**Carcanet Oral History Interview [27 March 2019]**

**Respondent: Helen Tookey (HT)**

**Interviewer: Victoria Stobo (VS)**

VS: Would you like to introduce yourself for the tape?

HT: I’m Helen Tookey, formerly a Managing Editor at Carcanet and now published by Carcanet as a poet.

VS: Could you tell us more about your relationship with Carcanet Press? So, for example, when did you first meet Michael Schmidt?

HT: I first met him when I was working here at the University of Liverpool for the Reader Organisation. This was early 2000s, I can’t remember exactly. I was working for the Reader, which was a literature outreach organisation, and I met Michael Schmidt through that: he was invited by Jane Davis to participate in Readers’ Days and things like that. That was really good for me because at that point I was already writing poems. I was starting to get them published in magazines. So, making a connection with Michael was really good; I’d already identified Carcanet, being in Manchester, as a really key player in poetry publishing. Not that long after that, I actually started working freelance for Carcanet. Michael was looking for a proofreader for *PN Review*, and I’d worked for a long time as a freelance editor. So that worked out really nicely. I think I just started proofreading initially, because someone else was doing the copy-editing. So, it was a relatively contained job at that point, purely on a freelance basis. But it went well, and I started gradually doing a bit more freelance editorial work for them. Most of the editorial work was being done in-house. Judith Willson was the managing editor at that point. But every so often there would be a pile-up of work, or something that was a particularly big project. And Judith knew me slightly from previous publishing connections, so she was happy to put out editorial work on books to me. So, I gradually started doing more freelance work for the Press. I think it was 2011 – Judith wanted to take retirement from the job, so it was around 2011 that I took over from Judith as the managing editor. Should I say a bit about that job?

VS: Absolutely.

HT: It was a really interesting and quite unusual role in publishing, because there are not many roles in publishing companies where you’re essentially both the production manager and doing the actual copy-editing, the editorial work on the text. That’s really rare, because with most publishing companies, all the copy-editing is being done by freelancers. So, if you’re the production manager, really you’re just managing. It’s a workflow management role, and everything editorially, actual copy-editing, is being done by freelancers. So, this seemed to me a really quite exciting opportunity, because it’s so rare to have that job where you are doing the production management, but you’re also working on the text. Which is the part that I really enjoy. Not many people would be able to slot into that role, because it needed someone who had experience in production management, which I had – by that point I’d been working as production editor and then production manager for Liverpool University Press. So, I had that experience, but also I was a poet and I was interested in poetry, and I had experience as an editor. So, I was able to bring those two things together. It was an unusual job, but it did really suit me, and it was really important – obviously all jobs are important in a small company, everything is vital, but it was particularly important as a sort of buffer between Michael and the authors. A conduit, something like a conduit and a buffer, in different ways. I think it was very important to have someone in that role, because Michael was always stupendously busy with so much stuff. Trying to run Carcanet, I mean, I think we’ll come on to talk about the financial side, but trying to keep it afloat, even, trying to manage all those aspects, it was really important to have someone who was at that desk, in that role, managing the production, keeping everything going, keeping the books coming out on time, but also able to deal with the authors on a level, the sort of level that was required. So actually, to be able to have those conversations about specifics of the texts, to talk about the poems editorially, and not just in terms of things like proofreading or production. But actually, to be able to really engage with the poems on that level. And I think that was always really important, it was important to Michael to feel like he had someone in that role. Judith had been excellent, excellent in that role, and it was really important for the Press.

VS: Absolutely and I get the impression that quite a few of the editors that worked for Carcanet Press were also writers themselves?

HT: Yes, I think so. I don’t know if you’ve interviewed Judith at all?

VS: I’m interviewing her tomorrow.

HT: Oh ok. Judith’s a particularly interesting example because she was keeping her light under a bushel about being a writer, she’s now, as it were, come out as an absolutely amazing poet, I think. And I think that has been important, but I also think, there’s a little bit of a flip side of that, which is that you have to be able to put the job first. So, there’s a little bit of a risk, if you’re not careful, that someone who is primarily interested in thinking about themselves as a writer is going to be either trying to intervene too much editorially. You’ve got to be able to prioritise. You know, as an editor – this is not my book, it’s someone else’s book, the primary focus of this job is getting these books all coming out on time, so it’s a little bit of a balance, which hasn’t always been easy to get right. For small presses.

VS: Michael certainly alluded to that in his interview, where the reality of the Press is, it’s a business, and there is a bottom line eventually.

HT: Exactly, yes. I think it is difficult because in small companies like that you want people working there who are, to some extent, at least interested in writing, but they’re perhaps also writers themselves. But fundamentally, you’ve got to be able to get on with the job and prioritise that. Occasionally that was a tricky one to negotiate. Not for me, but around and in the air, kind of thing.

VS: And before we move on to the next set of questions, you mentioned that you were already being published by a couple of different magazines before you started working with Carcanet. Do you remember the names of the magazines at all? It’s just to get a sense of the different players in the landscape.

