**Carcanet Oral History Interview [7 November 2019]**

**Respondent: Peter Robinson (PR)**

**Interviewer: Lise Jaillant (LJ)**

LJ: Would you like to start by introducing yourself and giving me an overview of your career, when did you start becoming a poet?

PR: I was born in 1953 in the North of England and I started writing poetry in about 1969, I think, ‘68 or ’69, when I was sixteen or so. I began publishing immediately through school-type outlets; so writing and publishing always seemed as if they were part of the same thing. And I continued to do that all through university into my PhD period in Cambridge, which was where I came into contact with the Cambridge poetry scene. I helped run festivals and the poetry society and edit magazines, and that’s when I came into contact with Michael Schmidt, I believe. That was in Cambridge in 1978 or ’79. I was aware of *Poetry Nation* and the *PN Review* and I bought and read early copies of the magazine, but I only met Michael himself in 1979.

LJ: OK, but before that you were involved in the Cambridge poetry scene?

PR: Yes, as a PhD student and I knew Jeremy Prynne, J. H. Prynne, and I was aware of the prehistory of Carcanet when it was a magazine between Cambridge and Oxford students, and so on. I think it was Jeremy who told me this ancient history of Carcanet before it became the magazine and press that I was aware of.

LJ: Interesting, so that was before Michael Schmidt obviously?

PR: Yes, before I knew Michael Schmidt I had heard about how Carcanet had come to exist.

LJ: So, you mentioned that you were at Cambridge, were you involved in the poetry festival?

PR: I was: the first poetry festival took place in 1975. I was still on a gap year at that point, so I wasn’t aware of it, but as soon as I arrived I found it had been quite an event. Veronica Forrest-Thomson had died in its immediate aftermath, as I think maybe Rolf Dieter Brinkmann had as well. So, it was circulating as almost a legend in the first year it took place, and I became involved in the next one which happened in 1977. I was the secretary for the society.

LJ: Please could you give me a bit of context about ‘the legend’. What do you mean exactly?

PR: It was literally because I hadn’t been there but knew people: I had acquaintances and friends who were undergraduates and had been at Cambridge that year, and they’d attended it. I must have met Richard Burns who had organised it, very soon after getting there as part of this poetry scene.

LJ: Yes, he mentions you in an article he wrote about the Cambridge poetry festivals. So, you didn’t attend the first one, but you had heard of it.

PR: Yes, I had heard of it, and I reviewed Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s *On the Periphery*, her first posthumous volume of poetry, published by Street Editions in Cambridge in 1976. The fact that she had died straight after the festival was something which was widely known in the town amongst the poetry scene and it influenced my reading of that book.

LJ: And you started becoming involved in the festival in 1976.

PR: Yes, almost as soon as I arrived I was involved. There was an undergraduate poetry workshop and we started editing a poetry magazine called *Perfect Bound* and then I started to be involved in the festival as well. I got directly involved in as much of the poetry scene as there was really. Within the space of three or four years I became something of a go-to person, as it were.

LJ: And how would you describe the festival for someone who didn’t know it?

PR: In those days I think the first three or four incarnations of it . . . it was modelled on the Poetry International Festivals, from the 1960s I think, the famous one at the Royal Albert Hall, for example. And it was called the Cambridge International Poetry Festival. People came from all over the world . . . Well actually . . . no, they came from the European and Anglo-American world, to be absolutely fair, that’s what we used to call ‘all over the world’ in those days. There were no Japanese poets or South American poets that I remember. Although Cambridge people knew about them . . . I met Mario Vargas Llosa when he was not known at all in Richard Burns’s house, amazingly.

LJ: Interesting, and how was it organised, did you have readings all day?

PR: Yes, endless readings, a bit like a long weekend of big celebrity readings in the evenings and smaller readings in the day plus ancillary events . . . exhibitions and things of that sort.

LJ: Was it one poet or several poets?

PR: Usually groups of three poets, little team readings for about an hour and a half.

LJ: And did you have questions and answers at the end?

PR: Not much, no, it wasn’t really like a conference. It became more like a conference when it was revived in the 1990s, I think late ‘80s or early ‘90s. I was involved in it from 1977 to 1985 and after that I didn’t have anything to do with it. In fact, about that time it changed its character altogether because the funding became much more difficult. It became more of a symposium of like-minded poets, from the more strictly Cambridge group. Whereas the earlier one was very much more open field . . . a very international thing.

