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

**Respondent: Peter Jay (PJ)**

**Interviewer: Lise Jaillant (LJ)**

LJ: I have a few questions for you. Perhaps we can start with your student experience at Oxford because I believe you read English, and Classics as well?

PJ: That’s right, I did Classics for one year, and then English. [laughs] I don’t know why I changed, quite. I felt out of my depth in the Classics, I think.

LJ: So, when did you start at Oxford?

PJ: ‘63.

LJ: Was it before Michael Schmidt arrived?

PJ: Yes, Michael arrived about the end of my time.

LJ: Ok, because I believe he started at Harvard and then he moved to Oxford, so he might have arrived later. And you contributed to Carcanet magazine, when it was still edited by other people, and then Michael Schmidt edited it.

PJ: That’s right, yes.

LJ: So, I’m just wondering about your experience –

PJ: I didn’t contribute to it while Michael was editing it, before that. I don’t think I even have copies of those old issues.

LJ: Very difficult to find, actually. Only Cambridge Library has a complete run of *Carcanet* magazine. Very difficult to find. So yes, I’m just wondering about your experience as a contributor for *Carcanet* magazine, how was it?

PJ: Well, I remember nothing about it at all!

LJ: So, it was a joint venture between Oxford and Cambridge and they wanted to –

PJ: It was Oxford and Cambridge but… well, I think Richard Burns had something to do with it in Cambridge. Maybe he started it.

LJ: He was involved. He didn’t start it, but yes.

PJ: By the time I was aware of it, I think the editor was an Oxford person.

LJ: OK. Well, let me check because I… because I had a look at one of the issues in which you’ve wrote… so yes, and then Michael Schmidt arrived and he took it over. Ok, so the editors at that time, in 1966, were Diane Troy –

PJ: Oh yes.

LJ: Did you meet her?

PJ: I remember her, yes.

LJ: Perhaps you could describe her?

PJ: She was a rather serious person, I thought. But I don’t know, I mean, I knew her very, very slightly. I can’t even remember which college she was at.

LJ: OK. Perhaps we can start –

PJ: I mean, I think the whole thing worked – the way anybody knew about this magazine was through the Oxford Poetry Society. Of which I was a member, and a lot of people I knew were also members. Roger Garfitt. Philip Holmes. I think, even Kit Wright. So that was the sort of social hub for anybody interested in poetry. And I think somehow we found out about this magazine then, and -

LJ: I see, so when did you get involved with the Poetry Society?

PJ: I think I was a member all the time I was there. Yes. Which was four years.

LJ: So, you arrived at Oxford and you became involved in this poetry society right at the beginning?

PJ: Yes. It was a very nice society, I mean, I don’t think you could run anything like it these days. It had a tiny bit of money from the University, not much. We all paid, I don’t know, a few shillings, or a pound or two, for our membership. And then we invited poets to come and read, and we paid their train fares and put them up and fed them, and whatever. It was all shoestring, but it was very nice. And we had wonderful poets. Really, I mean, gosh –

LJ: Do you remember the kind of poets you invited? Famous poets?

PJ: Well, I do remember Stephen Spender, I remember Kathleen Raine, Christopher Middleton…

LJ: So, it must have been quite an experience, as a young man, to meet these very famous poets.

PJ: To meet them, hear them, it was quite inspiring, really.

LJ: So how did it work, did they give a poetry reading and then you had dinner, drinks perhaps?

PJ: Yes, I can’t remember where… the meeting rooms varied according to who was the secretary of the society, I think. You know, he would get college rooms for the readings and so on, but then we would all go to the pub. Well, actually we would start in the pub, and then have the reading, and then go to the pub again. It was very nice.

LJ: So, it was a good way to network, perhaps? I mean, informally? You know, just to meet those famous poets and perhaps to get some recommendations on how to publish in, perhaps, the *TLS*, or -

PJ: Well, I – yes. I don’t… recall that sort of thing. I mean, it was mostly talking about poetry.

LJ: Ok. So, it was not – I’m just wondering, at that time, if you wanted to be a professional poet, or was it just like a side interest for you.

PJ: Well, it could never be a side interest. On the other hand, it couldn’t be a profession. I mean, the idea of being a professional poet didn’t make much sense, then. Now is different. Which I don’t think is entirely a good thing, but that’s another matter.

LJ: OK, so it was more talking about poetry, and –

PJ: Yes.

LJ: So, yesterday I had a chat with Roger Garfitt, who is of course the president of the Poetry Society.

PJ: He was, yes.

LJ: So, you met him as part of this?

PJ: Well, yes, Roger was a friend. He lived round the corner from me. Yes.

LJ: And he mentioned Ted Hughes, actually.

PJ: Oh Ted, yes, indeed.

LJ: So, was it the first time you met with Ted Hughes.

PJ: I suppose so. I don’t actually remember it at all.

LJ: So you said that you heard of *Carcanet* magazine as part of this poetry society?

PJ: Well, somebody there, you know, showed a copy around or, whatever.

LJ: OK. And you started writing for them?

PJ: Well, I don’t remember, I didn’t have much published in it, I don’t think.