HT: Yes, I think… the very first poetry magazine that I was published in was *Stand*. And I remember almost writing a good poem by accident. I sort of got this poem published by *Stand* and I had really no idea how I’d written a good poem. And everything I wrote after that for ages was rejected by everybody because it was terrible. I had no idea what I was doing. It was quite a slow process. I think I had also had some poems in *PN Review*. Quite early on, before I knew Michael, before I met him. And again, I think it was a little bit of beginner’s luck, I had some poems published by *PN Review*, and a lot rejected. Again, I didn’t really know what I was doing. Other things I’d have to look it up. I could go back to acknowledgements list in *Missel-Child* actually.

VS: Could you describe your relationship with the poets and writers published by Carcanet?

HT: Yes, it was a working relationship with a number of different aspects. The main thing, in a way, was to be the person that, once the book was passed for production, that I was their contact for all stages of that. So I would be the person writing to them, introducing myself, the book’s in production, what’s going to happen is, I will copy-edit it, I’ll contact you with any queries, we’ll resolve those, I’ll get proofs organised, send you the proofs, we’ll take it through all those stages, right up to the point where the book goes to press. It was also my job to liaise with them about the cover, what did they want to put on the cover, was that going to be feasible, doing that work of getting the permission to use images and that kind of thing. In terms of editing the text, it was really varied. It was also varied in terms of, some books Michael would work quite heavily on the text, and others he wouldn’t at all. Or a very light touch, kind of thing. That varied according to a lot of factors. So, in a way, that was sort of similar with me. With some books there might be quite a lot of to-ing and fro-ing with editorial queries. Sometimes with slightly larger-scale questions, sort of structural things almost, would it – I mean, I’m trying to think of specific examples, but would it work better if we, you know, organised it like this, or if we divided it in this way, those kinds of things. So sometimes it was kind of on that level, I suppose more often it was on the level of relatively small, specific copy-editing type queries. I think I was probably quite nervous about that, perhaps, when I started. And certainly, if you’re dealing with someone really eminent here, and I’m sending them a list of my suggestions almost, or editorial queries, are they going to take that well? What I found was that the vast majority of people were really happy to get that kind of editing. It was really rare that someone didn’t like having that kind of editing.

VS: Would that cover things like the sequencing of poems, the ordering of poems? Would it be line editing?

HT: It was more – it wouldn’t often cover things like the sequencing of poems. It might do occasionally. Or possibly things like the styling of certain aspects of the poems on the page, especially if there was, perhaps, the book had got a slightly different structure from the norm or something like that, you know. I seem to remember having quite a lot of conversation with Kei Miller about his book *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, because it’s got more than one sequence embedded in it, and they run through the book, but not consecutively, or there are other poems interspersed within the sequences. And so we had to think quite a lot about how to identify them on the page as parts of the same sequence, because some of the poems are numbered, and some of them are not numbered, and some of them are titled and some of them are not titled. So there’s a number of different factors floating around, and I do remember having quite an interesting back and forth with Kei about – ok, what’s actually going to work in terms of allowing the reader to see that these are part of the same sequence. So sometimes it was that, because sometimes for the author, they haven’t necessarily thought about it in terms of how it’s going to look as a printed book. So it’s trying to resolve some of those. Or you might have questions about, for example, if someone had written a lot of poems with very long lines, then you’ve got terrible problems about breaking the lines and that kind of thing. And with poetry, that can be huge. That can be a really big deal, so sometimes just trying to find ways to resolve those kinds of situations, but I suppose more of the time it would just be me sending them a list of, as you say, line editing queries. Not sure punctuation’s right here, or did you mean this here, rather than this? Or that kind of thing. Or occasionally saying things like, I’m not sure this – this doesn’t seem quite clear, do you want to look at that again, those kinds of things. And mostly people were really happy with that. Most writers, they don’t take that as criticism, they take that as a good opportunity and a reassurance that someone is looking at the work carefully, so it’s not going to come out with those typos or that kind of thing.

VS: Were there any challenges or challenging situations you faced when you were an editor?

HT: I’m sure there were, but I’ve blanked them from my mind. I mean, I do think this one I might have to think back on specific examples, because occasionally you would get someone who was quite difficult to deal with in one way or another. So, it would just be a case of having to, in a way, manage that. There were sometimes more practical problems to do with the nature of a book. There were sometimes cost problems. And that could be a tricky one, because sometimes, and this is not exclusive to Carcanet, the book will be commissioned or it will be agreed to be published, and then you’ll get it to the point where it’s in production, and it will be realised that actually, this is going to cost a lot of money, because it’s three times as long as we thought it was going to be, or the person wants to put colour images in it or something. Some complication like that. And that can sometimes be difficult.

VS: In those sorts of situations, would the book end up being published, or would it have a smaller print run, or would less be spent on marketing and things like that?