LJ: So, were you involved in the selection of the poets? So, there were mostly poets from the Anglophone world plus European.

PR: Yes, we would write to people. I wrote to lots of letters: to W. S. Graham, Samuel Beckett (who said ‘no’), Elizabeth Bishop, George Oppen. I have letters from Allen Ginsberg …

LJ: Oh, they must be valuable!

PR: Yes, I guess, I don’t know . . . and a number of letters from Joseph Brodsky, Andrea Zanzotto, Yves Bonnefoy, all this sort of quite high-level people. It was really an extraordinary thing to be involved in. I mean, I met Ezra Pound’s mistress, Olga Rudge, as a result of all this. It was amazing to meet this 90-year-old woman who had met Mussolini!

LJ: So, tell me about the socialising, you said you met these poets. Was it just at the readings or did you have coffee breaks?

PR: It was just very, very informal. Sometimes one organised things . . . I did an interview with Roy Fisher in 1977 for the student magazine, *Granta* as it was then called, and which eventually evolved into the publishing company, but in those days it was a student magazine.

LJ: Was it during the festival?

PR: Yes, during the festival. So, when Roy Fisher was down in Cambridge I interviewed him. Things like that would happen, but most of it was just hanging around. It would take place in the Students’ Union which had a bar so people would stand around in the bar and talk to each other: it was quite an extraordinary thing.

LJ: Yes, Michael Schmidt told me it was a good place to meet people, to network and so on.

PR: Yes, it was. I met Hans Magnus Enzensberger that way, all kinds of people.

LJ: Was it a mixture of younger and older poets?

PR: Yes, because there was always an attempt to put on some of the local writers. Poets like John James and Peter Riley, Wendy Mulford and Dense Riley would be on – the people more associated at that time with the Cambridge School and then some of the leading young people like John Wilkinson who was then a graduate student poet, they would also get readings.

LJ: Excellent and do you remember if there was a mixture of female poets and male poets?

PR: In the festival itself we did manage to get a reasonable balance. People didn’t really do headcounts of gender balance in those days, although this sort of thing was already beginning to emerge. I remember having conversations about if we were going to have a Palestinian poet shouldn’t we also have a Jewish poet. Some tricky issues of this kind would come up. But because Elaine Feinstein was living in the town at this time (I’d read her translations of Marina Tzvetayeva and her own poetry at York) she helped organise connections with Russian women poets . . . I did once get a telephone call from the Union of Soviet Writers in Moscow. It involved the arrival of Yunna Morits and Bella Akhmadulina. So some Russian women poets came over as well in the 1980s.

LJ: So, if we go back to the 1970s, would you say there was a strong interest in poets from continental Europe. You know, poets from perhaps East Germany, Eastern Europe?

PR: Yes, there was. I think that Zbigniew Herbert may have spoken at the Cambridge Poetry Festival. Perhaps Miroslav Holab read in 1975, which I didn’t see. So, there was an interest in Eastern Europe. Clive Wilmer and George Gomori were translating some Eastern European poetry. There was a broad interest in European poetry. I was involved in getting Andrea Zanzotto over to read in ’79 and there was a French poet called Alain Delahaye who read in 1977, Jacques Dupin then read in 1985.

LJ: So what’s your interpretation of this interest? Why was there a sudden interest in European poetry?

PR: I’m not sure, I mean I think some of it was just under the banner of the word ‘international’ and I was very struck by...I had been taught by a French writer at York called Nicole Ward Jouve, who was married to Tony Ward, who had been a friend of Elaine Feinstein and Jeremy Prynne and I was taught French poetry by her at York. So, I arrived in Cambridge with a lively interest in European poetry anyway.

**Continuation Interview [26 February 2020]**

**Respondent: Peter Robinson (PR)**

**Interviewer: Vanessa Millar (VM)**

VM: During your first interview in November you told us about your experience of the Cambridge Poetry Festival and you mentioned Elaine Feinstein. Were there any other women poets that you met at the festival in the 1970s?

