

**An interview with Michael Schmidt at the Carcanet Press**

**Friday 25<sup>th</sup> March 2022**

VW: I'm sitting here with Michael Schmidt. Perhaps you can begin by saying something about yourself and how you came to poetry.

MS: I am from Mexico originally; my parents were American. I was raised in Spanish and English bilingually, so I think that may have got me some way towards poetry. In my Mexican school we learned a lot of rhymes: Otomi Rain Songs, for example. We learned the names of the Aztec Kings, and we were always being alerted to other languages but also to wonderfully rhythmical patterning. And with English – at mealtimes when I was a boy my parents always played records, 1920s and 1930s songs. So I learned the lyrics to a lot of First World War songs and lots of college drinking songs, things of that kind. I had a lot of language, rhythmic language, invested in my head without, as it were, realizing I'd gone to the bank. There was a fascination with the noises you can make with your voice, even nonsense voices. With the Otomi Rain Song, I have absolutely no recollection of what it means but it's still charming and still delights me: we used to dance to it as well, a sense of being in your body, in your voice even if not quite in your language. I got a rich mix of cultures from the outside. As I grew older, I began to be fascinated by sonnet forms. When I was ten or eleven I wrote a book of sonnets for my grandmother, one for every red-letter day in the American calendar. These were not juvenilia I would wish to foist on the world.

VW: Those lyrics of the 1930 songs are just amazing, aren't they? They are very witty and catchy.

MS: There is one line I remember particularly which always amuses me:

*Let's all go along to Mary Ann's*  
*To tickle a tune upon the pianola.*  
*There's something nice*

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*Always on the ice,  
And you don't have to ask her twice  
To drink a coca-cola.*

Pi-an-o-la, co-ca-co-la, you see it's fun. It's fun! There is no meaning there, it is just cheerful, a kind of sociable ceremony, and 'tickle a tune upon the pianola' is so apposite, visually.

VW: It's the great age of Jazz as well, and there are a lot of wonderful musicals.

MS: We loved the musicals, too, *The King and I* for example, *My Fair Lady*. I know the lyrics and I think it's interesting, it's not noise, it actually is music and it's intelligent verse which we don't always get with contemporary songs, though some are wonderful. Leonard Cohen sent me one of the very first books I rejected as a publisher, 50-odd years ago. He wasn't particularly well known even as a singer then. I despised him because he was a popular singer, my usual arrogance. You have to get over it. In this case I was too late.

VW: Everybody knows him because of 'Hallelujah', if for no other reason.

MS: There were some that are branded on my memory now... 'Democracy', "Democracy is coming to the USA", those really angry songs, are beautiful at the same time, they may be better as songs, not as lyrics, but there we are. And he also translated Lorca...

VW: But you somehow thought that he was beneath you!

MS: He had a lot going against him. He was Canadian, for God's sake. I said something in my book *Lives of the Poets*, that Canadian poetry is a very short street. Another arrogance to get over...

VW: But not a cul-de-sac!

MS: Certainly not! I now publish several Canadians!

VW: I remember you once telling me that you went to Harvard, that you tried the American system and you hated it. And then you came to Oxford and spent some time there. I am suddenly reminded of T.S. Eliot, and how he was the kind of character who seemed to resent the very institutions that welcomed him - that forced him to belong to them. There is a little bit of this in you, I think. What made you hate Harvard so much?

MS: Well, I don't know that I did hate Harvard. I mean, in retrospect it was a wonderful opportunity which I wasted. I'd come to England for a year to an English Public School called Christ's Hospital in Sussex and I had loved it, I had fallen in love with the institution, the country, and so on. So, I went to Harvard, which is so like my American private school on a vast scale: bright privileged people with a sense of entitlement, preparing their futures. I didn't like it - but it was a really wonderful place. I think the main reason I didn't like Harvard, in the end, was that I was not elected onto the *Harvard Advocate* editorial board and this was what I really went to Harvard for. So a couple of friends of mine and I set up a little magazine called *The Island* and then I decided to go to Oxford instead. I got a scholarship to Oxford, so that was it. Oh, and there was Vietnam and the draft, the only lottery I ever scored in.

