



NEW DIRECTIONS IN BOOK HISTORY

# Women Poets, Male Publishers

Myth vs. Market in Post-1960s Britain

Lise Jaillant

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the first history of British poetry publishers and their (re)discovery of women poets, from the 1960s onwards. It was made possible thanks to a major AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) Leadership Fellowship (project reference: AH/R00773X/1). I am very grateful for this fellowship, which has allowed me to do extensive archival work at the John Rylands Library (University of Manchester), the British Library, Cambridge University Library, Yale's Beinecke Library, and many other collections. I also explored neglected collections such as the Arts Council archive at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, as well as various archives at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. In addition to extensive archival work, I conducted thirty oral history interviews with poets, editors and other figures of the British literary scene.

On a more personal note, I am very grateful to my husband, Marc-Aurèle, and my three children for bringing joy to my life.

## PRAISE FOR *WOMEN POETS, MALE PUBLISHERS*

“No one has done more to show us how twentieth-century literature was shaped and sustained by commercial publishers than Lise Jaillant. In this, her latest and most methodologically ambitious work, Jaillant tells the surprising story of how male editors at self-declared conservative publishers helped to fuel a resurgence in women’s poetry in late twentieth-century Britain. The book re-emphasizes that this thing we call ‘literature,’ emerges, unpredictably, in the complex relations among writers, publishers, editors, readers, and institutions.”

—Patrick Collier *Emeritus Professor of English, Ball State University, USA*

“Lise Jaillant’s deeply researched book offers a fresh, illuminating account of the British poetry scene from the 1960s to the 1980s and beyond. Alert to the regional, institutional, and commercial contexts of literary production, she shows, through groundbreaking archival and oral history research, how commercial publishers shaped a diverse and cosmopolitan canon of women’s poetry. It offers a compelling revisionary account of literary and publishing history in the period.”

—Andrew Nash *Reader in Book History and Director of the London Rare Books School, Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, UK*

“This broadly ranging, wonderfully researched history of women poets and male publishers, based on original study in often overlooked archives, challenges stereotypical views about the supposed insularity of male publishers. It also corrects the received idea that only feminist presses led to the rediscovery of women poets, while the critical role of conservative male publishers, in rediscovering women poets and bringing them to the marketplace, is told here for the first time. The text also raises critical questions concerning social values, publishing practices and public funding. Considering anthologies, reviews, individual poets and even digital archives, Jaillant masterfully revises the conventional view of women poets and the channels for poetry publication.”

—Ira Nadel *FRSC, Professor of English Emeritus, University of British Columbia, Canada. Author of The American Sentence: from Pulpit to Pulp Fiction (2025)*

“A welcome addition to the body of scholarship on modernist small presses and little magazines, *Women Poets, Male Publishers* urges us to consider the category of poetry written by women as a dynamic and complex genre profoundly shaped by institutional forces in the postwar British publishing industry and literary and sociocultural marketplaces. If terms like ‘growth industry,’ ‘marketing appeal,’ ‘mergers and acquisitions,’ ‘management buyout,’ and even ‘bestseller’ feel a world away from the concerns of poetry and poetry studies, *Women Poets, Male Publishers* will challenge you to think otherwise.”

—Mike Chasar *Professor of English, Willamette University, USA  
Author of Poetry Unbound: Poems and New Media from the Magic Lantern to Instagram (2020)*

“Lise Jaillant’s *Women Poets, Male Publishers: Myth vs. Market in post-1960s Britain* is a meticulously researched cultural history that incorporates interviews, contemporary reviews, and publishing data to describe the complex landscape and the behind-the-scenes decisions that led some conservative male publishers to (re)discover women poets after 1960. Focusing on three case studies (Carcenet and H. D.; PN and Elizabeth Jennings; Faber and Sylvia Plath), Jaillant tells a fascinating and counter-intuitive story about the ways market conditions and the Arts Council

paved the way for these influential publishers to promote and publish the work of women poets.”

—Karen Leick *Clinical Assistant Professor and Director,  
Professional Writing Program, Department of English, University  
of Illinois at Chicago, USA*

“*Poetry Survival* is both a significant contribution to the scholarship about twentieth-century literary institutions and a well-told analysis of a publishing firm that has not received much attention. Jaillant knows the players well, uses archival research expertly, and has well-informed ideas about how digital-born materials will change these kinds of projects.”

—Greg Barnhisel *Professor of English, Duquesne University, USA*

“*Women Poets, Male Publishers* is a major contribution to literary history. The book challenges commonplaces about aesthetic autonomy and canonization by demonstrating how state funding and the market combined to increase the status of poetry by women in postwar Britain. The book also presents a vital history of Carcanet Press from its beginnings as an undergraduate magazine in the early 1960s to its current position as one of the most important poetry publishers in the world. The book will become necessary reading for historians and sociologists of literature, and scholars of postwar poetry.”

—Joshua Kotin, *Associate Professor of English, Princeton  
University, USA*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

We are often told that the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s led to the rediscovery of forgotten women writers in Britain. Without feminist presses such as *Virago*, these women would have sunk into obscurity. Thanks to Carmen Callil and other trailblazing feminist publishers, a canon of women's literature emerged, and living writers managed to survive and sometimes thrive in a literary marketplace that had so far been dominated by men. Although obstacles remained, the story is one of triumph over a misogynistic publishing industry—a sector that had once sought to erase women writers of the past, marginalise living authors and close the doors to any future legacy.

There are two problems with this oft-repeated story. First, it focuses mainly on fiction rather than poetry (founded in 1973, *Virago* did not start publishing poetry until the early 1980s). Second, it neglects the major role conservative male publishers played in (re)discovering women poets in post-1960s Britain.<sup>1</sup> Poetry publishing enterprises such as Carcanet Press and its magazine *PN Review* were initially associated with a male-dominated right-wing environment, openly contemptuous of countercultural movements. Yet, with the growing influence of *Women's Liberation*, these publishers realised that there was a growing market for poetry by women. At the same time, the Arts Council of Great Britain

<sup>1</sup> In this book, “male publisher” primarily refers to the owner of the publishing house, rather than the publishing house's entire staff (which are often largely female).

started pushing for more diversity, nudging its “clients” to make more room for women and ethnic minorities.

These two incentives—from the market and public funding agencies—encouraged even the most conservative publishers to turn their attention to women poets, including writers that became heroines of the feminist movement. Sylvia Plath’s poetry was not published by Virago or the Women’s Press, but by Faber—an establishment publishing house that prided itself on its association with the late T. S. Eliot, who once described his worldview as “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion” (ix). This evolution towards more diversity helped these publishers survive in a very difficult marketplace, at a time when independent publishing houses were increasingly being incorporated in large corporations. Ultimately, survival proved more important than political commitment to traditional values and ideas.

Key research questions addressed in the book include: How can we explain that poetry publishers moved away from their male-dominated lists from the 1960s onwards? What role did these conservative publishers play in (re)discovering women poets, including poets associated with feminism and the countercultural movement? How did this evolution contribute to their survival in an extremely competitive marketplace?

Drawing on extensive archival work and oral history interviews, *Women Poets, Male Publishers* pushes the boundaries of a scholarship that has focused mainly on women’s poetry in relation to women’s presses.<sup>2</sup> Archival documents show the influence of the Arts Council and the market in pushing conservative publishers towards more diversity. This evolution has had long-term consequences on the canon of women’s poetry, a canon that was largely shaped by conservative publishing houses rather than radical feminist presses.

The terms “conservative” and “radical” are of course slippery and problematic. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “conservative” as “averse to change or innovation and holding traditional ideas and values, especially with regard to social and political issues.” In contrast, “radical” is defined as departing “from what is usual or traditional.” A press such as Carcanet Press was innovative and disruptive, in the sense that it wanted to disrupt a literary field dominated by London publishing houses. But it was also firmly committed to traditional values, and it positioned

<sup>2</sup> Here, “women’s poetry” is defined primarily as poetry written by women (rather than poetry read by women).

itself in opposition to the radical ideas and movements of the 1960s and 1970s—including second-wave feminism.

My argument is not that feminist publishers never issued poetry in the 1960s and 1970s. As we will see in Chapter 2, the publishing house Femina released *Without Adam: The Femina Anthology of Poetry* in 1968. And in 1979, the Women’s Press published *The World Split Open: Women Poets, 1552–1950*, edited by Louise Bernikow. But these publications targeted a niche market. Poetry seldom sold well when it was packaged as “women’s poetry,” which is precisely why Virago kept away of the genre during the 1970s. Yet, there were signs that poetry by women could reach a large market. In 1971, the *Daily Mail* wrote that young people were rushing to buy Sylvia Plath’s poetry in paperback form, and “the story of her suicide is told and retold in our Sunday newspapers” (Ferdinand 6). Faber presented her poetry as radically new and emotionally extreme—a perfect fit for the cultural revolution. Traditional male publishers did not wait for feminist publishers to issue women’s poetry first. Encouraged by the market and by financial incentives from public agencies, these publishers expanded their list of women’s poetry and targeted mainstream audiences.

This research is significant not only for historical purposes, but also because it sheds light on present-day publishing in Anglophone countries. Even conservative publishers will publish more diversely if they see a financial incentive. In a 2022 article, Laura McGrath highlights the commercial benefits that prompted publishers to publish books on anti-racism in the wake of the 2020 murder of George Floyd, not out of an altruistic purpose but because there was money in it. Similarly, in her study of women in American Christian publishing, Stephanie Derrick points out that a very conservative industry became more open to new ideas and genres when the market expanded post-1970s.<sup>3</sup> This finding has important implications for the future of publishing marginalised voices in poetry and other genres.

This book started as a project on Carcanet Press, a poetry publisher based in Manchester since the early 1970s. But as I began researching

<sup>3</sup> The 1970s “was a time of expansion for Christian publishing, a time when, just as in trade publishing, ideological goals became increasingly subservient to profitability and publishing margins grew tighter” (Derrick 479). In this context, fiction, a genre that Christian publishers had traditionally been uncomfortable with, became increasingly favoured due its profitability.

the complex history of poetry publishing in Britain, I increasingly became interested in the place of women's poetry in the post-war literary landscape. This has led me to pay attention to other publishers—from established London-based publishing houses (such as Faber and Chatto & Windus) to regional poetry presses (such as Bloodaxe), and from now-defunct feminist imprints (such as The Women's Press) to the still active Virago Press.

Literary and cultural studies have broadened from discussion on binary sex (with the terms “women” and “men” referring to biological sex), towards gender, sexuality and intersectionality. In her controversial 2020 book *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism*, Kathleen Stock argues against “gender identity,” i.e. the belief that one can self-identify as man or woman, independently of biological sex. For Stock, “when speaking literally and not immersed in a fiction, ‘woman’ and ‘man’ should be used in line with sex.” Tracing the origins of current debates on gender identity, Stock writes about the impact of Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance. Published in 1990, Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* had considerable influence in academia. “One by one, Women's Studies departments in the 1970s and '80s started to rename themselves as Gender Studies departments, interested in *all* gender performances and not just the narrow, heterosexual, white and Eurocentric performances of womanhood with which many feminists had mostly concerned themselves to date” (n. pag.).

I have no intention to make an intervention in the heated debate that opposes those who believe in “gender identity” and those who believe that sex matters (commonly known as “gender critical thinkers”). UK tribunals have recognised that the two beliefs are “worthy of respect in a democratic society.”<sup>4</sup> When I started writing this book, the idea did not occur to me that it might be problematic to write about “women” poets and “male” publishers of the post-1960s period. But as colleagues gave me feedback, some comments started to unsettle me. “Have you considered including non-binary people in your book?”, asked one. “How do you position yourself in relation to current scholarship on intersectionality?”, asked another. I was told that using the categories “women” and

<sup>4</sup> See *Maya Forstater v Centre for Global Development*. In this UK employment and discrimination case, the Appeal Tribunal decided in 2021 that gender critical views are protected as a belief under the Equality Act 2010. The same applies to gender-identity views.

“men” was too binary, simplistic and out of sync with current scholarship. Indeed, recent work in feminist book history has largely subscribed to a view of feminism that “embraces woman in all its definitions, including non-binary individuals who similarly remain marginalized” (Ozment).

Let’s clarify that this monograph does not attempt to contribute to the large body of scholarship on feminist theory, on gender and intersectionality. No book can cover everything, and non-binary/gender-nonconforming and trans authors are beyond the scope of the project. This book is about Anglo-American writers and publishers, whose gender aligned with their biological sex. Some of them were homosexual, but sexuality is largely irrelevant to this study. While this book is not concerned with sexuality or gender identity per se, it is concerned with the changing place of women writers in a literary field that had traditionally marginalised them. It is this story of marginalisation, exclusion and (re)discovery by publishers which is at the centre of *Women Poets, Male Publishers: Myth vs. Market in post-1960s Britain*.

This book focuses mainly on relatively large-scale book publishers rather than little magazines.<sup>5</sup> Of course, periodicals play a major role in the careers of poets and poetry publishers. Before founding Carcanet Press, Michael Schmidt edited *Carcanet* magazine and produced a series of pamphlets. The feminist magazine *Spare Rib* had a poetry section edited by the poet Michele Roberts in the mid-1970s (as we will see in Chapter 5, Roberts was vilified by writers associated with Carcanet).

Likewise, small presses have long played a major role in discovering new poets and supporting more established authors.<sup>6</sup> My objective is not to minimise the role that these small-scale publishing venues play in the literary field, but rather to shed light on the equally important role of more commercial publishing enterprises. Indeed, scholars have tended to neglect mainstream book publishers. In their influential 1947 study of the little magazine, Frederick Hoffman and his colleagues argued that “the commercial publishers ... are the rear guard” in contrast to avant-garde periodicals (3). This kind of statement had an enduring influence on the study of literary modernism, and more broadly, of twentieth-century literature in English. It is essential to pay more attention to larger-scale

<sup>5</sup> A publisher such as Carcanet Press is relatively large, compared to very small-scale enterprises that published a handful of titles per year.

<sup>6</sup> For recent scholarship on small presses, see Pollard; Colby et al.; Welsch; Hair; Sperling.

publishing enterprises that made poetry available to a comparatively broad audience.

This introduction is divided into two sections. The first part examines the cultural and social context that shaped the British poetry scene in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. It focuses not only on female and male poets, but also on literary institutions that shaped the publication, distribution and consumption of poetry. This includes publishers who selected poems and made them available to the public; funding agencies that supported poetry; newspapers and magazines that reviewed new collections of poems. Narratives on the death of poetry clashed against evidence that poetry was very much alive. The launch of the Penguin Modern Poets series in 1962 showed that even mass-market publishers no longer ignored poetry. A genre that had traditionally been associated with a niche audience was re-packaged for a diverse audience—including young people with an international outlook. The poetry scene remained divided between London and the South East on the one side, and relatively marginalised regions on the other side. Yet, the rising interest in “other” poetry (including poetry in translation) created new communities. The launch of new literary festivals—including the Cambridge Poetry Festival in 1975—offered a forum for emerging and established poets to network and showcase their poems. This included women poets such as Elaine Feinstein, who published poetry with London imprints (Goliard Press, Hutchinson) before the Manchester-based Carcanet Press became her main publisher. In the 1970s, with women’s presses focusing mostly on fiction and non-fiction, female poets had to rely on more traditional imprints to find an audience for their work.

The second part of this introduction looks at the theoretical and methodological approaches chosen in this book. As a book historian, I have drawn on a scholarship that has increasingly focused on neglected figures—including women who wrote, published and promoted books. However, the emphasis on women’s presses has obscured the fact that these imprints had initially little interest in poetry, partly because of their financial fragility. The story of women’s poetry cannot be told without referring to male publishers, who supported new female authors thanks to powerful incentives from funding agencies and the market.

POETRY SINCE THE 1960S: MEN,  
WOMEN AND LITERARY INSTITUTIONS

*The Death and Revival of Poetry*

Narratives on the death of poetry have long coexisted with evidence that poetry is still alive—including prizes, new books, new magazines and sustained attendance at readings. As Emily Kopley has pointed out, “verse has not long been dying; rather, reports of its death have long been living” (1). In 1928, the American writer Edmund Wilson published an essay on “Is Verse a Dying Technique?”<sup>7</sup> That same year, Virginia and Leonard Woolf’s Hogarth Press issued a pamphlet on the death of poetry as part of their Hogarth Essays series. The author, Edward Thompson, tried to understand why the genre was dying out. Few publishers dared to take the risk of taking on new poets since poetry was rarely profitable. The press was also to blame, with newspapers and magazines allocating little space to reviews of new verse. Reviews were not only scarce, and also suffered from low standards. In addition, periodicals had contracted the space devoted to the publication of new poems. Thompson made a series of recommendations to improve this situation. He wanted publishers to bring out cheaper books, and the public to commit to buying four books of verse a year. He also pushed for reviewers to submit enlightened criticism, and for editors to allocate adequate space to the genre in their periodicals.

Reviewing the book in *The Spectator*, Humbert Wolbe deplored that the public shied away from difficult books. Poetry “demands of the reader both training and intensity. It is not compatible with a pipe and carpet slippers.” Wolbe thought that poets themselves also had to shoulder some of the blame, since their verse was too gloomy to appeal to large numbers. Indeed, the aftermath of the First World War, which Wolbe described as “an age of disintegration,” had led to melancholic poetry, which contributed to this downward spiral of low readership. Excluding reprints and anthologies, very few poetry books sold more than 1,000 copies (“Review of *Cock Robin’s Decease*”).

This limited audience contributed to the appeal of poetry among Cambridge critics such as F. R. Leavis and his wife Q. D. Leavis, who distrusted popular literature. In *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932),

<sup>7</sup> The essay was reprinted in *The Triple Thinkers* (1952).

Q. D. Leavis denounced the consumption of detective fiction, bestselling novels and mass-market magazines as “an inordinate addiction to light reading” (50). Readers who indulged in such “dissipation” showed “a set of habits inimical to mental effort” (50, 224). In contrast, the rigorous practice of close reading difficult poems brought both intellectual simulation and social distinction from the mass of ordinary readers. Building on the work of I. A. Richards, the Leavises shared many common points with the New Critics in the United States, a group of poet-critics associated with journals such as the *Kenyon Review* and the *Southern Review*. In the mid-twentieth century, Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, Robert Penn Warren, Yvor Winters and others collaborated in disseminating New Criticism throughout Anglo-American literary culture. Dissociating poems from biographical and historical interpretation, the New Critics valued technical expertise and the ability to deliver detailed line-by-line metrical analysis. After the Second World War, the rise of the university sector on both sides of the Atlantic ensured large readerships for the poetry studied in classrooms, i.e. difficult poetry by T. S. Eliot and other poets favoured by New Criticism.<sup>8</sup>

This book starts in the 1960s, at a time when there were multiple signs that poetry was experiencing a revival, both within and beyond university classrooms. Reacting against Philip Larkin and the Movement, writers associated with the “British Poetry Revival” often published in small presses and little magazines.<sup>9</sup> But in 1960s Britain, poetry was not a genre that established publishers avoided. Faber, Chatto & Windus and Oxford University Press remained deeply committed to publishing verse, in part because a poetry list signalled that the imprint was a quality imprint. These publishing firms wanted to be associated with—in Pierre Bourdieu’s words—“the field of restricted production, in which the producers produce for other producers,” as opposed to “the field of large scale production . . . , which is symbolically excluded and discredited” (39). Other mainstream imprints, such as Cape and Macmillan, expanded their poetry lists at the time. These publishers issued hardcover books for a broad market, but not the masses. Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel*, published by Faber in 1965, sold for 12 shillings and 6 pence (the equivalent of

<sup>8</sup> For more on New Criticism and on the Leavises, see Piette; Hilliard; Mulhern; and Bentley.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the “British Poetry Revival” and its component the “Cambridge School,” see Mottram; Barry; Duncan.

around £14 in 2022). Collected editions were generally more expensive. Elizabeth Jennings's *Collected Poems*, released by Macmillan in 1967, was priced at 42 shillings (c. £45 in 2022) (Officer and Williamson).

