**Carcanet Oral History Interview [17 August 2018]**

**Respondent: Michael Rowan-Robinson (MRR)**

**Interviewer: Lise Jaillant (LJ)**

[redacted]

LJ: How did you meet Richard Burns?

MRR: We were in the same college. I was one year ahead of him, there were a group of us that used to meet every day in the rooms of Peter Mansfield. He had nice rooms in the courtyard of the college, so we all used to gather there. Then Richard appeared and I don’t quite know how we met up with him. It’s quite a small college, I think there were three hundred and fifty students. You tended to meet almost everybody. And I think because he was very keen on writing and so on, he quickly found us, as it were.

LJ: And you were already writing poetry?

MRR: We were already a group of people who were talking and writing yes. There were some other colleges connected with it as well.

LJ: Was this something you were doing before Cambridge?

MRR: Not really, no.

LJ: You arrived at Cambridge and met people who were interested in poetry?

MRR: Yes, I guess that was it. It was a big awakening going to university, for me. Other people had been… a lot of people had very interesting careers at school and so on, big noises at school, so sometimes they came to university and found it anticlimactic. Whereas I came from a small school in Yorkshire, where there was no one to talk to, and so coming to university was a very big awakening. Meeting all those people.

LJ: What was your major influence at that time, as a poet?

MRR: It soon became Georges Seferis and [Constantin] Cavafy. Initially though, I probably hadn’t read that much to be honest. I liked [W. B.] Yeats. I didn’t like [T. S.] Eliot.

LJ: Really, why? He was a big influence on many people at that time.

MRR: Absolutely, he was a very popular figure. He has a very literary style, lots of… his writing is full of quotes from other writers, and I found that rather arid. Eliot, [F. R.] Leavis, they’re all sort of, all the influential figures of that period, they’re very anti-science, and I was a mathematician, so I didn’t identify with that.

LJ: You were already interested in science?

MRR: I was studying mathematics. I intended to be a scientist of some kind. And so I wasn’t very interested in their very literary style of writing, full of quotes and allusions and chunks taken out of someone else’s writing. I was interested in more direct expression of experience.

LJ: You wanted to bridge the divide between poetry and science.

MRR: Yes. So then, this group gradually developed, and it was just a friendship group at first, it wasn’t – not everyone was interested in writing.

LJ: Richard Burns, yourself, and?

MRR: Richard joined it in second year, and Peter Mansfield was the dominant figure. Very charismatic, tremendous appetite for life and experience.

LJ: How would you describe him as a young man? I haven’t been able to find any photos.

MRR: I have some photographs. He was quite large, slightly sort of shambling appearance. He walked in a sort of shuffle.

[redacted]

LJ: So, you became close friends with him.

MRR: Yes. He was studying Classics and Philology. He was incredibly well-read, but in a way he’s also tragic, because he should have been an academic. But he got so caught up in this, life of the senses, and he didn’t do any work. He got a poor degree, and no possibility of continuing.

LJ: Would you say he was influenced by the counterculture of the 1960s?

MRR: I wouldn’t say so. I don’t think… we were a bit cut off from that, I would say. In a bit of a bubble, perhaps. Later I got interested in the Beats, for example. In my last year, in my third year, I organised a poetry reading because I was involved with the drama group in the college, and we did a poetry reading called ‘The Last Twenty Years.’ So, we had a lot of the famous names from the last twenty years, we had some of the beat poets as well.

LJ: Was it part of a poetry society?

MRR: No, it was just a one-off show that I put on using the people in the theatre group to do the reading, and one of the poets that I included was Seferis. There was this poster, ‘The last Twenty Years’, Eliot, Auden, everybody, the Beats, and then Georges Seferis. And in Pembroke, we had a lecturer in Modern Greek was one of the fellows, and he saw this poster and he said to me, I know Georges Seferis, he’d be absolutely delighted to see this poster, so we sent a copy of the poster –

LJ: Yes, but before that you were involved in *Carcanet* magazine, right?

MRR: Yes, *Carcanet* – well, yes. So *Carcanet* was one of a number of magazines that we published in.

LJ: You were involved in the second issue, right? 1963.

MRR: Yes. Basically… it was set up, the idea was it was a joint magazine between students and faculty. There were faculty – there was someone from Oxford and someone from Cambridge. Was it Kingsley Amis?

LJ: Yes, he was one of – because you needed a sponsor, so he was mentioned, I don’t know if he was actively involved.

MRR: He certainly wasn’t. He was in Cambridge briefly, and I don’t think he took any interest in students at all.

LJ: Did you meet him?

MRR: I didn’t meet him, but I remember seeing him parade down King’s Parade in a green corduroy suit. He was very full of himself.

LJ: He was a very controversial man.

MRR: Yes, well he didn’t last long in that Cambridge milieu, I don’t think it suited him. He certainly didn’t take an interest in the magazine.

LJ: Did you meet with people from Oxford on a regular basis?