PR: Yes, I came into contact with some of the women poets associated with the then contemporary Cambridge school. Elaine Feinstein had been associated with the Cambridge school in the 1960s and had known Tony Ward and Jeremy Prynne back in the 60s and that’s how I got to know of her before I even went to Cambridge. At Cambridge I met Wendy Mulford, and Denise Riley who is now very prominent, but was then just starting out writing. In fact I wrote a review of *Marxism for Infants*, her first book. And I came into contact posthumously with Veronica Forrest-Thomsonwho had died the first year that I arrived there in Cambridge, and I reviewed her book. There weren’t a lot of women poets around at that time, it was very much a single-sex college university back then in the 70s. We invited a number of women poets to the poetry festivals that I organised. Lauris Edmond came from New Zealand, for example. But it’s true one of the great changes that has happened in the poetry world since I started is the way in which it has levelled up in terms of gender involvement, I would say.

VM: Yes, things have improved.

PR: Enormously.

VM: Talking about Jeremy Prynne, you mentioned last time that he told you about the pre-history of Carcanet. Do you remember when you first met him?

PR: Actually, Jeremy Prynne interviewed me for my PhD at Cambridge, so I met him with Frank Kermode in the Spring of 1975. And again, I knew of him and knew of his work through those friends of his at York where I did my undergraduate degree. They’d almost passed me onto Jeremy in a way. And he interviewed me, and I managed to get through the interview. I saw quite of a bit of him during my time at Cambridge, also because, thanks to him, I taught for his college. And I had a lot to do with the poetry scene, and he was a sort of, I forget what the word they used was: each society had to have an academic who was a kind of sponsor, who oversaw it anyway, and Jeremy oversaw the Cambridge Poetry Society.

VM: So you knew about *Prospect*?

PR: I’d read some issues of *Prospect* in York because Tony Ward had been involved in editing them, so I’d read it, yes.

VM: And what was your attitude towards the Cambridge school?

PR: Well, initially just a kind of slight awe and puzzlement, I think. I wasn’t so puzzled by the kind of poetry inspired by the New York School, John James, and the New York end of things was quite sociable and flourishing with a lot of traditional poetic features and imagery and rhythm and rhymes and things like this. Jeremy’s poetry puzzled me and it still does, I think even more now than it did then. It’s got more puzzling over time, as it were. But I always understood that it was driven by a very serious intent, so I did my best to work out what that serious intent was.

VM: So, there were others that had a similar style to you?

PR: Yes, there were people like Peter Riley for example who I knew early on as well and published in *Perfect Bound*,who I corresponded with, and who was also published by Carcanet later. He writes poetry which is much more available, which is kind of a landscape poetry and not very far away from the work of the person who has had most influence on me: Roy Fisher. I’m Roy Fisher’s literary executor now, so I have gone from writing part of a PhD on him back in the 1970s to now supporting his estate.

VM: So, going on to talk about little magazines. You were involved in numerous ones including *Blueprint* and *Perfect Bound*. Could you tell me a bit more about your experience as an editor and contributor to little magazines?

PR: I’ve contributed to a vast number of magazines; I’ve got a great wall of them. I started trying to submit to them quite early. I published in undergraduate outlets in York so I was always publishing really. I was publishing from 1972 in student magazines. I was involved in editing literary supplements to the student magazine in York as well. There was a mixture of editing things and publishing as well, both in the ones I had edited and in others, that sort of went along with writing. And I also felt that it was really good, because it got you into contact with people who were similarly motivated and similarly enthused. Usually for no money, only for the pleasure and enjoyment of doing it. I found that all pretty good, mostly enjoyable. I must have been rejected from all sorts of things, but actually I’ve forgotten about it. My first wife did refer to me as the person ‘who had been rejected five time before breakfast,’ in the old days when you got rejected by post and it came thudding through the door. But I think, again, if you want to have a life in poetry you’ve got to get used to that.

VM: I guess it’s part and parcel of the process?

PR: Yes, it’s part and parcel exactly. One of the things that I’ve found sad in a way is how much people’s self-esteem was wrapped up in that. I sent some rejection letters myself and I have had some pained replies even from quite distinguished people who I thought were above that. I suppose it was a sort of discovery as well to realise that all poetry magazines are sort of little Venn diagrams with sections of the field and no poet however distinguished they get can be assured of being accepted by all magazines. You could have won the Nobel Prize and been rejected by some avant-garde magazine because they thought you were too mainstream or something. It was also like a mapping process in a way where you worked out who was connected with what magazines and what sort of tastes and enthusiasms particular magazines had so you knew whether to send or not to send or which poems to send. And it got me in touch with lots of poets so that was very good. When I look back on it, it all happened very, very quickly. When I arrived at Cambridge in 1975 I knew virtually nobody. I had only published very obscurely. By three years later I had published in *Stand*.I had been on the radio, on Poetry Now, so it was all rather extraordinary, rather great.