VW: So being rejected in that way at Harvard probably led you to your first publications, right? To your *Little Island*.

MS: That's right.

VW: From there you travelled to finally become the Managing Director of Carcanet.

MS: It began with the magazine *Carcanet* of course, and I am sure it will end with the magazine as well – *PN Review* in the swansong. I took over the magazine *Carcanet* which then became a publishing house.

VW: Okay, so back to Oxford. How long were you at Oxford and who did you meet there who you think might have been most influential?

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MS: I was there for four years. I started an M.Lit. and I dropped out after half-a-year. I came up here to teach in Manchester. My first Oxford tutor was a man called Ian Donaldson who was a wonderful Renaissance scholar and a Ben Jonson specialist. He left after my first year and went to be Professor of English at Canberra. I was handed over to a new academic, a new theorist from Cambridge, emerging from under the wing of Raymond Williams, called Terry Eagleton. He was my tutor for two years. I didn't terribly like him, I have to say. I also had a wonderful Old English tutor called Alan Ward. My Latin tutor was a woman who was married to Christopher Tolkien, I believe: we read Virgil, of course. They were good teachers. The tutorial system was preferable to the Lecture system, I thought, and the curriculum was prescribed, so your first term everyone read the same texts. You started Middle English, and also Old English. As a cohort we all spoke the same language, as it were, we spoke about the same things, we were developing all the time an individual perception of and response to the same texts. There was a sense of a common purpose. You could rebel against the text, some people didn't like Milton's prose, for example. You're speaking about the same works and you only earned the right to choice after a certain period, an opening out of the curriculum. We ended, if I recall, with D.H. Lawrence who was – who *is* – still quite modern. That was 50-odd years ago, remember: a strict, prescribed and limited curriculum. I liked having a culture in common with the other people doing the course. It was a common culture for the people who had done the course for decades. You couldn't make a contemporary Smorgasbord and fill your plate with whatever you liked.

VW: I know what you mean. Following the chronology of literature does enable one to be completely immersed and, as you say, to speak the same language with one's literary peers, which I think is one of the most useful things I ever got out of university.

VW: So, Michael, you are probably most famed as an editor.

MS: Am I? I always think myself a literary historian. I've written my book on the novel, another on Anglophone poetries, on Greek poetry, on Gilgamesh. I am not a scholar in any sense, though... The book on the Greek poetry was the most challenging because I don't know Greek. Anyway, it's a lively book, fun to read unless you are a scholar! It's full of stories and my approach has always been to try and make reading about literature a

pleasure rather than making it a task. My books about books are fun to read, I hope. I quite enjoy reading my books, though I balk at some of my then opinions.

VW: I think you are allowed. Whenever I hear your name it is always in relationship to the Carcanet Press. You are, after all, responsible for hundreds of poets' careers, for exposing them. At what point did you decide you would invest more of your time in exposing the poetry of other people instead of actually cutting your own groove and being better known as a poet in your own right?

MS: First of all, I don't think as a poet I was ever in control of my own writing. The Muse absents herself for a while, you're dry. I can't fake it. If you are doing your own poetry you get frustrated.

Most publishers nowadays, I think, are looking primarily for *new* talent. When I came to England many fine older poets were falling or had fallen into neglect. Poets like C.H. Sisson, a major figure, poets like W.S. Graham, Stevie Smith and so on -- they -- were not being read. We were told by the original publisher of W.S. Graham that he had died. He hadn't died. He was alive and very drunk in Cornwall. I had a love for the generation before mine and the generation before that, different though they were. I got to meet people like Empson. I got to know I. A. Richards quite well and elicit memories from him. I'd say, "I wish I'd met Thomas Hardy," and he would reply, "Well I was in Cambridge when he was honoured there. I watched him process..." He had also spoken with A.E. Housman. The sense of connection with the past is really empowering to me.

I had a much older father. He was born in 1892, he was of their generation. It was a bit like being in the company of his contemporaries.

