**Carcanet Oral History Interview [24 April 2019]**

**Respondent: Michael Freeman (MF)**

**Interviewer: Victoria Stobo (VS)**

**Amended version by M.F. 30.8.19**

MF: Perhaps I might begin by saying it’s still quite a surprise to me that I found myself at Carcanet. I was between careers, as I thought, and just wanted to fill in my time for a few weeks. So I asked Michael [Schmidt] whether I might be useful, and I was taken on as an unpaid middle-aged office-boy, intern, factotum. If we ran out of envelopes, I’d be the one sent to the local stationers. But what began as this casual encounter turned into a ten-year spell. The other reason for some surprise is political. I was a Labour Party activist and involved with the university’s Marxist group, though not a CPGB member.

Moreover, I had an interest in post-structuralist theory as it affected literary criticism. All of this put me at the opposite end of the spectrum from Michael and Peter [Jones]. But they were wide-minded, and as a teacher I’d learnt to compartmentalise my interests. So by a process of osmosis and patience on both sides I eventually graduated from being office boy to a sort of fiction editor – ‘sort of’ for reasons we might come to later.

VS.: Could you say something about your background and education?

MF: Well this too is rather different from that of my Carcanet colleagues. Via the 11-plus I got to a tiny run-down grammar school on Teesside, being taught literature by a staunch Leavisite, and then to Sheffield University – only because the places I wanted to go to wouldn’t have me. I’d no idea that Empson had recently taken the chair there. It was a tiny department in those days, which meant I had the legendary Empson as a weekly lecturer and as my tutor in my final year. Getting a First from Empson maybe helped Carcanet authors like Christine Brooke-Rose and Gabriel Josipovici to take me a bit more seriously later on. I took a postgraduate diploma in education and taught for several years in grammar and comprehensive schools in the North, until I became a lecturer at Didsbury teacher training college, where I taught some Modernism, contemporary poetry and experimental fiction. So later when I came to Carcanet I had at least a nodding acquaintance with its field. The college became part of Manchester poly which in turn became the Metropolitan University, but by then I’d had enough of institutionalised lecturing, so I took off. Though I kept up teaching a couple of courses for the extra-mural department and the WEA. I took a postgraduate diploma in librarianship, but then the decade at Carcanet intervened.

VS: So you didn’t work in the publishing industry before starting at Carcanet?

MF: Not at all, other than slight involvement at Didsbury with a colleague, Harry Chambers, who was developing his legendary Peterloo press, though Harry was a one-off and so was his press. Perhaps that might have described Carcanet in its early days?

VS.: It’s a good description of many of the poetry presses I’ve come across.

MF: Certainly I knew next-to-nothing about publishing. I was learning on the hoof at Carcanet. And that was a very different era. Michael and Peter would sit for hours bashing away at the typesetting machine, a labour of love and sweat. When the galleys came in, any mistakes had to be sent back and the corrected lines – strip by strip on the light-box – had to be pasted on, literally a scissors and paste job. If you look at, say line 8 of page 64 of novel X, you can see where the print-line is skewed - my personal imprint on those first editions! Hands-on, all hands to all tasks, and the unbounded enthusiasm of Michael and Peter, with Michael a hard-core workaholic, this kept the show on the road. Robyn Marsack, a scholar- critic and prize-winning translator, and trained in copy-editing by the stern professionalism of Helen Lefroy, became an editorial director. Her perspective on those years will be invaluable to your research on those years and on the sternly professional presence of Helen Lefroy.

VS: Just in terms of your background again, when you were being tutored by William Empson, was it mostly poetry or fiction you were studying?

MF: Well, for Empson it was both, but for me the priority was poetry. I became chair of the English Society there and I managed to get poets to come to read and discuss their work, a great boost for me and my fellow students, and a bit of background for my Carcanet years. But you have to remember that my Sheffield days were as far back as 1959, long before Carcanet was conceived. Still, even up to my years at the Corn Exchange I’d been teaching new poetry for the WEA classes, so I wasn’t entirely behind the times.

VS.: Which poets did you invite to your Sheffield meetings?

MF: Through Empson we managed to get MacNeice. There was Thomas Blackburn, Francis Berry, Herbert Read, Norman Nicholson, Norman MacCaig. It blurs a bit now. Later at Didsbury, through Harry Chambers, we had readings by the Northern Ireland poets – Seamus Heaney did a workshop for my students – and Northern English poets like Glyn Hughes, Jon Silkin, Tony Connor, Tony Harrison – not that ‘Northern English’ encapsulates their variety.