LJ: Well, I think you published two poems in this issue, and then Michael Schmidt took it over and you continued to publish a little bit for *Carcanet* magazine. So, when did you first meet Michael Schmidt?

PJ: Well… it would have been in Oxford, but I think it was after I had left the university. He was at Wadham College for a year, or maybe two years, I don’t t remember. And I think I ran into him then. I really don’t remember the circumstances. But I do remember when I started publishing, one of the very first books I did was his and Edward Kissam’s Aztec Poems, *Flower and Song*. A wonderful book.

LJ: So why did you decide to publish those books?

PJ: I thought it was wonderful. I still do, actually, I think it’s absolutely marvellous.

LJ: It’s interesting that Michael Schmidt, of course, today is seen as a very successful publisher, but perhaps, you know, his career as a poet has been a bit side-lined – you know, people know him as a publisher, not really as a poet.

PJ: Yes, but he’s a super poet, I mean really, a very fine poet, I think. But I think the kind of poetry he writes is not the kind that is popularly appreciated now. I mean, he’s – the current poetic climate is very strange. I don’t understand it. I don’t find it congenial. All the good poets I know don’t fit in. And Michael is one of them.

LJ: It’s interesting, because he’s very much - you know, at the centre of the poetry scene, still today of course, because he’s very much active as part of Carcanet Press. So you’re thinking of –

PJ: But I think people distinguish between, you know, him as a publisher and his writing, his poetry. And then of course, there’s all his criticism, and all the other things he’s done. I mean, I’ve never quite understood how he finds the hours in the day to do what he does.

LJ: Yes, everybody has told me that. He seems to have a lot of energy.

PJ: Well, yes. Extraordinary.

LJ: But what you’re saying is that, at first, you knew him as a very promising poet.

PJ: Yes, as a poet. Actually, I do remember, Michael had been a schoolboy at Christ’s Hospital, and when he was about sixteen, a poet who I liked very much, Gavin Bantock, must have visited Christ’s Hospital to do a reading or something. Michael had shown him a poem, and Gavin had immediately shown it to me, and said, ‘There’s this really talented young boy at Christ’s Hospital.’ It’s possible I even published it, I don’t remember.

LJ: I’ll look into this, that’s interesting.

PJ: I can find out – well, I could if I’ve got that – [Peter gets up to look for a copy of a publication]

When I was a student, I edited a magazine called *New Measure*.

LJ: Oh Yes, I’ve heard of it.

PJ: And that was where I – ah, yes.

LJ: So *New Measure* ran from 1965 to 1969.

PJ: Something like that.

LJ: And you had ten issues apparently.

PJ: And here they all are.

LJ: Oh fantastic, you have the complete run.

PJ: Have you seen them?

LJ: Not yet, no.

PJ: Now, I‘m going to guess which one I might have put Michael’s poem in. It might have been this one. Michael Schmidt, there we are. ‘In the Winter’, 1966 to 67 issue. And it’s a lovely…

LJ: Thank you so much.

[Presumably Peter and Lise are looking at the issue in question].

LJ: Ah, yes. And did you, of course you knew that he had grown up in Mexico, and he was fluent in Spanish, right?

PJ: No, I had no idea. I mean, this was before I met him.

LJ: Oh, OK. And why did you want to create a new magazine, at that time? *New Measure*.

PJ: I don’t really know. Well, to publish one or two people who I liked a lot, including Gavin Bantock, who weren’t getting published. Oh, I don’t know, it was just a thing to do.

LJ: And how did you get the funding for that, because obviously it cost quite a lot to print a new magazine, to advertise it, etc, etc.

PJ: I actually found a local printer, who was prepared to print the first issue. So, that started it. I don’t know, I mean, we sold quite a lot of copies because I used to get teams [redacted] to go round the Colleges with a bag full of the magazine and to talk people into buying it.

LJ: So, that was at Oxford? And then you moved to London, right?

PJ: Yes.

LJ: So *New Measure* was printed first at Oxford?

PJ: Yes, it was a really Oxford thing.

LJ: And you had another editor, right? For *New Measure*? Another editor, someone you were working with?

PJ: At the very beginning, a chap called John Aczel. But only for the first issue. John and I ended up disagreeing about poetry.

LJ: So, you just decided to –

PJ: He dropped out –

LJ: Did he continue writing poetry?

PJ: I don’t know what – well, all I know about John is that he ended up being a scientologist. And quite close to its then-leader, Mr Hubbard.

LJ: Interesting.

PJ: Anyway, so… I couldn’t deal with that.

LJ: And you created Anvil as a sort of extension of this magazine? With John as well? John was involved with the Press as well, right?

PJ: Yes. I was very lucky, I got a little bit of money from the Rockefeller Foundation.

LJ: I’ve heard of it, yes.

PJ: And that allowed me to – well, I sort of divided it in half, half of it I used for keeping alive for the best part of a year, and the other half I used for printing the first two or three books. And I used to hawk them all round London bookshops, so I’ve been a sales rep in my time.

LJ: That’s very interesting, because of course, to be a publisher you need to be able to sell the books, you need this kind of ability that not everybody has.