But you mentioned Eliot. A story is told -- I don't know if it's true -- that when he gave his first reading of 'The Waste Land' at Merton College, Oxford, a dead silence followed, then somebody piped up, "Tell us, Mr. Eliot where do you get your corn cob pipes?"

VW: So it could be why he left. I know he went to Merton on a scholarship, didn't he? He was going to Germany and war broke out, so he went to Merton and then just walked away from it. Somewhere he complains about hating the place and all of these sprawling academics with the sprawling children, sprawling books, everything was sprawling.

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MS: He did offer his papers to Merton College in the end and H.W. Garrod, was it, the Keats editor, wrote to him thanking him for the offer, but reporting that the college archive was not the appropriate place for them. Remember my response to Leonard Cohen.

VW: I had a friend who died not so long ago who was somehow related to T.S. Eliot. I remember he showed me all the first editions in his collection and I said “Gosh, it must have been amazing to have been in the presence of someone like T.S. Eliot. Imagine the conversations!”. And he suggested that he was, well, let’s say, a quiet man.

MS: His widow left all of the translations of his books and his Nobel Prize medal to Jesus College in Cambridge when Rowan Williams was Master. We had a conference to celebrate Seamus Heaney. I was walking across to lunch with Mrs. Heaney. “Do you want to see T.S. Eliot’s Nobel Prize?” I asked. “I would love to see Eliot’s prize.,” she replied. “We do have one of our own, you know.”

VW: Touché! So I was going to ask you if there were any poets in particular that you really enjoyed working with or any that were more than usually awkward or difficult to work with?

MS: The one I most enjoyed working with because he tolerated me in a very generous way was C.H. Sisson. I learned an enormous amount from him. Donald Davie was another who could be difficult but was wonderful because we were always critically engaged. He never pulled his punches. He would give me a bad review, but we were very, I think, close. Others like Charles Tomlinson were nice to deal with. And of the younger poets, my contemporaries, Robert Wells, a terrific poet, and Gareth Reeves, from whom I learned so much. Ones that were particularly difficult and I fell out with included Jon Silkin, a close friend, seemingly, but when I started consorting with Donald Davie and C.H. Sisson, I was in his ‘black book’. I lost other friends when I was friendly with figures characterized as conservative. C.B. Cox, Professor of English at Manchester, who invited me up to teach here, was famous for the Black Papers on Education. I was seen as a fellow traveler. I perceived myself as on the left, though not in education, but had no really strong sense of political coloring. But I was colored.

VW: Was Philip Larkin part of that? because I know you met him, and that Brian Cox knew him from Hull.

MS: That's right. He sometimes came over to go to the football (United, of course) with Brian. Brian said that when a goal was scored, Larkin showed emotion by raising his hat. Yes, Larkin was part of it. Larkin's politics seldom really mattered because he didn't write about politics very often and the human sympathy in poems like 'The Old Fools' is so deep that no matter what his politics, he was above all that.

VW: Why did you never publish Larkin?

MS: We did put a couple things in *P.N Review*. Larkin in a letter wrote to Andrew Motion disobligingly about the Press when we published *The Pleasure Steamers*, Motion's first book. But the Manchester University Library Librarian, Fred Ratcliffe, consulted Larkin about acquiring the Carcanet archive and Larkin said he should, it would be an important acquisition. I liked Larkin as a human being, he was very funny and fun to be with.

VW: Alright, so you have an OBE for your services to poetry.

MS: They were actually services to *higher education* and poetry.

VW: How did this come about?

MS: I have absolutely no idea. I just got a letter from the Palace.

VW: Queen: "Please come to the Palace for an OBE?"

MS: My secretary Pam opened it and read it to me down the phone: "How would you like to have an OBE?". I said: "What's an OBE?". I had no idea how the honors system worked. Then later on I thought, "Why not the CBE?" I think higher education was probably due to the fact that I had done a lot to set up the 'discipline' of creative writing in Manchester, working with my friend, the novelist, Richard Francis. We originally set it up not to train wannabe writers but to create better readers. It was a time when theory was in the ascendant

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and people were undervaluing the skill to do close reading. When Richard and I set it up here, the students who did it were reading better, doing better all across the board. It was seen as a kind of useful adjunct, teaching a skill, rather than a discipline in itself. It went on to become a kind of department in its own right.