HT: I mean, sometimes you might get a situation where some books almost just, the can got kicked down the road for quite a long time, and I do think there were probably over the course of my time at Carcanet, there were a few like that. One that does spring to mind was Nicolas Barker’s book about the history of the book, actually. And that was really complicated because the text was pulled together from various sources – he had given various talks – the text was coming together from various different sources, some of which he’d written a long time ago and were in various different places, and then there were dozens if not actually hundreds of images, which were very old slides, it was really quite complicated.

[Discussion of copyright left out]

 But when I left Carcanet, it was still not apparent whether that book was actually going to be able to be published, because it was still in a state of disarray. It has been published now which is great, but at the time I remember not feeling sure if it was going to be able to, because there seemed to be so many practical problems involved. I don’t think Michael had envisaged quite what it was going to involve. So, there were a few books like that. Occasionally there would be a *Collected Poems* that was so huge, that again, the cost situation was quite a problem. And then as you say, you’re almost weighing up the equations of - it’s always difficult in publishing, if you try to cut the cost by publishing fewer and fewer copies, that doesn’t work really, because the cost per copy is just bigger and bigger, and you’re not going to recoup the money if you haven’t published enough, but obviously you’ve got big outlay if you’re trying to publish more. That can be a problem. But I think if I cast my mind back, I can probably think of more specific examples.

VS: [Wide scope of Carcanet’s published output]

HT: That’s a good point because I would say that probably the books that caused the most problems, often, were the ones that fell outside, in a way, the thing that Carcanet was equipped primarily to do. So, anything that really involved integrated design on the page – Carcanet was not set up to do that, because a designer will charge you a lot more than just regular, straightforward type-setting job. Fair enough. They’re integrating, you’re asking them to come up with a bespoke design, they’re integrating images and text. And I had worked with really good designers on other books for other presses, but at Carcanet there was never, ever the budget for that. So something like that Nicolas Barker book would… part of the issue was that we couldn’t afford to pay a designer to really design it in a properly integrated way, so it kind of stalled on that problem. If you haven’t really got the budget to do integrated, illustrated books, you can’t really do them very well.

VS: You just end up with inserts at various points.

HT: Yes, or you just end up with a bit of a bodge, that isn’t quite what you wanted, which no disrespect to anybody, typesetters or anybody, but if you’re trying to do something that’s really outside the boundaries of what you’re either set-up for, or willing and able to pay for, that’s where it runs into problems. And I guess, yes, anything that – Carcanet does do an interesting range of stuff, but those would often tend to throw up problems, because it would require bespoke design or it wasn’t part of its regular remit. Those were probably the trickiest ones.

VS: Does Carcanet have more capacity for that design work now, or is it still in a similar sort of situation?

HT: That’s a tricky one. The person who took over from me, Luke Allen, was more experienced in design. I’m not a designer. And he did have experience working in design, so to some extent, there was more capacity there. But he’s not working there anymore, and I think – I’m not sure where the situation is now, with that.

VS: [Women in Carcanet] what was your experience as a woman working for the Press?

HT: That’s an interesting question. When I was working at Carcanet, everyone there except Michael and Okey Nzelu, who was the salesperson, everyone else was female at that point. Which again, is not unusual for publishing, actually. Publishing is, in some ways, a female-dominated, in scare quotes, industry – but often not at the top. But also, I would say many of the important players around Carcanet were women. Kate Gavron, who was the Chair of the Board, and she was an extremely important person in the world of Carcanet. Also, the finance person when I was working there, Christine Steele, she was quite an important figure in the running of the press on a day to day basis. And Michael listened to her in a way that he didn’t always listen to everybody. She was a fairly fierce Geordie woman and she didn’t stand any nonsense, and that was quite important. Michael sometimes goes off on enthusiasms of various kinds, and Christine, partly because she was the finance person, but also because of just who she was, she really did have the ability to say ‘Michael, No.’ And sometimes that felt very important. She was great, Christine. Just beyond the finance role, I think she did play an important role at that time.

VS: That’s useful to know.

HT: She might tell you all kinds of things! But it was a sort of balance, it was a checks and balances situation, you do need the person who’s the editorial decision-maker, to have imagination, and to some extent follow whims and hunches and be imaginative and try things, a risk-taker, you need all of that stuff, and that’s been really important to Carcanet. But you also need someone with the gravitas and that Michael was sufficiently, you know, he would listen if Christine said no, we’re not doing that, or no, that’s not going to work. Or that’s not a good idea. And similarly, with Kate Gavron. So, it always felt to me as though there were really quite important, quite strong women around who were not afraid to say what they thought. And Michael would listen to that.

VS: And how did you work with the women poets that were published by Carcanet?