PJ: Well, I don’t know if I was really any good at it, at any rate.

LJ: So, tell me about the bookshops you approached to sell the books.

PJ: Well… I’m very out of touch with bookshops now, but I do remember John Sandoe’s bookshop on the King’s Road.

LJ: Did you try Oxford as well? Blackwell’s?

PJ: Yes, oh yes, I would go to Oxford and do those things.

LJ: Because Michael Schmidt mentioned that Blackwell’s were quite friendly with him, he had a special rack for the books, apparently.

PJ: Yes. And then one summer, my then-girlfriend and I toured the whole country for about three weeks, stopping off at towns with half-decent bookshops and showing them, you know, the first few books. So, that way I got a sense of… what there was.

LJ: Yes. So you tried selling them in London, Oxford but also in the rest of the country.

PJ: All around the country.

LJ: Do you remember where exactly?

PJ: Well, I think we did a sort of circle, going up to Edinburgh. I mean, we would have gone to Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool even… Edinburgh, Glasgow. And then Bristol, and so on. All the major towns, really.

LJ: And what was the main difference between bookshops perhaps in Manchester, Liverpool, and bookshops in London?

PJ: Well, I found them all as receptive as they could be. I mean, I don’t remember any big brush offs. Or anywhere which made us feel unwelcome. I mean, I think they probably thought we were crazy, but…

LJ: So, for the funding you mentioned the Rockefeller Foundation, and I actually read about it in article in 1999, and I was quite surprised, because I actually did some research at the, you know they have an archive, the Rockefeller Archive Centre? That was for another project, I went there for this project on creative writing programmes. And most of the time, the Rockefeller Foundation they funded American institutions –

PJ: I know, Yes.

LJ: So, I was very surprised to discover –

PJ: So was I. It was extremely odd, and I’ve never quite discovered how it came about, but I think it came about through the American poet Stanley Moss. Who I published too. But I know Stanley had a grant from Rockefeller, but I think he talked Gerald Freund - who was the then-Director, or at least the person dealing with artistic things – into it. It was extraordinary. I mean, what happened was I got a phone call one day, saying ‘Would you like to come and have lunch with me?’ And so, we had lunch in a nice pub in Shepherd’s Market, and Gerald Freund said, ‘What would you do if you had a couple of thousand dollars?’ [Laughter] That was it, I mean, that was the interview. It duly arrived.

LJ: So, what did you tell him? Did you have a list of books you wanted to publish?

PJ: I suppose I must have told him my plans, yes, but I didn’t have to make any formal application on paper, or anything.

LJ: That’s very different to today.

PJ: Those days are gone.

LJ: Yes. It’s not like a thirty-page application.

PJ: No, it was extraordinary, and I couldn’t quite believe it had happened, really.

LJ: And of course, you got funding from the Arts Council as well.

PJ: Ah well, that started a little bit later.

LJ: Tell me about it.

PJ: I mean, not having any private patronage, Anvil was actually dependent on Arts Council funding, which started in a very small way in, I suppose, the early seventies. ‘72, ‘73, ‘74. It’s very hard to remember how I managed everything. I mean, I didn’t have a job, so I had to keep myself alive.

LJ: So, did you do some teaching, or how did you manage to make a living?

PJ: Well, I did some freelance work, proofreading for Penguin, that kind of thing, but it wasn’t really enough. After a few years, I persuaded the then-director of the Arts Council - who died a couple of years ago, Charles Osborne. Who I got on very well with, unlike some, who [laughter] hated him. I liked Charles. I mean, he was a rogue in many ways, but a delightful one.

LJ: What do you mean?

PJ: He was funny. He was extremely intelligent. I mean, actually music rather than literature was his thing. He wrote a lot of books about opera.

LJ: Ok, and you mentioned that many people didn’t like him. So, how was he, as a person?

PJ: I think, Charles was very capricious in the decisions he made. Nominally, decisions he made had to be put to his committee, his literature panel. But in practice, Charles didn’t take any notice of the panel, when it suited him. Anyway, I persuaded Charles that I couldn’t go on doing it, if it was worth doing, without being able to pay myself something. Which meant, of course, that the grant had to be increased, considerably. Well, Charles did that. So, things went on. But –

LJ: But before that, I believe Eric White was literature director of the Arts Council, right?

PJ: Yes, it was Eric then Charles Osborne. Charles was the assistant to Eric.

LJ: I see. And do you remember when you first met Eric?

PJ: No, I don’t.

LJ: But you remember him, right?

PJ: I remember Eric very well. He was a delightful man. They were a strange combination. But, I mean, Eric also was a musicologist, really.

LJ: But obviously they were very interested in Anvil, you know, they provided quite a lot of support over the years. So you must have quite impressed them, in a way. So, you mentioned he was quite a nice man, you got along well with him, right?

PJ: Yes, but I didn’t have a lot to do with Eric, because most of my dealings were with Charles. At the same time I was acting as assistant to the London Poetry Festival that Charles pretty much managed. Ted Hughes and Patrick Garland were the so-called Directors, but actually it was really Charles’s show, in many ways. My job was to be, kind of, just dogsbody and help look after the poets, make sure they knew what they were doing, where they were going, generally. Which was a wonderful, wonderful job, and through it I met a lot of poets.