VS: Blurred or not from your Sheffield days, it gives a sense of the time. And it’s what Michael was doing on those lines at Oxford.

MF: Though Michael’s hit-list would have been more numerous, more prestigious, than anything we could manage at little old Sheffield. Despite Empson’s presence, it was where you’d really go to read metallurgy or glass technology. Still, as a small department, we were exposed to a variety of critical approaches: Empson teasing out the ambiguities, bibliographical scholars teasing out the cruces of commas, a Marxist, a Leavisite, a disciple of Wilson Knight symbol-mongering, et al. All good stuff for us students.

VS: New universities were exciting in that sense, and I do tend to associate Oxbridge with more traditional approaches to scholarship.

MF: I’m afraid Sheffield was old red brick, not plate glass. Empson once referred to it, endearingly, as ‘plucky little Sheffield’, not least as in getting him back on the academic ladder.

VS: When did you first meet Michael, and what was your first impression of him?

MF: As I best recall, we met through two friends of ours: Alan Young, a good friend and colleague of mine at Didsbury, and Brian Cox who had become the English professor at Manchester. And of course it was Brian who persuaded Michael to come to Manchester, getting support for him and the press. But the first real encounter was when Michael and Peter interviewed me – that’s too portentous a word for the casual occasion. You couldn’t help but be struck by his quick wit, width of cultural reference, ironic edge, sheer energy, *chutzpah*.

VS: Why did Carcanet eventually return to a poetry-dominated list? Was it a natural process? Because you weren’t there taking care of the fiction list?

MF: Well, I wasn’t there to fight a corner for experimental novels. But more importantly, more positively, Michael probably felt it in his bones that he should return to his home ground, to what the firm was clearly good at, and known to be good at. I’m sure he was right about it. Nicolas Tredell would have a trustworthy view on that question. Is he on your list of interviewees?

VS: He is now. I emailed him this morning, actually.

MF: He was always a stalwart for *PN* as a contributing editor. Long after I’d eft Carcanet and was ruminating about what I’d not managed to do there, he told me I’d introduced Carcanet to areas it had never thought of before. Coming from Nicolas, that’s very comforting. Still, in historical terms Carcanet and *PNR* re-located to its core territory, poetry. That’s where it essentially is, where it gets plaudits for.

VS: We’ve talked about the fiction list, but you did work for *PN Review* as well.

MF: Well, that too was by in-house osmosis, as there were so few of us in the office. I might be there to take the flak from a disgruntled contributor or reader. I had to try to placate Iain Hamilton Finlay after I’d fallen foul over one of his diatribes, or reassure Elizabeth Jennings that she really ought not to commit suicide. I had to develop skills as therapist, father-confessor, and instant cover-stories.. I did crop up in print in *PN* by writing reviews from time to time. At one point I was billed as a coordinating editor – that is, a scissors and paste mechanical.

VS: Were you ever a director at Carcanet or *PN*?

MF: Not that I recall, or if ever it was temporarily just to fulfil some document or other that needed another signature, some legal pro forma or accountant’s paperwork.

VS: So you started at Carcanet around 1983 and were there for ten years?

MF: That sounds right. After that I re-cycled myself as a freelance editor for would-be novelists and biographers, then an editor with a firm of legal information resources. The legal eagles hired me to tidy up the logic and syntax of the critiques and abstracts for their on-line journals. It was pretty low-level work but it paid the bills till I retired. I kept in touch with Michael. I like to think we’re good friends still.

VS: So you started working for Carcanet in the 1980s?

MF: I think it was ’82 or ’83.

VS: Do you mind my asking how old you were?

MF: Not at all. Forty-five – as I say, a middle-aged office-boy.

VS: So you didn’t begin as fiction editor. How did that come about?

MF: Osmosis again. Besides the daily bits and pieces, I started writing ‘reader’s reports’ for Michael. Sifting through the unsolicited manuscripts [‘slush pile’ – terrible phrase], penning paragraph-length summaries and recommendations as to their acceptability – my sense of their literary quality and/or whether they would fit in with our list, our range. But Michael was the managing editor: he managed, he edited, he called the final shots with the fiction list. This was principally translations of Italian and German fiction, French and Brazilian, Lebanese and Moroccan, some of which you might describe as ‘experimental’ but that wasn’t the point. We were opening up English translations of international modern classics. For all his adopted Englishness, Michael is an internationalist. And of course, some funding from international cultural funding wasn’t sniffed at.