HT: Generally, very well. Nothing stands out as a particular problem, in that regard. I always felt that Carcanet’s - I know this is slightly jumping ahead – Carcanet’s list, to me, always seemed very, women poets always seemed to me to have been really quite central to Carcanet. Eavan Boland was one of the writers that Michael had always seen as a really significant writer. I think she had always been one of the people he was most excited to publish. Proud to publish. I guess one of the strengths of Carcanet is that they have published people over a long time. So, Michael probably first published Eavan really quite early in the 70s, so her career as a poet has been with Carcanet. Similarly, important American women poets like Louise Glück, Jorie Graham – I think Jorie Graham, probably in particular is someone else that Michael had a huge amount of respect for and interest in her work and thought that she was a really, really vital part of poetry. And that it was really important for Carcanet to be publishing her. And then people like Sinéad Morrissey, newer writers like Tara Bergin was someone who was published in *New Poetries 5*, I’m pretty sure about that. You know Michael always seemed to me to be not… I want to say he didn’t look at things in a particularly gender-based sort of way. But I’m not sure whether I actually mean that, or that in many ways he thought that particularly interesting work was being done by women poets, actually. A bit of both of those things, I would think. I do think that’s really been a strength of Carcanet. It’s never felt to me at all like a male-dominated list. At all. I would say Carcanet’s got a very, very good… I don’t know, gender balance is such a weak way of putting it. I think Michael really, there are certain poets who are also women, like Eavan, Jorie Graham, Louise Glück, Tara Bergin, Jane Yeh in a slightly different mode, that Michael just sort of, yes, this person’s important. And important in the type of work that Carcanet has always tried to publish, which is – Michael describes it really nicely on the website somewhere as modernism and its aftermaths. Work that is informed by the experimentalism of modernism but is being written now.

VS: You don’t feel that women have been marginalised on the list?

HT: No, I don’t. No, I wouldn’t say that at all.

*[Section deleted following interviewee’s request]*

VS: How much influence did you have as an editor in terms of bringing people into the Press?

HT: Not a huge amount I would say, to be honest. That’s possibly because I wouldn’t say I was tremendously confident about identifying writers and saying, I think we should be publishing this person.

VS: Had you done any of that at Liverpool University Press?

HT: No, I’d never been in a commissioning role. Liverpool University Press, because it’s an academic press, I was much more in a straightforward production role. I guess at Carcanet that was certainly looser. Michael would quite often ask my opinion about things, work that had been submitted for the magazine, and the place where I did have more input was, I guess, working on *New Poetries 6*, which I did edit with Michael. How those anthologies tended to be put together, sort of flowed from the magazine usually, so it would be a case of identifying writers that Michael, or that we were interested in their work, they had been in the magazine a few times, Michael tended to keep lists of possibles for the next New Poetries anthology. A sort of flow process, which I think works really well actually. So, people had often been in the magazine a few times, then they would be invited to be in a New Poetries anthology, and then from that would usually come quite a lot of collections. So, we did have a lot of conversations around the poets that were going to be included in *New Poetries 6*. Perhaps if I had – I don’t think Michael would have resented that at all. If I’d been more the kind of person who would have come in and said, this person’s amazing, I think he would have completely listened. It just wasn’t something I did very much of.

VS: [Arts Council] could you say a few words about the relationship between Carcanet and the Arts Council.

HT: I’m not sure when Carcanet became – well, it used to be called a regularly funded organisation before - what they have now is national portfolio organisations. I think I’m right about this, before that it was what was called a regularly funded organisation. So rather than have to keep applying for separate project funding, you had ongoing funding, although you still had to keep applying for that, re-applying for that every so often. I’m pretty sure Carcanet had already got that status and had had that status for quite a while, when I was there. And it was obviously vital, it was really important. As far as I’m aware, the relationship between Carcanet and the Arts Council was good. Alison Boyle was the Arts Council person, she was the person who was assigned to the North West. Alison used to come to - she might have been on the board, I’m not sure, but she certainly used to come to a lot of meetings at Carcanet. It’s quite possible that they would have had an Arts Council representative on the board. That would make sense. That was a very good relationship, Alison was often there. Obviously if you’re receiving regular funding from the Arts Council, then it puts you under certain obligations to the Arts Council, and if the Arts Council has a shift of policy, or a shift of emphasis, then you’re going to have to fit in with that. The process of reapplying every five years or whatever it was, for the funding, was really big and time-consuming. But that’s the way it is for all arts organisations. A huge amount of time on funding bids.

VS: What is that process like? I’m not familiar with it.