LJ: So, that was at the beginning of the 1970s, right?

PJ: It started in 1969, no ‘67. ‘67’s a huge one. Nothing in ‘68 but then in ‘69, was the second one.

LJ: And of course it was quite unusual to have festivals at that time, now you have a festival everywhere, but at that time it was unusual, right?

PJ: Yes.

LJ: So, that was quite a unique opportunity for you as a young poet, publisher, to meet those very distinguished poets –

PJ: Yes, it was wonderful. I mean, it didn’t really lead to any, sort of, publishing contacts as such, but it did lead to a couple of translating things. I was very taken with the Hungarian poet, János Pilinszky, and I translated some of his poems, and also a funny novel. And I’m hoping to continue translating his poems now. But we’ll see.

LJ: Fantastic, Yes. It seems to me so many people were interested in poetry in translation in the 1970s, you, Antony Rudolf, Michael Schmidt… so why was there such an interest in translation at that time?

PJ: Because there had been so little before, almost none, and it happened that there was really, a fantastic generation of poets in so many countries… so, yes, they were first to be translated. I mean, I think all the terribly exciting work was done then. I mean, there still is a lot of poetry translated, but it seems to me it’s not of, kind of, first-rank importance.

LJ: Well, I’m just trying to imagine the literary scene of the 1970s, because I was not there at the time, but you know, it seems to me that there was such an interest in European poetry as well. And I’m from France originally, so that’s, you know, very much of interest to me. The fact that so many people were turning towards Europe...

PJ: I think, well, the festival invited the best-known poets it could find, I mean, Bonnefoy – actually, we even invited Paul Celan, but he declined. I think it was the year before he died. Yehuda Amichai, I mean, partly it was personal preferences of Ted Hughes, but partly it was pretty easy to pick the top poets from European countries.

LJ: Yes, you mentioned Yves Bonnefoy, he came to Britain to read his poems.

PJ: Yes, he came to the London festival, then later he came to the Cambridge Poetry Festival.

LJ: OK. And of course, the Cambridge Poetry Festival was created by Richard Burns.

PJ: Yes, I remember going to Bonnefoy’s lecture on Yeats, at which he read his translations of Yeats – fantastic.

LJ: Yes, would you say at that time, many poets were still influenced by Modernism – I mean, you mentioned Yeats, H. D. of course was being re-published by Carcanet at that time, it seems to me that, you know, people were interested in Pound, H.D., this kind of modernist poetry.

PJ: Yes, I think, yes, modernism had a kind of, second wind. In the late sixties and early seventies. I think, now, nobody’s interested. I mean, from the creative point of view.

LJ: I see, Yes. Well, scholars are, still very much interested.

PJ: Yes, well, Ezra Pound is an industry. Keeps a lot of American academics alive.

LJ: That’s very true. He was a strange man.

PJ: No, I mean, it’s weird, I still am very fond of Pound. But he annoys me at the same time, because you know, there is so much garbage. And I always wonder why T. S. Eliot, who was his editor at Faber, why Eliot didn’t put his editorial foot down and say, ‘Now, come along Ezra, this won’t do.’

LJ: Yes, that’s interesting you mention the fact that T. S. Eliot was an editor at Faber, because obviously as a young publisher, I’m sure you had contacts at Faber, because that was very much a reference, right? I mean, obviously it was still associated with T. S. Eliot, it was, you know, very much a reference for poetry publishing, right?

PJ: Yes, but to us, Faber was too stellar and too patrician. I mean, it just – and also, at the time I thought, I wouldn’t think this now, at the time I thought they were snobbish. And not interested in the younger poets, who I thought were…

LJ: Ok. So, would you say you created Anvil as a kind of response to the fact that Faber was ignoring those poets –

PJ: Well, in a way, yes. I mean, at the time there were very few publishers doing poetry, there was – apart from Faber, there was MacMillan doing a bit, Chatto… two or three others, but not a lot. So, the poetry market was not exactly as full as it is now. I mean, publishing conditions have changed so radically, partly what’s happened in the book trade, and with online publishing and so on, but also, it’s just so cheap now, to produce a book. If you know what you’re doing, you can make a really quite nice looking book, very cheaply indeed.

LJ: So, I believe at that time, Peter du Sautoy was director at Faber. I’m sure his surname is du Sautoy?

PJ: Charles Monteith? Was the boss then.

LJ: Possibly, Yes, so did you know him personally, or…?

PJ: I think I met him once, yes.

LJ: Yes, because I was reading some letters, I mean, Michael Schmidt was trying to get contacts at Faber and trying to meet people at Faber, and perhaps get some advice, you know, in the 1970s. He seemed very eager to create relationships with Faber.

PJ: Yes, well I guess I wasn’t. I thought I knew what I was doing [laughter]. By myself.

LJ: So, I mean, obviously you managed to survive as a press for a very long time, which is very much an achievement, you know, so many presses last perhaps a few years and then they die away, so I’m just wondering, what’s the reason for your success? The fact that you managed to survive for a long time?