Before the 1960s, paperback publishers had avoided poetry due to the large print runs they needed to make a profit. Penguin had once required print runs of at least 17,000 copies to cover set-up expenses and keep the cost of each book at a low level (MacKenzie). New technologies—such as the replacement of metal type with cheaper printing from rubber plates—made it possible to publish smaller print runs and still keep prices low. When Penguin launched its Modern Poets series in 1962, it sold it for 2 shillings and 6 pence (around £3 in 2022). The first book in the series featured poems by Elizabeth Jennings, Lawrence Durrell and R. S. Thomas. By the early 1970s, there were twenty-seven books in the series, with sales collectively amounting to half a million volumes (Stevenson, *The Oxford English Literary History* 152).

Newspaper and magazines allocated ample space to poetry reviews, and articles by poets. In the 1960s, Jennings's poetry was reviewed in periodicals such as the *Times* and *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Listener*, the *Guardian* and the satirical magazine *Punch*. Writing in the *Spectator* shortly after Edith Sitwell's death in 1964, Jennings declared:

more is expected of poets who are women, I think, than of those who are Men. Their sex is constantly mentioned, if not in a crude way, then at least in an inquisitive or histrionic one. According to their characters and upbringing, women seldom remain impervious to many, often futile, expectations; either they become recluses, like Emily Dickinson, Charlotte Mew and Emily Bronte, or they hide what they really feel, what means most to them, behind a peacock persona, a mixture of grandeur, dignity, and absurdity. To this second category, Dame Edith Sitwell, who died suddenly last week, certainly belonged. (9)

For Jennings, being a woman poet required a performance that no one expected of men. Like Sitwell, she would later take on an eccentric persona that led the *Times* to describe her as the “bag lady of the sonnets” (Parry).

Elizabeth Jennings's high profile in the 1960s was highly unusual at a time when most published poets were men. As Nathan Suhr-Sytsma points out, post-war literary institutions were “homosocial”: “otherwise diverse male writers and editors seem to have been more comfortable

collaborating on equal terms with each other than with women” (27). When the Arts Council of Great Britain set up a Poetry Panel in 1951, its original membership was composed only of men (Richard Church, C. Day-Lewis, Sir George Rostrevor Hamilton, Christopher Hassall and L. A. G. Strong). Little had changed in the 1960s. Out of 81 authors published in the Penguin Modern Poets first series, only three were women: Jennings, Denise Levertov and Kathleen Raine.

With the post-war extension of the education system and of English as an academic discipline, new opportunities were opening up for these (predominantly male) poets. Poetry appeared in print form but was also broadcasted on television and on radio—at both national and regional levels. In 1967, a reader in the East Midlands thus informed the *Times* that “Radio Leicester ... successfully devotes fifteen minutes every week to the broadcasting of new poems” (Sully 9). Other radios were devoting more space to poetry. The BBC Third Programme (which became Radio 3 in 1967) played an important role in the dissemination of contemporary poetry via programmes such as *Poetry Now*.

In the 1960s, universities in the provinces started hosting writers-in-residence, a practice that had originated in the United States (Jaillant, *Literary Rebels* 151–174). Following a bequest by the publisher Eric Craven Gregory, the Gregory fellowship was set up at the University of Leeds to support painters, sculptors but also poets. In 1968, a donation from Joseph Compton (the first chairman of the Arts Council Poetry Panel) allowed the University of Hull to appoint C. Day-Lewis as visiting lecturer in poetry for a year. The Compton fund was then used to fund poets-in-residence at the universities of Dundee and Manchester (White 209). These institutions—universities, media, publishers—offered new prospects to writers, including regional writers. However, it remained difficult for those without a traditional background to break through in a poetry world dominated by the London-Oxford node.

### *Geographical Divides*

As the economic, cultural and publishing capital, London remained the place to be for the most ambitious poets in the post-1960s period—often after a stint at the University of Oxford.<sup>10</sup> The trajectory of Ian

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 3 for a discussion on the University of Cambridge’s place in the literary scene, in relation to Oxford.

Hamilton (1938–2001) exemplifies the opportunities that these literary centres offered. After growing up in Darlington, Hamilton went to Keble College, Oxford, where he joined the Oxford University Poetry Society as treasurer and then president. He also founded two little magazines, *Tomorrow* followed by *The Review*. At a time when poetry was sold to the masses in Penguin paperbacks, Hamilton wanted to publish less accessible poems with a deep awareness of their place in literary history. “Pop poetry was coming into vogue and *The Review* was going to put a stop to that,” he later said (Harsent 66).

After graduating from Oxford, Hamilton moved to London in 1966. Four years later, Faber published his first collection of verse, *The Visit*. Hamilton was making a name for himself thanks to the support of powerful London-based institutions—Faber, but also *London Magazine* and *Times Literary Magazine*. He became *TLS*’s poetry and fiction editor, a prominent position that allowed him to push his own *Review*. The magazine and its successor, *The New Review* launched in 1974, received generous Arts Council grants. When the funding was removed, *The New Review* went out of business in 1979. For a poetry magazine, even one created by a London-based tastemaker, survival remained a gamble.

Many poets who felt excluded from the London establishment saw Ian Hamilton’s *Review* as—in the world of Edna Longley—“a spearhead for the metropolis” (162). But not everyone agreed that provincial poets were suffering from the domination of London. Take the example of Anthony Thwaite. Like Hamilton, Thwaite had studied at Oxford and led the Oxford University Poetry Society before moving to the capital. He then became the literary editor of the BBC weekly magazine *The Listener*. However, having grown up in Northwest England and the United States, Thwaite did not see himself as a London tastemaker. In a 1970 article in *The Review*, he rejected the notion that the literary scene was divided between “the wicked power of ‘the establishment’ on the one hand, and ‘the underground’ on the other hand.” Instead, he argued that “there are several ‘establishments’” (23). In particular, Thwaite claimed that he had accepted poems by “writers from the provinces – most notably, the Northern Irish trio of Heaney, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon – as they arrived through the post” (Suhr-Sytsma 17).

The story of the manuscript that arrived through the post is a leitmotif among publishers and editors. As I have argued elsewhere, it is a way to show that only literary quality mattered, and that social connections are irrelevant (Jaillant, *Literary Rebels* vi–vii). Anthony Thwaite downplayed

the importance of the London-Oxford nexus because he was already a member of an elite of well-connected gatekeepers. For writers living on the periphery, sending poems via mail was unlikely to lead to publication, let alone literary success. The obstacles were even higher for women poets based in the regions. It is not a coincidence that most of the female writers mentioned in this book were associated with the literary centre. For example, Elizabeth Jennings had studied at Oxford before working for the London publisher Chatto & Windus.

While the London-Oxford centre remained prominent, other regional centres were emerging, offering poets alternative routes to publication. Funding from the Arts Council of Great Britain largely explains the rise of Carcanet Press in the 1970s, followed by Bloodaxe Books. Carcanet's founder Michael Schmidt had started his literary career in the same way as Ian Hamilton or Anthony Thwaite. During his time at Oxford, he edited a little magazine, and he took advantage of his position as president of the Oxford University Poetry Society to network with some of the most famous poets of the time. When the American poet Robert Lowell came to be a fellow, Schmidt introduced himself to him and became his typist for a book called *Notebook*. Lowell then gave Elizabeth Bishop's address to the young poet, thus expanding Schmidt's network of contacts.<sup>11</sup>

Schmidt continued to seek out prominent writers and literary figures. When he was still at Oxford, he was invited to join the Arts Council Literature Panel, which advised on grant-giving and general policy. This allowed him to build strong relationships with Eric Walter White, the Literature Director, as well as other members of the Panel—including Brian Cox, a well-connected professor and writer based in Manchester.

After taking over *Carcanet* magazine (a student magazine that linked Oxford and Cambridge), Michael Schmidt started publishing poetry pamphlets in 1969 and sold them by subscription. These activities laid the ground for the creation of Carcanet press, devoted to the publication of a wide range of poetry. In 1971, the press published eight titles—including *Tribute to Freud* by the modernist poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), poetry in translation by the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa, and new poems by young men who had studied at Oxbridge (Anthony Rudolf and Daniel Weissbort, who were then 29 years old and 36 years old, respectively).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Schmidt, Interview with author, Manchester, Nov. 24, 2015.

In March 1972, Brian Cox applied for a grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to bring Schmidt and his poetry press to the University of Manchester. He presented his project as a way to promote “the Arts in the North” by creating a leading poetry centre that would have an impact on the entire English-speaking world.<sup>12</sup> The Arts Council of Great Britain supported this regional project with an international outlook and agreed to fund Schmidt’s poetry fellowship for three years. The creation of the Manchester Poetry Centre would build on existing Arts Council initiatives in the provinces and offer an alternative to the powerful London literary scene.

When the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan learnt about Schmidt’s move from Oxford, he responded enthusiastically: “A move to Mancherpool? That sounds good. Up the north!”<sup>13</sup> That same year, Morgan contributed a chapter on Scottish poetry in Schmidt’s collection *British Poetry since 1960*. At a time when there was a revival of interest in poetry from the regions, Scottish poets were still searching for ways to express their identity. Nationalist-minded poets were tempted by an overemphasis on Scottish tradition, sometimes to the detriment of “the naturalness of voice and heart.” As Morgan put it:

The step into freedom may be for the Scottish writer the hardest step... There is so much that he is asked to, or may legitimately want to, relate himself to. He is aware of native traditions that are distinct from English traditions – [William] Dunbar, [David] Lyndsay, [Robert] Burns, [Hugh] MacDiarmid, the Gaelic poets, the Kailyaird – and even when he turns aside to [Charles] Olson and [Allen] Ginsberg (Tom McGrath) or [Carl] Jung and [Albert] Camus (Alan Jackson) the subterranean Scottish notochord may still be tingling, and carrying messages from a disowned past. (132–133)

Here, Morgan drew on a masculine literary tradition, and used masculine pronouns to refer to contemporary Scottish writers. In the rest of the essay, he went on to give only examples of male poets—including Tom Leonard, Iain Crichton Smith, Norman MacCaig, Sorley Maclean,

<sup>12</sup> Brian Cox to A. Wraight, March 7, 1972, COX 5/1, Brian Cox papers, John Rylands Library, Manchester (hereafter referred to as JRL).

<sup>13</sup> Edwin Morgan to Michael Schmidt, Feb. 13, 1972, CPA 2/1/51, Carcanet Press Archive (CPA), JRL.

George Mackay Brown and Ian Hamilton Finlay. In the Scottish literary landscape described by Morgan, women did not even deserve a brief mention—they were simply invisible.

In the early 1970s, Scottish poetry did not always enlist the support of local publishers. Edwin Morgan described how Edinburgh University Press (EUP) had kept his second collection of poetry for one year and a half before rejecting it, arguing that its small budget had to be employed for publishing academic work rather than poetry. Yet, EUP had done well with Morgan's previous collection *The Second Life* (1968), selling 2,000 copies—a large print run for a collection of poems.<sup>14</sup> When Michael Schmidt offered to publish Morgan's new book with Carcanet, the Scottish poet reluctantly agreed. As cash-strapped Scottish publishers failed to provide much support, the Manchester-based Carcanet Press took advantage of the new opportunities created by the rising interest in Scottish poetry. In 1972, the year when *British Poetry since 1960* appeared, Carcanet also published Hugh MacDiarmid's *Scottish Eccentrics*, and Edwin Morgan's translation into Scots of Vladimir Mayakovsky's poems.

The press went on to publish anthologies of Scottish poetry, edited by the poet Maurice Lindsay, with financial support from the Scottish Arts Council. With *Scottish Poetry 8* (1975) and *Scottish Poetry 9* (1976), Michael Schmidt wanted to be seen as the go-to publisher for Scottish poets. He joked with Trevor Royle (the Literature Director at the Scottish Arts Council) that his imprint should be renamed MacCarcanet Press Ltd.<sup>15</sup> Being based in the Northwest of England was an advantage in a context when the Scottish national movement concentrated its attacks on London rather than the English regions.

However, growing tensions between Maurice Lindsay and Trevor Royle threatened Carcanet's Scottish ambitions. In June 1976, Lindsay told Schmidt that "the Scottish Arts Council was increasingly against subsidising English publishers, and that it was [Royle's] belief Scottish publishers could now serve poetry as effectively as their English opposite numbers (which is nonsense!)." <sup>16</sup> Although Royle denied that English publishers were at a disadvantage,<sup>17</sup> Michael Schmidt found a stronger

<sup>14</sup> Morgan to Michael Schmidt, April 29, 1972, CPA 2/1/51, JRL.

<sup>15</sup> Schmidt to Trevor Royle, Feb. 18, 1975, CPA 3/14, JRL.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Lindsay to Schmidt, June 28, 1976, CPA 2/1/46, JRL.

<sup>17</sup> Royle to Schmidt, July 8, 1976, CPA 4/2, Box 9, JRL.

ally in the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) than in the Scottish Arts Council.

Public funding had become central to the publication of poetry, especially poetry from traditionally marginalised regions. Carcanet took advantage of the ACGB's growing ambition to make literature less London-centric and remained associated with Scottish literature for the next few decades. The Newcastle-based Bloodaxe Press, founded by Neil Astley in 1978, also benefited from grants designed to help regional publishers. In a 1980 letter to Peter Jay (the founder of Anvil Press), Astley wrote:

Newcastle has its advantages. For one thing, Northern Arts are the wealthiest of the regional arts associations, and know what they're doing in literature. There's also the Tyneside Free Press Workshop here: I do much of my design work there, and they now print the pamphlets, publicity and stationary.<sup>18</sup>

Access to grants and to printing facilities was central to the development of Bloodaxe and Carcanet, allowing them to compete against London publishers for the publication of poetry (including Scottish poetry).

This led to accusations that the English were de facto controlling Scottish literature. "Carcanet, Cape, Faber and Bloodaxe are still the arbiters of Scotlit," declared Tessa Ransford, the founder of the Scottish Poetry Library (SPL) in an article on the Edinburgh literary scene. Ransford also deplored that "things are not allowed to grow naturally now." Without Arts Council subsidies, initiatives did not exist, she said (J. C. 14). These comments seemed to imply that public funding had stifled local creativity rather than energise it. Joyce Caplan, the Chair of the SPL's Board, responded that her institution did not share Ransford's concerns. "Without the support of the Scottish Arts Council, the SPL itself ... would not exist" (15).

Until the 1970s, this public money was often used to support the publication of male poets, while women remained on the fringes of the poetry scene. But women gradually became more visible. Tessa Ransford was 43 years old and had only recently started publishing poetry when the idea of establishing a Scottish poetry library took shape during

<sup>18</sup> Neil Astley to Peter Jay, July 15, 1980, Box 33, Anvil Press Poetry Records, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter referred to as HRC).

the 1981 Edinburgh literary festival.<sup>19</sup> She overheard an American poet, asking where the local poetry library was. Ransford realised that there was no Scottish equivalent to the Poetry Library in London, established in 1953, on the recommendation of the Poetry Panel of the Arts Council of Great Britain. She set up a Steering Committee with the help of (male) poets such as Edwin Morgan, Iain Crichton Smith, Norman MacCaig, Hamish Henderson and Ian Hamilton Finlay. An application for a £10,000 grant to the Scottish Arts Council was rejected, but another attempt was successful, and the Scottish Poetry Library opened in 1984. Ransford remained director until 1999, when another woman (Robyn Marsack) succeeded her. Women were becoming more visible as poets but also as managers of literary institutions, thanks in large part to the support of the Arts Councils.<sup>20</sup>

### *Celebrating Poetry and Bringing People Together: Literary Festivals*

From the 1960s, the Arts Council of Great Britain played a major role in promoting poetry festivals with an international outlook. In 1961, the Poetry Book Society, with the support of the Arts Council, decided to launch what proved to be the first of a series of festivals of poetry. Eric Walter White obtained the support of the modernist poet Ezra Pound as a patron for this event, “Poetry at the Mermaid,” which took place at the Mermaid Theatre in London.<sup>21</sup> Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were among the poets who read their work. In his introduction to Plath’s reading, the festival director and poet John Wain said:

We have such a predominantly masculine week here, a fact that didn’t really strike me until the programming was complete ... I’m very glad we have

<sup>19</sup> “Tessa Ransford” [obituary], *Times* (Sept. 10, 2015): 57.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the Scottish Poetry Library, see the chapter by David Finkelstein in *The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland, Volume 4: Professionalism and Diversity 1880–2000* (ed. Finkelstein and McCleery). For more on Scottish poetry publishers, see, in this edited collection, the chapter by Rosemary Addison on Salamander Press, a Scottish press established in 1981. The Print Studio Press, a writers’ co-operative formed at Glasgow Print Studio in late 1977, also published poetry in pamphlet form. In addition, the Scottish publisher Oliver and Boyd published poetry, as discussed by Alistair McCleery and Melanie Ramdarshan Bold in their 2012 article (118–19).

<sup>21</sup> Eric White to Ezra Pound, Jan. 29, 1961, Box 13, Eric Walter White Papers (hereafter referred to as EWW), HRC.

at any rate, one very fine woman poet this evening, Miss Sylvia Plath, as I refer to her by her maiden name before she was Mrs Ted Hughes.<sup>22</sup>

As Plath's biographer Heather Clark points out, this misogynistic introduction highlights the barriers that the American poet had to overcome (658). In the audience was the head of the Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard, Jack Sweeney, who was very impressed by Plath's reading of "Tulips." He wrote that it was "very moving to hear and see Sylvia as the only woman on the stage that evening and the only American on the stage."<sup>23</sup> Following the reading, Sweeney had dinner with Plath and Eric Walter White of the Arts Council, and he asked her to send her poem's drafts for Harvard Library. Literary festivals such as Poetry at the Mermaid opened up networking opportunities that were particularly valuable for traditionally overlooked women poets.

The Arts Council continued to sponsor festivals in the following years, including Poetry International in 1967. Started by Ted Hughes and Patrick Garland, the festival took place in the newly opened Queen Elizabeth Hall and Purcell Room on London's South Bank. Hosted in brand new buildings, the festival signalled a renewed poetry scene, open to international influences. Among participants were English-speaking poets from the United States and the Commonwealth, as well as foreign poets whose work reached the audience through translation. In his memoirs, Eric Walter White recalls that "the first 'Poetry International' ... was a sell-out, thanks partly to the appearance of enormously popular figures such as W. H. Auden, Allen Ginsberg, and Pablo Neruda" (199). He does not mention any women poets, and goes on to explain that after 1969, Poetry International became an annual event, with its direction in the hands of Garland and Charles Osborne.