VW: So then you went down to London and were given your medal by the Queen?

MS: Yes, I went with my children and my partner. We dressed up nicely, I put on my top hat and everything. I had met the Queen before. I made her laugh -- my children were astonished because nobody else made her laugh, I just said: "We've met before but you won't remember me, I had more hair then".

VW: You've taught poetry across the world, haven't you?

MS: Only in England.

VW: I thought you had been invited to teach all over the world ...?

MS: Oh yes, I've done a lot of events abroad, lectures, workshops and suchlike.

VW: So my question is what are the greatest challenges, do you think, in teaching poetry or the appreciation of poetry, to a generation that I certainly find quite impatient - the fast-food, A.I. generation?

MS: My old age will answer this question. The only way you get into poetry and into poets' work is reading and re-reading a range of poems by that poet, reading attentively and finding what you really like and discovering you suddenly know them by heart. Nowadays I find the students, especially those doing creative writing. I don't know how widely spread it is, whose knowledge of the general culture and of the history of English literature is nugatory, or, I should say, 'very localized'. They may have read extracts of Chaucer on a course, or the Metaphysicals; they almost certainly won't have read the eighteenth century. They won't have read much of the seventeenth and their grasp of the Elizabethans is tenuous. There is a lack of curiosity about the sweep of English literature and probably a lack of curiosity about

other English literatures. I certainly was rather slow to realize how much there is in Australian Poetry, for example, or in New Zealand poetry which I'm very fond of too.

VW: You were friends with Les Murray though, weren't you?

MS: Oh, yes. He was great and he was one of our most successful poets as well. We always hoped he'd win the Nobel Prize. But that was saved up for Louise Gluck last year or year before last. We were delighted with that, as well.

VW: What were your greatest poetical influences as you were growing up?

MS: Coming back to C.H. Sisson I suppose. Lowell was an influence and the poet I was the most passionate about and I dedicated my second book to is Elizabeth Bishop. We corresponded a bit. And I really liked her work a lot. As time went on, Larkin became very big for me, and then James Baxter, and the wonderful Judith Wright from Australia, and people of that kind. I read an anthology by D.J. Enright and discovered Walcott, whom I'd not read, and gradually developed a strong interest in some of the Caribbean writers.

Almost all the poets that I really love were rooted in the things that I was rooted in. Les Murray might have rebelled against the central English tradition, but he knew it on the pulse. He could quote as well as the next man. That was exciting, the poem freed from the page. And Baxter, Baxter seemed much closer to some of the American poets. I relished how real the religious faith of Baxter and Murray is.

VW: I spend quite a bit of time in Australia, these days, and find Australians are quite sensitive about the fact that not enough is really done to popularize Australian literature. There is a great deal of it - and wonderful prose as well as poetry.

MS: Maybe the point is not to try to popularize the whole literature, but to popularize the few *really* good writers. Then you've done your duty. There are not many Judith Wrights in Australia.

VW: So you've given us some of your poetry to publish in this volume. I read all of the poetry you said not to read unless I was especially bored. I read it all and I noticed that you

have several which are very closely linked to biblical characters, biblical themes. I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about why you did that.

MS: My father had been married to a Roman Catholic so there was a degree of hostility to the Catholic church at home. We were not a church-going tribe. When I was beginning to rebel of course I threatened to become a Roman Catholic. I was a contrary son, I knew all his Achilles heels and this very loveable man was a veritable centipede. In my American boarding school, before the Catholic period, I became an Episcopalian. We still used the Book of Common Prayer. Again, it was a matter of language, the language of the Book of Common Prayer is so luminous, different in kind from common usage, enactive language. Watching and hearing the way it worked and having the accompaniment of the hymns... The sung services were great. I joined the choir, though I was hardly musical. When I came to England I became even more enamored and declared myself Anglican.