PJ: I wouldn’t really call it success. I mean, the only reason Anvil survived as long as it did was because we had one very successful poet. And in around the years 1999-2000, our sales were, kind of, just going up and up.

LJ: Who was that?

PJ: Sorry?

LJ: You mentioned a successful poet.

PJ: Carol Ann Duffy. But once Carol Ann had decided to move on, our sales went… and that was the end, in effect. We couldn’t sustain life after her book - *Mean Time*, in particular, was the one that sold extraordinarily well.

LJ: It’s –

PJ: It continued to be precarious, I mean, in fact, in about 1980, Anvil Press was on the verge of bankruptcy, and I had an introduction from a fellow publisher, Rex Collings. Rex was famous as the publisher of *Watership Down*. He also published one or two books by Tony Harrison. I got to know Rex quite well, and to do a bit of work for him. And so, yes, Rex talked to a Dutchman he knew, Mr Carp and Mr Carp bailed Anvil Press out. To the tune of ten thousand pounds, which was a fair bit of money then. He’s a strange man. I never knew what to make of him, but he was very gentlemanly and sort of kind in a detached sort of way. But he quite rightly insisted that we get ourselves organised, turn Anvil Press into a limited company, which it hadn’t been, it had been just me, trading as -

LJ: Ok, I didn’t realise that, obviously that was quite a lot of risk for you, right? Because I mean obviously, if you went bankrupt, you know, your house could be –

PJ: Yes, I would have been in big trouble. And he also got us a Board of Directors. And they were very nice, in fact I’m still in touch with one of them – Dieter Pevsner? Who’s the son of Nikolaus Pevsner. The man who did the architectural guides to – so Dieter and Oliver Caldicott.

LJ: Ok, and was it difficult for you to work with this Board of Directors? Because obviously you had been alone before that.

PJ: Not really no, it simply meant every three months we would have a meeting and look at sales figures, look at plans for future books, you know, that sort of thing. So, it did get me into a more business-like frame of mind about things. Which was good. And in fact I –

LJ: You said, that was good for you.

PJ: Well, yes and I would need that kind of knowledge and interest later on in my relations with the Arts Council. Who did continue supporting Anvil. But it all got kind of tricky in the 90s, the Arts Council would do things –

[Short break]

LJ: You know, I went to the V&A Museum, they have the Arts Council archive there, and I had a look at some of your letters to the Arts Council. It was interesting.

PJ: Oh God.

LJ: You often said you needed more money for Anvil, so –

PJ: Somewhere I’ve got copies of the – every few years the Arts Council would do an assessment of its clients, every five years, so I’ve got these assessment reports. Actually, they’re probably all in the archive.

LJ: Yes, possibly, I had a look at the 1970s and 1980s, and I need to go back there. But it’s in London anyway, so I can do that later. But just to clarify, your Board of Directors, that was in the 1980s?

PJ: Dieter and Oliver would have been in the 1980s. Oliver died, so yes, so the Board meetings in the 80s would consist of myself, Victor Carp, Deiter… it must have been someone else, but I can’t think who. Anyway, at some point in the late 90s, we had a whole new board of Directors. Dieter resigned, he felt he’d done long enough. Mr Carp also retired, he ran a chain of bookshops in London and had some other business interests, I don’t remember what. But anyway, he went back, he was from the Hague, so he retired to the Hague. But the last Board of Directors, all of whom were of at least ten years standing, in some cases more, were Fraser Steel, who knows Michael, Fraser works at the BBC. Peter Kilborn, freelance publishing consultant, who I met through one of the Arts Council appraisals. And afterwards invited him to join our Board. Andrew Bolton, who is an accountant, and David Shelley, who now is head chap at Little, Brown.

LJ: Oh interesting, in the US?

PJ: Who was still running Allison and Busby. So –

LJ: Yes, I’m thinking of Carcanet because they had this Board of Directors in the 1980s, so approximately at the same time, so it seemed to me that the structure was changing quite radically at that time, right?

PJ: Yes, I think the Arts Council were beginning to gently insist on a little bit of professionalisation. Fair enough. I mean, later on, all that got out of hand, and whether or not it was the government leaning on the Arts Council to impose conditions on the people they gave money to, I don’t know, but we felt under different kinds of pressure, from time to time. I mean, did we publish enough black writers, that was one big thing for a couple of years. In answer to that, we only published one. But we were diverse in the sense that we published a lot of translated poets. So, poets from abroad, we had a fair – so that was one thing, I can’t remember what else, the whole Arts Council thing became so tedious.

LJ: But you would say in the 1970s you felt more in charge of your list? You know, you’re the publisher, you choose the kind of writers you want to publish, right?

PJ: Yes, but with the disadvantage of having no money whatsoever to do things properly with. So…

LJ: But you would say that was more informal? You had more freedom, perhaps?

PJ: Yes. I mean, I don’t think having a Board of Directors to whom one is accountable, need be any disadvantage. For one thing, if you have had any part in choosing the Directors, you’re not going to be choosing people who are going to be opposing your every idea.

LJ: Yes, but did you have an experience of not getting along with one of the Directors? Somebody who might say, ‘Ok, you shouldn’t publish that.’ Or, you know.

