**Carcanet Oral History Interview [08 October 2018]**

**Respondent: Kate Gavron (KG)**

**Interviewer: Lise Jaillant (LJ)**

LJ: Perhaps we can start with the Folio Society, I believe Lord Gavron was the chairman of the Folio Society?

KG: Yes, he was. He actually bought the Folio Society the same year, or within a few months, of Carcanet. But for very different reasons.

LJ: Could you tell me more about this?

KG: Well, he bought the Folio Society because he thought it was potentially a good business, and he wanted to invest in it and grow it a bit. He wanted it to grow, which it has done quite a lot since he bought it. But that was a commercial decision if you like, whereas Carcanet was more a purely aesthetic decision. And the reason he bought Carcanet was because he was on the literature panel of the Arts Council. Carcanet was already a client of the Arts Council, and he met Michael [Schmidt] through that. And he was very impressed by him. As a publisher, but also as a person, he liked him very much. But he also spotted something which is certainly true about Michael – which is that he’s a much better businessman than the figures would lead you to suppose.

LJ: That’s interesting.

KG: That’s connected with the fact that Carcanet is still going strong after 50 years.

LJ: It’s interesting because Michael actually told me, you know what, I’m not such a good businessman.

KG: Well, I think he is. I’m not saying that he is particularly interested in business, he’s not passionate about it, but he’s got a basic understanding of business, which I don’t think all publishers have. And it’s interesting that sometimes in the past, when we’ve had to make difficult decisions, agreeing for example that we can’t afford to publish so many books and we should delay four or five for a bit, he’s always chosen the ones that are likely to lose the most money. He completely understands the business. He may not feel it’s important to him, and I don’t think he would ever have wanted to be a businessman, but actually if he had wanted to be a businessman, I think he would have been successful.

LJ: Yes, it’s interesting, because his father was a very successful businessman in Mexico –

KG: Yes, exactly, I think that’s part of why he understands it. And he’s not frightened of business decisions.

LJ: If we go back to the Folio Society, your husband was a book collector, right? He loved books.

KG: He loved books, he was a book reader.

LJ: Not a collector?

KG: Not particularly, no. I mean, yes, he had thousands and thousands of books, which I – well, I’ve still got about half of them, half I’ve had to get rid of because I’m moving out of a large house. He was a great buyer of books, but he wasn’t somebody who was a real collector. He bought some beautiful books and over the years he bought one or two valuable books, but he wasn’t a collector in that he didn’t do it methodically. He was above all a reader.

LJ: Interesting, because the Folio Society appeals to book collectors, people who love –

KG: Yes, it does.

LJ: - the physical format of the book.

KG: Yes, certainly he appreciated beautiful books. And it’s one of the important reasons he bought Folio, but he’s not a natural Folio customer himself, partly because Folio in those days was predicated on the idea that people are happy to have a list curated for them. And Bob, that wasn’t really his thing. He browsed in bookshops and bought masses of books. So, he didn’t buy Folio because he was the sort of person who would be a customer, more because he understood the urge to collect books and to want to have books. And he particularly understood wanting to have good editions of books.

LJ: So, he became the chairman of the Folio Society in 1982, and he acquired Carcanet in 1983, so approximately the same time. Do you think it’s related? You mentioned the fact that he met Michael Schmidt -

KG: Yes, probably. He bought them for different reasons, but I guess he thought that they might work together, there might be some synergy between them. He may even have thought at the time - I remember we talked about it - he may even have thought at the time he’d build up a bigger group, and add more publishers to it, which he never did. He was involved in Virago at the time as a shareholder, but he never owned it completely. But I guess he thought he might add other imprints to those two, but he never did.

LJ: Ok, so perhaps he thought that Carcanet was the beginning of something larger, right?

KG: Folio he thought of as the beginning of something larger, probably. That came first, and then Carcanet.

