or in technical colleges. I’ve spent most of my time with people who don’t speak standard English, as you can probably tell from this interview!

So, I’m very aware of how people see poetry. Many people say to me they’ve encountered a poem they like - it may even be a very new poem - and they’re very pleased to have met that poem. I think, as poets, we have to think of ways in which we can enable people to stumble across poems, find them, and have a chance to see whether they like them or not. I don’t think people, especially the young, are necessarily hostile to poetry. People, in fact, are looking for it, for weddings, funerals and so forth. This may, almost, be a good era of opportunity. But I certainly blame myself for not promoting poetry more. I think some of my generation, like me, were not very good at getting work out there. I hope my daughter’s generation may be much better. So, I think the whole question of critical attention is very interesting because it brings home the fact we’re all fighting for a scrap of a very narrow band. There’s a bigger question there about where poetry can go, who might like to read it or hear it. I love listening to poetry.

VS: I think you’re being hard on yourself! Not just in the publishing industry, but you alluded to the music industry, the shift from print to digital has had huge repercussions, it levelled the playing field in some ways but made it also very hard to compete in others.

AB: Yes, you see some brutal choices being made, and I know the *Guardian* has had all kinds of financial struggles and I have tried to support it. But recently when its big review turned into a small review, one of the things that went was the Saturday poem. I’ve had several poems from my collections featured by the *Guardian* as Saturday poem. But somebody somewhere must have thought, this is not important enough for my readers to leave in, whereas other things were left in. And poems are short! You could still fit a poem into that Review. So I think that’s one of the interesting points at which you think well, must try harder. And this isn’t intended to run down the *Guardian*, it’s just one of those snapshots of a moment, when you draw breath and think, well, I must make a bit more effort on this.

VS: It speaks to the cottage industry nature of a lot of poetry publishing, particularly Carcanet when it first started was a cottage industry, a lot of the small presses were. I guess the other face of that question, if you’d not been a Carcanet poet, well, who else might you have published with?

AB: Yes, actually that really brings home how unstable the poetry industry has been, because a good friend once said to me, in a kind of general way, that if I ever moved publishers, [Oxford University Press] OUP might suit me! Their poetry list is, of course, long gone. They were excellent poetry publishers. I was talking quite recently to someone who used to work with them. But there was a period when poetry lists were going down like nine-pins. So I think, what might have happened to me, if I’d tried to go off somewhere like OUP, and succeeded, is that I might now be out of print, because it’s not always easy getting yourself off a closed list into another publisher’s list. It probably would have coincided with my black hole of Calcutta, writing everything and going nowhere. This might almost be a kind of… I wouldn’t say object lesson, but perhaps sometimes it’s best sticking with the loyal person you started with, rather than swapping. Obviously, a lot of people have stayed the course with Carcanet, which is excellent.

I perhaps ought to say that, in relation to publishing in general, that I’m very pleased that the standards of design have got so good. I love Carcanet’s covers now and I think that’s a thoroughly good thing. I’m old enough to remember the Virago editions bursting into bookshops, those beautiful stands of books. There can be a bad side to cottage industry, in that people might not always have time to think about design and so on. So, I’m fully in favour of poetry books looking as good as they can, and I notice that in presses run by younger, very thoughtful people, they are very keen on high standards of book production: a bit like vinyl in records. They want the books to look beautiful, and their buyers want books to look beautiful. They probably look after them better than I do, reading my pamphlets with my coffee. That’s a good development. People value the poetry book as a beautiful object and want it as they want vinyl. I’m wholly in favour of that.

VS: You mentioned OUP – would you have published with Bloodaxe, or Anvil, would you have considered those as alternatives to Carcanet?

AB: Well… I started dealing with Carcanet in 1980, I think. Really, they have been the whole of my publishing life. But, despite my complete failure to network, I suppose I’ve bumped into people, because Neil Astley actually got a Gregory Award the same year as I did. This meant recently I had to read a poem completely off the cuff at the Ledbury Poetry festival, because Neil spotted me in the medieval hospitality room in Ledbury and decided that I should be part of the Gregory celebrations. Never take a free cup of coffee at a poetry festival, it’s going to get you into trouble!

I do know Neil slightly, and I used to meet Peter Jay who, I thought very highly of. One thing I valued on both their lists was the strand of Chinese poets. They are both publishing houses that I think very highly of. When we talk of covers, I think Neil’s covers are stunning. His ability to find young artists and use their work on covers is excellent. So, there are many things I liked about those lists. If for some reason Carcanet had stopped, there were certainly publishers to whom I would have been very grateful, if they had taken me on. I‘m thinking both about the publisher and what they publish. I like many of Neil’s younger poets, like Miriam Nash, very much, and I immensely admire the Chinese poets published by Anvil. So, I think, in a funny way, especially as you get older, you almost look to see who else is on the list. Not because they’re glittering names, but just because it’s something you admire, you would like to be with. Like being a bee in a hive. I think that would always affect my judgement.