Eric White was deeply troubled by the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s and its impact on the literary and art scene. In March 1970s, he went to St Ives festival and wrote in his diary about the clash between the locals and young artists. In particular, controversial

<sup>22</sup> *Live Poetry Reading at the Mermaid Theatre, London*, Recorded on July 17, 1961, *The Spoken Word: Sylvia Plath* (British Library/National Sound Archives/BBC Audio Compilation, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Jack Sweeney to Stephen and Agatha Fassett, July 27, 1961, cited in Clark 658.

paintings by the feminist artist Monica Sjöö<sup>24</sup> had been removed from the Guildhall where they had been officially on display and moved to another location where they remained unofficially on view. White had been influenced by the modernist movement in the interwar period, a movement that had often been branded obscene, and he claimed that the problem with Sjöö's paintings was their lack of artistry rather than their offensiveness. "I thought the important point was not that these paintings depicted various acts of copulation, sodomy & fellation between blacks & whites, but that they were bad paintings, apart from their subject matter," he wrote in his diary.<sup>25</sup>

White was similarly unimpressed by the *Commedia dell'arte* entertainment that Exeter University Drama Department staged at the festival. "In accordance with the traditional style of playing these Italian comedy scenes, Pantaloon sported an 18' long red penis stuffed with cotton wool," wrote White, before adding that children who were in the audience with their parents seemed to relish the mime. White found the production "crude, & unimaginative, & of an extraordinary low standards" especially from university students. The same accusation of poor artistry applied to poetry, which seemed amateurish, and to underground films (which White compared to "visual diarrhoea – they show practically no signs of control, selection or technique").<sup>26</sup>

For White, it was worrying that some people confused the 1971 festival with the 1953 Arts Council subsidised festival, also held in St Ives. It gave the impression that the ACGB "had unaccountably lowered its standards." As Assistant Secretary and Literature Director to the Arts Council, White was eager to separate his organisation from the countercultural movement:

I think these "new activities" have very little to offer anyone except the "new activists" themselves: but this is no more surprising than to say that only amateurs, who are interested in amateur activities. The new activists may need help from some quarters to acquire the necessary

<sup>24</sup> The same year as the St Ives festival, Sjöö wrote *Towards a Revolutionary Feminist Art* and co-founded the Women's Liberation Group in Bristol.

<sup>25</sup> White, Diary, March 21, 1970, Box 41, Folder 9, EWW, HRC.

<sup>26</sup> Id.

space & technical equipment. Best, I would say, if this didn't come from an Establishment organisation like the Arts Council.<sup>27</sup>

In 1971, the Arts Council was still associated with the conservative “Establishment” rather than with Women’s Liberation and other countercultural trends.

Women poets were not entirely absent from these Arts-Council-sponsored literary festivals, but their place was on the margins—as the example of the Cambridge Poetry Festival illustrates. In 1973, Richard Burns, a 30-year-old poet, approached White to suggest a poetry festival in Cambridge. He wanted to invite a wide range of Anglophone poets, as well as distinguished writers from non-English-speaking countries. As part of the festival, Burns also planned a session on new “underground” poetry, which had flourished in part thanks to the development of low-cost duplicating machines (such as mimeographs, which sparked a rise in “do-it-yourself” magazines) and cheaper industrial printing. He also planned a collaboration with the Writers in School Scheme recently inaugurated by the Eastern Arts Association, which had a list of available writers living locally and could facilitate arrangements.<sup>28</sup>

White was no longer working at the Arts Council: he had retired two years earlier, after twenty-nine years of continuous service. But he was still very active, and extremely well-connected in the literary scene. Having spent a decade pushing for the Arts Council to fund literary festivals, he continued in his retirement to help festival organisers. In November 1973, White told Burns that he was happy to host meetings at his home in London in order to plan the Cambridge Poetry Festival. He also recommended applying for a grant from the Arts Council, and discussing this with the new Literature Director Charles Osborne. Finally, he suggested applying for funding from the Compton Fund to commission poetry from the Festival.<sup>29</sup> The correspondence between White and Burns sheds light on the wide range of literary institutions that provided funding for poetry (from the Eastern Arts Association to the Arts Council and the Compton Fund).

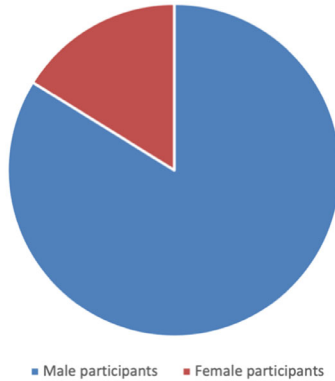
<sup>27</sup> Id.

<sup>28</sup> Proposals, Cambridge Poetry Festival, [May 1973], Box 31, EWW, HRC.

<sup>29</sup> Eric White to Richard Burns, Nov. 17, 1973, Box 31, EWW, HRC.

Funded in part by taxpayers' money, the first Cambridge Poetry Festival was designed to appeal to a broad audience. As the *Cambridge Evening News* put it, “the organisers are anxious that divisions between town and gown should not mar the event – they emphasise it should be for everyone and anyone interested in poetry, student, housewife, schoolchild or office worker” (Kelleher). The reference to housewives shows that women’s place was firmly on the margins, as amateurs and consumers of poetry. The programme listed 129 participants in the festival (mostly poets, but also dancers and other artists), with only 21 women (16% of the total). Among these women participants were poets who went on to distinguished careers—including Elaine Feinstein and Eavan Boland.

First Cambridge Poetry Festival, 1975



The Cambridge Poetry Festival was both interdisciplinary and international. It aimed to foster close links between poetry and other arts, including music, dance, film and painting. The American dancer and choreographer Diana Theodores thus performed in *Three Women—Three Poems*. Approximately one-third of participants came from outside the UK, including Germany, Greece and the United States (with 6 participants each), Sweden (5), France (4) and Italy (2). The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe was listed in the programme, alongside the Irish poet Seamus Heaney and the French-American author Nathaniel Tarn (who had founded the Cape-Goliard Press, specialising in contemporary American Poetry). The programme included poetry forums on translation, and on Contemporary German Poetry with Michael Hamburger, a poet

whose family had fled the Nazis in the 1930s and settled in Britain. As the editor of the bilingual anthology *East German Poetry* (Carcanet, 1972), Hamburger was emblematic of the new generation of internationally minded poets.

The Arts Council not only funded the Cambridge Poetry Festival, it also ensured its long-standing legacy through the preservation of its archive. During the festival, audio/visual tapes were made of most of the readings, recitals and discussions. In June 1975, Eric White wrote to Charles Osborne: “the problem now arises what the Festival Committee should do about storing them, using them, and making them available.”<sup>30</sup> One possibility was to deposit the tapes at the Arts Council’s poetry library, if the collection was moved to larger premises to include audio-visual records as well as books. Another option was to approach the British Institute of Recorded Sound (now the British Library Sound Archive). Like today’s born-digital records, audio-visual materials were relatively new in the 1970s, and archival institutions had to adapt to these new formats. The second Cambridge Poetry Festival in 1977 was also fully recorded. Documenting this festival, the Arts Council’s Literature Assistant Josephine Falk wrote to Osborne: “historians of the future may derive some fodder if this brief note is deposited in the archives.”<sup>31</sup> The Arts Council played an active role in shaping the literary archive through the creation and preservation of archival records, destined to be made available to the public.

### *Institutional Support for Women Writers*

In the decade that followed White’s retirement in 1971, the Arts Council increasingly moved away from the “Establishment,” and towards supporting writers and artists influenced by the counterculture—including feminist writers such as Angela Carter (who wrote fiction but also poetry). Based at the University of Sheffield from 1976 to 1978, Carter wrote a glowing report at the end of her first year of the fellowship funded by the Arts Council. “I’ve ... been able to make some experiments with the methodology of actually teaching creative writing, with

<sup>30</sup> Eric White to Charles Osborne, June 2, 1975, ACGB 62/51, Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) Archive, Victoria & Albert (V&A) Museum, London.

<sup>31</sup> Josephine Falk to Charles Osborne, April 20, 1977, ACGB 62/51, V&A.

very hopeful results,” she declared, “and I shall pursue this further next year.”<sup>32</sup> She also benefited from her conversations with the folklore group in the English Department at Sheffield and wrote her short story “The Company of Wolves” (a retelling of the Little Red Riding Hood tale). Kenneth Graham, the Head of department, was also pleased with Carter’s contribution: “Her own interests in the Gothic led to her full involvement in one of our Special Subjects for third-year students, ‘The Gothic Imagination.’”<sup>33</sup> In short, Carter brought her own creative expertise to the department while also benefiting from her colleagues’ and students’ existing interests.

The support that Angela Carter received from the Arts Council is little known. This is in part due to the neglect of the Arts Council archive at the Victoria & Albert Museum, a collection that is currently closed pending its transfer to a new site in East London. In contrast, scholars and commentators have paid much more attention to the women’s presses which published Carter and other feminist writers. The underlying assumption is often that women writers had been neglected by male publishers, and that women had to step in to redress this injustice. In its obituary of Carmen Callil, the founder of Virago Press, the *Bookseller* thus declared: “Inspired by the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* and deploring a lack of representation for women writers by publishers, she came up with the idea for Virago in a pub and founded the publisher in 1973.” In the same article, Lennie Goodings (who chairs Virago) presents Callil as a “genius” and a rule-breaker who changed the world and (re)discovered a wide range of women writers. In total, the term “genius” is employed three times in the short article (Chandler).

This heroisation hides the fact that Virago often relied on well-established authors rather than beginners. Angela Carter, for example, had not been discovered by feminist presses. She had published with the London firm Heinemann and had won prestigious awards (such as the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize). It was not until she was in her late thirties that she joined Virago. In his biography of Carter, Edmund Gordon mentions the encouragements that she received from Carmen Callil. “I would never have finished [*The Sadeian Woman*] if Carmen

<sup>32</sup> Angela Carter to Josephine Falk, June 30, 1977, ACGB/60/9 Creative Writing Fellowships Reports 1976–1980, V&A.

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth Graham to Falk, Feb. 22, 1979, ACGB/60/9 Creative Writing Fellowships Reports 1976–1980, V&A.

hadn't nagged me," Carter said (323). The book was published in 1979, with a paperback cover that showed a young woman peeping behind a curtain amidst references to pornography. The back cover declared: "SEXUALITY IS POWER" alongside a quotation by Sade foreseeing a future where women will break their bonds and enjoy sexual pleasures like men do. Like other Virago volumes, *The Sadeian Woman* carried on its second page the declaration that "Virago is a feminist publishing company," followed by a quotation from Sheila Rowbotham's *Women, Resistance and Revolution*: "It is only when women start to organise in large numbers that we become a political force, and begin to move towards the possibility of a truly democratic society."

Virago's brand story of female empowerment applied only to fiction and non-fiction in the 1970s, and it was not until the following decade that the press started publishing poetry. In 1981, Charlotte Mew's *Collected Poems and Prose* was jointly published by Virago and Carcanet. This partnership seemed surprising: Carcanet and *PN Review* (the magazine that Michael Schmidt co-edited from 1973 with Donald Davie and C.H. Sisson) were broadly associated with right-wing conservatism. Disdain for the counterculture in general, and for Women's Lib in particular, was a leitmotiv in *PN Review*. A collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry by women writers, *Bread and Roses*, edited by Diana Scott and published by Virago in 1982, was dismissed as "a woefully inadequate anthology." The reviewer, Dick Davis, claimed: "It is a particularly unfortunate book in that it is, by its editor's own admission, aimed at readers who have little previous experience of poetry; that is, those who will not have read the major poets absent from its pages and thus will have no yardstick by which to gauge much of the rubbish that is included." The review was peppered with terms such as "tendentious rot" and "third-rate rant" to describe poetry by women ("On Anthologies of Women's Poetry").

This image of Carcanet/*PN Review* as hostile to women's poetry obscures two important points: Carcanet started publishing neglected early twentieth-century women poets in the 1970s and included a growing number of contemporary poetry by women in the 1980s onwards. The modernist poet H. D. was not rediscovered by Virago, but by Carcanet. Following the publication of *Tribute to Freud* in 1971, Carcanet published *Hermetic Definition* (1972) and *Trilogy: The Walls do not Fall; Tribute to the Angels; The Flowering of the Rod* (1973, the first time the three parts of the trilogy were published in a single book). As

we will see in Chapter 4, financial support from the Arts Council made this programme of rediscovery possible.

In the 1970s, the feminist presses showed little enthusiasm for publishing poems by women modernist writers, or even by key figures of the Women's Lib movement. Take the example of the American poet Adrienne Rich (1929–2012). In 1951, Rich's first collection of poetry, *A Change of World*, was included in the Yale Series of Younger Poets, with an introduction by W. H. Auden. The following year, the book was published in Britain by the Oxford University Poetry Society, as part of the Fantasy Poets series (which had started with the publication of Elizabeth Jennings's poems). Rich went on to publish her poems with the Hogarth Press, owned by Chatto & Windus. This included *Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law* (first published by Harper & Row in the US in 1963), which explored more personal themes and tensions in her roles as a writer and mother of three boys. The Hogarth Press continued to publish Rich's poems until 1972, with two volumes published that year: *Leaflets: Poems 1965–1968*, and *The Will to Change: Poems, 1968–1970*.

Reviewing *Leaflets* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Anthony Thwaite dismissed her recent development as a feminist poet:

Adrienne Rich began as an elegant American - there is nothing more elegant than an elegant American: cf Wallace Stevens - in the early 1950s, but since then she has loosened up, gone confessional, and (though the progression should not occasion surprise) lost a good deal of her intensity. Whimsies slide into incoherences, incoherences into ingratiating beseechings, and the clamorous female emerges. ("Moving Around")

Thwaite concluded by saying that he hoped that Rich "will recover herself." He was not the only one to think that Rich's poems were too extreme for British taste. Writing in the *TLS* in 1976, William Pritchard declared that "American poets have always been attracted towards extremities of performance, freelancing out along the razor's edge of grim-faced dedicated sincerities, of the sort Adrienne Rich has lately been propounding" ("Going Quietly Sane").

In a context where reviewers of poetry were mostly male, and often hostile to confessional poetry by women poets, Virago and other feminist presses chose to concentrate on non-fiction. *Of Woman Born*, Rich's essay on motherhood as a personal experience and institutional structure, appeared under the Virago imprint in 1977. Reviewing the book for

the *Guardian*, Martin Bax was dismayed to see that “the Adrienne Rich [he] knew in the early sixties” has morphed into a radical anti-patriarchy activist (“Woman and Men”).

Two years later, Onlywomen Press published Rich’s *Women and Honor: Notes on Lying*, followed by *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* in 1981. In a blurb on the back of their feminist poetry anthology *One Foot on the Mountain* (1979), the London-based press presented itself as “a women’s liberation publishing and printing group, producing work by and for women as part of creating a feminist communication network and, ultimately, a feminist revolution.” Politically, Onlywomen Press was more radical than Virago. As Carmen Callil said on radio in 1981, “We are not separatists ... we are celebrators of the values that women represent.”<sup>34</sup>

In 1980, Virago went on to publish Adrienne Rich’s *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978*. In an interview with the *Guardian*, Rich embraced her new identity as a non-fiction writer: “I am still a poet and I feel strange when I’m not writing poetry, but I don’t mind being known now as an essayist” (Maitland). Rich’s changing reputation, away from poetry and towards social commentary, reflects the trajectory of British women’s presses. It is not a coincidence that Onlywomen Press published Rich’s *Women and Honor* in its Social Welfare collection.

Having established her reputation as a leading poet, Rich was now sought after as a feminist commentator—at a time when women’s presses were making a case for their significance in a publishing field traditionally dominated by male editors and publishers. Rich’s discourse on the limits imposed by patriarchy on women found a fertile ground in this context. It was only when this feminist discourse was more broadly accepted that the women’s presses turned to publishing poetry, a genre that they had previously neglected. This wider public acceptance can be traced to the turn of the 1980s. Reviewing the Virago edition of *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* in 1980, the *Sunday Times* presented them as “essays from America’s leading feminist and lesbian writer, urging female anger as a necessary transforming force in a world where passivity has been the norm.”<sup>35</sup> The fact that a conservative mainstream newspaper could present essays by a

<sup>34</sup> “Out of the Air,” *Listener* (July 30, 1981): 78–79.

<sup>35</sup> “Paperback Preview,” *Sunday Times* (Oct. 5 1980): 44.

radical feminist writer as “a serious and courageous voice” sheds light on changing attitudes towards Women’s Lib.

Rich was hardly a consensual figure: she had left her husband (he committed suicide shortly after), had come out as a lesbian, and was an entrenched critic of male privilege. Yet, by 1980, she was no longer dismissed as an extremist, even by critics with a conservative reputation. In a BBC Radio 3 show entitled “Feminist Enterprise,” Michael Schmidt thus remarked: “After half a lifetime of conformity, Rich has entered what Virginia Woolf called ‘the vast chamber where nobody has been’ – exploring in verse the fact of homosexual love between women.”<sup>36</sup> The parallel with Woolf elevated Rich to the canon of women writers who had chosen anti-conformist paths, leading first to ostracisation and later to public acceptance.

With feminism entering the mainstream public sphere, publishing women’s poetry became a more appealing prospect. Lilian Mohin, who founded Onlywomen Press with a collective of other women, had a trajectory that resembled that of Rich: having grown up in the US, she married young and had children, before divorcing in 1973 and coming out as a lesbian. It broke up the family, said her son Timothy Mohin, who was 12 years old at the time. He remembered her as a devoted mother, who then turned away from her children to focus on feminist activism.<sup>37</sup> Having settled in London, Mohin started publishing pamphlets in 1974, and then books. She edited *One Foot on the Mountain: An Anthology of British Feminist Poetry, 1969–1979*—thanks to grants from the Greater London Arts Association (£450) and the Arts Council (£1000). This institutional support made it possible for feminist poetry to reach a larger audience: by December 1979, 911 copies of the book had been sold (Murphy). The anthology was reviewed by periodicals with a mainstream audience, such as the *Guardian* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. No longer confined to a niche market, feminist poetry could now reach new readers, including in universities which were establishing new courses in women’s studies and diversifying the literary curriculum.

<sup>36</sup> “Out of the Air,” *Listener* (July 30, 1981): 78–79.

<sup>37</sup> “Last Word—Michel Roux, Sammy McCarthy, Lilian Mohin, Roy Hudd,” dir. by Matthew Bannister, *Last Word* (BBC Radio 4, 2020) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000gc57> [accessed Nov. 2, 2022].

## THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

This monograph draws on an interdisciplinary framework, influenced by book history, sociology (Bourdieu, Boltanski and Chiapello) and literary studies. Works of literary scholarship on women poets in Britain expanded in the 1990s.<sup>38</sup> While these studies have focused mostly on the literary text, this book adopts a book history approach to look at the way “women’s poetry” was selected, published and sold to a growing audience of readers—at a time when the funders and the market (including the education market) were creating new opportunities for diverse poets.