HT: Basically, it was that every five years, you would have to fill in a very detailed report to the Arts Council. I don’t t know exactly, Michael would know the details of this, because I don’t think I was ever involved, although perhaps providing info. But it was a very big exercise, you’d have to provide very, very detailed breakdown of everything we’d done, and going forward what you’re going to do. It was huge, a really big exercise, very time-consuming. But they’re giving you a large amount of money, so it was often… there is an element of, this requires a lot of work, but that money was really essential. Carcanet would have been in a really problematic position without it. Occasionally that thing of a shift of policy or something, I seem to remember that certainly towards the end of when I was at Carcanet, the Arts Council had started to put a lot more emphasis on publishers running events and almost literature promotion activities. I remember a lot of conversations around that, because it sort of felt that there are already existing literature promotion organisations. That’s what they do. Is it not ok that a book publisher just publishes books? I do remember there was a bit of tension, because it felt like you were getting messages from the Arts Council that you need to be doing more events, you need to be doing more workshops, or more outward facing things in the community. But really, we’re a book publisher. There was a bit of a tension around that, I think. You have to compromise a little bit, because if that’s the policy, and they’re the people awarding the funding. So yes, there could be a certain amount of – if you want to go in a direction that perhaps they aren’t keen on, or they want you to go in a direction that you’re not keen on, then that’s tricky. It never was a huge problem, but it was certainly floating around a little bit.

VS: Have Carcanet gone down the road of doing more events like that? Have they been able to negotiate that element?

HT: I don’t know. I’m not sure. That would be interesting to look into, I don’t really know the answer to that.

VS: I think they do an annual poetry reading at the Rylands?

HT: Yes they do. And a lecture, and they’ve done that for a long time. And they do do, they obviously do do events and things, not that they don’t, but whether they’ve had to, in a way, find ways of doing that more, or doing it differently as a result of that drive for the Arts Council, I’m not really sure. Or possibly the Arts Council might not be so much pushing that line anyway.

VS: [timeline, started at Carcanet in 2011] When did you leave?

HT: It was at the end of 2014. I’m trying to think whether there were other particular initiatives or drives that the Arts Council was following at the time. It would be worth looking back at Arts Council policy.

VS: I do remember there was a couple of years when they were announcing major cutbacks, wasn’t there? Because there were quite a few institutions either had their funding severely cut, or they were cut off.

HT: Yes. And that may have been while I was still there. And that was always creating a lot of anxiety. That’s not happened to Carcanet, but yes, I’ve just seen all over Twitter this week – the Poetry Business in Sheffield has had an Arts Council bid knocked back. And it sounded like that was not just specific, not project-funding but ongoing funding. So, that’s the business that Peter and Ann Sansom run, so again that’s quite major news. So yes, it’s not easy. I’m trying to remember with Arts Council whether – it might have been - digitisation is often one of those things that are a big buzz word, and that might have been a particular Arts Council push, making things digital, widening access in various ways. That may well have been something that was going on, because I do remember quite a lot of, in common with a lot of other publishers, digitising the backlist was always a kind of huge, ongoing project. So that may partly have been driven by an Arts Council policy.

VS: [Helen’s own publications, her new collection] Your first full-length collection was published by Carcanet in 2014 – so what was your experience as a poet being published by the Press?

HT: So, as I mentioned before, I’d been in *PN Review* quite a few times before I was working for Carcanet, so I’d had poems in *PN Review*. And then I was selected for *New Poetries 5*, and I think that came out before I started working at Carcanet. But it was sort of around the same time, I can’t quite remember if I was already working there or not. And that was great, because there were a lot of promotional events and things around that, because the great thing with an anthology like that, you can have a showcase, you can have four or five poets from the anthology, reading at events. I remember doing some readings around *New Poetries 5*. So, after that, Michael and I started having conversations about putting a collection together. Obviously it’s an unusual position to be having your book published by the press that you’re actually working for, and I did feel a bit, does this look a bit bad? I think I was relieved by the fact that my work had been in *New Poetries* before I had started this job at Carcanet. So, it didn’t look as though it was an insider job, in a weird way. I was aware of that, there’s credentials here.

VS: Were there any other publishers that you would have considered publishing with?