VS: How has Carcanet survived over the years, when you consider things like Arts Council funding, the commercial realities of publishing poetry – have you been able to make a living from your poetry?

AB: No, you can probably hear the hollow laughter down the phone. When it comes to poetry and money, I’m always rather wary of saying anything, because I think poets’ lives are so different – poets make different decisions about what to do. What I can say about poets and money is that I’ve been to some really interesting events recently at Poetry Festivals, where a variety of people, many of them younger than me, have talked about the possible ways in which, as a poet, you make money, if you don’t do a different day job, like the one I did. I was a metal finisher... I think at every one of these sessions, every poet involved has said, that certainly for the kind of poetry they are writing, which I suppose could be described as literary, although very varied, that the only way that you make money is some form of teaching poetry, whether you’re teaching individuals in some way, or part of a university, or doing workshops. I don’t think I’ve recently heard anyone, on any panel, say you could make money as a poet just from publishing. The whole business of best-selling Instagram poets is very interesting, and I’m not at all hostile to this, I enjoy reading them.

But I think for the majority of British poets, as far as I can see as an interested observer, if you aren’t going to do a different kind of day job, you are going to be doing some kind of teaching involving poetry. So it’s going to be a question of whether that actually suits you. I have to say categorically it would not have suited me in the least: a, because I can’t teach, and I come from a family of teachers, so I know what’s involved, and b, because one thing Oxford taught me, very painfully, was that I couldn’t do poetry and academic work. I could do the odd review. Reviewing, I think, is different. So, personally I wouldn’t have wanted to go down a very academic route, and to attempt to write. But every poet’s mind and their abilities are different. I’m not saying other people are wrong to do that.

So, as I didn’t do any of these things, even when I was broadcasting a bit and so forth, my income from poetry was very, very small. But of course, I wouldn’t in any way blame Carcanet for this. There were gaps in my publishing time because I was busy with my daughter and so forth. I would say, if I did have a model, Philip Larkin remains a poet who is incredibly important to me. And I would distinguish firmly between the opinions or letters of Larkin, and what’s in the poems, which I think is very different. Larkin was a librarian. I was a very modest kind of librarian when I started, but he did a serious library job, he was responsible for building big, new libraries up in Hull and so on. Larkin managed to produce some of the best written, in terms of craft, and for me, some of the most moving poems that I have read in my lifetime. So, I think I had a vague feeling that if Philip Larkin could manage to do a full-time job and write, then perhaps this was OK for me. I think if I did have any kind of model, it was perhaps somebody like Larkin. I didn’t ever feel at all drawn to try and make money from poetry, because I think it was apparent, even then, that the ways I might have tried to do so, would have involved something like teaching, I didn’t want to do.

But the price of that, of course, is my twenty-three years of – I won’t say radio silence, I got on the radio - but not being able to do most public things. And obviously that was an extreme example, I was self-employed in my husband’s business, we couldn’t get days off - although I do have poems about the firm which I did manage to write, and which readers have valued. There are some really interesting questions, aren’t there, about the way you live and the way you write. It’s a fascinating business. But I think when I hear young poets talking about their lives and choices, I’m very sympathetic, because I think what enables you to have subjects to write, might not enable you to get out into the world and do your readings and so forth. And then, you might make other choices where you do rather well, in terms of prestige, and yet your subjects dry up. I have seen this happen to some people, tragically.

But I would not claim to be an example for anything. As I say, if you saw my poetry accounts you would weep. We had to have an accountant for the firm, and I think the accountants used to laugh their heads off when they saw my poetry totals. I think the accountant said one year, ‘You really ought to earn a bit more revenue’. If the BBC came along, I did slightly better...

VS: Were you aware in the 1980s that Carcanet did go through difficult periods?

AB: More in retrospect… I always say to people, I’ve never claimed to be an expert on Carcanet, I’ve registered changes. Yes, I think I knew in outline what was happening. I hope I’ve never asked Carcanet for things it couldn’t do for me – I think I’ve always been fairly realistic about that. Yes, I think I was probably aware of the main crisis points. I hadn’t actually realised till recently the full financial implications of the bomb blast, although I did know, obviously it disrupted their accounts, and as someone who did bookkeeping, I knew how devastating that was. But I didn’t realise the full implications of that bomb blast in 1996, even for their accounts.

The one thing I have understood very clearly, of course, is the changed way in which publishers sell poetry books. In the early 1980s, as a poet, you didn’t have to market. In fact, I knew of cases where people were told not to do too many readings - these would distract them. Your publisher sold books to things called bookshops – recently, I’ve read, in the Society of Authors magazine, comments from Faber that it’s hard to sell to bookshops. I think now, sales have an awful lot to do with social media, and people just knowing that your book is there.