PJ: I’ve never had that problem. Michael has a much bigger Board of Directors, I think. I mean, about a dozen as far as I remember. Which I think is too many, I think you need to have few enough people to be able to discuss things – as if it were – well, in fact we used to have our Board meetings here.

LJ: That’s a nice setting.

PJ: One chair there, another chair there. And it was, you know, it was intimate but also business-like. I mean, we had all our papers with…

LJ: And if we go back to the beginning of the Press, I’m just wondering about the kind of competition that you had, because obviously Carcanet was created at roughly the same time, so would you describe them as direct competitors? Or you were doing something else?

PJ: Well, I certainly never thought of Carcanet as competition, I mean I was probably fairly blinkered anyway, just concentrating on what I was wanting to do, but it seemed to me that Michael was publishing poets who I either wouldn’t want to publish, or wouldn’t feel I could publish, properly. I mean, poets like C. H. Sisson, I always felt ambivalent about Sisson.

LJ: Why?

PJ: That he was an elder poet, I felt it would be difficult – I don’t know. Why? I felt he had no music in his poetry at all. It was a kind of prose.

LJ: So, it was not something to do with his political opinions?

PJ: Nothing, no, no.

LJ: Because obviously many people were quite upset by, you know, the *PN Review*, the fact that it was seen as right-wing, and you know, and Michael Schmidt was associated with that, even though he might not have shared the same kind of political ideas, he was still associated with that. I’m just wondering what was your opinion towards, you know, this political climate, *PN Review*?

PJ: Well, it never bothered me that Michael was to the right. I probably rather admired it, because nobody else was. You know, he was standing up for himself. And on the whole, the arts world at large has been leftist, really, ever since the war, maybe even before, and I find that a bit uncomfortable. I mean, I don’t think it’s the job of artists, poets, anybody, to make the kind of pronouncements that they do. I mean it’s different if their ideas are somehow implicit in and embodied in their work, that doesn’t happen very often, I don’t think. So, I mean, I’ve never been political. That I’m aware of.

LJ: So, you were very much interested in the literary text, but not the political aspect.

PJ: Yes.

LJ: So you’re probably the exception here, because I’m thinking of Menard Press, and obviously in the 1980s they became quite political, so…

PJ: Yes. Was he? I don’t know.

LJ: Well, he was very much involved in the anti-nuclear movement. And he was very, very upset by the nuclear threat.

PJ: Well, if you need to worry about something, I suppose that’s as good to worry about as anything else. But… Yes.

LJ: But Menard Press totally switched from poetry, publishing poetry, to publishing political, you know, things about –

PJ: Yes, that’s true. I never really saw any of those things. I mean, I get on very well with Tony, but…

LJ: I actually met him two weeks ago, I went to his flat in Finchley. It’s quite impressive, he has a huge collection of papers and everything, so he’s sorting out his archive at the moment. But you sold the archive to Austin, right? Austin, Texas. They have your archive, right?

PJ: Oh yes.

LJ: And part of it is also in Manchester, right?

PJ: Yes.

LJ: Ok. So that was one question I had for you, because obviously in 2015, you merged with Carcanet, you know, it’s quite an unusual thing to do, perhaps another possibility would have been to choose a successor, so I’m just wondering why you chose to merge with Carcanet.

PJ: Well, I mean, a merger is a very nice way of putting it. The fact is that Anvil Press was finished. And if I didn’t find some publisher, ready, willing to take on the books and various other liabilities or – not so much liabilities as contracts and so on, then I have no idea what would have happened, it would have been extremely messy indeed. So, the fact that Michael was willing to take it on was an absolute blessing. I mean, it wasn’t a takeover because no money exchanged hands. I was literally offloading. But it did help keep the books alive, and -

LJ: Which is great.

PJ: And I think it has given Michael one or two poets who he likes, James Harpur, Martina Evans. So, that’s all to the good.

LJ: And why did you choose Carcanet, and not Bloodaxe, for example?

PJ: [redacted]

LJ: [redacted]

PJ: [redacted]

LJ: [redacted]

PJ: [redacted]

LJ: [redacted]

PJ: [redacted]

LJ: [redacted]

PJ: [redacted]I mean, the only thing I can say about Anvil Books that I can be absolutely sure of is that, for whatever reason, I really thought that a particular book ought to be published, by me. Now, I’m quite sure – well, I know I was wrong in many cases, and I did publish books that I regretted having published, but -

LJ: [redacted]

PJ: [redacted]

LJ: [redacted]

PJ: [redacted]

LJ: [redacted]

PJ: [redacted]

LJ: [redacted]

PJ: [redacted]

LJ: [redacted]

PJ: [redacted]

LJ: And if we go back to Anvil, what was your main market? Was it mostly individual readers who really enjoyed reading the range of poets you were publishing, or was it more schools, universities, or a mix?

PJ: Well, that’s the one thing a publisher never really knows.