HT: Well, I didn’t really think about it, I suppose because I had been cultivating this relationship with Michael Schmidt as someone who was publishing my work, before I was working at Carcanet. Although it’s true that I had been doing freelance work for them. It felt natural to carry on with that, and also because Carcanet are one of the top poetry publishers, so it would have seemed like a really odd thing to turn your back on that. I just sort of thought, well, perhaps to some people this does look a little bit weird because now I’m in this job at Carcanet, but I was not in this job when Michael started to take an interest in my work, so I felt like that was ok. Putting a first collection together is often quite a weird thing, and it often is the case that people have a lot of stuff that’s been written over really quite a long time. It’s often very different from the process of writing a subsequent collection, where you’re actually writing it in a really short time, a year, two years, three years. That seems like a really short time for a poetry collection to come together. Whereas first collections, often the material has been written over fifteen years or something like that. That was certainly the case with me. So it was this process of how to shape it into something, and what is it really about, what are the themes and approaches, and I found that really hard to see. Michael was really helpful with that, and I remember we had quite a few conversations, go for lunch and you’d get the manuscript on the table and – this doesn’t go in at all, and maybe it would be better if these were connected and that kind of thing. He really helped me with that shaping and focusing process. The part that was really a bit weird because I was the production manager, I was producing my own book, there was no one else to do it. So, that was strange. I effectively just did the whole thing – I copy-edited it myself, I think I might have given it to my husband to go through, because he’s also an editor, but I had to send it to the typesetter, send it to the printer, and that was really weird! And I do remember, when it came back from the printer, thinking this is a bit odd, because I just felt a bit flat. This wouldn’t usually be the case for another author, they wouldn’t be doing this themselves. So that was a little bit weird. But obviously it was great to have the book and everything. My memory is that at that time, Carcanet did not have an enormous amount of money to throw around on marketing and events and stuff like that. My memory was that the whole book launch side of things was fairly minimal. The press was generally not in a position to organise and pay for a launch event for every book that came out. That didn’t happen. What sometimes happened was that you would try, if you could group two or three books together and have an event that was more economically sensible. Or if the author had organised something, the press would support it. But I think it certainly wasn’t a, we can just organise and pay for an event for every book. But I guess most poets realise that there’s just not much money in poetry publishing. Although it might feel as if you’re not getting a huge amount of marketing and publicity and events and stuff like that, it’s just not feasible really. I certainly did quite a few readings and stuff like that, there probably were some events that you could have branded as, this is a launch event or whatever, but there was nothing huge going on, so it wasn’t like that at all.

VS: [Prizes] I’m not familiar with the process of how books are nominated for prizes, so how was that managed by Carcanet?

HT: Yes, it’s… there are certain prizes that the publishers generally try to put everything forward that they can. Everything that’s eligible for something, they will try and put it forward. And I think that would have applied to the Seamus Heaney prize, which is for first collections. So you would just put forward all your first collections from that year, you would probably only be talking about maybe five books. And yes, things like the Forward Prize and stuff like that. There are some prizes though, and this is really controversial, the publisher actually has to pay to nominate things, or if your author is shortlisted. The Costa Prize, for instance. It’s really a bit controversial. Or it’s not necessarily that you have to pay – some prizes you do, the publisher has to pay to even nominate books for it, but other ones, it’s more that if your book gets shortlisted, the publisher is expected to pay quite a large amount of money towards the publicity and stuff like that. And I think that’s how the Costa works. So the publisher can put their books forward, but if one of them is shortlisted, in putting your book forward, you basically sign an agreement that if the book is shortlisted, you will pay £5,000 or something towards the prize. That’s a bit weird. So actually, quite a few prizes essentially are ruling smaller presses out of the running, because they cannot afford to submit books to them. I’ve noticed a lot of stuff on Twitter about the Costa, but it’s not the only one at all. And so sometimes, yes, a press will say to you, we can’t afford to put your book forward for this prize, or if you have to pay to nominate, we’re only going to nominate these two over here. So there is a bit of that, but they will absolutely try and put everything forward for everything, as much as they can. Obviously it’s in their interests to do that. I was so surprised that my book was shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney award, because it’s not a prize short-listy kind of book, I don’t think. It doesn’t have an immediate USP, it’s not – huge generalisation, but books that make it on to prize shortlists often are fairly clearly driven by some kind of issue or something. They’ve got some kind of clear USP or narrative line, or something like that. And I was really surprised that my book was shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney. The Seamus Heaney Prize is a little bit more eclectic in what it shortlists. I remember the shortlist for that year, and it didn’t really overlap at all, with any of the other prize shortlists, which often echo each other. So it was brilliant, great.

VS: [Discussion of themes in *Missel child*]

HT: The new book seems to have weirdly also an awful lot of water in it. There’s a huge amount in this book which I only noticed as I was going along putting it together. There’s a lot of water rising and vaguely threatening to engulf people. I don’t really know why. And the picture that’s on the cover is a painting by a painter called Algernon Newton, it’s this very eerie looking picture of a house reflected in a canal. So again, it’s a very dark water kind of scene.

VS: Is there anything else that you’d like to discuss that you think might be relevant? Or anything you’d like to ask me about the project? [Mention of economic aspects of Carcanet]

HT: Carcanet is wholly owned by Lady Gavron now. This is my understanding. Lord Gavron bought Carcanet at some point in the 70s I think.

VS: [Influence of Gavrons, Michael still has free rein?]