Since the late 1990s, scholars have started to address the neglect of women in book and publishing history. In a 1998 editorial, Leslie Howsam—past president of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP)—noted that “most publishers and editors have been men.” And she added: “I want to suggest that book historians think about how the book has been implicated in those structures of masculine power and authority known to feminist scholarship as patriarchy” (1–2). New work in feminist book history and print culture has focused mostly on the periods prior to the twentieth century, and on the feminist periodicals and small presses associated with the Women’s Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Women publishers such as Lilian Mohin at Onlywomen Press, Stephanie Dowrick at The Women’s Press and Philippa Brewster at Pandora have started to attract interest from a new generation of scholars. Ground-breaking works include Simone Murray’s *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics* (2004); a chapter by Catherine Riley on women-only publishing and early second-wave feminism (EUP, 2020); an article by Gillian Murphy on Onlywomen Press (2021); and the work associated with the project “The Business of Women’s Words: Purpose and Profit in Feminist Publishing” (Jolly).<sup>39</sup>

Smaller women’s presses have been largely eclipsed by Virago Press and Carmen Callil. Recent scholarship includes Catherine Riley’s *The Virago Story: Assessing the Impact of a Feminist Publishing Phenomenon* (Berghahn 2018) and D.-M. Withers’s *Virago Reprints and Modern Classics: The Timely Business of Feminist Publishing* (Cambridge University

<sup>38</sup> This includes: Dowson (ed.); Dowson and Entwistle; Bertram; France; Dooley (ed.); Montefiore.

<sup>39</sup> Focusing on a different context (the USA) and genre (fiction), see also Dan Sinykin’s discussion of women writers and sexist male literary publishers in the 1970s.

Press 2021), as part of the work in gender and publishing studies in the new CUP Elements series (ed. Samantha Rayner). Withers also wrote a chapter on Virago's reprint series for the *Edinburgh Companion to Women in Publishing, 1900–2020* (Edinburgh University Press 2024). Lennie Goodings's memoirs on her professional experience at Virago (*A Bite of the Apple: A Life with Books, Writers and Virago*) was published by Oxford University Press in 2020.

These studies have focused mostly on Virago Press as a publisher of fiction, that played a major role in recovering the voices of forgotten women writers. However, this scholarship has largely neglected women poets in relation to the post-1960s publishing field. There is no study of Carcanet Press, Bloodaxe, Faber and other (male) publishers in relation to the (re)discovery of women poets. It is this gap in scholarship that *Women Poets, Male Publishers* seeks to address.

The book is rooted in extensive archival work in poetry collections at the John Rylands Library (University of Manchester), Yale's Beinecke Library, Cambridge University Library and many other collections. I spent several weeks working in the Arts Council archive at the Victoria & Albert Museum, and in the Eric Water White archive at the Harry Ransom Center (University of Texas). I also conducted thirty oral history interviews with key figures of the British literary landscape—both men and women who published, wrote and commented on poetry. A combination of strategies which included personal contacts and *snowballing* was used to recruit these interviewees. I paid attention to the diversity of the list of interviewees, in terms of gender and geographical locations. Ethical approval was obtained from the University Ethics Committee, and an Informed Consent Form was signed by interviewees. Transcripts were then prepared, and interviewees had the option to make corrections. Not all interviews can be shared on the project's open-access digital resource ([www.poetrysurvival.com](http://www.poetrysurvival.com)) due to permissions and copyright reasons. Chapter 8 is based on the nineteen publicly available transcripts, which have been checked and approved by interviewees (nine women and ten men).

Chapter 2 looks at the publication of anthologies of women poetry by male publishers in the 1980s and 1990s, including *The Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry* (1985), *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* (1985) and the *Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry* (1987). Following Virago's success in reprinting fiction in its series of classics, these publishers sold anthologies of women's poetry to the education

market—at a time when “women’s studies” was becoming institutionalised in universities. With these publications, male-dominated imprints such as Bloodaxe, Chatto and Faber played a major role in shaping the canon of women’s poetry—occupying a space that could have been dominated by Virago and other feminist publishers.

Chapter 3 is on poetry by women and ethnic minorities in *Carcenet Magazine*, from 1962 to 1970. Before it became a leading poetry publisher, *Carcenet* was a student magazine set up by undergraduates who wanted to link Oxford and Cambridge. This chapter sheds light on the forgotten history of *Carcenet* magazine, focusing particularly on women and ethnic minorities. Prior to Michael Schmidt’s takeover of the magazine in late 1967, *Carcenet* was co-edited by Diane Troy and Farrukh Dhondy. The magazine offered opportunities to writers from India and ex-colonies (including Adil Jussawalla and Edward Brathwaite) to publish their work, before moving on to more mainstream venues. *Carcenet* magazine can be seen as a site of struggle between various players: between the Oxford and Cambridge literary sets, and between British/European and postcolonial groups. Drawing on extensive archival work in neglected collections, as well as oral history interviews, this chapter tells an alternative history of *Carcenet* magazine as a case study for the larger literary field of post-war Britain. The story is less focused on Michael Schmidt, without diminishing his accomplishment in transforming a student magazine into an enduring publishing enterprise.

Chapter 4 focuses on Hilda Doolittle. It shows that *Carcenet* Press constructed an image of H. D. as a rigorous writer dedicated to poetic form and tradition. This rediscovery was made possible by the support of the Arts Council, and it opened the door to the publication of other neglected modernist texts by Wyndham Lewis and Ford Madox Ford. Far from being presented as a woman writer neglected by a patriarchal literary establishment, H. D. was tied to a more conservative reading of modernism—a movement intertwined with controversial figures (from Ezra Pound to Wyndham Lewis).

Chapter 5 is on *Carcenet* magazine’s successor, *PN Review*, and the Arts Council of Great Britain, 1973–1990. It examines the evolution of this leading Manchester-based poetry magazine, in relation to second-wave feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. Largely funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain, the magazine was initially not a welcoming place for female poets and contributors. Women’s poetry was often disparaged, and few women contributed to the magazine. From the early 1980s,

however, *PN Review* started to include more women voices—a transition led by the founding editor Michael Schmidt, who was eager to include forgotten and neglected female poets on his list. This chapter argues that changes in public funding, and increased market opportunities for women authors and feminist ideas, forced the magazine to evolve and adapt quickly. Women were taking a more visible role in the publishing world, as the success of Virago Press shows. Women poets were becoming more vocal, and openly denounced their marginalisation in the poetry scene. The funding cuts decided by Margaret Thatcher’s government led to profound changes as Arts Council “clients” competed fiercely to survive in a tough landscape. Changing priorities at the Arts Council—including the need for more diversity in publishing—also had an impact on grant holders. *PN Review* therefore offers a good example of a literary institution that was directly pushed towards gender diversity through external pressures from the Arts Council of Great Britain and the market.

Chapter 6 centres on Elizabeth Jennings, whose career exemplifies the tribulations of the UK poetry market in the second part of the twentieth century. At the start of her career in the 1940s, she benefited from powerful literary networks associated with the University of Oxford. As a student at St Anne’s College between 1944 and 1947, she networked with young people who would become successful writers (including Kingsley Amis). Her poems appeared in the annual anthology *Oxford Poetry* for 1948 and 1949. Oscar Mellor’s Fantasy Press then published her first collection, *Poems*, alongside titles by Donald Davie and Thom Gunn. By the mid-1950s, she was grouped together with Amis, Davie, Gunn and Philip Larkin as part of the Movement. The only woman in the group, Jennings thrived in a male-dominated literary world. However, her nervous breakdown in the 1960s and her difficulties with her publisher Macmillan led to a decline in her reputation. It was not until 1975 and the publication of her collection *Growing Points* with the young Carcanet Press that Jennings staged a comeback.

Although Elizabeth Jennings did not identify with the feminist movement, she had to play by the rules of a male-dominated literary field—rules that often marginalised women writers. Chapter 6 analyses her publishing trajectory and shows the role that publishers played in branding Jennings as an unusual poet in a field dominated by male voices. Like the previous generation of modernist writers, Jennings carved a name for herself by harnessing the power of literary networks—while also emphasising her artistic originality.

Chapter 7 focuses on Sylvia Plath and her growing reputation following her death in 1963. Faber played a crucial role in developing the Plath brand, a brand closely attuned to the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s. With rising suicide rates among women in England and Wales, the Plath brand resonated among readers unsettled by rapid social transformations. In 1976, Aurelia Schober Plath tried to offer a more cheerful image of her daughter in *Letters Home*, but the cuts and controversial selection of letters led to criticisms. Siding with Ted Hughes, Michael Schmidt attacked those who were disappointed and angry at the Estate's treatment of Plath. He also promoted alternative women poets, far from the "extremist" poetry epitomised by Plath and Anne Sexton.

Chapter 8 draws on interviews of poets, editors and other people associated with Carcanet and with the poetry scene in Britain. The overall objective was to understand how poetry has survived in a very tough marketplace in the past fifty years. The women and men that were interviewed contributed in big and small ways to the poetry scene in Britain. Collectively, they tell a fascinating story about the enduring appeal of poetry and the ways in which publishers bring it to market.

The conclusion is on social media and the rise of a new generation of popular women poets. At the time when "Instapoets" are using Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitter and other social media platforms to reach mass-market audiences, the issue of the preservation and access to born-digital archives is particularly acute. Few archival institutions are preserving social media and other born-digital records (such as emails), and getting access to these archival records is extremely complicated for researchers and other users.

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## CHAPTER 2

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# Anthologies of Women's Poetry, Male Publishers and the Literary Canon

In May 1987, the feminist critic and academic Lorna Sage wrote a review of *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry*, edited by Fleur Adcock. Sage has spent her academic career at the University of East Anglia (UEA)—an institution created in 1963, which had been at the forefront of the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s. She was very familiar with women's presses such as Virago—the publisher of her friend and fellow UEA academic, Angela Carter. In her review of the *Faber Book*, Sage noted: "It's not (surely?) entirely paranoid to suspect that the (mostly) male publishers who are behind anthologies like this really want to get the whole thing over and done with, out of the way (remember the Chatto book of 'Post-Feminist Poetry')" ("Women to Make Yeats Weep"). Although Sage found many things to praise in Adcock's anthology, she also thought that the tone was too moderate. Without the feminist political rage born in the 1960s, women poets would still be marginalised, she argued.

Lorna Sage was not the only one to notice that feminist ideas had entered the mainstream, making it appealing for traditional publishers to market these ideas to ordinary readers. In *Into the Mainstream: How Feminism Has Changed Women's Writing* (Pandora, 1989), Nicci Gerrard wrote: "the success of the feminist books, coinciding with the growth in feminist awareness in the 1970s, alerted mainstream houses to a 'gap' in the market. Now there are very few publishers that do not have a women's list" (31). Gerrard focused on prose, not poetry, but it is certainly the case

that (male) poetry publishers increasingly became interested in publishing women's writing. As detailed in Chapter 5, Michael Schmidt collaborated with Carmen Callil to publish Charlotte Mew's poems in 1982 under a joint Carcanet/Virago imprint. Three years later, Neil Astley published *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets*. The anthology was often reviewed alongside *Making for the Open: The Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry*, also published in 1985. By the time *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry* appeared in 1987, women's poems reached large audiences—including pupils, university students and their instructors.

Anthologies of women's poetry were a perfect fit for the education market—at a time when Women's Studies was becoming institutionalised in universities. With the publications of anthologies, male-dominated imprints such as Bloodaxe, Chatto and Faber aimed to shape a canon of women's poetry—occupying a space that could have been dominated by Virago and other feminist publishers. Although these mainstream anthologies were edited by women, they attracted suspicion from some feminist critics. For Germaine Greer, they had failed to produce the long-lasting tradition implied by the word “canon.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, the set of poems gathered in these anthologies were ephemeral and bound to be replaced by others in future anthologies, Greer claimed (“A Biodegradable Art”).

Bloodaxe, Chatto and Faber did not pioneer the publication of women's poetry in anthologies. Starting in the early twentieth century, this publication history can be divided into three periods, summarised in Table 2.1.

The first section of this chapter gives an overview of anthologies of women's poetry from the early twentieth century to the 1960s. It shows that the canon of poetry by women remained undefined: works that appeared in earlier anthologies were frequently discarded in later ones. Women's verse continued to be a curiosity, packaged by literary presses for an educated audience. The second section moves the focus towards feminist publishers eager to promote women's poetry to an audience tuned to second-wave feminism. Yet, this readership remained relatively small, and was dismissed as too radical by many mainstream reviewers and publishers.

<sup>1</sup> Defined as “a body of literary works traditionally regarded as the most important, significant, and worthy of study.” See “canon,” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press (June 2021) [accessed Aug. 11, 2021].

**Table 2.1** Classification of women's poetry anthologies in the twentieth century

<i>Period</i>	<i>Publishers</i>	<i>Audience</i>
1910–1960: Women's Verse as Curiosity	Literary presses	Educated audience
1960–early 1980s: The Rise of Women's Poetry alongside Second-wave feminism	Feminist publishers	Niche, feminist audience
Mid-1980s onwards: Marketing women's poetry	Traditional (male) publishers	Mainstream audience, particularly education market

The next section shows that it was not until the mid-1980s that traditional (male) publishers started marketing women's poetry to a mainstream audience, particularly to the education market. The rise of Women's Studies proved that the discipline had become safe enough to be taught in a wide range of educational institutions—including schools, polytechnics and traditional universities. The final section examines the controversy over the canon shaped by these male publishers. By the time the discourse of feminism entered the mainstream, there was still no general agreement on what constituted the best and most significant poems by women. In Germaine Greer's words, women's poetry was still "biodegradable" as it always had been and lacked the characteristics of enduring canonical works.

### 1910–1960: WOMEN'S VERSE AS CURIOSITY

As early as 1910, the publisher Herbert & Daniel issued *A Book of Verse by Living Women*, edited by Lady Margaret Sackville. Then aged thirty, Sackville already had a long career as a published poet. Her poems had appeared in periodicals such as the *English Review*, *The Englishwoman*, *Country Life*, *The Nation*, *The Spectator* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* (Blodgett). Her first collection of poems, *Floral Symphony* (1900), was followed by *Poems* (1901). In her introduction to *A Book of Verse*, Sackville was critical of women poets who tried to emulate men:

With the majority of women, what they say is merely repetition. It is as though they were so anxious to prove their capacity for liberty, for emotion, and the larger experiences of men, that they mistake the expression of intense feelings for the feelings themselves, with the result that no one is convinced ... With many women poets who talk a great deal about life, one feels that meantime they are forgetting to live. (n.pag.)

For Sackville, women could not convincingly write about a life they had no knowledge of, due to social limitations. In other words, the “larger experiences of men” were closed to them, and the lives they lived were more limited; creative development would come only with social emancipation: “When women have fully proved their capacity for freedom, we can begin to estimate better their capacity for poetry” (n. pag.).

Sackville’s preference for traditional verse led her to select poems by writers such as Alice Meynell, Dora Sigerson, Mary Robinson (Madame Duclaux), Margaret L. Woods, Rosamund Marriott Watson, Jane Barlow. Although these poets and Sackville herself have not completely disappeared from literary history as their inclusion in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography shows, their reputation today is hardly comparable with that of modernist writers. Mina Loy (born 1882) and Hilda Doolittle (born 1886) were around the same age as Sackville, and their commitment to the modern movement earned them a place in the literary canon under the influence of feminist critics. In contrast, Sackville largely sunk into obscurity—despite a recent renewal of interest in her anti-war poetry written during the First World War.

A decade after the publication of Sackville’s anthology, John Collings Squire edited *A Book of Women’s Verse* (Oxford University Press, 1921). Most of the women poets included in *A Book of Verse by Living Women* did not appear in Squire’s book. Alice Meynell and Margaret L. Woods were among the few names included in both anthologies. Written shortly after women over thirty years old had obtained the right to vote, Squire’s introduction argued that female writers had the same opportunities as men:

To-day we scarcely bother about the distinction between men and women writers. With thousands of women writing, with women’s verses in every magazine and women reporters in every newspaper office, when literary women congregate in clubs, and robust women novelists haggle with editors and discuss royalties with their male rivals, we take composition for granted as a feminine occupation. Even though we may not expect it

we should be only mildly surprised if a female Plato or Shakespeare were to appear, and a second of the sort would cause no surprise at all. (xiii)

There are two interesting things in Squire's anthology: first, the fact that there was no agreement on who were the most important living women poets; and second, the idea that women had reached equality with men, therefore making any feminist demands unnecessary.

Yet, if women poets were already treated the same way as men poets, it made little sense to single them out in anthologies of women's verse. Squire was aware of this paradox, and he tried to justify his project. It was certainly true that poetry was poetry, whoever wrote it,

But it is a fact, at least so far as my observation goes, that people do feel curiosity about women's contributions to the arts, and that this curiosity is common to all kinds of persons, from those who exaggerate the differences between the sexes, to those who seem to think that they can eradicate them. (vii)

Squire himself felt this curiosity when he conceived the project of compiling women's verse.

Not everyone was convinced that the poetry field was equally open to women and men. Reviewing the anthology in the *Sunday Times*, Mary MacLeod Moore wrote that this argument was "open to argument even in these days" ("Women's Poetry"). Moreover, Moore thought that Squire's anthology was incomplete. Not only had he neglected to include the American poet Emily Dickinson, he had also omitted war poems written by women—which seemed surprising for an anthology published just three years after the end of the First World War. *A Book of Women's Verse* did not deliver its promise to feature the most important and significant poems by women, poems that could have formed the basis of a new literary canon under the aegis of Oxford University Press—an imprint known for its Bibles and traditional scholarship.

Virginia Woolf would certainly have agreed with Moore: claiming that women writers had the same opportunities as men was doubtful, to say the least. Seven years after the publication of Squire's book, Woolf was invited to deliver lectures at two women's colleges part of the University of Cambridge: Newnham and Girton Colleges. These lectures were then revised and published in her famous essay, *A Room of One's Own* (issued in 1929 under her own imprint, the Hogarth Press). As part of

the Hogarth Living Poets, a series published between 1928 and 1937, the Press issued *An Anthology of Cambridge Women's Verse* in 1931. The book was severely criticised in the *Listener*:

This is little better than the verse which is to be seen in any High School annual. The selection is edited by Miss Margaret Thomas, who provides a girlishly facetious preface ("the purpose of this anthology is ... to dispel a little of the unnatural modesty which trammels the brighter spirits of Girton and Newnham") and has the honour of contributing the worst poem in the bunch ... There is really no excuse whatever for thrusting such crude exercises out into a world already overstocked with immature poets.<sup>2</sup>

This condescending review stereotypes Cambridge women poets as childish and frivolous and makes clear that the anthology should never have been published. The tendency to see women as immature would later be denounced by the writer Maggie Gee. Responding to a review of *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets*, she wrote that women and men are not seen as growing up at the same rate. Women poets tend to be seen as emerging writers, even when they have already accumulated a great deal of experience and recognition ("Women Poets").