LJ: And of course in the 1980s, Carcanet was expanding, you know, it opened a branch in the US and –

KG: That was partly the influence of Bob’s son, who worked for Carcanet in the US. Bob’s son Simon opened a combined office for Folio and Carcanet in the US, I think because he felt that Carcanet – both of them, Folio and Carcanet - could grow much further in the States if they had a presence there.

LJ: And of course, the branch closed at some point, right?

KG: It closed because they lost so much money. I mean, during that period, the company lost money. Both companies.

LJ: Do you think it was a mistake, the fact that –

KG: Yes, in hindsight I think it was a mistake but it was probably worth a try. I think with a company like Carcanet, and perhaps even more with Folio, the idea of having an office somewhere is not so important nowadays, because new technology has made it less necessary to be onsite somewhere. I now think with both companies, it’s better to make a virtue of being British and based in Britain, rather than trying to have a more global presence. Having said that, of course our customers are global, Folio particularly. At Folio less than 40% of our sales are made in Britain. It’s a very global company.

LJ: Yes, but in the case of Carcanet, of course, Michael Schmidt is American, he goes –

KG: Yes, and our list is extraordinarily global in terms of authors. But it doesn’t make sense for us to have offices or representatives employed exclusively by us outside the UK. I mean, we have representatives and agents overseas selling our books, as you know, but it wouldn’t make sense to have an office anywhere. That’s what we decided.

LJ: But in the 1980s, many people complained that Carcanet books weren’t available in the US, it was very difficult to get them, basically. You had, for example, Donald Davie, Professor in the US, who really struggled to find Carcanet books, and he was disappointed by that. So, I guess that the fact that you opened a branch in the US was a response to this –

KG: Yes, I’m sure it was. But I don’t think it made enough of a difference in terms of increasing and widening sales to justify the cost of having the office there. That’s one respect in which Amazon has been very good for publishers like Carcanet, because our books are available everywhere. Even when they were only available through bookshops it was very hard to get something like Donald Davie’s books into bookshops. It would probably be even harder now, but it was hard in the 1980s. I’m not a huge fan of Amazon, they’re so tough on publishers in the discounts they demand but now, thanks to Amazon, it does mean that everyone’s books are available everywhere. And that, actually, is hugely valuable to a company like Carcanet.

LJ: So for a small press like Carcanet, you would say Amazon was a good thing, right?

KG: I’m not sure everyone would agree, but I think it’s a good thing because to be completely dependent on the book trade, when there are fewer bookshops and it’s harder to fight for shelf space – and poetry’s always been pretty marginal in most bookshops – I think the idea that you can order a book of poetry and get it wherever you are in the world is a huge advantage.

LJ: Yes. So, you mentioned the fact that your husband was part of this Arts Council panel, and Michael Schmidt was also a part of the panel?

KG: No, he wasn’t on the panel, he was a client, he was getting a grant.

LJ: He was on the panel earlier.

KG: Yes.

LJ: So, they didn’t meet on the panel, but your husband was aware of the work that Carcanet was doing.

KG: Yes.

LJ: Did they always agree on everything? Or did they have, perhaps, fights?

KG: Neither Bob nor I have ever disagreed with Michael, or even wanted to argue with him, on matters of editorial decisions. Who he publishes has always been completely up to him. Neither Bob nor I would feel remotely qualified to argue with him about which poets to publish. If the company was losing too much money the only thing we might disagree with him about is publishing too many books.

LJ: You mentioned the fact that in the 1980s, they lost quite a lot of money, right?

KG: Yes, but that wasn’t Michael’s fault, that was more to do with the decision to open the American office, because that experiment lost quite a lot of money over a few years.

LJ: Ok, and at that time, Carcanet had a fiction list, as well, right?

KG: Yes.

LJ: And I believe this fiction list is no longer active.

KG: No, we made the decision some time ago to concentrate on poetry. We still publish one or two things, for example we still publish Gabriel Josipovici’s novels, but I think they’re the only novels we publish regularly. We made a decision that we couldn’t compete in fiction and that we would concentrate on poetry.