VM: And do you think nowadays things can happen quite so quickly?

PR: Well, I only got so far, but over a similar stretch of time Seamus Heaney went from being unknown in Belfast to being published by Faber and Faber so that was the real rocketing . . . I just went from being nowhere to somewhere. I think it can happen now. It more likely happens I think where somebody strikes a nerve, a social nerve. I don’t think it happens in the same way or by the same routes exactly, but it does happen. Prizes have a more important part to play now than they did then. In fact, I think there were no poetry prizes back then. There were some awards, like a Cholmondeley Award. There was a Gregory Award for young writers, but that’s the only thing you could get which I did apply for.

VM: So, do you think prizes are a good thing or not?

PR: I don’t know . . . now that I’ve got to my age, I wish there was, like in America a life-time achievement award, an award for ‘sticking it out’. I think it would be good if there were a few more of those. A lot of awards are for an individual collection, but I think it would be good if there were awards for long-service, long service medals.

VM: So, at the time you were editing *Perfect Bound* in Cambridge, Michael was editing *PN Review* in Manchester.

PR: Yes, they just about overlapped. *PN Review* had just started, that’s right.

VM: So *PN Review* was often described as a right-wing journal. What was your opinion of the journal and why do you think it was so controversial at the time?

PR: Well, I think it was actually. It was definitely controversial, and it was conceived to be on the right. Part of that was to do with the rather naïve, what I call aesthetic politics, of thinking that if you were avant-garde in terms of your form and style then you must be left-wing in terms of your politics. On the other hand, if you rhymed and were rather conservative in form then that meant you were rather right-wing in politics. And there are lots of cases where this is obviously not so. But I think the reason that Carcanet was seen as a right-wing insurgency, as it were, is because of the role of Davie and Sisson on the masthead. Davie in particular was very curmudgeonly about the state of Britain. He had quite a quarrel with everybody in about 1973 over Philip Larkin’s *Oxford* *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*. From his fastness on the other side of the Atlantic he was being very curmudgeonly about things. There’s a vast amount of correspondence with Michael Schmidt about this, and I imagine Michael was very much under their sway, in ways that he manifestly isn’t now. Doing things like an issue on the King James Bible, it sort of looked as though they were trying to locate themselves with Roger Scruton and with intellectual right-wing independent thinking at a time prior to Mrs Thatcher’s election victory. So I recognised the way that they were being identifed and I was partly sceptical about the pigeon-holing that was going on in doing that; but I also recognised that Sisson was interested in Action Française and Davie had moved from being softly left in the 1950s to being not left in the 1970s. He came for a reading at Cambridge and I met him, and he talked quite frankly about Britain being a better place after the election of Margaret Thatcher. Which I dutifully listened to.

VM: So you met Michael in the late 1970s, is that correct?

PR: I must have done. I think I met him at the 1979 Poetry Festival where he gave a reading.

VM: And what was your impression of him at the time?

PR: Well, I was amazed actually because I’d assumed that he’d be a really confident and self-assured person, but actually as a reader of poetry in public he looked almost frightened. I thought he was a very anxious reader of poetry in public and that made me have a quite different sense of him as a person from what I had imagined, at a distance and receiving letters from him and so on.

VM: So there was more to him than you initially thought?

PR: Yes, exactly. I didn’t know anything about his sexuality or anything of that sort back then. I just thought here’s a person, and how established I thought he was, how he was friends with Davie and Sisson and publishes all sorts of famous people. I imagined he would be more socially confident, as it were. And it seemed that at least as a poet he wasn’t, and that was interesting . . . and likeable.

VM: You edited the collection of Adrian Stokes’ poetry for Carcanet in 1981.

PR: I did, yes.

VM: Could you say a few words about this experience?