### 1960 TO EARLY 1980S: THE RISE OF WOMEN'S POETRY ALONGSIDE SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM

Anthologies of women's verses became increasingly common from the mid-1960s and the rise of second-wave feminism. A search for "women's poetry" on Google Books Ngram shows that this growth lasted for four decades, until the mid-2000s (Fig. 2.1).<sup>3</sup> The renewal of interest in the 2010s coincided with a particularly eventful period for the feminist movement (it was dubbed the "decade the women fought back" in *Forbes*) (Elting). In short, the category "women's poetry" is closely linked to "feminism" (which was not necessarily the case in earlier periods, as the publication of J. C. Squire's anthology shows).

<sup>2</sup> "The Listener's Book Chronicle" [Review of *Anthology of Cambridge Women's Verse*, ed. by Margaret Thomas], *Listener* (June 10, 1931): 984.

<sup>3</sup> No result was found for "women's poems" and "women's verse."

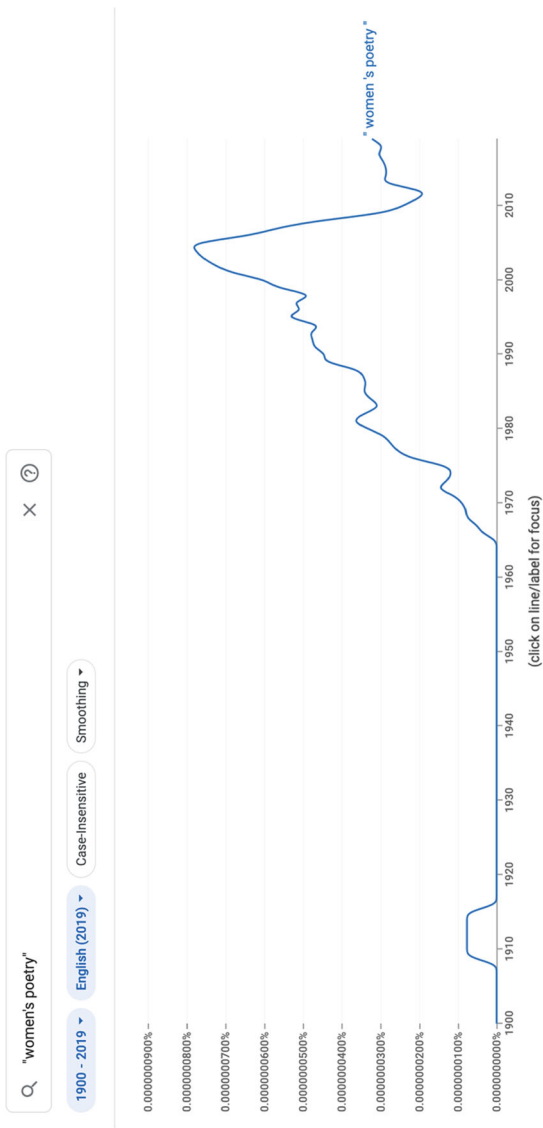


Fig. 2.1 Search for “women’s poetry” on Google Books Ngram (English corpus), 1900–2019. Accessed Aug. 18, 2021

In 1968, the new feminist publishing house Femina, created by Muriel Box, issued *Without Adam: The Femina Anthology of Poetry*. One of the first female film directors in Britain, Muriel Box (1905–1991) recruited distinguished women to join the Board of Femina—including Vera Brittain, who went on to publish a book on Radclyffe Hall for the new imprint. In 1967, the *Guardian* described Mrs Box as “a propagandist” on a mission to educate the next generation of women and encourage them to demand gender equality:

She longs to get books about women’s achievements into girls’ schools. This is one of her aims for a Femina anthology of poems by women, from Sappho onwards, to be edited by Joan Murray Simpson. She would like to do an anthology, too, of women painters and sculptors. She wants girls to stop thinking of themselves as the second sex. She is outraged that mothers should inculcate into their sons the idea that the things women do (including cooking, washing up, making beds) are beneath them, are cissy. (Stott)

The reference to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*—a key text for second-wave feminism—should not hide the fact that Box belonged to the pre-Women’s Liberation generation. A pillar of the Married Women’s Association, she was already in her sixties when she founded Femina, and the press published just a few books before disappearing in 1974.

In a review entitled “Poems in Petticoats,” Stevie Smith described *Without Adam: The Femina Anthology of Poetry* as an unsuccessful book. The volume included modern poets such as Edith Sitwell, Kathleen Raine, Elizabeth Jennings, Diana Witherby, Sylvia Plath, Marianne Moore, Fredegond Shove and Smith herself. Far from being impressed by this distinguished list, Smith found the whole enterprise “awkward.” “Why have poems by women only?” asked Smith before adding: “It is a person’s poems that stand to be judged” (28). This idea that poetry should be judged on its own merit, independently of the gender of the author, continued to be influential. Yet, the mixed-gender anthologies of the 1970s did not benefit women poets. In Arthur Quiller-Couch’s *The Oxford Book of English Verse* of 1923, there were only twenty-five women poets to over 200 men. When Helen Gardner produced a revised edition in 1972, she reduced the number to just nine.

The creation of Virago Press in 1973—shortly before Femina disappeared—did not lead to a golden age in women’s poetry publishing.

Poetry had never been the most profitable literary genre, and from the start, Carmen Callil made clear that her press was designed to turn a profit. Interviewed by the *Guardian* in 1975, Callil said that her plan was to “apply mass marketing techniques to minority ideas—to publicise feminist ideas. There was a commercial aspect to it; I saw that there was a vacancy, an opportunity, a hole for Virago.” Although feminist ideas remained minority ideas, Callil was betting on an expansion of this niche market towards the mainstream. Virago claimed to be “the first mass market publishers for 52 per cent of the population – women.” Ultimately, the market could even be expanded towards men, with Virago presented as “an exciting new imprint for both sexes in a changing world.”<sup>4</sup>

Callil was surrounded by a team of women who shared her commercial ambitions for Virago.<sup>5</sup> Harriet Spicer, who co-founded the press, said in 1993 that Virago’s list had to be “financially viable” (Goodings n. pag.). And Lennie Goodings, who joined the press in 1978, wrote in her memoirs: “from the beginning Virago has wanted to prove that the business of publishing books by women is a profitable enterprise and that the very existence of Virago shows the world that a feminist business run by women would work.” Poetry was not initially a priority for Virago, a press that covered “the classics, history, sex, memoir, education, and biography” (“Chapter 2” n. pag.).

Virago made no exception for well-known American poets such as Adrienne Rich. The press did not publish her poetry, but in 1977, it issued her ground-breaking essay *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Rich’s central argument on motherhood as a socially constructed institution did not convince Martin Bax, who combined his literary interests with a medical career as a paediatrician. In a *Guardian* review, Bax described the book as overflowing with anger (echoing the stereotypical characterisation of feminist writers as over-emotional, even hysterical): “*Of Woman Born* is a cry of anguished rage about her experience of motherhood, and her feelings almost override the coherence of her attack on the patriarchal society, to which all ills are ascribed.” Bax reminded readers that the post-war American society that Rich so severely

<sup>4</sup> “Fen Party” [Review of *Fenwomen: A Portrait of Women in an English Village*, by Mary Chamberlain], *Guardian* (Sept. 5, 1975): 9.

<sup>5</sup> Critics have made a distinction between commercial “publishing feminism” and smaller-scale “feminist publishing” (see Zeisler).

criticised had produced affluence and stability, leading to successful child rearing. In contrast, the independent way that Rich had chosen had led to the destruction of her marriage, followed shortly after by the suicide of her husband and father of her three children (“Woman and Men”).

Like David Holbrook, who denounced the nihilism of the counter-culture (see Chapter 7), Martin Bax found *Of Woman Born* too bleak and unforgiving. Adrienne Rich did not offer any solutions, or any clear vision of a society in which women and men could be equally fulfilled. “I found it a destructive and angry analysis of only some of the bad things that have gone on in the past,” wrote Bax. “For sanity and solutions, I will read more of her poems” (“Woman and Men”). These poems were published in Britain by Chatto & Windus, a traditional publisher that lacked the radical image of Virago.

Despite its ambition to target a mainstream audience, Virago remained a small publisher for most of the 1970s. “By the time I arrived at Virago [in 1978],” wrote Lennie Goodings, “it had published around thirty books” (“Chapter 1” n. pag.). The press was described as a “shoestring feminist publisher” in 1977, when it received a grant of £3,250 from the Equal Opportunities Commission, the government body set up to promote and enforce the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts (Ashdown-Sharp 4). However, Virago started an ambitious expansion programme in 1978 with the launch of the Virago Modern Classics series, dedicated to the rediscovery and celebration of women (fiction) writers. Among the first titles published in the series were Cristina Stead’s *For Love Alone*, Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *The True Heart*, and Antonia White’s *Frost in May*. No longer a small press, Virago was becoming a recognisable player in the literary field—but poetry publishing was still not part of its plans.

Not all feminist publishers neglected poetry. Created in 1977, the Women’s Press was determined to be commercially successful (it was backed by Quartet Books, which had previously partnered with Virago). But it also recognised that niche markets such as poetry could be profitable. One of the first books it published was Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s long-narrative poem *Aurora Leigh*. In 1979, it issued *The World Split Open: Women Poets, 1552–1950*, edited by Louise Bernikow.

Echoing Stevie Smith’s dismissal of the *Femina* anthology a decade before, the poet Vicki Feaver wrote a scathing review of *The World Split Open*, blaming the feminist movement for the marginalisation of women poets. For Feaver, many feminist writers confused poetry as therapy and

poetry as art, leading male editors to reject this self-centred form of expression. Citing Virginia Woolf ("It's fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex"), Feaver argued that the great women of the past did not obsess about their gender: they just wrote the best poetry they could ("The Gap between Art and Therapy").

The *Listener* reviewer shared Feaver's doubts, pointing out that feminist publishers and editors excluded women poets who did not share their rigid worldview. It was no longer acceptable to present a traditional view of femininity associated with kindness and empathy. For example, Mrs Hemans's *Records of Women* (1837) included "19 narrative poems about kindly, suffering women – queens and great ladies from history-books, peasants and Indian squaws from travel-books – most of them much nicer than their men-folk, but generally rejected or maltreated by these attractive-repulsive beings." Unsurprisingly, these poems did not feature in *The World Split Open*—an anthology dominated by "bitter" feminist voices (Jones, "Records of Women").

For many commentators, the feminist movement had gone too far, and it was time to stop publishing women poets separately. The poet Patricia Beer wrote in 1978 that "neither religious belief nor gender has much to do with the ability to write. Obesity, say, or exceptionally bright red hair might have more" ("Dissenters Divided"). Beer belonged to an older generation (she was born in 1919) but her concerns were shared by some younger women—including Vicki Feaver (born 1943) and Carol Rumens (born 1944).

In 1981, the literary critic, editor and poet Ian Hamilton wrote that there should be some relief in the emergence of women poets such as Feaver and Rumens, who were "neither post-Plath hysterics nor muscular harpies of the Adrienne Rich school." Yet, their verses were as "as tame, predictable and well-behaved as any bloke." In trying to emulate men poets, they produced bland poetry that lacked the excess, but also the passion of feminist poets, Hamilton argued. Like many men of his generation, he did not view women poets as equal competitors in the literary field. On the one hand, feminist writers were dismissed as hysteric, aggressive and physically repulsive ("muscular harpies") in their attempts to resemble men. On the other hand, more moderate women poets lacked originality, talent and dedication to their craft ("At Home with the Muse").

This line of argument explains the violent response of *PN Review* to the publication of *Bread and Roses: An Anthology of Nineteenth and*

*Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry* in 1982. The book signalled a turning point in the strategy of Virago: as the market for feminist ideas was becoming increasingly mainstream, the press started publishing women's poetry. But it soon discovered that reviewers were reluctant to endorse "poetry coming out of the present-day women's movement" (as the back cover of *Bread and Roses* promised). Reviewing the book for the *Guardian*, Peter Redgrove rejected the "most explicitly polemical" poems that seemed to have nothing to do in an anthology of canonical poetry ("Taking a Share in Inspiration").

Similarly, Fleur Adcock wrote in the *Observer* that feminist poetry was "often amateur stuff." It was readable, but not intellectually demanding or technically original. The editor, Diana Scott, justified her selection by claiming that self-expression was more important than writing literature. "Really?" asked Adcock, "Is it as easy as that? No craft? No hard apprenticeship? To think of our predecessors battling for equal rights and female education when all we needed was self-expression!" ("Singing Sisters").

Writing in the *TLS*, Tracey Warr agreed that the feminist poetry included in *Bread and Roses* was flawed. While she praised the inclusion of poets such as Stevie Smith and Anne Stevenson, she also noted:

most of the Women's Liberation pieces are not so successful. These poems have important things to say, but they are often linguistically and formally uninteresting and undisciplined. Scott's remark, "I choose at the present not to make judgements about what poetry is," is not an adequate defence. ("Ad Women's Lib")

The consensus among reviewers was therefore that the subject matter (topics associated with women) was important, but that the poems selected by Scott lacked the professional polish necessary for inclusion in an anthology of canonical works. To target a wider audience, editors of women's poetry anthologies had to convince readers that the poetry included was, to paraphrase Matthew Arnold's well-known phrase, the best which has been thought and said in the world.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Arnold defined culture as "the best which has been thought and said in the world" (viii).

## MID-1980S: MARKETING WOMEN'S POETRY TO A MAINSTREAM MARKET

Penguin was the first UK mass-market publisher to understand that women's poetry could reach a mainstream audience in cheap paperback format. In 1978, it issued *The Penguin Book of Women Poets*, an anthology spanning 3,500 years. The book was generally well-received, but reviewers were not always convinced by the heterogeneity of the collection. Writing in the *Observer*, Lorna Sage pointed out that the book was trying to cover too much ground with forty literary traditions, starting with the Ancient World and ending with twentieth-century moderns and contemporaries ("The Feminine Muse"). Fleur Adcock expressed a similar criticism in the *Guardian*. Although the focus of the anthology was too broad, Adcock was relieved that the women poets included in the *Penguin Book* were neither "a bunch of curiosities" (as in early twentieth-century anthologies) nor "another boringly predictable product of the women's movement" (a default that Adcock would later find in the *Bread and Roses* anthologies) ("Poets of Oppression").

Penguin's decision to package women's poetry to the mass market was not uncontroversial. In 1981, a "secretary and poetess" called Pat Morrish wrote in the *Sunday Times* that she was "horrified" by this anthology: "If I were on a bus looking after the passengers and taking their fares, I would be a bus conductress, and I would not expect to be called a woman conductor," she noted. Since men who wrote poetry were not called "men poet," the term "woman poet" seemed demeaning to Morrish, as it had been to Stevie Smith and Patricia Beer before her ("Poetesses' Corner?"). By the early 1980s, however, these voices had become increasingly isolated.

In higher education, the popularity of Women's Studies courses sent a clear signal that there was a demand for books by women, addressing the female condition. The discipline was created in the United States. In 1966, Annette Baxter set up her course in Women's History at Barnard College in New York City. Other institutions, including the University of Chicago and New Orleans Free School, offered Women's Studies courses from the late 1960. "By the time the National Women's Studies Association was set up in 1977, Women's Studies had come to stay as part of the educational smorgasbord offered to American Humanities undergraduates," wrote Greer ("The Proper Study of Womankind").

A 1984 article in the *New York Times* presented a detailed overview of the rise of Women's Studies in US universities. There were at least 450 Women's Studies programmes in America's more than 3,000 higher education institutions. In addition, there were many courses—mostly in history, English literature and social studies—offered on campuses that did not have anything as formal as a “programme.” In total, around 150 schools gave bachelor's degrees in Women's Studies, fifty gave master's degrees and about a dozen granted PhDs (Goodman).

In Britain, the development of the discipline was slower than in the US—in part because British universities were publicly funded and not so susceptible to undergraduate demand. In 1973, the fifth National Women's Liberation Conference in Bristol addressed the topic of this new discipline. Three years later, an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* counted twenty-five courses in nineteen universities, as well as those in polytechnics, colleges of education and in further and adult education. The field was led by Cambridge, Essex, London and Kent. Courses were also offered by University College London, Hull's department of English, Middlesex Polytechnic and elsewhere. Ulster Polytechnic offered courses specially arranged at times to suit women with young children at school, and City Lit (a provider of adult education courses founded in 1919) organised seminars with attached playgroup. “The majority of courses have a sociological base; for those linked with literature the most frequently recurring names are Woolf, Plath and Lessing,” declared the *Times Literary Supplement* (Dinnage).

The rise of Women's Studies courses in the UK continued throughout the 1980s. As Greer noted in a 1988 article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, “the number of institutions offering multi-disciplinary Women's Studies courses at graduate level continues to grow” (“The Proper Study of Womankind”). The same trend applied to undergraduate programmes and options.

In addition to higher education, Women's Studies was increasingly taught to school pupils. In 1986, the *Daily Mail* reported that a group of teachers, academics and educationalists had written a book, *The Wayward Curriculum*, to denounce lessons that “damage children.” “Not only are timetables occupied by dubious subjects – anti-racism, Women's Studies, peace studies – but established subjects display little of the discipline traditionally associated with them” (Rowlands). The fight against the marginalisation of women and ethnic minorities had traditionally been carried out by the Left, which explains why a conservative tabloid such

as the *Daily Mail* attacked the distribution of these ideas by left-leaning teachers.

However, the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher was also pushing for more diversity (see Chapter 5). As Nicci Gerrard put it in 1989, “where once the women’s movement presented a threat to the establishment, now its bowdlerised ideas have been cosily absorbed so that in Britain the right-wing ex-junior health minister, Edwina Currie, can call herself a feminist and Margaret Thatcher can use its vocabulary without blinking” (6). Feminism, and the academic discipline of Women’s Studies, had entered the mainstream.

Created in 1984, the International Feminist Book Fair combined a focus on entrepreneurialism and on diversity, a combination encouraged by the Thatcher government. The idea for a Fair came from Carole Spedding, who worked for the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* and was a co-founder of Sheba Feminist Publishers, and Ros de Lanerolle, the managing director of the Women’s Press. The aim was to put feminist writers and publishers in the marketplace, in libraries and on the educational curriculum, at a time when many booksellers hesitated to order feminist books for fear that they would not sell. Spedding was convinced that feminism was “a growth industry,” which was confirmed when the bookselling chain W.H. Smith agreed to put on a window display on the Fair in their bookshops (Evans). Spedding later said: “We decided to be confrontational and kill the myth that feminist books don’t sell. It worked” (Watts, “Feminist Publishing”).

Held in Covent Garden (Central London), the first Fair attracted more than 100 exhibitors from twenty-three countries, and displayed and sold feminist books to thousands of visitors (Lowry). It continued to take place throughout the 1980s and was described as “one of the slickest marketing ploys of recent years” (Briscoe). For the feminist writer Michelene Wandor, the success of the Fair highlighted the radical transformation of feminism, a word that could now be used “to blazon sales on book covers” (“Chronicles of the Sexual Revolution”). By 1990, as the *Guardian* declared, the distribution problems that had hindered the progression of feminist ideas were over: readers could find their “favourite feminist author on the Penguin shelf, and grab [the] next blockbuster from the railway Virago stand” (Briscoe).