How do people know your book is there? How to market poetry now is, I think, a rather mysterious business, but I think Carcanet’s doing it rather well. I also think because Michael is good at picking poets boldly, he has had a whole string of excellent people like Kei Miller who win big prizes, absolutely deservedly. I’ve never asked Michael why he took on his most successful poets, such as Kei, but I would hazard a guess it was purely on the quality of their poetry. It has been rewarded via prizes. So, I think in the last few years, excellent poets have been a very good thing for Carcanet. I think the quality of the list is vital – I’m very aware with Arts Council funding, that things are extremely tight. I’m not talking about Carcanet in particular, but if grants are held at the same amount, and you’re dealing with inflation, you’re looking at a bad situation over the years. I’m very aware of that kind of thing.

In my darker moments, I do predict to people that within the next ten years, we could see some extraordinary casualties. I’m not actually talking about Carcanet, but I think we might be very surprised, at the changes, if we had this conversation again in ten years’ time. We’ve all noticed the tendency for crowdfunding, for example. Ledbury’s just crowd-funded its international poets. I think we’re looking, especially after Brexit, at a very difficult situation. I wouldn’t stare into my crystal ball, except rather darkly. I do think anyone who cares about poetry and has the means must support it, by buying books. I’m sure Victoria, you’ve met affluent people who come out with extraordinary statements. They want to get published but they say ‘I don’t buy many books’ or ‘I buy second-hand books. I stare at them with unusual fierceness, and I say, ‘If you want to be published, how do you think your publisher is going to make a living if you are not buying new books?’ I think people really have to get the message about that.

I think also, if any one of us does have a little spare money, and it need only be a little bit, we have to be the new patrons. It’s probably no good talking to big companies, they might be in trouble after Brexit. I think things like crowdfunding aren’t a sentimental idea. They may be partly the way things are going. If we want things in the poetry world to last, any of us with a fiver to spare, should become a patron. I think we might be looking at a new model there. But certainly, in terms of book buying, this is relevant to Carcanet, I do tend to support them by buying all the poets I like that they publish, which is a fair number actually. So, I have to say that Carcanet have never paraded its money worries, it’s never come to its writers with caps or wails, so the fact that I know a little less about it than I should is probably due to admirable reticence. But it is completely remarkable that they’ve kept going for so long, and I think Michael Schmidt must have real business acumen to have done it. I think many people would not have kept the firm going! I’m happy to put that on record.

VS: A lot of the people we’ve spoken to reflect on how hard he works.

AB: Oh, phenomenally. I think from people who know him better than I do. Anecdotally, the work rate is absolutely phenomenal, and something which Carcanet poets probably take far too much for granted. But we are aware that the quality of the editing takes time. He’s worked very hard with me on all my books. I know not all publishers do that, even the bigger publishers, so I think credit really should be paid for the number of hours that everyone puts in at Carcanet on every aspect of the job, especially Michael.

VS: Could you give me a bit more insight into how the publishing process has worked for you with Carcanet?

AB: Well again, I haven’t really talked very much to other Carcanet poets about what they do. From the odd time I have discussed it, I think practice varies a lot. I think Michael’s probably very flexible in his approach to poets. I make no secret of the fact that I quite clearly write far too much. Recently loads of plastic bags left my house, with an excellent van driver, heading for the John Rylands Library in Manchester. Those were poems, hundreds of them, which had never got into my Carcanet collections. And I have to say in defence of these poems, that some of them have been, for example, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, or *Radio 3*, so I don’t think they’re all rubbish!

The prolific poet is a bit of a nightmare for their publisher. Some very good poets are prolific. Elizabeth Jennings, with whom Michael worked immensely hard, also wrote a great deal. So, the problem that Michael and I have is not one that every poet would have, but there are too many poems. I try to make a virtue of this, in that I think it’s better to prune than pad. At one point in the 90s I think, I actually managed to submit a book that for once was a bit short. And we put some newer poems in it. Now, I was deeply impressed by the reviewers because they all realised that these poems came from a different period, as it were. And they complained about this, which was very interesting. But this made me think, I mustn’t do this again, I must go back to the old method, as it were, of almost over production.

So, typically, I would send Michael more poems than I know we need. And then we have amiable fights, lots of long emails, about what is going to go in the collection. And it’s really a process of negotiation, because if I really like something, Michael will let me leave it in. And he generally saves me from the worst excesses of my clumsy syntax and so on. But even there, he’s occasionally given in and probably been to kind to me, and then a reviewer has complained. So, I think at every level, he’s trying to save me from myself. The main area of contention is that of animal poems. I think Michael will be the first to admit that he’s not a person who’s had a great deal to do with animals. Although, irritatingly, he’s written a really superb poem about a cat-life, it’s extremely unfair! - better than any of mine, I think.