LJ: Ok, because you have competitors like Bloodaxe, I mean, Anvil Press is no longer active, but Bloodaxe is still very much active, right? So how do you position Carcanet, how do you see Carcanet in relation to Bloodaxe, for example?

KG: That really is a question Michael should answer. I can’t do so because I don’t know the world of poetry well enough to describe or analyse the difference between the two.

LJ: So, your expertise is very much as a publishing businesswoman, right? Could you say a few words about your background?

KG: Well, I went into publishing when I was 19. I didn’t go to university at that stage. I went into publishing, I worked at Heinemann, and Secker and Warburg (I worked for both because they were part of the same group). I worked in the production department and I became production director ultimately. I spent a few years as production director and in smaller and medium-sized companies you get to know a little about how the whole business works, particularly once you’re on the board. So I had been working in publishing for 15 years, and then I gave up my job and went to university and studied social anthropology, and that was the point at which I stopped working for Heinemann and Secker and took over as Chairman of Carcanet.

LJ: In the early 1990s, right?

KG: I think it was 1989 I became Chairman. And then sometime later I became a director of Folio Holdings, which is the holding company which used to own both Carcanet and Folio. And that’s when I started getting involved with Folio Society as well.

LJ: It’s interesting, because obviously you’ve been involved in publishing through – I mean, the period has brought large changes, right? So how do you see the evolution of Carcanet, you know, since the 1980s when you became the chairman of the Board?

KG: Well, I think in some ways Carcanet hasn’t evolved very much, in that we still do the same sort of list as we did then. Having said that, it is true that it was more varied when I was first involved with Carcanet, and we did subsequently take the decision to reduce the range of books we did, and to concentrate pretty much exclusively on poetry. Before that we were already publishing *PN Review*, which is a poetry magazine, and that hasn’t changed. But what Carcanet has done, successfully, and probably did earlier than quite a few other small independent presses, was to move with the times technically. We started using print-on-demand for reprints quite early and we started doing e-books quite early. One of the things about Michael is that he’s never been frightened of changing the way things are done. We’ve always had very good, intelligent young staff who are unafraid of new technology and technological change.

LJ: It’s interesting that you mention that, because he started using an IBM machine very early on, in 1975 or something. And at the time, small publishers didn’t use these kinds of machines.

KG: Well a lot of small publishers, perhaps particularly poetry publishers, were quite old fashioned and some of them, of course, were printers as well. They liked using beautiful paper and printing the books themselves. Michael was never like that, for him it was always more about the words, the content. Having said that, one of the things he’s been good at is that he’s always cared about how the books look. And I think the books look much better now than they did 30 years ago. Well, it’s hard to tell because tastes change, so you can’t look with today’s eyes at something produced 30 years ago and understand what it seemed like then.

LJ: So you think the physical format of Carcanet books has improved?

KG: Yes. I think it has.

LJ: It’s interesting, because if you look at the first booklets that they published in 1969, they actually look good.

KG: They’re rather elegant, aren’t they?

LJ: And he paid quite a lot of attention to the covers and those kinds of things. Do you remember when you first introduced e-books? In the 1990s, or…?

KG: No, I don’t know when that was, I don’t remember. I wouldn’t even be able to guess. But I know that it was something we started discussing really early, as soon as it became an option. And I was quite sceptical about it, because I wondered who would really want to read poetry in an e-book form. And technically it did take a while to introduce them because of the problems of translating the electronic files to an e-book format, because poetry isn’t simply a block of text that can be presented in any format. If you think of the way e-readers work, you can change the font and you can change the size, so obviously if you have line breaks in poetry that is quite tricky and it can start to look confusing and unattractive. So we had a few technical problems to overcome before we started publishing the e-books. But it was certainly something Michael wanted to do quite early on because he could see it was another way of selling our books. Although it’s still quite small for us.