From the start, the International Feminist Book Fair did not shy away from radical feminist books—such as Andrea Dworkin’s *Pornography* (published by the Women’s Press), which was part of the selection of

books advertised by W. H. Smith in the *Daily Mail*.<sup>7</sup> While some controversial fiction and non-fiction books published by feminist presses reached the mass market, women's poetry moved from niche to mainstream largely thanks to non-radical feminist editors and male publishers.

In 1983, Anne Stevenson, who would later write a controversial biography of Sylvia Plath, celebrated the fact that women's poetry was no longer marked by "hysteria" and could now appeal to ordinary readers:

At the end of the 1960s it looked as if the predominant tone of women's poetry for the next forty or fifty years was going to be obsessively Medean. Vengeance, self-immolation, man-hating and blood were the themes of the angry women who followed Sylvia Plath, taking from her brilliant, feverish example those elements best calculated to sustain her note of hysteria. Now, in the 1980s, the overall mood seems calmer. ("In and out of Time")

Stevenson praised Gillian Clarke's collection *Letter from a Far Country*, including the title poem which celebrated women's traditional role taking care of children and their home. "Coming as it does in the wake of the Women's Movement and domestic rebellion, the poem ... has the force of a counter-revolution," Stevenson argued ("In and out of Time"). It is fitting that Clarke's collection was published by Carcanet—a press with a conservative image.

Citing recent poetry collections, including *Bread and Roses*, Stevenson gave examples of hysteric topics in poems often influenced by Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* (1961). While Stevenson welcomed the return to more reasonable topics, other poets criticised the vilification of supposedly extreme poems. In the letter section of *Times Literary Supplement*, the poet Sylvia Kantaris claimed that Stevenson had created a new literary movement, the Hysterical Women's Movement (1963–1980). Kantaris pointed out that "the women's presses may have posed a certain threat to the Establishment, not least by unearthing earlier, neglected women poets and thereby disturbing our view of our literary heritage." But the backlash against "humourless female hysterics" was groundless ("The Hysterical Women's Movement [1]"). The heated exchange between Kantaris and Stevenson shows the lines of divisions between feminist presses and

<sup>7</sup> Advertisement, "Women on Women: First International Feminist Book Fair," *Daily Mail* (June 8, 1984): 8.

uncompromising poets on the one side, and traditional publishers and non-radical women poets on the other side.

Like Fleur Adcock, Carol Rumens and other women writers with a distaste for extreme poetry, Anne Stevenson was nevertheless deeply influenced by the women's movement and refused to accept the marginalisation of women poets. In 1984, she criticised the fact that Michael Schmidt's *Some Contemporary Poets of Britain and Ireland* named only two women. "Surely the anthology, with all its merits, is unbalanced with respect to women's poetry?" she asked ("Women's Poetry"). The rise of Women's Studies and the popularity of the International Feminist Book Fair had shed light on the emergence of an educated mainstream audience interested in women's topics. In 1985, less than one year after the first Fair, Chatto and Bloodaxe issued their own anthologies of women's poetry.

Chatto & Windus found its origins in 1855, when John Camden Hotten opened a bookshop in London (Schneller). The firm started publishing the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne in 1866 and kept a distinguished poetry list in the twentieth century. In 1946, C. Day-Lewis, later Poet Laureate, joined the firm as a literary adviser. From the late 1960s, Chatto & Windus contributed to the wave of mergers and acquisitions that was re-shaping the publishing industry on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1969, it merged with Jonathan Cape, a press that shared Chatto & Windus's focus on literary fiction, non-fiction and poetry publishing. Four years later, Chatto and Jonathan Cape Limited purchased the Bodley Head. And in 1982, the firm bought Virago to form a new company: Chatto & Windus, Virago, Bodley Head and Cape.

Chatto & Windus and Virago now belonged to the same company, with Carmen Callil working as a managing director of Chatto & Windus and remaining the Chair of Virago. So why was the 1985 anthology of "post-feminist poetry" branded as a Chatto book, rather than a Virago book? Not only was the brand in the title, but it was also repeated at the top of the book cover, which indicated that the anthology was part of the "Chatto Poetry" list. The collection was therefore presented as the latest publication of a traditional firm, founded and led by men for the largest part of its history.

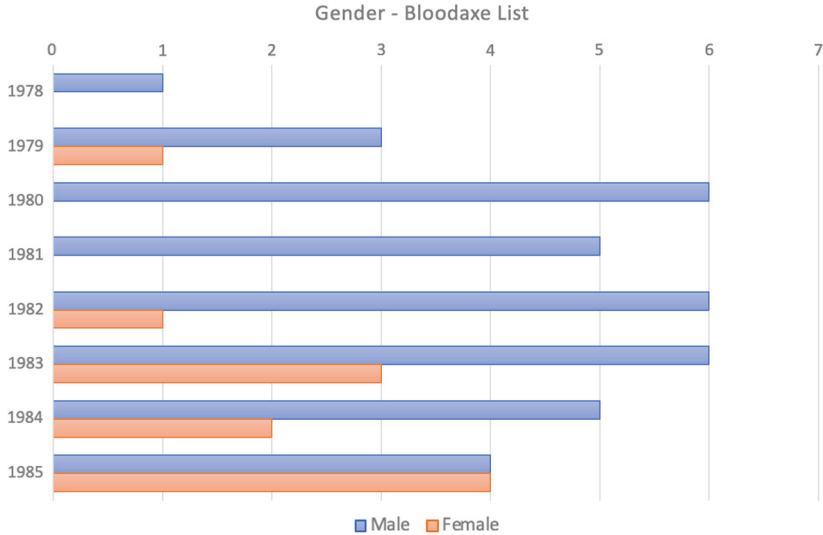
The *Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry* was positioned as an anthology for a mainstream audience, rather than a women's liberation book (hence the "post-feminist" in the title). *The World Split Open* and the Virago anthology *Bread and Roses* had attracted severe criticisms from reviewers

convinced that canonical poems should be chosen only for their literary merit—not the affiliation of the authors to the women’s movement, or any other social and political movements (see Chapter 5). The *Chatto Book* can be seen as a direct response to these criticisms. As Carol Rumens put it in her introduction to the anthology, the quality of the work alone must decide if women should be taken as serious poets. Women’s poetry was no longer confined to the feminist ghetto, it was now accessible to all readers, men and women. The book cover showed an open road, echoing the main title of the anthology “Making for the Open.” Like the International Feminist Book Fair, the *Chatto Book* signalled its intention to reach a large market and prove that women’s poetry could sell.

As a new poetry publisher founded in 1978 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Bloodaxe seemed at first sight very different from a prestigious London-based press with a long history such as Chatto & Windus. Yet, *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* had a similar positioning and branding as the *Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry*, emphasising the name of the publisher in the title and its mainstream appeal. And like Chatto, Bloodaxe was nobody’s idea of a feminist press. The first book that Neil Astley (the founder of Bloodaxe) published was Ken Smith’s *Tristan Crazy*, with a book cover showing a drawing of a man with an erect penis. In its first five years of existence, the press included just two titles by women poets: Fleur Adcock’s *Below Loughbrigg* (1979), and Carol Rumens’s *Scenes from the Gingerbread House* (1982). When Astley edited the collection *Ten North-East Poets* in 1980 to consolidate the firm’s regional identity, he included only men: Peter Armstrong, George Charlton, David Constantine, Stephen Dunstan, Desmond Graham, Peter Laver, James Longwill, Vincent Morrison, Lawrie Walker and Mike Wilkin.

As Fig. 2.2 shows, the gender balance of the Bloodaxe list started to improve in 1983 (with the publication of Frances Horowitz’s *Snow Light, Water Light*; Helen Dunmore’s *The Apple Fall*; and Shena Mackay’s *An Advent Calendar*). And in 1985, the press published an equal number of men and women—including figures associated with the feminist movement, such as Angela Carter and Jeni Couzyn. This evolution paralleled that of Carcanet, a press created nearly a decade before Bloodaxe. Like Michael Schmidt, Neil Astley understood that he had to adapt to a changing market and to the funders’ requirement for gender diversity.

But Bloodaxe went further than Carcanet in its effort to reach a large market interested in woman’s poetry. Simon Thirsk—who joined Neil



**Fig. 2.2** Gender of authors published by Bloodaxe, 1978–1985

Astley as a co-director in 1982—was instrumental in this market-driven approach. Following the publication of the bestselling collection *Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times* in 2002, Thirsk declared: “Although I have a great interest in poetry, my job at Bloodaxe has always been on the business side; I regard myself as having an ordinary interest in poetry rather than an academic or zealous interest.”<sup>8</sup> As a self-defined ordinary reader, Thirsk wanted to attract other ordinary readers to the Bloodaxe brand:

Crucially, we’ve learned to evaluate saleability irrespective of artistic merit. We acknowledge that most people don’t buy poetry for its own sake but because it touches other reflex within them - feminism, nostalgia, ethnicity or whatever. Ordinary people buy poetry, occasionally, for many reasons.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Simon Thirsk, “Selling the Un-sellable,” Hooked booklet, n. d., p. 23, Box 2, CPA 20, JRL.

<sup>9</sup> Id.

In the early 1980s, Thirsk and Astley recognised that “feminism” had broad market appeal, and that an anthology of women’s poetry could sell not only to people who attended the International Feminist Book Fair or who enrolled in Women’s Studies courses, but also to a more general audience. *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* became a set text at A-level, ensuring access to the educational market. Priced at £5.95 for the cheapest edition (the equivalent of around £18 today) the book brought healthy revenues to the new press, leading to a period of expansion.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Bloodaxe and Chatto anthologies targeted a similar mainstream market, the editors Jeni Couzyn and Carol Rumens had different views on the place of women in the poetry field. For Couzyn, women poets had been marginalised for too long. Challenging this imbalance, particularly in the education system, was an urgent priority. Lorna Sage, who was herself an educator, agreed with Couzyn: “you’ve only to leaf through a few anthologies or routine syllabuses to see that women poets are (still) on the margins rather than in the open” (“Tribe of Women”).

But not everyone found this narrative of marginalisation palatable. Reviewing the anthology in *Times Literary Supplement*, the poet Michael Hofmann wrote:

The most distinctive thing about *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* is that only just half its pages have poems on them. The rest are taken up by Jeni Couzyn’s fighting introduction, by photographs of the poets and their own introductions to themselves. Jeni Couzyn and many of her contributors give short shrift to men: men have used their power as sole arbiters of poetic taste to silence and ignore and misrepresent women poets, driving them to despair and even death. (“Hopes and Resentments”)

For Hofmann, Couzyn had lost sight of the real objective of an anthology: collecting the best poems with long-lasting appeal. The *Bloodaxe Book* had “a pent-up and resentful quality from which too few of the poems manage to liberate themselves” (“Hopes and Resentments”). Reacting in the Letter section of *Times Literary Supplement*, the writer

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bloodaxebooks.com/history> [accessed Aug. 24, 2021]. Calculations made through “Measuring Worth” (Officer and Williamson).

Maggie Gee pointed out that male reviewers often have little sympathy for difficult women who refused the status quo. Yet, “women writers have cause for anger,” Gee argued, before adding that the feminist fight was far from over (“Women Poets”).

Reviewers who praised Jeni Couzyn’s approach in the *Bloodaxe Book* often found Carol Rumens’s more moderate stance in the *Chatto Book* unsatisfying, and vice versa. For Lorna Sage, the Chatto anthology had a “silly title”: who could genuinely argue that feminism was over, and that we had entered a “post-feminist” world (“Tribe of Women”)? Deborah Singmaster in the *Guardian* was puzzled by Rumens’s hope that her anthology would be a steppingstone to the time when writers would not be defined by their gender. “As if to hasten on this day, [Rumens] has tended – intentionally or not – to choose poems that do not draw attention to their writers’ sex: there is little domestic paraphernalia, children are limited, so are love poems.” Singmaster was not convinced that genderless poetry was a desirable aim. “Women will always be able to write with more insight about certain subjects than men (the converse is not necessarily true); to abandon this strength would be a loss rather than a gain” (“MsPrint”). For female reviewers such as Sage and Singmaster, gender was central to poetry—from the choice of topics, to the unequal opportunities open to women poets.

In contrast, for male reviewers such as Michael Hofmann and Dick Davis, Carol Rumens’s refusal to dwell on gender was a boon. Writing in the *Listener*, Davis (a frequent contributor to *PN Review*) was relieved that despite its title, the *Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry* was in fact “an anthology of poems by women most of whom remain largely untouched by feminism.” Aware that the publisher was trying to benefit from the growing interest in feminism, Davis recommended to “ignore the silly, breathless marketing” and focus on the texts of this “interesting and worthwhile anthology” (“Death and Cosiness”). Like Davis, Hofmann praised Rumens’s selection based primarily on excellence, rather than on feminist credentials—a departure from earlier anthologies published by women’s presses.

When *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women’s Poetry* was published in 1987, it adopted the same kind of moderate, feminist-but-not-too-feminist approach chosen by Chatto two years earlier. The book cover had the sobriety of collections of classics—it showed simply a hand holding a pen, framed with an elegant pattern that repeated Faber & Faber’s initials “ff.” As the leading poetry publisher in Britain, Faber made

clear that the anthology edited by Fleur Adcock contained only texts that would withstand the test of time, and had been chosen for their excellence rather than their conformity to any particular dogmatic line. The inner flap thus declared:

This anthology of women's poetry is destined to establish a canon by which other, more partial anthologies will eventually be judged. It is at once historically representative, catholic in its taste, and rigorously selective – demonstrating the richness and variety of women's contributions to twentieth-century literature.

The vocabulary of class and taste dominated the description of the book. The *Faber Book* was presented as “a work of scholarship, profound research and fine discrimination,” led by Adcock who had all the credentials of a “highly respected poet.” The inner flap mentioned her *Selected Poems* published by Oxford University Press in 1983, but not her earlier association with the less-prestigious Bloodaxe.

Adcock's moderate tone irked Lorna Sage. The editor was “by temperament as well as conviction a more-or-less cheerful stoic, who prefers to think that space is gradually being made for women poets on the middle ground of letters,” Sage wrote (“Women to Make Yeats Weep”). Like Carol Rumens before her, Adcock lacked awareness that the end of history had not yet been reached, and more political rage would be needed to advance the gender equality agenda.

The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer, Barbara Hardy, preferred to insist on the positive aspects of this middle-of-the-road approach. “The editor deliberately excludes high-pitched screams, rough aggressions, ragged confessions, incantations,” suggesting instead that Fleur Adcock had chosen “civilized, hyperconscious, reconciliatory, unified” poetry. Opposing passion and reason, Hardy saw the *Faber Book* as a mature work in which “the super-ego rules,” contrary to early anthologies such as *The World Split Open* and *Bread and Roses*. In psychoanalytic theory, the super-ego plays a critical and moralising role necessary to balance instinctual desires (what Sigmund Freud called the “id”). But if Adcock was determined to choose dispassionate voices, why did she select Sylvia Plath's poems? In addition to being a Faber poet, Plath was already part of the literary canon. “Despite her wildness and storms, Sylvia Plath [is] the most distinguished instance of an imagination which includes but

transcends feminist attack, jealousy, and bitterness," wrote Hardy ("The Need for Wilderness").

### BUILDING AN ENDURING CANON OF WOMEN'S POETRY

The fact that mainstream publishers such as Faber targeted the feminist market did not immediately threaten women's presses. By 1988, there were eleven feminist publishing houses in Britain (Cochrane). "Women's publishing may be alive and kicking today," wrote Joanna Briscoe in the *Guardian*, "but with feminism itself moving from the margins to the mainstream, how long can it survive?" ("Feminist Presses: who needs them?"). In the early 1990s, several women's presses were indeed struggling. The Women's Press reported losses of £300,000 in 1991 and was saved from bankruptcy only by the intervention of its parent company, Quartet Books. Pandora, a press founded in 1983, had three owners in its first eight years of existence. In 1991, its conglomerate parent HarperCollins offered a management buy-out to concentrate on activities seen as more central to its core business (Jones, "The Need to Publish and Be Feminist"). The relatively small size of women's presses made them vulnerable to the economic recession. Moreover, as the women's movement had largely moved from the margins to the mainstream, feminist publishing was in danger of becoming indistinguishable from competitors.

Virago still enjoyed commercial success at the time when other feminist presses were scaling back operations. In 1991, it published nearly 100 books and had a turnover of £2.5 m (Jones, "The Need to Publish and Be Feminist"). Yet, Carmen Callil was aware that the future of the press was uncertain. "Politically and socially these are not good times for those of us who in the sixties and seventies thought the world was our oyster," she said (Briscoe). The preoccupations of her generation seemed out-of-touch with third-wave feminism and its focus on diversity and individualism in women. Callil was determined to retain the identity of Virago, while making room for younger women. "I'd like to see a younger generation of women who define what they think Virago should become," she added (Briscoe).

Virago's twentieth birthday in 1993 led to a high-profile event, with leading actresses such as Fiona Shaw and Juliet Stevenson reading extracts from canonical fiction writers published by Virago. For Natasha Walter writing in the *Independent*, the "resurrection of our lost canon" was cause

for celebration (“Still Maligned, Still Loved, Still Needed”). The feminist agenda was not over since the arbiters of taste in publishing remained mostly male. Yet, by the time the discourse of feminism had entered the mainstream, there was still no general agreement on the canon of women’s poetry.

In a long article published in 1995 in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Germaine Greer argued that the multiplication of women’s poetry anthologies had not led to an enduring canon. Women’s poetry was still “biodegradable”: poems that appeared in one anthology were not necessarily reprinted in another. Greer gave the example of John Collings Squire’s *A Book of Women’s Verse* (1921). By the time Fleur Adcock edited *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women’s Poetry*, she included only one poet chosen by Squire: Frances Cornford. In 1928, Hodder & Stoughton—a publisher known for its commercial acumen—issued a successful anthology, *The Treasury of Living Poets*, which included a quarter of women poets. Yet, six decades later, only one of these poets appeared in the Faber anthology. Of course, this phenomenon of literary obsolescence also impacted men’s poetry, but a core segment remained consensually canonical throughout much longer periods (“A Biodegradable Art”).

This article, and the publication of Greer’s book *Slipshod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection and the Woman Poet*, led to revelations on how the women’s poetry anthologies of the 1980s had been put together. Craig Raine—then Poetry Editor of Faber—was accused of having cut Fleur Adcock’s anthology by 20% (Fainlight). Not all male editors shaped the canon as directly as Raine. Carol Rumens thus claimed that Chatto’s editor Andrew Motion had not intervened in her selection of poets (“Women’s Poetry Anthologies”). But as we have seen, Chatto had still played a major role in packaging Rumens’s anthology as a safe “post-feminist” product that closed the door to the excesses of earlier anthologies.