PR: I wrote a poem about it actually called ‘Editorial Footnote’ which came out in my second collection, the first Carcanet book. I really admired Adrian Stokes a lot, but he wrote his poetry right near the end of his life when he was dying of cancer and many of the poems I think were not entirely finished. The manuscript I received was a mess: there were multiple copies of poems in different states. I was still only in my twenties and it was the first editorial job of this kind that I’d ever taken on and to be honest it was a little more than I could really cope with. So, there are some flaws in that book which I regret. I was glad to do it, and nobody has ever re-issued those poems since. Although I do think some of them are of great interest, especially if you like Stokes’s writings in prose about art. But I learned a lot from it. That’s one of the ways to learn – by making mistakes. But it was the first book that I’d edited and sadly I had to get over its reception a bit. Donald Davie at that point had a bee in his bonnet about psycho-analytical readings of Pound which were also combining left-wing thinking with criticising Pound’s phallocentrism and such like. Davie thought that the Stokes’s psycho-analytical line of thinking was one of the things that had done the damage. So he included Stokes’s poems along with some other critical tendencies in the literary world at that time and he gave it a bit of a drubbing because he wanted to let off steam about that particular thing. So I got caught up in that a bit. Which was rather painful. The first time I had been reviewed in the *TLS—*and it was a drubbing from Donald Davie. A decade later he rather made up for it, though, by giving my first critical book, *In the Circumstances*, a very positive review in the *LRB.*

VM: So, did Carcanet approach you to do the editing? How did it come about?

PR: I think the way that that happened was Michael was in touch with Stephen Bann who was a real enthusiast for Stokes. No, maybe not. What must have happened was Stokes had died in the early 1970s and Carcanet had published an uncollected prose volume called *A Game That Must Be Lost* in 1973. They must have been in touch with the estate. And the poems were lying around with nobody doing anything about them, so it must have been Michael who suggested it. It will have got known that I was interested, I don’t quite know how. Certainly I wrote an essay for *PN Review*. Probably one of my first *PN Review* appearances was an essay on one of Adrian Stokes’s poems that appeared in the supplement edited by Stephen Bann. That’s how around 1980 I was starting to appear in *PN Review*.

VM: So, Michael published your own poems including *Selected Poems* in 2003. How would you describe you experience as a published poet with Carcanet?

PR: With Carcanet, well, complex. I was talking to Tony Fraser who took over publishing me after my collaboration with Michael stopped in the early 2000s. We were talking about another poet who had gone to Japan and stayed there who was looking to publish some of his work with Shearsman, and Tony said that Michael Schmidt had managed to keep my name in the public eye pretty well in the eighteen years that I had spent in Japan. I had published a collection with Carcanet in 1988. The following year I got a job teaching in Japan and was out of the country for eighteen years, and, in that time, Michael published three more collections and a *Selected Poems*. It felt at the time at quite long intervals, but probably wasn’t in retrospect. And so when I came back to England in 2007, I wasn’t one of the prominent poets of my generation, but I was known and people knew of me, and that was probably because Carcanet would keep on publishing a book every four or five years, that sort of thing. So retrospectively that looks like rather a good thing for Michael to have done and to have managed. Things got a bit ragged towards the end somehow or other. I began to get restive. There was also a problem about permission payments for anthologies. This is partly due to the emergence of the internet as well, I think. One of the ways that Carcanet would make residual monies out of authors was by charging fees for appearances in anthologies. The kind of anthologies that wanted to publish poems of mine were usually shoestring anthologies that didn’t have any money. So, if they were asked for any kind of fees, they wouldn’t be able to put you in. So curiously enough, having a contract with a publisher meant reducing the amount of attention you got – or so it seemed to me at the time, so I began to feel a bit restive. That was one of the things that came about towards the end; but never mind, I’m very grateful for what Michael did during the fifteen years or so that he published my poetry. It was a sort of foundation for whatever reputation I’ve now got as a writer, and it kept me focused on what I was doing and where it should be going.