LJ: Oh, really? I’m surprised because obviously it’s easy to access with iPads and Kindles, etc. Do you remember when you started working with Amazon?

KG: No.

LJ: I’ll ask Michael. And about the financial aspects, you mentioned the fact that your husband was very much interested in the Folio Society for financial reasons, a way to develop the business, Carcanet was different. At some point, did he consider selling the company? Or was it not really on the table?

KG: Selling Carcanet? No, I don’t think he ever thought about selling Carcanet.

LJ: Even when they had financial difficulties with the US branch?

KG: No, because I think he felt it was partly his responsibility that they had those particular financial difficulties, because he and his son had made the decision to open the US branch. Michael was supportive of that decision, but I think Bob felt that it was his fault that it had cost the company money, and he was happy to go on putting money into it to get out of that hole. But he never for a moment believed that he was going to make his fortune owning Carcanet.

LJ: So, did he consider himself a patron, perhaps? Somebody who was helping Carcanet develop?

KG: Yes, I think somebody who was helping Carcanet.

LJ: And what was his plan for the long-term future of the company, because obviously, you know, it’s very much dependent on Michael Schmidt who is the main editor, so what was he thinking about that? About the long-term future.

KG: We never really discussed it. He felt that Michael was such an important part of the company, it was difficult to envisage what Carcanet might be without Michael. It isn’t really something I’ve wanted to confront.

LJ: Obviously it’s difficult to talk about this with him, but he’s not immortal, right? It’s something you’re considering at the moment, about the long-term –

KG: Well, I do have to think about it, obviously, it would be irresponsible not to. But I don’t do so very much because Michael is the life and soul of the company. I have two streams of thought about it. One is that when the time comes when Michael either wants to give up or has to give up, he and I would look for someone to carry on in as close a tradition to Michael as possible, which of course would be extremely hard to find. My other thought is that there is no law that says that Carcanet has to continue forever. It might be that it should be one man’s life’s work, and it should just stop with Michael. However, I think the Arts Council would be unhappy about that.

LJ: Yes, they’ve been funding it for many, many years.

KG: Yes, they would like it to continue, but I don’t see any point in it continuing unless it can continue to be an excellent publishing company. And it may well be that it could be with the right person taking over from Michael.

LJ: So, what’s your relationship with the Arts Council like?

KG: Well, I see them from time to time, and I believe we regard each other as co-funders of Carcanet.

LJ: And obviously many people are critical of, you know, some policies of the Arts Council, you know, the fact that they are really trying to push a certain direction in publishing. Is it something you are happy with?

KG: Well I must say that for Carcanet they’ve been incredibly good, supportive patrons, and they’ve never tried to push us in any particular direction, in terms of publishing. Of course, they have particular themes that they concentrate on every few years. At the moment, for example, they’re trying, quite rightly, to encourage diversity in various forms, whether it’s diversity of employees, diversity on the board, or diversity of product. And at Carcanet we’re very, very good in terms of diversity of product. It’s very much a global list. Diversity on our board and among employees has never been quite so wide as the diversity on the list. But it’s quite difficult, particularly with such a tiny company.

LJ: I had an interview with Peter Jay of Anvil Press and he was quite critical of the Arts Council, you know, the fact that they tried to push him in certain directions and then they cut the funding, so it’s definitely something that you hear, you know, when you interview people, not everybody’s happy with the Arts Council right now.

KG: Well, I suppose people have different views about what the Arts Council is for. One of the Arts Council’s roles is, and surely should be, to widen access to the arts. If you believe that you do that by encouraging diversity in all its forms, I think diversity in terms of what you publish would widen interest in the art form. Therefore, I think, as far as that goes, then they’re right.