The publication of Greer’s book also led to a revival of old debates on women’s poetry anthologies. Echoing Stevie Smith’s earlier argument about the lack of value of isolating women poets from men poets, the writer A. S. Byatt declared:

Literary feminism is really less interesting than any other feminism. Political feminism is extremely important, but literary feminism has actually done

as much harm to women writers as good. There are very few writers for whom their gender is the most interesting thing about them. (Aitkenhead)

For Byatt, the time when women's writing was grouped together—for good or bad—had now passed. It was essential to discard the literary heritage of second-wave feminism, and to stop reducing female writers to their gender. In short, Byatt was calling for a “post-feminist” literary world where, in Lorna Sage's words, literary feminism would be over and done with, out of the way (“Women to Make Yeats Weep”).

Byatt's doubts shed light on the reasons why both Virago and the Women's Presses failed to make a lasting impact with their women's poetry anthologies. The audience they targeted was much too narrow. Some second-wave feminists could be convinced that self-expression and a commitment to women's liberation ideas were enough to be included in a collection of women's poetry. But other readers were not easily persuaded that these kinds of poems deserved to join the canon. In particular, Fleur Adcock dismissed the touchy-feely topics in the Virago anthology *Bread and Roses*. The editor Diana Scott was keen on “angels, magic trees, timeless music, spirit-haunted rivers, the sea, the moon,” which signified “the Meeting ... with the Muse” (“Singing Sisters”). For Adcock, Scott should have paid more attention to stylistic and technical considerations, instead of basing her choice of poems on sentimental subject matter. Not all poems included in *Bread and Roses* had a syrupy tone. Some explored violence and extreme emotions. Anne Stevenson gave the example of Stef Pixner's poem “A Day in the Life”: “Today I pulled my diaphragm out of my vagina. I found a / small basin of dark blood. / ... Today I spilled blood on the bathroom floor. I wiped it / up without a trace” (“The Hysterical Women's Movement [2]”). For Stevenson, extreme topics could only alienate moderate readers.

When publishing houses dominated by men launched their own collections of women's poetry, they privileged a middle-of-the-road approach designed to appeal to a wide audience that went well beyond die-hard feminist readers. Even *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets*—which denounced the traditional marginalisation of women poets—lacked the passionate tone of Virago and the Women's Presses. The book would probably not have been selected as an A-level set text if it had included topics deemed too controversial for high-school pupils. The mainstream positioning shared by the Chatto, Bloodaxe and Faber anthologies was conveyed not only through the text, but also through the paratext. The

heavy branding of the anthologies conveyed the impression that the anthologies were not only the choice of individual editors: instead, they were endorsed by the entire publishing house as a Chatto, Bloodaxe or Faber book.

The objective of these publishing houses was to produce an authoritative edition of canonical women's poems that would sell for many years. However, their definition of the canon was soon contested. If the poems selected were really the best which had been thought and said, why were there so few overlaps with earlier collections such as Margaret Sackville's *A Book of Verse by Living Women* or John Collings Squire's *A Book of Women's Verse? Why did Faber's poetry editor Craig Raine cut one-fifth of Fleur Adcock's anthology? For Germaine Greer, women's poetry was often derivative and inauthentic—hence the difficulty to identify a stable canon that would be recognised by everyone. “The problem that confronts the student of women's creativity is not that there is no poetry by women,” she wrote, “but that there is so much bad poetry by women” (*Slip-Shod Sibyls* 259). Other critics, such as Byatt, pointed out that putting women poets in a special category did not serve them well. Poetry had nothing to do with gender, they argued, echoing a long tradition of distrust towards anthologies of women's poetry.*

Yet, Chatto, Bloodaxe and Faber were right to identify the educational market as a target for their anthologies. Instead of blending poetry by men and women, schools and universities have continued to teach poetry by women as a special category. In the past decade, for example, Cambridge University Press issued *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry*, *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry*, alongside several titles focusing on other periods and countries. In a context of feminist revival, women's poetry remains an attractive marketing category—particularly if it is aimed at the school and university markets.

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## Women, Ethnic Minorities and the Forgotten History of *Carc Janet* Magazine

In late 2019, Michael Schmidt gave an interview to the *Daily Telegraph* to talk about the fiftieth anniversary of Carcanet, the press he founded and continues to manage. Although Carcanet has experimented with fiction, it is better known as a poetry publisher, particularly of poetry in translation and inspired by the modernist movement. “Four Carcanet authors have received the Nobel Prize in Literature, and six have won Pulitzers,” the *Daily Telegraph* noted, before turning to the history of the press: “Carcanet began as a publisher of poetry pamphlets, having grown out of a magazine of the same name Schmidt edited while studying at Oxford.”<sup>1</sup> A similar narrative on the origins of Carcanet can be found in a 1987 article in the *London Times*: “At Oxford [Schmidt] began editing a small magazine called *Carc Janet*, and decided to publish a few pamphlets of poetry as a swansong. They went surprisingly well” (Peachment).

*Carc Janet* magazine is often presented as an undistinguished student magazine, which would have sunk into obscurity had Michael Schmidt not taken it over in 1967. It was set up by undergraduates who wanted to link Oxford and Cambridge, but after a few issues, the magazine lost its focus and accumulated debts. According to the Carcanet Press website, “the magazine Carcanet had fallen on hard times by October 1967 when Michael Schmidt, a newly arrived undergraduate at Wadham

<sup>1</sup> “‘Rare Jewel’ of Publishing Celebrates its 50th Birthday,” *The Daily Telegraph* (London) (Dec. 9, 2019): 26.

College, Oxford, took it over.”<sup>2</sup> The same narrative is repeated in the description of the Carcanet Press archive at the John Rylands Library in Manchester. This description is then cited in Michael Thurston and Nigel Alderman’s *Reading Postwar British and Irish Poetry*: “While the magazine had managed to stay in production for seven years, it was in dire straits by the late 1960s” (56). In this oft-repeated story, Michael Schmidt is the sole hero, who transformed a struggling student magazine into a successful publishing enterprise before launching the magazine *Poetry Nation* in 1973 (which became *PN Review* in 1976).

There are two interesting things in this Oxford-focused, male-dominated story. First, the influence of the Cambridge group in setting up the original *Carcanet* magazine in 1962 is seldom mentioned. The group is disparaged for its amateurism and financial irresponsibility. But this focus on the negative obscures the predecessors’ long-lasting legacy: a brand name that is both intriguing and meaningful (according to the Oxford English Dictionary, a carcanet is a “an ornamental collar or neck-lace, usually of gold or set with jewels”).<sup>3</sup> The second interesting point is the invisibility of women, despite their role in the original *Carcanet* magazine. In his introduction to *Fifty Fifty: Carcanet’s Jubilee in Letters*, Schmidt mentions Roger Garfitt, then President of the Oxford Poetry Society:

The first meeting I attended when I went up to Oxford as an undergraduate in 1967 was that of the Oxford University Poetry Society. Its president was Roger Garfitt, subsequently a Carcanet poet and in the early years a close collaborator. I seem to remember him on that occasion wrapped in a kind of wizard’s gown and with the inclusive, friendly, smoky vagueness that accompanied many young cultural people in the evenings of the late 1960s. He declared that the Oxford-Cambridge literary magazine Carcanet was up for grabs and if anyone was interested they should see him after the meeting. I did so and came away with the prize. (xxv)

Schmidt says nothing about Diane Troy, who co-edited the Winter 1966 and Summer 1967 issues. Yet, it was Troy—not Garfitt—who was

<sup>2</sup> “About Us,” [www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showinfo=ip020](http://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showinfo=ip020) [accessed Jan. 23, 2020].

<sup>3</sup> “carcanet, n’ *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019. For more on distinctive and memorable brand names, see Robertson.

looking for a successor to the magazine. A decade later, Schmidt told his friend and fellow poetry publisher Peter Jay that: “She was very reluctant to let me have the magazine *Carcanet* and in the end let me have it only by default of better offers.” And he added: “To imagine what would have happened had someone more promising come forward! I might now be living in Hawaii!”<sup>4</sup> Troy was co-editing the magazine with a young Indian poet, Farrukh Dhondy.<sup>5</sup> They worked with contributors from various ethnic backgrounds, including Adil Jussawalla, who went on to a successful literary career in India. In contrast, Schmidt had more conventional poetry interests, despite his Mexican upbringing. The first issue edited by Schmidt included only English names, and only one woman: Sally Purcell.

The story of *Carcanet* magazine illuminates two key characteristics of the broader literary landscape in Britain: first, the emphasis on Oxford as the birthplace of literary innovation in the decades immediately after the Second World War; second, its marginalisation of women and ethnic minorities. When I was researching this chapter, I had no problem finding interviewees eager to tell the Cambridge side of the *Carcanet* story. The first few issues of the magazine are preserved at Cambridge University Library and are easily available to researchers. Finding information about the women associated with the magazine is more complicated, in part because they were so few of them. Purcell, for example, is no longer here to share her own story. She produced several books of poetry and translations and died in 1998 at the age of 53.

*Carcanet* magazine also published ethnically diverse collaborators who went on to promote a diverse conception of English literature to a large audience. This was not entirely new, of course. The Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for *Gitanjali*, a book of poems in English. In the interwar period, the writer Mulk Raj Anand developed close links with the Bloomsbury group. And in 1958, the young Dom Moraes was awarded the Hawthornden Prize for

<sup>4</sup> Schmidt to Peter Jay, Nov. 20, 1979, CPA 2/3/80, Carcanet Press archive, John Rylands Library, Manchester (hereafter referred to as JRL).

<sup>5</sup> In *Cambridge Company*, Dhondy describes how he started editing *Carcanet* magazine. He was told that “the magazine had been first published in the late nineteenth century as a joint venture between Oxford and Cambridge with contributory poems from both. It had been dormant for several decades and had been revived for one trial before I inherited the editorship” (n.pag.).

his first book of poems, *A Beginning*. Building on this legacy, the generation of poets associated with *Carcanet* magazine championed a diverse understanding of English literature. Adil Jussawalla edited an influential anthology of new writing from India, published in 1974 as a mass-market Penguin paperback. He also wrote his own poetry, including the collection of poems *Missing Person* (1976). Jussawalla's archive at Cornell University Library contains letters and documents on *Carcanet* which have been largely neglected.

In the past two decades, the field of book history has moved towards more diversity. Books have no borders, and the focus on national projects is no longer the norm. The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP) chose "Indigeneity, Nationhood, and Migrations of the Book" as the theme of its 2019 conference. As Sydney Shep put it in her article "Imagining Post-National Book History," "transnational, crossnational, or *histoires croisées* approaches are now common" (257). Yet, "we still need room on the expanding bookshelf for those other histories on the horizon including Africa, India, the Philippines, and New Zealand" (255). It is of course important to study the literary and publishing field in these countries. But it is equally important to pay attention to authors who sought out publishers in literary centres in the West. Adil Jussawalla, who published with *Carcanet* magazine before returning to India, exemplifies the transnational trajectories of postcolonial writers.

In the field of postcolonial studies, an attention to the material context of publication and diffusion of literary texts has become increasingly common. For example, Laetitia Zecchini has recently discussed the influence of the Cold War on the publishing, critical and literary scene in India from the 1950s onwards, with a special focus on Bombay. Drawing on Adil Jussawalla's unpublished documents, she pays particular attention to little magazines that enabled the transnational and translational traffics of Indian modernisms. Yet, she does not mention Jussawalla's experience with *Carcanet* magazine—a periodical based in England, but open to Indian writers ("What Filters Through the Curtain").

My central argument is that *Carcanet* magazine can be seen as a site of struggle between various players: between the Oxford and Cambridge literary sets, and between British/ European and postcolonial groups. The contribution of writers from India and other ex-colonies has long been forgotten. Drawing on extensive archival work and oral history interviews, this chapter creates an alternative history of *Carcanet* magazine as a case

study for the larger literary field of post-war Britain. The story is less focused on Michael Schmidt, without diminishing his accomplishment in transforming a student magazine into an enduring publishing enterprise.

This chapter starts with an overview of the first three years of *Carcanet* magazine. The original aim was to link literary groups on both sides of the Oxford/ Cambridge divide. I show that this objective highlights a key characteristic of the post-war literary landscape: the focus on Oxford as the original centre of literary experimentation, leading to feelings of marginalisation in other centres. The second section turns to women and ethnic minorities who contributed to *Carcanet* magazine. The last part focuses on the transition from little magazine to small press that Schmidt piloted. From the start, *Carcanet* followed a pattern characteristic of modernist publishing enterprises (think of the *Egoist* magazine and the Egoist Press, which published James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis). In short, *Carcanet* magazine can be seen as pilot project that allowed Schmidt to launch his literary career and to position his press as neo-modernist.

### 1962–1964: CONNECTING OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE

In a 1974 article in *PN Review*, Michael Schmidt's mentor Donald Davie argued that Oxford was the place to be for any young man with literary ambitions: "for the last fifty years each new generation of English poets, as the 'generations' were subsequently to be understood and talked about by journalistic commentators, was formed or fomented or dreamed up by lively undergraduates at Oxford, who subsequently carried the group-image to London and from there imposed it on the public consciousness so as to earn at least a footnote in the literary histories." Davie gave examples of these successful generations of Oxford undergraduates who went on to dominate the highbrow literary world: Wystan Auden and Stephen Spender in the 1930s, followed by Kingsley Amis, John Wain and other "Movement" writers after the war. In the early 1960s, Ian Hamilton and John Fuller started building their literary careers via Hamilton's magazine *The Review*. A few years later, Michael Schmidt and his friends Grevel Lindop and Gareth Reeves became the latest Oxford-educated poets eager to establish themselves. For Davie, it was clear that Cambridge had not played an important role in the literary world since the Bloomsbury group. "Every new putsch has come from Oxford and has picked up its Cambridge recruits (Christopher Isherwood in one generation,

Thorn Gunn in another) only afterwards, and incidentally” (“The Varsity Match”).<sup>6</sup>

The creation of *Carcanet* magazine in 1962 can be seen as an Oxford-led attempt to recruit Cambridge collaborators from the start of the project, rather than “afterwards, and incidentally.” Richard Emeny, a student at Merton College in Oxford, had been to school with John Halliday, who was reading History at St. John’s in Cambridge. Emeny wanted to create a joint-university literary magazine, and he asked Halliday to help him develop the project. Although Halliday accepted the offer and became the Cambridge editor of the first issue, he lacked confidence in his literary skills, and he asked two English literature students to join the committee: Michael Duffett and Richard Burns (who then changed his name to Berengarten).

The magazine would be called *Carcanet* and would contain short stories, poems and critical essays. Since undergraduates could not publish a magazine without the endorsement of established university figures, the next step was to find Senior Members. At Oxford, the committee enlisted Nevill Coghill, a distinguished literary scholar who had been part of an informal discussion group that included C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. At Cambridge, the young men obtained the approval of Kingsley Amis, who was much more controversial than Coghill. Apart from lending his name, Amis played no part in *Carcanet* magazine.

The name of the magazine was suggested by someone in the Oxford team: Richard Emeny as editor, and his committee composed of Roger Green, Michael Hind and Roger Chinery. The cover of the first issue showed a drawing of a carcanet as an ornamental necklace, set with jewels. It symbolised the union of Oxford and Cambridge, to produce a delicately crafted magazine. Injecting a good dose of school boys’ humour, the drawings in the inside pages played on the term’s archaism and possible French origins.

Published in late 1962, the first issue of *Carcanet* can be seen as the product of a male-only public-school system, which led to enduring friendships across the Oxford-Cambridge divide. Yet, these existing ties did not necessarily make communication easy. First, there was the issue of travelling from one place to another for meetings. The two teams sometimes met in London, which was more easily accessible. The second

<sup>6</sup> Ted Hughes, who studied at Pembroke College, Cambridge, might also be mentioned in the same context.

problem was the lack of agreement on editorial policies. Oxford didn't have a regular literary magazine at that time, and the objective of Emeny and his friends was simply to offer an outlet to fellow students. On the Cambridge side, a central influence was *Granta*—a magazine founded in 1889 by students at the University. Burns, who had published a short story in the *Transatlantic Review* when he was still at school, then won a prize in *Granta*. The magazine was the leading reference for all Cambridge students with literary ambitions, and it did not compete directly against *Carcanet*, a much more amateurish affair. “Carcanet was an attempt to break away from what we saw as the portentous style of *Granta*,” Michael Rowan-Robinson told me.<sup>7</sup>

Like Burns, Rowan-Robinson was a student at Pembroke College in Cambridge. He contributed to the second issue of *Carcanet*. With the publication of *Carcanet 2* in January 1963, a clearer editorial policy began to emerge, influenced by Greek mythology and culture. C. A. Trypanis, a 54-year-old Greek scholar and poet who was then at Oxford, contributed several poems to this issue. At Pembroke College, a young man called Peter Mansfield made a lasting impression on the *Carcanet* team. Rowan-Robinson said: “There were a group of us that used to meet every day in the rooms of Peter Mansfield. He had nice rooms in the courtyard of the college, so we all used to gather there.” A great drinker and bon vivant, Mansfield was excessive in many ways. He “was the dominant figure,” Rowan-Robinson added. “Very charismatic, tremendous appetite for life and experience.”<sup>8</sup> Mansfield was reading Classics and had a mastery of Greek, both ancient and modern. His series of poems set in the Homeric world gave a distinct flavour to the second issue. The influence of Greek poets such as George Seferis and Constantine Cavafy can also be seen in Rowan-Robinson's poems. In 1964, Rowan-Robinson met Seferis, before embarking on a professorial career in astronomy.

The first and second issue of *Carcanet* magazine shared sexual undertones typical of the early 1960s. In a story entitled “Afternoon on the sea,” Mike Travis described a Mediterranean lifestyle: “In the morning you work, in the afternoon you rest, in the cool evening you make children.” One man finds himself unable to respond to the sexual needs of his partner: “He felt her warm polished legs on each side of his body.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Rowan-Robinson, email to author, April 4, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Rowan-Robinson, interview with author, Aug. 17, 2018.

But the sun was too hot and jealous” (6). Richard Burns also published vaguely erotic poems, “To His Coy Mistress” and “An Exercise,” in the first two issues. These pieces remind us that *Carc Janet* was a magazine by and for undergraduates, who were exploring sexuality. Sold for 2 shillings, it was three times cheaper than the Faber books of poems advertised in the inside pages.

These advertisements give us information about the dominant market for *Carc Janet* magazine: mostly male, young, relatively privileged students from Oxford and Cambridge. EVERYTHING FOR YOUR SKI-ING HOLIDAY, declared one ad for the Men’s Shop of a department store in Oxford. Barclays Bank promised students that it was easy to open a bank account: “For as an undergraduate you’ll quickly appreciate how useful it is to be able to pay college, books and tailors’ bills by cheque.” Another advertisement for Harrisons and Crosfield, a trading house looking for new graduates eager to start a career overseas, celebrated Britain’s colonial past. “Founded in 1844 as a partnership for the import of China tea into the United Kingdom, it was one of the pioneers of rubber planting in Malaya and Sumatra.” The company offered vacancies in the Far East, and rapid promotion “for the right men.”<sup>9</sup>

Edited by an all-male team and designed with an audience of male students in mind, *Carc Janet* magazine celebrated the close links between writers and ordinary readers. Single poems were issued regularly and sold for one penny in bookshops. Featuring a new work or a translation, the “penny poem” sheet created a continuous link with readers who were waiting for the next magazine issue. Overall, the objective was not to create a polished literary magazine, but rather to offer an informal forum of discussion and experimentation. “We decided to produce a magazine not just for editors and critics, but for readers and writers,” declared the editorial of the second issue in January 1963.