VS: Carcanet was already a well-established poetry press in the 1980s. Why was it decided to launch its more experimental fiction list?

MF: Well, there wasn’t a revolution, or not one that I noticed. Maybe it was just another spasm of Michael’s restlessness. Anyway, some of the European classics were themselves pushing at the boundaries of conventional narrative fiction. Maybe we were even tuning in to some of the unsolicited manuscripts, especially where they clicked with the sort of fiction I’d been teaching earlier. Sometimes we were being cajoled – for example we were nudged by George Steiner into Christine Brooke-Rose’s new novel. Certainly, I was keen on that nudge and her work became an important set in our experimental fiction list. And there was happenstance. One Monday morning pile threw up an unusual novel by a Turkish writer we didn’t know. I recommended it in my reader’s report, though the translation didn’t read at all well. Michael cautiously nodded, and we invited Orhan [Pamuk] to work up a better translation. Something was going on in our office in the Corn Exchange, so Orhan and I sat in the buffet at Manchester Victoria station hammering out a better version. This emerged as *The White Castle.* The reviews were good, but of course we couldn’t offer Orhan the royalties or promotion that Faber could, so off he went on the road to his eventual Nobel prize. It’s the old story: a small press does the risky, exploratory work, then the big guys do the big business. But if we got that one right, we got another one badly wrong. We had published Vikram Seth’s poems and he then sent us his novel *The Golden Gate,* a social satirical novel about Californian culture and written in six hundred Onegin- style sonnets. I thought it was technically very clever but not a lot more than that, and Michael fortunately – or unfortunately in the event - agreed with me. We turned it down and it went elsewhere to be a huge success. So it goes.

VS: There’s almost a parallel with the music industry in that small independent labels bring debut acts through, who then end up signing to major labels later in their careers, but it is, you know, the independent labels who provide a really gestation point in the process? You gave Orhan Pamuk as an example of, I guess, a bridging piece of fiction between what Carcanet had previously published and their risk-taking with serious experimental fiction. Can you talk about an example of a more experimental work?

MF: I mentioned Christine Brooke-Rose earlier. Much earlier she had written novels and short stories of a largely traditional nature, followed by a set described as the English *nouveau roman* – that annoyed her - but she was better known internationally as a literary theorist. George Steiner had listed her in his trinity of critics for his postgraduate students: the others were Donald Davie, who had become a Carcanet father-figure and academic trustee, and – of course, again – Empson. I was keen to endorse her new *Amalgamemnon,* which then became the first of her new wave of experimental novels - there had already been an earlier wave, a fiercely innovative quartet - and eventually we took both the first wave as well, as part of a package deal. Christine and I became good friends, though her friendships were risky: she used my wife and me as a puzzling couple in one of her more grumpy novels, *Life, End of,* though she did apologise afterwards, and we made a joke of it. And she was never too happy about Carcanet: she thought she deserved bigger and better, we were *faute de mieux.* Still, she was one of only two experimental novelists kept on the list after I’d left, the other being Gabriel Josipovici. Others had their brief day with us, such as Mike Westlake and Latife Tekin.

VS: That’s very illustrative. Did you proactively approach such authors or were you basing it mostly on the submissions you received?

MF: I suppose there were several channels. Yes, one was by working through the weekly pile of unsolicited typescripts – I was ever optimistic. Then there were recommendations, like George Steiner’s advocacy of Christine Brooke-Rose. Or a few would be poets we’d already published who then offered us their novels, like Vikram Seth. Then there were books which, in effect, came as part of some funding tactics that Michael was good at negotiating.

VS.: Did you go to book fairs?

MF: Michael did that. I was sent on just a couple of international jobs. One was to Warsaw when the Stalinist generals were running Poland. Their Ministry of Culture thought we might be persuaded to take on some of their favoured titles, but we didn’t. Meetings with the Union of Writers, working dinner at the Ministry, it was all quite revealing of their politics of culture, and my wife and I were treated quite handsomely, and we met a couple of politically subversive writers, but I came home quite happily empty- handed. Jennifer also came with me to Milan, where Carcanet was to receive the Krizia prize for promoting Italian literature in the UK. Mario Vargos Llosa and Penelope Lively were picking up prizes too. That was fun, though at the lavish Krizia dinner I managed to irritate the Chief of Police, by asking about his helicopters monitoring the city-wide strike by hotel staff, and upset one of the Mondadori sisters by my chatter, not knowing that her sister had died the day before. Still, Carcanet was duly honoured.

VS: We were talking about approaching authors and accepting unsolicited manuscripts . .