LJ: I was reading some letters of Michael Schmidt in the early eighties, and he said, you know what I’m very grateful to the Arts Council, but at the same time, they have a lot of power over the company, and he was not very happy with that in the early 1980s, which was why he wanted some other sources of money. Is it something that you’ve considered, the fact that the Arts Council has a lot of power on Carcanet and other –

KG: I don’t think they do have a lot of power with Carcanet. They don’t have a power in any sense over the most important thing, which is what we publish. Now, if the Arts Council were ever to say, I think you shouldn’t publish X, or you should publish Y, I would be very worried. I would dislike that. But we’ve never had a hint of that. Not as far as I know, anyway.

LJ: If they decide to cut the funding, which is – you know Anvil Press, it’s what they had done – you know it’s a form of power.

KG: Yes, they could. Absolutely. They certainly have power in that sense. They have power to grant or withhold patronage, but then that’s in the nature of the organisation. The difficult thing for the Arts Council is that they can’t go on funding everyone forever, or else they’d never be able to publicly fund anything new. So they have to make these difficult decisions.

LJ: So, how do you manage the risk, the fact that, at any time, the Arts Council could cut the funding?

KG: Well, I think completely pragmatically. At the moment you are offered funding for a four-year period, so once you’ve secured that, then so long as you report to them properly, have regular contact and go on doing the work you’re supposed to do, then you have four years funding. That makes it much easier of course: for almost three years you can relax, and then you start worrying again. When I say relax, you can’t completely relax obviously, you have to communicate with them, you have to feed them a lot of information. But so long as you go on doing the sort of work that has got you the funding in the first place, it’s not a stressful relationship. We have a very supportive and helpful Arts Council officer in Manchester. Perhaps being in Manchester helps, because we’re dealing with a smaller Arts Council office.

LJ: Ok. So how does it work? They have a representative in Manchester, did you say?

KG: They have an office in Manchester, which deals with the Arts Council clients in the North West, and there’s an officer there called Alison Boyle, who you should probably talk to, she’s the person who deals with us from the Arts Council. She comes to one or two of our Board meetings every year. She gets sent all the minutes, she responds to all the reports that we send, and she also does an appraisal for us every year, of how we’re doing.

LJ: So, she’s part of the advisory Board, right?

KG: Well, she’s not part of the official Board, but she comes to some of the Board meetings. And she attends some of our events, particularly if they’re in Manchester.

LJ: Do you have some disagreements with her, sometimes?

KG: No, I wouldn’t say we do. I’d say it was a very harmonious relationship. Of course, it could become acrimonious if they suddenly decide to stop our funding, but for the moment, you know, I hope we do what they want us to do, and they are very supportive.

LJ: And you mentioned the fact that they are based in Manchester, they have an office in Manchester. Could we talk a little bit about the location of Carcanet, the fact that it has been based in Manchester for a very long time. Since 1972. Is it really important, or could it be based in Oxford, or?

KG: It could be based anywhere, particularly nowadays; in the digital world it could be based anywhere at all. It’s only been based in Manchester because that’s where Michael was working, and then once the office was established and we had employees, then even when Michael was working in Glasgow it made sense for Carcanet to continue to be in Manchester. Manchester’s a really interesting city for Carcanet to be in, you know. It’s not London; publishing is so London-centric that it’s quite good to be somewhere else. It’s a very lively, interesting city, with lots of young people. We’ve had a succession of bright, well-educated young employees who’ve developed with us and then moved on, almost always to other jobs in publishing. We’ve been a very good incubator for them. What it means, of course, is that we’re quite often having to find new people. We don’t have people that stay for decades.

LJ: Is it something to do with the salary?

KG: Certainly, the salary doesn’t help. The salaries are very low. They’re reasonable first salaries but they’re low. We can’t afford to make them higher. Of course, one of the advantages of being in Manchester is that people can actually afford to live in Manchester on a worse salary than they could in London. So from the point of view of using our Arts Council funding cost-effectively, it’s more doable in Manchester than it would be in London.

LJ: What are the disadvantages of being based in Manchester? You’re quite far from the literary centres in London and Oxford.