LJ: Well, you get readers, sometimes, you know, who write –

PJ: Occasionally, yes. Well, certainly with the Carol Ann Duffy books, especially the last two, that was schools, because I know that they were both used as A-Level textbooks. Actually, my daughter had to do one of them for A-Level. But the library market kind of collapsed at some point in the late 80s, early 90s. Which changed things for the likes of us, considerably, because it had been a fairly steady market.

LJ: So, the political climate in the 1980s was quite different, right?

PJ: Yes, but it was funding and cuts, funding, local councils changing their priorities.

LJ: Yes, so it must have been very difficult for you.

PJ: Yes.

LJ: I read one of your letters in the Arts Council Archive and you were clearly worried about the cuts.

PJ: Yes.

LJ: But you managed to survive and get some funding at the time.

PJ: Yes, the thing I don’t know is, what’s the Art Council’s actual reason for discontinuing Anvil funding.

LJ: When did that happen?

PJ: Well, I think we were told it would happen in 2014.

LJ: So, quite recently.

PJ: And we were given a year’s notice, so end of 2015.

LJ: So, it must have been quite a shock for you.

PJ: Yes. It was horrible, actually. I could have found out what the real reason was, I mean, I knew what the ostensible reason was.

LJ: So, what was the official reason?

PJ: The official reason was very bland. You know, I don’t even remember it. I mean, it really was… it was kind of nothing. But I know there was more to it. Only I thought, what’s the point? This is irreversible.

LJ: It must have been awful after so many years, and you know, all the success that you had.

PJ: Yes, but then I thought to myself, you know, I’m seventy, do I really want to go on with –

LJ: It’s a big question for Carcanet, because obviously Michael Schmidt is seventy-one, so it’s difficult to think about the future, I don’t know what you think about the future of poetry publishing? Do you think that presses like Carcanet and Bloodaxe will continue to flourish, or will it be more difficult?

PJ: I think, structurally, Carcanet seems to me, very well placed. It’s extremely well set-up. It’s got the wonderful Kate Gavron backing it. It couldn’t be better, I don’t think. But if Michael were to have a heart attack, I think -

LJ: He seems to be very healthy! I’m meeting with him next Wednesday.

PJ: At some point Michael will want to pack it in. Presumably. He might not, I mean there are, there was a publisher called Souvenir Books, Ernst Hecht, who went on working until his eighties. Yes, I met him once, delightful chap. Yes, a great talker, his going to the office, I don’t think he employed very many people, but clearly his life was in the office. He liked the people he worked with, he liked his lunches with writers.

LJ: So, what was the best aspect of your career, if you look back? Was it meeting new writers? What was, you know, the most enjoyable thing to do as a publisher?

PJ: It’s so difficult to answer because there’s – I can’t know it any other way than the way it is. But I guess it was coming into contact, meeting one or two writers who I was then inspired to start translating.

LJ: So that was more the translation aspect of your list. Because obviously you published many British poets as well.

PJ: Yes. The thing with translating is that, especially - this is perhaps paradoxical, especially with poets who write in a language you don’t know – translating their work with the help of someone who does know the language, obviously, brings you very close, I think, in spirit to the original poet. I mean, whether or not the translation works or not as a literary object is another matter. But the experience of it, of doing it, is wonderful. It’s the most enjoyable kind of writing I’ve ever done.

LJ: It’s interesting because, I’m thinking of Penguin, because when you started they had this Modern European series –

PJ: I think I have them all.

LJ: - and obviously now, we think of Penguin as a big group, you know, Penguin Random House, so it’s not associated with poetry or translation, so I’m just wondering, is it something that has changed over time? The fact that, obviously, you know, small presses are competing against these big, multinational groups, that might not have been the time, the same thing in the 1960s and 1970s, right? I mean, what was your experience reading Penguin books?

PJ: Well, because they seemed to go along with the poetry festival, the London Poetry International Festival, it was some of the same poets, the same… I never use words like this: zeitgeist. But that series was very much in the spirit of the times, and it was very bold, because it did publish poets nobody had ever heard of. But who then later came to England for the Poetry Festival or whatever? So, it was really forward looking, and exciting. I mean, really exciting. Nothing Penguin have done since, for poetry, has had that kind of impact, that kind of charge. They were really thrilling books.

LJ: It’s interesting for me to think about the market for those books, because obviously you had Penguin, you had Anvil, you had Carcanet, so it seemed to me you had a big readership, or at least a readership large enough, you know, to make it possible to publish those books.

PJ: I think it was easier for people interested in poetry to find books in a bookshop. I mean now, if I ever wanted to depress myself, I go to my local Waterstones, and look at what passes for a poetry shelf. It is dire. They don’t have any –

LJ: So, what’s the biggest problem now, with the kind of poetry that is available at Waterstones, or…?

PJ: Yes.

LJ: Is it something to do with the popular poets? There was a controversy in *PN Review* recently about those popular poets that draw big crowds –

PJ: Oh, what, rap and that sort of stuff? Well. It is a different world. It is the verbal equivalent of pop music. I guess. If people enjoy that, well, good luck to them. Personally, I don’t see how anybody can get anything out of it.

LJ: Yes, you know I had a chat with, I don’t know if you know him, Grevel Lindop? He was a friend of Michael Schmidt at the beginning and he still lives in Manchester.