MRR: I wasn’t - I’m not going to be of much help, because I wasn’t really involved in the editorial side. I think Peter Mansfield went, possibly with Mike Duffett to Oxford, and met with the Oxford people who were editing it. And managed to, he took with him all our latest efforts, and he basically managed to take over the magazine, almost, in that our group was very heavily represented. I had a copy of the magazine, all my life, and the minute you called, I couldn’t find it!

LJ: That’s ok, at Cambridge they have a complete run. You mentioned Mike Duffett at Cambridge, you knew him?

MRR: Yes, slightly. He was the least bohemian of the group. He was quite straightforward. He would be good as an editor of something, because he just… most people were living a kind of performance and he wasn’t. He didn’t really spend a lot of time with our group, we just met him sometimes. I think Richard Burns perhaps knew him better. They might have been students together.

[LJ remarks she doesn’t have much information about him at that time].

LJ: What about Richard Emeny, who was the editor?

MRR: I didn’t really meet the - he was at Oxford. I think I was just a beneficiary of all this to-ing and fro-ing. And so, Peter basically gave them my poems, and they were included.

LJ: You mentioned another magazine?

MRR: Called *Pawn*. That was not so lavishly produced. It was photocopied and stapled. That was edited by John Blackwood, who was deeply into Buddhism. He was a spiritual kind of person. I remember he was very energetic, as I say he edited this magazine and he featured us all in it. There was a point when he was organising an evening to honour E. M. Forster’s something-th birthday – I was supposed to be laying on a production of one of Yeats’s plays. But it all fell through because Forster wasn’t well, so that was something that didn’t happen. In Cambridge at that time, there was a dominant literary magazine, which was *Granta*. That was fairly tightly controlled by a small group of people, Liz Calder was one of the editors. John Barrell [and Angus Calder] was involved.

LJ: Would you say that Carcanet and *Pawn* were created as a reaction to it?

MRR: Yes, I think so. Yes, they were, I suspect we would all have been happy to have been in *Granta*, but they were very… the style in *Granta* was much the more, the orthodox movement of the day. Very Eng Lit. So we were more of a romantic group.

LJ: And quite diverse as well, you were studying mathematics.

MRR: Apart from Richard who was studying English, none of us were studying English. And Richard did actually get involved with *Granta*, in his second and third year, he became an established – I mean for us, say Peter Mansfield and myself, *Carcanet* was the big thing, the big moment, and we were launched on the student stage. But it didn’t go down very well. It was reviewed very badly.

LJ: I’m more familiar with the later stage, when Michael Schmidt took it over, at Oxford.

MRR: Essentially, at that time it was a sort of student magazine, it became a much more serious literary magazine, it still survives doesn’t it? Does Carcanet still survive?

LJ: Not the magazine, it became *PN Review*.

MRR: After that period, it revived as a mainstream literary magazine, rather than a student magazine, I think. Is that right?

LJ: At Oxford it was still a student magazine, but then it became a press. That’s why I wanted to ask if you knew it when Michael Schmidt took it over in 1966, 67.

MRR: By then I’d moved to London.

LJ: I see. When did you learn that Carcanet had survived and became a press?

MRR: I noticed… the name came up because you’d see books of poems coming out, Carcanet, and it was clear that it had morphed into something new.

LJ: But you’ve never met Michael Schmidt?

MRR: No.

LJ: That’s interesting, because as you said, it was very much a Cambridge enterprise, and then it moved to Oxford, and this Cambridge history was more or less forgotten, which is why I’m very interested in that.

MRR: I think Carcanet, too, has poems from both universities, surely?

LJ: That’s the idea, to link the two universities.

MRR: We were very excited about it, when we heard about this opportunity.

LJ: You mentioned it was poorly reviewed at first?

MRR: Yes, well, I would say it was slated, really. I think… the comments about my poem were not too awful, but there were some very bad comments about the others, especially Peter. I think Peter was heavily criticised.

LJ: Did the reviews appear in other student magazines?

MRR: In student newspapers and so on.

LJ: Do you remember the titles of the student newspapers?

MRR: Well, *Varsity* was the main one, I think there was another one, called maybe *The Reporter*, I’ve forgotten what the other paper was. I don’t think I have the cuttings anymore. I was looking at – I have some notebooks here and in my office, and I was looking through to see if I could find anything that would be helpful. And I found one mention of Carcanet, in which I wrote in my diary, I wish Carcanet would come out. So, I was waiting for this thing to appear. But nothing that would really help you.