KG: Yes, it’s true, and it means that there’s quite a lot of travelling down to London. We’re not in the mainstream but we have a lot of events in Manchester, which are well attended, poetry readings and such things. But we also have events in London, and it means people have to come down from Manchester for events. And Michael does do quite a lot of travelling to London for events. Obviously, there are disadvantages, but honestly I don’t think for a poetry publisher they are huge. I think there are more advantages than there are disadvantages. Rent is so much less than if we were in the middle of London. That makes a huge difference.

LJ: Yes, and perhaps for the Arts Council, as well, it’s a plus.

KG: And also, the Arts Council like having us there. The arts is so London-centric that clients outside London are good news for them.

LJ: Yes, and of course, Bloodaxe is based in Newcastle.

KG: Yes.

LJ: So in the long-term, you see Carcanet – you said there were two options. It could stay with somebody who would pursue the list, or it could just stop. What’s the best option, for you?

KG: The best option would be to find somebody who was like Michael, who understood Michael’s list, who would aspire to carry on publishing in the way that Michael did. And ideally publishing the same people, especially the younger poets. We’ve got a lot of young poets who are just at the beginning of their careers; it would be important to find somebody who liked those poets and wanted to carry on the list as before. Because for Carcanet to have a complete change of direction would be like starting a new company.

LJ: Yes, it would be complicated, obviously. And if you try to summarise your husband’s involvement in Carcanet, because he was involved from the beginning of the 1980s until his death in 2015, it was quite a long time –

KG: It was a long time, but he wasn’t very involved, because there were various other people who were more involved, like his son Simon and a previous Chair called Victor Ross. This was because until 1993 Bob was running a large printing group at the same time, and so he wasn’t able to be very much involved with Carcanet. He always enjoyed seeing Michael but there was always someone else who was chairman of Carcanet, rather than him. So, although he was involved, he wasn’t very involved. He tended to get involved just when it came to: can we have a bit more money?

LJ: Ok. So he saw himself as a patron, you said.

KG: Yes, and particularly his pleasure was helping Michael to go on doing the work that Michael wanted to do, because he admired him enormously as a publisher and just as a man. And as an intellectual.

LJ: Would you say they were friends?

KG: Yes, definitely.

LJ: Did they meet on a regular basis?

KG: Well I don’t know exactly how much they met, I mean I don’t remember how much they met between 1983 and 1989, but it probably wasn’t more than twice a year, I expect usually for lunch. They kept in touch with letters regularly, but I don’t think they met more than that. I don’t honestly know or remember. Once I became chair, Bob’s involvement tended to be through me. But we would see Michael regularly and obviously I would be in touch with him a lot.

LJ: And your advisory Board meets twice a year?

KG: No, we meet four times a year. We try to meet every three months.

LJ: Ok, every three months. And how many people do you have?

KG: I think we have ten at the moment.

LJ: Ok, so it’s quite a large board. So, how do you manage the relationships between people, because when you have so many people it can be a bit tough, right?

KG: We don’t usually have more than six or seven members of the Board at any one meeting, because some of them are based in London, some of them are based in Manchester, not everyone can get to every meeting, but we usually have about six or seven, and sometimes more. They’re an interesting group of people and everyone seems to get on well. Everyone admires Michael. There’s really no conflict or argument, either on the Board or off the Board. I’m not saying that there couldn’t ever be, because there could be, but there really hasn’t been, since I’ve been Chair.

LJ: It’s quite a diverse group, right? You have academics, you have people like Robyn Marsack, who used to work in publishing, yes? So even though those people –

KG: She’s fantastic, she’s wonderful. She’s a really helpful Board member. Of course, she knows the company terribly well, having worked in it. And then she ran the Scottish Poetry Library, so she’s not just worked in Carcanet, she’s deeply embroiled in the world of poetry.

LJ: Well, thank you so much for the interview, that’s really, really helpful.

[Pleasantries, interview ends]