MF: . . . mostly not accepting them, though usually by polite little letters rather than mere rejection slips . . .

VS: . . . and how the fiction list grew. Did you have much to do with literary agents?

MF: Not me personally. The manoeuvres of contracts, the high diplomacy of the agents’ world, that was Michael’s area. That’s where his commercial eye and his *chutzpah,* excelled – and where he wriggled out of crises. Besides, Bob Gavron was always ready with advice if asked, and with occasional warnings. I should say here that Bob was the ideal patron, never attempting to influence the literary list. Bob and the Arts Council were crucial supports.

VS: So the fiction list was expanding, and then in 1984 there were plans to launch a fiction magazine the following year. Could you talk a little about that and how did it link in with *PN Review*?

MF: It was Michael’s idea, perhaps to do for fiction what *PNR* was doing for poetry, with new work, reviews and critical essays on the genre. A parallel magazine, a sibling house journal. And as I was a fiction editor and involved with *PNR,* Michael asked me to be editor of the new magazine. I thought such a magazine was promising, though I felt less promising as its editor. Still, I convened a meeting of writers we knew who might form an editorial board, including Gabriel Josipovici, and Stuart Hood and murmurs of support from Christine Brooke-Rose. We formed a good idea of what it might do, how it might be pitched. Draft contents were listed. Our printers did a mock-up. We reached the stage where Bob Gavron came to discuss the project. He didn’t try to block it but it was fairly clear to me that he was pretty sceptical about its commercial viability. By then I’d begun to have doubts about the editorial board, whether their differences, ideologically as well as in literary positions, could hold together sufficiently and

– this particularly – whether I had the clout to make it hold. So I told Michael that probably the magazine shouldn’t be started, or if it were then he should find a different editor than me. He didn’t propose another editor. So it all stopped at a very early stage, at least without much loss of expense or kudos. But *PN Review* then had started to run the sort of stuff that would have gone into the new fiction magazine.

And that lasted for a couple of years until *PNR* moved back essentially to its earlier scope. Well, it had never really moved far away. And by then I had left Carcanet.

VS: It sounds like Michael had trusted you with the fiction, that he didn’t have a replacement in mind, or he couldn’t see himself working so well with someone else. Like you’d built up a rapport over a long period of time, and he could trust your judgment, your insight and instincts.

MF: It would be nice to think that, but Michael is, quite simply, his own free-standing power-station. As Carcanet’s *chef de cuisine* he didn’t make his impact on the British literary scene by relying too much on his *commis chefs* or the *plongeurs*. The menu was his.

VS: Well, you’d been acting as a filter for him. He had the final decision but your filtering helped reach those decisions.

MF: Now and again perhaps. As regards the fiction magazine, I probably disappointed Michael. Basically, I wasn’t up to it, but I didn’t even suggest anyone else who might take it up. I felt by then that the difficulties were considerable, particularly problems of building a readership.

VS: Publishing is always a risky business because you don’t know where the audience or market is for a particular . . . I don’t want to use the word ‘product’.

MF: But it *is* a ‘product’. We shouldn’t mystify it. And a product that needs selling. But that wasn’t something I was directly involved with. I did go to some of the meetings with our sales reps, to talk up the titles I’d worked on, though I often felt I couldn’t give them the sales points they wanted, the marketing pitch they needed. Usually I hadn’t even written the ‘blurbs’. Michael appointed Nick Rhodes and Mike Abbot on sales and marketing. Nick set up a ‘hi-tech’ database for that, though I don’t know how productive it turned out to be. And we’re still talking about a pretty small organisation then If you want a no-nonsense account of how it actually worked you should ask Pam Heaton.

VS: You’re the second person who has told me that.

MS: I can give you Pam’s address. She kept the show on the road, she was the day-to-day fixer, she knows where the bodies are buried. She and Robyn [Marsack] were stabilising forces, to the extent that Michael wanted to be stabilised. Of course there was also a sequence of accountants to put a brake on things, or trying to.

VS: I think Pam Heaton probably had the best idea of the financial status at any one point.

MF: She was a rock-solid presence as other folk came and went. She’d smile wryly if she came to read any of the transcripts in your project.

VS: The next section is about Carcanet’s US branch in the 1980s.

MF: Well, I can’t tell you much at all about that. We published American writers of course and, yes, we opened an office in New York, but I had virtually nothing to do with the US end of things.

VS: Did the US writers tend to be the poets? Were there any novelists?