The experience of being edited moved from quite close attention . . . actually it was a bit patchy. The first book got quite a lot of attention from Michael; there was a lot of editorial input, but the second didn’t. It was probably published a bit too quickly and a bit more editorial input would probably have been useful. Then the third book got a lot of editorial input again very helpfully, the fourth book a bit less. And then the *Selected Poems* was published more or less as I wanted it. So it varied a bit: sometimes Michael would go through the manuscript putting ticks and crosses against poems and then I would negotiate with him. Or he would suggest bits that needed attending to. He did say one thing which I think was really the right thing to say, and I have taken it over into my own practice as an editor working for Two Rivers Press and that is that when you edit a book you hand it over to the poet and you say: ‘Those are my suggestions. Whatever you decide to do with it now, I will publish that thing.’ So in other words the final cut, as it were, is the poet’s. I think that’s the way to do it. The editorial input is the penultimate thing, and then the poet comes back with their version and that’s what you publish. That does seem to be right.

VM: I imagine not all publishers take that view?

 PR: Maybe not, but I thing that’s the proper way to do it. And, as I say, that’s what I’ve taken on from Michael when I’ve been editing for Two Rivers Press.

VM: Now Carcanet is celebrating its 50th anniversary, how do you explain its longevity? What do you think has contributed to it?

PR: I would think that there are three things, probably. First of all, Michael’s determination, doggedness and commitment, and that’s one thing. I suppose determination, doggedness and commitment are all different types of things, but it’s going to be a complex set of qualities, isn’t it? It can’t just be idealism or something that would keep it going like that. And then I think the ability to change and adapt – so, as we were saying earlier, the press was very much associated with right-wing politics at first and rather dubiously with conservatism in artistic taste, and it’s evolved rather dramatically. I was very struck when my *Selected Poems* came out in 2003 that the thing next to it in the catalogue was Tom Raworth’s *Collected Poems*, and I thought of Tom as this ‘way out there’ experimentalist who we’d published in *Perfect Bound*. If you thought twenty-five years before, Carcanet couldn’t possibly have published Tom Raworth, but in 2003 they were, and since then it has opened up in all sorts of directions. One of the reasons I was dropped by Carcanet after my *Selected Poems* is probably just because Michael can only take on so many books, and he’s got to keep abreast of the times; and apart from that he’s got to justify the Art’s Council grant. So he’s also supported by the Arts Council, and also. I think there was someone called Gavron who owned the press at one time. So there were also some wealthy supporters in the background. Michael’s ability to pull all that together and keep it rolling, that’s important as well. So those are the three things: there’s Michael’s combination of characteristics; there’s the ability to keep the Art’s Council supporting them, and also having other means of support, and also keeping a tight rein on finances; and then the third one is to be artistically flexible and to move with the times. Those would be my three reasons why it has survived so well. A reason which has got nothing to do with Carcanet directly is that it’s been surviving in a period that has been devastating for poetry publishing in general, certainly in trade publishing. If you think of the time that Carcanet started in the mid-1970s there were many trade presses that were publishing poetry lists and now there are many, many, many less. It’s almost like a little cartel of three or four in London plus Bloodaxe in the northeast and Carcanet in the northwest. So Carcanet was surviving and managing to survive in a marketplace that was shrinking, which meant that Carcanet had a terrific list because there were so many poets that were losing their publishers and needing a place to go. So, they were benefitting, they were becoming an important go-to place. I remember Elaine Feinstein saying something like ’Thank God for Carcanet’ to me on one occasion. She went from Cape Goliard to somewhere else to Hutchinson and then finally to Carcanet.

VM: That’s very useful, thank you, that was my last question, but is there anything else you would like to add?

PR: As I mentioned in part of the first interview with Lise, which didn’t get recorded properly, I did feel upset about being dropped after the *Selected Poems* in 2003, and that has clouded my relationship with Michael and the press a bit, I have to say. And that’s a pity. But also, for reasons that I’ve already said, the press had to move on. I was taken up by Michael as a poet in my very early thirties, and when I edited the Stokes poems I was still in my twenties. By the time I got to being fifty, I had the feeling that I would always be the person he picked up from nowhere and, as far as the press was concerned, I would never graduate. It felt like I would be one of his aspirant poets forever, and I was in danger of being dropped for precisely that reason. Whereas with other publishers I’ve worked with since, I haven’t felt that. So, it’s as if to graduate to another level I would have to be with a different publisher, for better or worse. Still, as I said, being published by Carcanet did make a good base from which everything else has sprung, and I have a lovely four-hundred page *Collected Poems*, lots of which was first published with Carcanet, so I’ve got to be grateful, I *am* grateful. There, that’s a good note to end on.