We had a huge battle early on in *P.N. Review's* history. *P.N. Review* 13 was called "Crisis for Cranmer and King James". It's an important issue. We had three petitions: the Saint Cecilia petition of composers and musicians, the religious petition from the church itself and the poets' and writers' petition. They were all petitions to the church not to abandon the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible. Auden had famously said: "Why spit on your luck?" He'd come that way himself. I got involved and grew hostile to the New Anglican Church and some of the new liturgy. I still find it difficult to say. I keep drifting back into the old language rather loudly.

The Bible stories meant a great deal to me and the way that the language worked in those two books. They are where my faith is still rooted. "With this ring I thee wed" rather than "I give you this ring as a symbol of our marriage". Liturgical change came at a time when lexicography too was moving from being a definitive to being a descriptive discipline. Authority was moving from etymology and precedent to contemporary usage. You went to the dictionary less to find out what a word meant, more what it had meant, where it had come from. When the authority of the OED was eroded, the most fatuous and imbecilic things acquire a kind of authority; connections loosen – between words and between periods of language. What had precision, or seemed to, succumbs to relativism.

VW: Yes, I am absolutely going to agree with you. My Ph.D. focused on Reformation biblical translation. The choice of words used in biblical translation was, at that time, a burning issue, and many were prepared to die over the substitution of one word for another.

MS: There is a wonderful poem by Edward Taylor, the American clergyman. He used to write a poem when he was preparing to celebrate communion. He is not a good poet, but he *is* a really fascinating poet, an heir of the Metaphysicals – lots of curious metaphors. There is a poem, a meditation, where you are patiently reading in preparation for communion and suddenly it says, “Oh let me eat my Word”. Breathtaking! Brilliant. If you know what “my Word” means.

VW: Yes, especially in the context of early modern American Protestant identity. Indeed. Okay, I am going to leave you to meditate on that one a little bit more. If you had not been a poet and publisher and historian what would you have been?

MS: The only job interview I was ever invited to when I was at Oxford was at the Bank of London and South America, I think it was called. I might have been a banker, rich and happy, living in the tropics and with a tribe of children. I might not have enjoyed banking; I am not very good with numbers. What would I have been...hmm, probably a teacher. But I am a teacher, am I not? I never made a living as a publisher.

VW: But I remember you telling me you would've wanted to be a Matador.

MS: Yes, I did love the bullfights. I used to go every Sunday. And I went again about twenty years ago, in Sevilla. I'd never been to the Spanish ‘bulls’, I'd only ever been in Mexico. In fact, I knew a number of bullfighters. We used to go to a ranch in Zacatecas, in northern Mexico, to the *tientas* where they try out the cattle to see which ones are fit to breed -- Miura bulls. Anyway, in Sevilla I found I had lost the taste. It was unbearable. I could no longer tolerate it. When I was a boy it was great. I changed, though, my value system had become vegetarian.

VW: You should write a poem about this. ‘Becoming vegetarian after a bull slaying’. So what's next for you then? What have you got left to accomplish?

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MS: I don't really know. I am supposed to be writing a book about Latin poetry. It will begin with Ennius and go right through the Middle Ages and then right through the re-classicisation of Latin Poetry. (It may play with chronology). It will certainly be a book of stories. It will be about poets and lost things and things that continue to connect us to, or rather, through ancient Rome.

VW: Will you be including Jerome's Vulgate?

MS: I haven't quite planned the book. I signed my contract about six months ago and am still clearing my throat. I've bought dozens of books, my library groans with things which call out "read me, read me". I keep finding critical books that are really quite old. There are some old translations of Medieval Latin by Jack Lindsay, a friend of Edgell Rickword, one of my early enthusiasms, a great early Marxist critic and poet who was an informal teacher and dear friend to me. Lindsay's versions are really readable. He doesn't do the extended syntax very well but he's got a wonderful sense of the couplet. And Helen Waddell is worth her weight, she really is. These writers had an instinct for Latin and its connections to us, an instinct for Latin which came from having read a lot of English poetry as well. And it's not only the English Latin poets I am pursuing, I am drifting "lonely as a cloud", far and wide... It'll be another big fat book, 800 pages I should think.