MF: For instance Harry Matthews’ novels, and Christopher Middleton’s – both brilliantly innovative. But you’re right, the emphasis was on the poets. Quite a range: from H.D. to Guy Davenport, even Robinson Jeffers, a collected William Carlos Williams in two magnificent volumes, and of course – extensively – John Ashbery.

VS: How did the New York office come about? Was that a result of the Bob Gavron patronage?

MF: He would have seen the argument for opening an office there, as useful for stateside arrangements for marketing and sales and maybe for dealings with American publishers and literary agents. But I don’t think it lasted very long, which presumably meant its results weren’t all that impressive.

VS: The next section of questions has to do with results. Was the fiction list profitable while you were at Carcanet? And if it wasn’t, why was that the case?

MF: I couldn’t offer you any analysis of the accounts, the profits and losses. All I knew was that we kept going, chancing our arm, taking hits but striking out again, taking deep breaths and moving on.

VS: There are probably accounts from that time that we can look at, that should give us an insight, maybe more granular data on how the list was doing.

MF: Though I suppose one way of answering your question is: did the writers feel they were getting a good return on their creativity? I reckon they were pleased to be published by a prestigious firm and they never expected to be getting big advances or royalties. Another answer might be: Bob Gavron, the Arts Council, the Gulbenkian, Michael’s working a forty-eight-hour day, his jobs as a professor at Manchester, then Glasgow, his production-line of massive literary histories, these made it possible. Possible and marginally profitable?

VS: Was this round the time there was a controversy about *PN Review*’s promoting a campaign for the *Book of Common Prayer*? And I get the impression from some other interviews that some writers ddn’t want to publish in *PN Review*.

MF: Well, the magazine stuck its neck out in two controversial campaigns. Yes, one was a campaign – ‘Crisis for Cranmer and King James’ - against the Church of England’s dilution, betrayal of the language of the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Authorised version of the Bible. It wasn’t just a matter of literary, stylistic preference. It was argued as a betrayal of liturgical, even theological values. David Martin was the guest editor. Michael had become an Anglican himself, but the campaign was supported by non- Anglicans, agnostics, theists and atheists, humanists across the board. I wasn’t at Carcanet then, but even as an ex-Anglican humanist, I applauded the campaign. Then later the magazine charged into a very different battle. Nicolas Tredell edited a *PNR* polemic against, broadly speaking, an alliance of post- structuralist and neo-Marxist theory, especially as this had infiltrated literary criticism and the teaching of literature in higher education. Again, there was thought to be a betrayal of values at stake. I may have been the only one at Carcanet who had rather more sympathy with the other side of the argument, and Donald Davie asked me why I didn’t pitch into the argument. All I did was put a short ironic piece in the magazine, a parody of anti-theory theorists, on the lines of people in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones, and straw men are easy targets. In fact I wasn’t a paid-up member of The Enemy. Anyway, these two campaigns were reckoned by many to be *PNR*’s finest hours, but inevitably they ruffled many feathers in first the Anglican and then the academic communities – as they were meant to. And it surely did no harm to the magazine’s profile or subscriptions.

VS.: It’s interesting because all through this period Michael was publishing material from left wing writers. A lot of the Scottish poets he published would have been identified as on the left.

MF: Yes, although himself a Conservative, even a member of the Salisbury Club, Michael didn’t block off left-wing writers, whether they were insistently Left, like MacDiarmid, or more quietly so, like Edwin Morgan. Stuart Hood and Mike Westlake are visibly novelists from the Left. He was always pretty even- handed in these things, and I suspect he became even more so after he’d become a teacher in Manchester and Glasgow. But even early on he’d published selections of two of the thirties Marxist writers, Cauldwell and Cornford. And he published several collections of Edgell Rickword’s essays and poems, and later Hobday’s intellectual biography of Rickword. When it comes to the relation between literature and politics, the politics of his culture – or should that be: the culture of his politics? – he would argue fiercely against any reductive polarity. In these matters Michael is pretty Whitmanesque: he is large, he contains multitudes.

VS: Since you left Carcanet have you contributed to *PN Review*?

MF: No. The only literary journal I’ve written for recently is one you’ve probably never heard of. I’ve become a regular reviewer for The Mekong Review, a literary and political magazine edited by Minh Bui Jones – he’s rather like Michael in his enterprise and energies. You might look it up sometime.

VS: Is there anything else you’d like to discuss this afternoon?

MF: Well, I might just add that my spell with Carcanet widened my literary horizons immensely, and gave me some good friends, not the least of whom was Les Murray who died so recently. My years in the Corn Exchange were time well spent.