HT: Yes. Definitely that’s the case. Kate Gavron has been the chair of the Board for quite a while now. She’s a pretty firm hand, but she doesn’t try to impose anything on Michael in terms of editorial line or anything like that. I think that is important. It’s probably, definitely worth being up front about the fact that – when people talk about independent publishers, the kind of questions are always, ok, who actually owns it? Where is the money? Because often there’s these huge corporations and then there’s the indies – well, ok, it is independent, but it is also owned by Lady Gavron. And that’s because it would not have been able to survive without – it wouldn’t have been able to. You’ve got to weigh those things up. I think that’s always been the case and Michael’s always been, there’s the pragmatic consideration, how do we keep this press going? That’s why at whatever point that was, in the 70s, Bob Gavron bought it and that gives you a solid base. You’re still accountable in lots of ways, and that’s also not saying that they’re just pumping money into the press. Because they’re not. So Carcanet has also still had to rely on both its own sales and revenue, and on Arts Council funding. Money is coming from various sources, but what it does give you is that security. The Gavrons also own the Folio Society, so it is in a way part of a bigger thing. But they certainly have never interfered with the editorial line at all. But I just think it’s worth, people don’t really know anything about how publishing operates in terms of who owns what, or anything. And when I started working in publishing it was a massive shock to me to realise that small publishers were usually owned by bigger ones, and they were owned by bigger ones. I just didn’t know that, and most people don’t know that. They just see the name, the imprint name. The first job I had in publishing was when I was in Cambridge and I’d finished a Master’s degree and I didn’t know what to do, I tried to get a job in publishing, got a job with what I thought was a small, independent publisher, and it was actually by that point an imprint of Simon and Schuster. Simon and Schuster was owned by Paramount, Paramount was in turn owned by Viacom, Viacom is probably now owned by an intergalactic something. I thought I was working for a small publishing company, I’m working for the same people that make Star Trek! The company letterhead had the little Paramount mountain. That was a massive eye-opener, and I often talk to the students about this, trying to get a sense of the poetry publishing landscape, which imprints are part of something much bigger, which is part of something much bigger, vastly bigger. And which ones are sort of independent, so Carcanet or the smaller ones like Nine Arches or something, but even then, many of the presses have got some kind of backer, or funding or whatever. Because often that’s been the only thing that’s enabled it to actually keep going. When I was working at Carcanet I would say the average print run, for a new book by someone not – well, pretty much by anyone, it was about 400 copies. You know, with novels, they’d just ‘What?!’ And of that, probably nearly 100 copies is going on advance, PR copies, that stuff. You’re printing hardly any.

VS: Definitely still a cottage industry aspect to most poetry publishing.

HT: Yes. There really is, because the market is so small, although they keep saying, ‘Oh, poetry sales figures have rocketed,’ you’re talking about three authors, a couple of poets who’ve made their name on Instagram and are now selling books in their thousands. But that’s absolutely disconnected from the vast majority of poetry books, which are being bought by the same people, who are writing them. I kind of think, ok, *Missel-Child*’s probably sold, say it’s sold 400 copies, I probably know all those people. It’s such a tiny, tiny world! The people writing it are the people buying it, to a large extent.

VS: Do you get the sense, what is the poetry publishing landscape like now, and do you get the sense, is there any trickle down from those couple of really famous Instagram poets? Do you think there’s enough new people coming into poetry to sustain it in the long-term?

HT: I would be surprised if there was much trickle-down or trickle-across. I would be surprised if there was much crossover between – again, huge generalisations but – the vast numbers of people buying, say, Rupi Kaur’s books, they’re not going to buy mine. Or most of those people are really unlikely to venture into the territory of anything that would be published by Carcanet. Again, this is a massive generalisation, you’re talking about such a different type of product, in a way. Obviously there is some area where you’re talking about poets who are a bit more popular I suppose, and I guess there might be some sort of crossover readership going on there. But I would be surprised, because it’s just a very different kind of thing.

VS: I think even the way people engage with it online is very different.

HT: Yes. Again, huge generalisation, but I do feel that a lot of the poetry that’s being written for the internet, it’s designed to have a really immediate impact. That’s what it’s designed for. And that’s almost completely at odds with everything, you know, that more literary poetry is aiming at. It’s absolutely almost the opposite. And that can be a problem that you run up against in teaching, actually. This sort of – why do I have to struggle to understand this, or work my way into it? Because if someone’s used to reading little, short, instant, grab-able things on the internet and then you give them poems by almost anybody, even if it’s not obscure poetry, it’s still not designed to have an instant hit. And even students, who are studying writing, they’re struggling a bit with that. It’s like you’re talking about things, they share the same name, poetry, but they’re very far apart.

VS: It’s like you were saying about the list and modernism and its aftermaths. Engaging with the concerns and frustrations of modernism must be baffling to generations that have come afterward.

HT: Yes, you’re making the argument that there’s actually a kind of inherent value in a sort of difficulty or a challenge. Or something that’s not intended to be transparent. It’s intended to make you grapple with something. And that again really comes back to the idea that it’s not so much what the poem is about, it’s using language and form. It’s not so much, what is it about? I immediately want to know what this is about. That’s not what it’s trying to do. It would be interesting to hear from someone like, perhaps, Michael would know, or someone like Jane Commane who runs Nine Arches – have they seen any sort of impact from those hugely boosted sales figures, or not really at all? I feel like, probably not. Although I do think the sales of Nine Arches - Jane came up to do a talk to my students last week. The book that she’s published, written by her and Jo Bell, *How to be a Poet*, I think that’s actually sold pretty well. It may be that there is some degree of wider interest.