So, there is a running joke about haggling over hedgehogs, because if Michael and I are going to disagree about anything, it’s going to be owl poems. But if you have an indulgent weakness yourself, it may be good to have a publisher who’s very hard on that. If a horse poem’s going to go through, it’s going to be one that’s pretty well defended. So, in the case of Michael and me, there’s quite a lot of work and interchange and so on, and I think this produces a better book. It’s better to trim than pad, but I think the experience of other Carcanet poets may be completely different, and I think that’s wholly to Michael’s credit, I think he does what the particular poet needs.

VS: Thinking about the Carcanet list, do you think the list has diversified? Do you think they’ve brought in more female poets, for example?

AB: I think that has happened, and I think what’s happened has been a reflection of the culture, it is very heartening that there are just so many very good, young, women poets around, and Carcanet clearly has a deserved selection of those. But in terms of talking about life, there was a period when I was aware that I was hearing various stories about women – this is a long time ago, the 80s – who’d had children, perhaps had difficulties writing, and to be blunt, had been dropped by their publisher, or lost heart and stopped publishing, and never really started again. I think a lot of people fell by the wayside, and so to have a publisher who’s loyal, almost to the point of being uncommercial, to a woman poet who has commitments– and it might happen to a man as well, if he’s going through family life – I think is of enormous importance. What you need in life is survival, and that includes your professional relationship with your publisher.

So, I think anyone who joined Carcanet, perhaps when I did, as a woman poet, would have a good chance of staying the course, which was demonstrably not true for all kinds of reasons, for some of my generation. I mean, it’s always complex, but you can see some people have stopped and started. So, I think without ever trying to be fashionable, Carcanet has almost instinctively moved with the times. If there are very good new woman poets there, Carcanet will publish them. But I think the international range and the sense of time and history in the Carcanet list can’t be underestimated. It’s a serious list in the best sense. Reading the work of poets from Germany, from a divided Germany, reading work from Latin America makes you think about time and history and the responsibilities of the writer in a very deep way. I think it’s been a remarkable list for that. It’s not a list that intimidates you. It’s a list that I think broadens and deepens your abilities.

VS: The writers that I’ve spoken to have all mentioned commitment, and the important relationships that they’ve built up with their poets.

AB: Yes, writing isn’t a smooth business, and age is very hard on poets. People always have times when they’re less productive, when they’re less well-received, critically, so it really is essential to have some who’ll stick with you, I think. The starting again is a painful process and it’s one that some people don’t achieve, and it may be that it isn’t the worst people who fail to do that, which is rather haunting.

VS: Is there anything else that you would like to discuss?

AB: Well, shall I read you eight lines of poetry and then we can see if there’s anything more– This goes back to the days of the bomb blast, because I had seen the Manchester offices that were bombed. I used to sit there looking at the books poised above Michael’s desk, rather perilously. And I read afterwards that because the windows had gone, that birds were flying in and out. So, this is a poem which I think was in the national newspapers at the time and has popped up since.

It’s called ‘Carcanet: A Pigeon’s Eye View’

From my thick sill I saw the books.  
The books were black. The books were green.  
I saw the window burst by blast.  
I flew in where the books had been.  
  
Then, as I dozed, I saw the books.  
The books were green. The books were black.  
I saw the pages arch, then preen,  
Whirr up like wings. The books flew back.

VS: That was wonderful, thank you Alison.

AB: It’s one of those poems, I think, that drops out of the sky on the poet. Since I’ve retired it’s been easy to catch those. Carcanet by its loyalty has enabled me to get to the stage where I have time to write, but I think life makes you write, if something is as huge as that bombing, with the injuries and the devastation. Carcanet and its terrible problems were the edge of a huge event. I think people do write what they need to write.

It’s very good to have somebody around who keeps records – I have a terrible confession to make. As an archivist, you’ll be horrified! I can be rather careless, especially when I was younger, and I had rather lost track of this poem. But I knew it existed. I knew some of it by heart, and I found it on Carcanet’s website – not only are Carcanet my publisher, they appear to have become my archivist! I think I might try to put it into my next collection! I do think that the whole way Carcanet is organised is most helpful for its poets. *PN Review* is fully digitised. This isn’t self-importance. it’s a deep sense of salvage and keeping things. Events like that bomb blast really bring home to you how fragile things are. It’s a huge human effort to preserve anything.

[Political discussion]

AB: Time is a very strange thing, maybe we’re always fighting the same fight. Again, and again, you don’t stop. I think probably what we’re saying about enterprises like Carcanet – there’s a kind of valour in what they’re doing. It can at times be very controversial. It’s never dull. In the end, there’s a lot that you can pick out. You can say you’re very glad that Carcanet’s there, and that its books will live on, and remain vitally important to many readers.

VS: Thank you so much for your time today, Alison.

[Pleasantries; ENDS].