LJ: You mentioned that Georges Seferis –

MRR: The poetry reading, and the poster was sent to Seferis. And Seferis wrote back to this young don, and said, if the organiser is in Athens, then he should come see me. So, a year or so later I was in Athens, and I think I sent him a postcard. And he sent one back saying, drop in on such a day, here’s my phone number. So, I went to see him. It was rather special. He was packing to go to Spain, because he was going to give a lecture. He’d won the Nobel Prize the previous year, and he said it’d changed his life suddenly, everybody wanted a piece of him. He said he found it quite difficult, that very few people read his poetry in Greek, it was almost all through translations. Which of course is how I came to it, although I did learn Modern Greek, and so I tried to read Seferis in Greek. I was interested in the fact that he’d been the Greek ambassador in London, because I was embarked, by then, on my career in astrophysics. And I was wondering, can you seriously write poetry and have another completely different career, and of course he had done this, and he talked about that a bit. He said he found his diplomatic career really interesting, he was the ambassador in London during one of the Cyprus crises, and so he had – and he’s written about this in various autobiographical works – he had a big role to play there. He had just stood down from his diplomatic career as well. And he told me that he was in Paris once, with T. S. Eliot and Saint-John Perse, the French poet. Saint-John Perse also was a diplomat, he was expelled by the French Government when the Nazis came. I think Saint-John Perse was pretty bitter about that. Eliot was working in a bank and hated his job, so they both hated their jobs. Whereas Seferis actually quite enjoyed his job.

LJ: And he continued to write poetry.

MRR: He did, I think towards the end of his career he wasn’t writing so much, but after this point when I met him, he wrote – I think it’s called Six Secret Poems or something [*Three Secret Poems*, 1966], he had a surge of new writing after his retirement. So, I told him about what I was planning to do in cosmology –

LJ: This is when you were just starting your career.

MRR: I was just starting as a PhD student. And I was talking about the way that scientific knowledge has exploded, Goethe could know everything, but today you could only know one little bit of one science. It was an interesting conversation –

LJ: Because you wanted to continue writing poetry while doing your…?

MRR: Yes. I thought it was still important, even though – I suppose if Carcanet had been a great success, my path might have been a bit different. I focused instead on astrophysics.

LJ: But you couldn’t manage to continue both?

MRR: I continued to write, not really – nobody read it.

LJ: Did you publish anything?

MRR: Not much. Occasionally.

LJ: Is it something you’d like to do in the future?

MRR: Well, I think its… I don’t know. I think about self-publishing now, a collection, but I don’t know.

LJ: I think your trajectory is very unusual, I’ve never met a poet who became an astronomer. Did you have other scientific students who were part of this scientific group?

MRR: No, there was just me. I was amazed to discover, years later, when I was at Pendegowan [Imperial College, London] here, one of the postdocs came to talk about Seferis, and I knew all about him, so he was a bit stunned. Anyway, I told him that I’d met him – he went away, and he was able to find a memoir of Seferis’s, he was able to find the lecture that he delivered in Spain straight after I saw him. The text of this lecture is published, and this Greek PhD student read it and translated it for me. And in this lecture, he [Seferis] talked about me! He’d been struck by this image of the huge expansion of knowledge. And again, he writes about this in the secret poems as well, so I claim to have influenced Seferis. But I didn’t discover that until twenty years ago, when Seferis was long dead. I should have kept in touch with him, if I’d realised he’d been listening, I’d have corresponded with him.

LJ: But you kept in touch with Richard Burns?

MRR: Oh absolutely, all through our lives. Peter Mansfield is a sad case because he should have had an academic [career], he should have been an academic, a scholar. He wrote –

LJ: Did he want to become a scholar?

MRR: Well, he did when he arrived at university, but he threw that away because he didn’t do any studying. Whereas I did, I worked quite hard, and that path was open to me. And then, you know, his writing didn’t come to anything, he never published a book, even.

LJ: It’s unusual, he started as a successful young poet.

MRR: He was a very charismatic figure and should have come to something.

LJ: So, what happened to him after Cambridge?

MRR: Well, he and Richard both went to Greece for a while. And then when they came back, I think he started work, well, I think they both worked teaching English to foreign students, that kind of thing. Richard always struggled to make a living, all through his life. He’s lived the life of the impecunious poet and done odd jobs, really. It’s only in the last few years that he’s begun to get recognition, which is great. And Peter, it never happened for Peter. He never had anything published. He didn’t make it into – there was this magazine that came out each year called *Universities Poetry*, and Richard and I were both in it, and he wasn’t. So he obviously submitted, and I don’t know, it just seemed to me that his life petered out, really.

LJ: He died quite young?

MRR: Relatively, yes.

LJ: He was still in Greece?

MRR: No, he was back in England, living in Hampshire by then. And I don’t know what he was doing, I don’t know how he made a living then. Because he’d given up the language school. He had a language school in Stratford.

LJ: He became quite a sad figure, would you say?

MRR: I think so, it’s sad, unfulfilled. I mean, at least I had the fulfilment of astronomy. And I wrote ten or twelve books about astronomy, so I did write. I didn’t make money out of writing. But Peter…for him it wasn’t anything.

LJ: It’s very unusual, because Richard Burns managed to become an established poet, he’s quite well known in poetry circles, so it’s quite unusual to start – did he continue to write, even though he didn’t publish, Peter Mansfield?

MRR: I think so, he showed me things later on when I met him. So, he was still writing, yes.

LJ: It is unusual… and you kept in touch with Richard as well?

MRR: Yes, mainly with Richard, but also occasionally with Peter. Richard also kept in touch with Peter, I think. Richard used to get Peter to comment on or edit his poems, and Peter would say leave that out and so on, so he was still acting as a mentor to Richard.

[Thanks, recording ends].