VS: That’s something we didn’t pick up on earlier – what your relationship was like with Carcanet’s competitors. When you were an editor.

HT: Yes, well Nine Arches is interesting because I think Jane, who runs it and who founded it, was mentored by Michael at some point. I remember her, the first time I met her was when she came to Carcanet for a mentoring session or something like that. It was a very positive relationship there. And also, with other presses. Michael has a very long-standing relationship with Peter Sansom, from the Poetry Business, who has published Michael’s own poetry. And I think that’s one thing that often - because on the whole, editors who are also poets are not going to publish their own work. You get these network-y cross connections, so classically Don Paterson publishing Robin Robertson, and Robin Robertson publishing Don Paterson, Cape and Picador. I personally, in so far as I was in contact with any other publishers, that was always perfectly fine. I think there has been some degree of rivalry perhaps, between Michael and Neil Astley [laughter]. They probably have a somewhat love-hate relationship. Obviously a respect and admiration, but a bit of needle perhaps, between the two of them. But they’re both – those operations are very, very similar. In a way, that’s kind of inevitable, I guess.

VS: I get the impression they’re on better terms now.

HT: That’s good to hear! Perhaps things have veered in and out a bit. Certainly, Michael’s not averse to having feuds with people, he quite likes plunging into that kind of thing every so often. On the whole I think poetry publishers try to be supportive, because it’s just such a fragile ecology. You do get these occasional dramatic poaching instances, or somebody suddenly switches lists, and it’s a huge deal. There was a, I do remember one situation where one of Carcanet’s really long-standing poets was keen to publish something with someone else, and that, Michael was not happy about that at all. But, in general it’s pretty positive. And I think, with Nine Arches, there was some kind of mentoring role there, and that’s really good.

VS: What do you think has contributed to Carcanet’s success, why has it survived when so many other presses have folded?

HT: I think it really comes down to Michael’s personal indefatigability. And his eye for poets and poetry. There are just some people, you feel there must be ten of them, how do they get all this stuff done all the time? He’s always been able to do that. I think he has also, strategically, called on people and brought them in and stuff like that, but I think fundamentally really, he just has - and it’s not that I have always liked everything that Carcanet publishes by a long, long way, occasionally I think I just don’t get this at all –but on the whole I think he’s really identified strong, interesting poets. Poets’ poets, that other writers will really take seriously. And I think it is that thing about modernism, where that goes. I think he’s not really interested in fads, at all. He really has got a more, there’s a deeper thing underlying it, and it does go back to older writing. Carcanet is not floating shallowly on the now. It’s really rooted in older writing, and particularly in that pre-twentieth century stuff. But particularly in that material of modernism. And so, it’s just got so many writers at the core of its list, who are just really central, important, serious, philosophical writers, or writers who are really exploring form and what you can do with language. And I think that, you can almost take any number of little detours around the edges, or you can take risks on quite odd things, and you can have some things that are quite popular-ish and will bank roll a few other things. But that fundamentally, and people have a massive amount of respect for Carcanet in terms of serious, intellectual engagement rather than, ok, what’s really hot? Carcanet has gone on publishing Eavan Boland, Jorie Graham, Louise Glück, those kinds of people, it’s gone on publishing them so you build up a really important line there. I think people think, ok, if Carcanet is publishing it, then it’s worth looking at. . . . That doesn’t mean that everybody’s going to like everything, but it feels like there’s a really central, intellectual drive at the heart of it. An intellectual and formal – in the sense of play with form, play with what you can do with the poem, I think. People trust Carcanet writers and poets. They think they’re going to get something that engages you seriously with the poetic tradition, whatever that means.

VS: It’s interesting what you say about taking the long view, understanding where the writers that are writing now fit within the general history of tradition of poetry, because if you look at Michael’s own books, *Lives of the Poets*, *The Novel: A Biography*, he clearly has an astonishing knowledge, not necessarily of the canon, because one of the wonderful things about Carcanet is that he clearly goes outside the canon and finds writers that have been ignored.

HT: Yes, and also the internationalism is important as well, which might also be connected with the fact that Michael isn’t British. So, he definitely has always been interested in writing in translation, I think that’s given Carcanet’s list a real strength. He’s always had that wide range as well as the digging back. I mean, one of the questions that Michael frequently will ask you, which always unnerves me is, not only what are you reading, but also what are you reading that’s pre-twentieth century. And I think ‘Help!’ He wants to know that people he’s engaging with are still engaging with that kind of thing, they’re not just skimming along the surface. So everything’s not in an echo chamber of itself, what’s coming out now only speaking to what’s coming out now. I think that’s really important. And the way that Carcanet books just do keep, you know, they’re shortlisted, they win major prizes, people buy them, people take them really seriously. So I think that’s it, really, more than anything about who owns it, or any of that stuff. I think without that, it wouldn’t have survived.

[Pleasantries, interview ends]