PJ: Oh, Grevel, yes.

LJ: Grevel Lindop, Yes. And he told me about the Liverpool poets in the 1960s, and obviously they performed in pubs, you know, they had quite a large, popular audience, so perhaps there’s a parallel between those Liverpool poets in the 1960s, and the popular poets now. I don’t know.

PJ: But I mean, it’s an interesting comparison because at the time, I think, we all thought the Liverpool poets were absolute crap, you know. But now, comparing them to this lot, I mean, they seem quite good. Maybe we’re all getting old, or at least older.

LJ: And just to conclude, I’m thinking of Menard Press and the fact that it’s very much a one person enterprise as well, with Tony Rudolf, and he’s not sure about the future for Menard Press, so what would be, you know, perhaps, the way you view Menard Press in the future, will it survive, what would be the best option, perhaps?

PJ: For Tony? I don’t know. I haven’t seen him for a couple of years, but every time I do see him, we have this conversation about – Tony says, ‘I’ve given up publishing,’ and then a year later, he’ll have published a couple more books. So, he’s actually addicted to it. And he doesn’t know what to do with the backlist. I don’t know if he has, now, done anything about it, but he had a huge stack of books at his distributors, gathering dust and probably costing him money. Which… there’s nothing for it but to destroy, because they’re never going to be sold.

LJ: Yes, it’s difficult.

PJ: What Tony does, I mean, with the remainder of the business, I don’t know.

LJ: It’s very much, it seems to me, an important period, we are looking towards an uneasy transition, with people like you retiring, so it seems to me that, it’s going to change quite a lot for small presses and poetry publishers. One question I forgot to ask you about Angus Wilson – I don’t know if you –

PJ: Oh, Angus Wilson?

LJ: Yes, because I read one of your letters to Angus Wilson in the Arts Council Archives, I wonder if you remember meeting him?

PJ: A letter from me to Angus?

LJ: Yes, because he was part of the literature panel –

PJ: That’s right, he was on…

LJ: Yes.

PJ: Angus was a lovely man, really delightful. I remember once having tea with him at the Athenaeum Club, crumpets and tea, in London. I don’t know what that letter was about –

LJ: Oh, it was more because they had this programme called Writers in Schools, and you were just suggesting a few things about selecting writers, and –

PJ: But that was probably not long before Angus left England. I mean, he went to France with his partner Tony. Who I met, who’s now in Suffolk.

LJ: Oh Yes, they lived in Suffolk, so –

PJ: Yes.

LJ: So, did he go back there after –

PJ: Well it must be down, maybe after Angus died, or before. I don’t remember.

LJ: It’s quite a sad story, because obviously Angus Wilson became quite sick when he was in France. And, you know, -

PJ: Yes. I think he was suffering from dementia. In any case.

LJ: But you remember having tea with him.

PJ: Yes, I do, I do remember him being delightful. And I was also on an Arts Council committee, which Angus was on, in fact, it was the literature committee. I was on it as a so-called junior member. For a year, possibly two years. Angus was the Chair. He was just so funny, mischievous, witty.

LJ: He was very charming.

PJ: Yes, terribly funny. Great man. Nobody reads his books these days, I’m afraid.

LJ: Well I do, I love Angus Wilson, Yes. And also, because I’m finishing my history of creative writing programmes, and he was associated with creative writing at University of East Anglia. Well, actually he was teaching at UEA when he was part of the Arts Council. So I don’t know if you talked about UEA, and creative writing with him?

PJ: I don’t remember that, no.

LJ: But you mentioned that you were part of the literature panel, as a junior member. Do you remember when you started there? Was it in the 1960s?

PJ: Well, it would have been ’68. I think, Yes.

LJ: And what kind of discussion did you have as part of…?

PJ: I’ve actually got old papers in the cellar.

LJ: Oh, really? Oh, I would be very interested -

PJ: I don’t know if they’re confidential or not. I think the papers I’ve got are a different committee, not the literature panel. Literature panel discussed who to give money to, I mean, in those days a lot of money was given to individual writers. I remember B. S. Johnson used to get money every year.

LJ: Why was that the case?

PJ: I think Angus was quite keen on him, I think Angus had a soft spot for experimental writing. Anyway, Julian Mitchell was on the committee. I remember him being very lively and entertaining.

LJ: That’s interesting because Michael Schmidt was a junior member as well, so perhaps this was another committee, or…

PJ: He didn’t overlap with me.

LJ: Because he was part of a committee with Brian Cox, and he was, I think he was the young member and Brian Cox represented the North of England or something like that. But it was not the same committee as you?

PJ: No.

LJ: It’s interesting that you remember Angus Wilson because you’re right that not many people today remember him.

PJ: No, they don’t, and guiltily, I haven’t read any Angus, but I have got one of his books. Which I shall read.

LJ: I mean, his kind of writing is not popular today, it’s very much associated with the 1950s – but I do enjoy it. I think he was a wonderful writer.

PJ: I like that, give me the fifties any day.

LJ: Well, I think I’ve asked you all my questions, thank you so much for your time.

[Pleasantries, recording ends].