By that time, however, tensions between the Oxford and Cambridge team had become public knowledge. Reviewing *Carc Janet 2*, the magazine *Varsity* deplored its mediocre literary standards:

*Carc Janet* ... started off promisingly last November but has now become more muddled in its claims for “poetry in evolution” and its aims to cater for “writers and readers.” So long as the quality of the writing is good,

<sup>9</sup> The advertisements cited here can be found in the first two issues of *Carc Janet* magazine.

one does not mind the strange formula, but the second issue was sadly disappointing. It contains a nonsensical editorial which was largely the result of misunderstanding between the Oxford and Cambridge sides of the business. (Sutton)

*Carcanet* 3—which should have been edited by Richard Emeny at Oxford and Peter Mansfield at Cambridge—did not materialise until 1964 with a new editor, Roger Kuin. An enterprise started in a spirit of collaboration between the two universities ended with a takeover from the Oxford side. Another problem was that the founding members of *Carcanet* were about to graduate, and many of them left shortly afterwards to travel or start a job. Duffett went to teach in Arabia, Burns to Greece and Italy. The original team graduated in 1964, having planted the seeds for a magazine more open to alternative voices by ethnic minorities. Throughout its history, however, *Carcanet* magazine remained relatively closed to female contributors—with a few notable exceptions.

### 1964–1967: MOVING TOWARDS MORE DIVERSITY?

The first issue of *Carcanet* in 1962 included 25% of women, a number that decreased to 9% in the second issue. Among these few female contributors was Rima Alamuddin, a Lebanese student, who died at the age of 22. She chose English to express herself creatively, one of the first women from the Middle East to do so. “Rima drew most of her ideas, from Western Culture but the atmosphere she depicts is purely oriental,” declared *Al Raida*, a Beirut-based publication of the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World. “The background is Lebanese and so are the characters of her stories and poems, though they may appear in Western dress and adopt Western manners. Her artistry performed an ideal marriage of cultures” (Ghurayyib 4–5).

Born in 1941, Alamuddin came from a wealthy, cosmopolitan family. Her Swiss mother had a doctorate, and her Lebanese father was the Director of the Middle East Airlines. Educated in Lebanese private schools, she majored in English at the American University of Beirut and then continued her studies at Girton College, Cambridge. At the age 19, she wrote a novel *Spring to Summer*, published in Beirut and London in 1963. Written in a realistic style, the novel told a familiar story: Samar, a young woman from a privileged background falls in love with a fellow student of obscure origins, Akram. The *Sunday Times* declared: “What

is remarkable is that Samar's life at university and in the confines of her safe bourgeois home seems, despite the hot tempers of the Middle East, extraordinarily familiar ... she could be a North London Miss" (Raphael). The *Times Literary Supplement* found the narration awkward but conceded that "Miss Alamuddin writes with an energy which promises better things to come" (Williams, Wordsworth and Knight).

The year 1963 started well for Alamuddin and ended tragically. In January, her short story, "Beyond the Wall" appeared in *Carcanet* 2. She was the only woman among eleven contributors. As often in Alamuddin's work, the scene is set in the Middle East. The story follows an eleven-year-old girl who witnesses a violent argument between her parents. Her home environment is described as a threatening place where everyone seems scared, including pet birds: "Behind the girl on the balcony Abdul the Bulbul was silent and still in his bamboo cage, waiting patiently, but getting more and more silent every day, his feathers cotton-ruffled, his marble-hard head half-hanging over one wing." The girl leaves the flat at night and meets a strange man, who asks her questions about her family. She does not fully understand what he expects of her and seems increasingly frightened. The story ends with her running away back home, and a nightmarish vision of "nothing left but ... a mountain of men like ants" (41–51). Verbal and physical violence inflicted by men is also at the centre of Alamuddin's first novel. Akram, a murderer and thief, nearly destroys Samar, before she manages to escape this noxious relationship. Following the publication of the novel in March, Alamuddin returned to Lebanon and was murdered by a spurned suitor later in 1963.<sup>10</sup>

After her death, Hodder and Stoughton published a collection of stories: *The Sun is Silent* (1964). A volume of poetry, *The Years of Youth*, also appeared that year. Alamuddin has not been entirely forgotten: one of her stories appeared in *Hikayat: Short Stories by Lebanese Women* (2006). Her short career highlights an important moment in the post-war literary landscape, the moment when diverse voices in English fiction and poetry started to attract more attention.

As early as 1962, the Cambridge-based team was keen to publish alternative voices in *Carcanet* magazine. Peter Mansfield and Richard Burns planned an Indian issue of the magazine for Autumn 1963, with two

<sup>10</sup> *Le Dictionnaire Universel Des Créatrices*, Paris: Éditions des femmes, 2015.

Indian students (Ajit Singh and Adil Jussawalla) as “honorary editors.”<sup>11</sup> It never materialised, in part because the Oxford team was reluctant to commit to the project. “The internal politics of this magazine is in a bit of a mess,” Singh wrote to Jussawalla.<sup>12</sup> Following the takeover by Oxford, the third issue of *Carcanet* was published in 1964. It did not include any texts by women or ethnic minorities. Reflecting 1960s preoccupations, the main theme was spirituality, outside traditional religions. “Lou is God”—a story about an obscure cult—was followed by a translation of “Speech of Christ, Dead, from the Heights of the Cosmos, Concerning the Absence of God,” by the German writer and theologian Jean Paul (1763–1825). With only 28 pages, *Carcanet* 3 was approximately half the size of the previous issue. It had no cover illustration and no editorial.

After disappearing in 1965, the magazine re-emerged with a new editorial team who regenerated a declining enterprise plagued with financial problems. Farrukh Dhondy and Diane Troy edited the Winter 1966 and Summer 1967 issues (*Carcanet* 4 and 5) and moved the magazine towards more diverse writings. Focusing on death and sex, these two issues featured striking covers: “Soldiers’ Heads” by Elizabeth Frink, and a psychedelic drawing of a naked woman and a skull, by Salim Patell. Exploring the darker side of the 1960s, Adil Jussawalla’s ambiguous poems seem to deal with drugs, overdose and suicide attempts. “The Raising of Lazarus” concludes with the dying speaker being rescued, only to face a cold and threatening world: “He brought me round but never asked the matter/ With my life nor why it went/ Nor took the fatal tablets from my coat.” The second poem describes children playing in a municipal park, and laments the loss of childhood: “At evening/ comes the lame/ guard to shut/ the gates lock/ the lank/ chains.” The third poem can be read as the quest of a drug-addict looking for his dealer: “White man whose daily dis-/ Appearance is my brief.” The last word of the poem, “maiming,” reinforces the impression of racialised violence and impending death.<sup>13</sup>

Born into a Parsi family in the city of Bombay, Adil Jussawalla moved to England in 1957, at the age of 17. Like Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes and

<sup>11</sup> Ajit Singh to Adil Jussawalla, n. d., Box 7, Folder 31, Adil Jussawalla papers, Cornell University Library.

<sup>12</sup> Singh to Jussawalla, 1963, Box 7, Folder 31, Jussawalla papers, Cornell.

<sup>13</sup> *Carcanet* magazine 4, Winter 1966, 3–5.

other Indian poets writing in English who emerged after Independence, Jussawalla was educated and trained in the British way. He read English at Oxford and taught in a language school. In 1962, his first collection of poems, *Land's End*, was published by the Writers Workshop, a new Calcutta-based imprint dedicated to Indian writing in English. "The paradox [is] that in India, English came into its own as a language capable of poetry only after Indians got rid of its original speakers," he wrote in 1968. "Indian poetry in English doesn't seriously begin to exist till after Independence" ("The New Poetry" 65).

This new generation of writers faced two major obstacles. First, Jussawalla was acutely aware of the difficulties of writing in the language of the ex-colonial power: "In my own poems, mostly written abroad, I have tried to show the effect of living in lands I can neither leave nor love nor properly belong to" ("The New Poetry" 78). He saw himself as belonging to a movement of Indian writers that were using English for lack of a better option. Although he had a basic knowledge of three Indian languages (Gujarati, Hindi and Urdu), he could read and write the first two with painful slowness and could only understand a spoken usage of the third. In the early 1970s, when he edited the influential Penguin anthology *New Writing in India*, he had to rely on English-language translations of Indian works written in regional languages (22).

While Jussawalla has never been a prolific writer, his conception of language has had an important influence on Indian writers. *Marginalized: Indian Poetry in English*, a 2014 volume edited by Smita Agarwal, contains a chapter on his work alongside other major poets (Thomas). His essay "Being There: Aspects of an Indian Crisis" is also included in Meena Alexander's anthology, *Name Me a Word: Indian Writers Reflect on Writing* (2018). These critics particularly value Jussawalla's self-awareness as a poet who feels that the language he is using is not really his own. Alexander argues that in *Missing Person*, Jussawalla "gives voice to the fragmented life of a protagonist who effectively has nowhere to go but within and is effectively forced to piece together a self from the shards of several civilizations"(248). Jussawalla's ambiguous feeling towards the English language was shared by many other postcolonial writers.

The second obstacle that Jussawalla's generation faced was the lack of publication opportunities. Corresponding with several Indian writers in the late 1960s, Jussawalla soon realised that many had to depend on themselves to get their work published:

Professional publishers didn't seem to have been around from the very time they started. The situation now is much worse. The writers – novelists, playwrights, poets – have continued to write. New writers have emerged. But new publishers haven't. No publisher, that is, who has been willing to keep pace with the quality and quantity of the work. It's the writers themselves who've had to take this risk, venturing into a field about which they know nothing but must, of necessity, learn. (Cited in Pinto 234)

After returning to India in 1970, Jussawalla co-founded the influential poetry publishing house Clearing House in Bombay, with Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and others. He saw the press as a way to bypass irresponsible publishers who closed their door to Indian poetry in English. This publishing work has contributed to Jussawalla's international reputation (Cornell, a university at the forefront of postcolonial studies, has the archive of Jussawalla and Mehrotra). As a poet-turned-publisher, Adil Jussawalla has a trajectory similar to that of Michael Schmidt.

There is another common point between the two men: both were influenced by literary modernism and tried to find new audiences for the movement. Modernism has often been viewed as a European and American product, transnational only insofar as many modernist artists and writers lived outside their countries of origin. However, the past two decades have seen an expansion of scholarship beyond the period of high modernism (1910–1930), and towards non-Western countries. Jussawalla's poetry “voices typical Modernist angst,” notes A. J. Thomas. “Dark irony, images of a shattered mirror, decentred forms and a general sense of hopelessness and despair” pervade these poems (230). This analysis certainly applies to the texts published in *Carcanet* magazine. With Clearing House press, Jussawalla brought modernism to India—publishing the works of leading figures such as Gieve Patel, Dilip Chitre and Arun Kolatkar.<sup>14</sup>

Like the modernist periodicals of the 1910s and 1920s, *Carcanet* magazine played a pioneering role in discovering and sponsoring the new literature. In their 1947 study of little magazines, Frederick Hoffman et al. describe these publications as the “advance guard.” In contrast, large publishing houses are the “rear guard” whose editors “will accept a writer only after the advance guard has proved that he is, or can be, commercially profitable” (3). It is true that large publishers did not discover James

<sup>14</sup> See Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India*.

Joyce or Gertrude Stein. They waited until these difficult writers had accumulated enough social capital and celebrity to open up new markets for their difficult texts.

Similarly, post-war commercial publishers waited a long time to publish ethnically diverse authors writing in English. Jussawalla's first collection of poems had already been published by a small press in Calcutta when he started contributing to literary magazines based in Britain and the United States (*Carcanet*, Benoit Poetry Journal). These periodicals opened the door to more mainstream publishing opportunities. Shortly after his poems appeared in *Carcanet* magazine, Jussawalla started working with Penguin to edit an anthology of Indian writing. To be published in an Oxbridge little magazine was a step towards recognition as a serious Anglophone poet, on an equal footing with English-born writers. Jussawalla was not the only Indian writer associated with *Carcanet* magazine who later collaborated with commercial publishers. *New Writing in India* appeared in 1974, two years before Dhondy's collection of short stories *East End at Your Feet*, published by Macmillan.

Born in 1944 in a Parsi family, Farrukh Dhondy studied at Poona University in India before getting a scholarship to read English at Cambridge. With Diane Troy at Oxford, he brought new life into the declining *Carcanet* magazine. After graduation, he worked as a teacher before publishing several books on the experience of young adults in Britain's ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. From 1984 to 1997, he was Commissioning Editor in charge of Multicultural Programming for Channel 4 TV. As a chronicler of British multicultural experiment, Dhondy has been described as a prominent figure in Britain's "alternative establishment" of the 1970s and 1980s (Rosen).

The Jussawalla archive at Cornell includes correspondence with Dhondy and Adi Katrak, who contributed to the Winter 1966 and Summer 1967 issues. The Jussawalla-Dhondy-Katrak group was completed by another Indian student, Ferishid Bharucha, who designed *Carcanet* 4. Like Dhondy, Bharucha was born in Poona, India, before moving to Britain to pursue his studies. In 1971, he settled in France, where he became known as a specialist in US comics through his involvement in various publishing enterprises—including large-circulation magazines such as *L'Écho des savanes*. In 1995, he founded his own press, Éditions USA, to publish comic books by American authors. Indian-born contributors to *Carcanet* magazine shared at least one common point: they did not stay in a little magazine ghetto. They used this experience

as a step towards a larger audience, like successful modernist writers and artists had done before them.

*Carcanet 5* included works by Indian writers, but also a poem by Edward Brathwaite, a 37-year-old who had studied at Pembroke College, Cambridge. Originally from Barbados, Brathwaite often wrote about the experience of displacement, loss and suffering. His *Carcanet* poem, “Robin,” focuses on a dead bird caught on an electric line:

Caught in her flights’ trans-  
 Actions: power-  
 Less breast  
 Along the power  
 Line’s strength.

Opposing nature and technology, the poem presents migration as inherently dangerous, a power game that the migrant is bound to lose (19–20).

Shortly before the publication of *Carcanet 5* in Summer 1967, Oxford University Press published Brathwaite’s first collection of poems, *Rights of Passage*, about a West Indian’s move to London and New York and home again. References to slavery gave historical depth to the volume, conceived as the first of a trilogy. The book was a Poetry Book Society recommendation and was widely reviewed. In the *Sunday Times*, Christopher Ricks praised the ambition and “direct intensity” of the collection and situated it in the long history of modernism: “Not only does it marry simplicities of rhythm to some of T. S. Eliot’s experiments with unpatterned verse, it makes use of very subtle rhyming and punning” (27). Three months later, in June 1967, the *Sunday Times* published Brathwaite’s poem “The Cat,” about a feline playing with mice: “Untriumphant lazily rubb-/ Ing the soft fur of home” (52). Migrating was a source of danger, and home was not a safe haven.

Endorsed by emerging and established publishing institutions, Brathwaite’s work attracted the attention of the Arts Council. In late 1967, he was awarded a bursary of £1,200 (the novelist Jean Rhys received the same amount). Brathwaite went on to win numerous honours and fellowships from the Fulbright Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation. He has taught at Harvard University, the University of the West Indies, and New York University. Now a major voice in the Caribbean literary canon, Brathwaite benefited from the

support of *Carcanet* magazine when he was still a relatively unknown writer.

Although *Carcanet* 4 and 5 did not lead to the creation of a coherent literary movement, the magazine fostered close relationships between contributors. Several names appeared in both issues, including Adi Katrak, Peter Jay, John Birtwhistle, as well as the co-editors Farrukh Dhondy and Diane Troy. Only Jay and Birtwhistle continued to contribute to the magazine following its transfer to Michael Schmidt in late 1967. His editorship of the magazine was initially characterised by a focus on young white males, and a move from little magazine to small press.

### 1967–1970: FROM LITTLE MAGAZINE TO SMALL PRESS

In 1972, Schmidt published an essay on recent British poetry by women in a volume co-edited with Grevel Lindop. Two years before, the first National Women's Liberation Conference at Ruskin College, Oxford, had offered a forum to discuss the challenges facing women and to prepare a series of demands. The prominent feminist magazine *Spare Rib* was launched in 1972. It is in this context that Schmidt decided to publish the piece under a female pseudonym (Margaret Byers). In short, he shared his own opinion on women poets while hiding behind a female persona. Explaining his stratagem to Lindop, Schmidt expressed contentment with this "rather neat little essay,"<sup>15</sup> suitably entitled "Cautious Vision."

In this essay, Schmidt noted the lack of gender diversity in poetry publishing: "I am always disappointed to see how few women are included in anthologies as they appear." To explain this neglect, Schmidt pointed out that the best contemporary women poets "constitute a sort of a group" with common characteristics—including "background, themes, formal preoccupations, aesthetic frames of reference, social class." Limited by their middle-class condition, these poets lacked the ability to see beyond their own personal lives as "teacher, housewife, invalid." Clustered in metropolitan centres and university towns, they could not contribute to the growth of regional literatures: "No female spawn have [sic] been reported in the swamps of Liverpool or the slow waters of Tyne." Deriving their inspiration from humdrum realities, their poetry had "a well-educated aesthetic quality" but lacked variety (Byers 74–84).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Schmidt to Grevel Lindop, Jan. 29, 1972, Grevel Lindop papers, JRL.

Overall, Schmidt edited seven issues of *Carcenet* (out of a total of twelve), with a focus on young Oxford men—including Peter Jay, Grevel Lindop, and Gareth Reeves, who co-edited the eleventh issue in Winter 1969–1970. The underrepresentation of women contributors in *Carcenet* magazine did not start with Schmidt’s editorship. *Carcenet* 3, 4 and 5 did not feature any texts by women. Surprisingly, the gender diversity did not improve during Diane Troy’s tenure as co-editor. When Schmidt took up the magazine, the percentage of women contributors reached an average of around 15%, with a peak at 31% for *Carcenet* 10 (Autumn 1969), an issue guest-edited by Elizabeth Jennings.

Schmidt’s generation often viewed women as weaker competitors in the literary field (if they were competitors at all). Socialised in a male-only environment at a time when there were only a couple of colleges for women, the original team of *Carcenet* magazine did not pay much attention to gender diversity. This bias was also shared by men from ethnic minorities. Adil Jussawalla included only three female writers in his anthology of forty representatives of *New Writing in India*. This generation also tended to reduce women to their physical attractiveness. For example, Garfitt told me about Sally Purcell’s pleasant appearance (she had long straight blond hair) and liberated sex life.<sup>16</sup>

Sally Purcell was the only woman poet who appeared in nearly all the *Carcenet* issues from 1967 to the demise of the magazine in 1970. Born in 1944 in a working-class family, she was the first girl at her school to win a scholarship to Oxford, where she studied Medieval and Modern French literature at Lady Margaret Hall. She was involved with the university’s Poetry Society and made valuable contacts there—including Peter Jay who launched the little magazine *New Measure* before creating Anvil Press. Purcell completed her first degree in 1966, but she remained in Oxford to do an MA thesis and thereafter rarely left the city. She scraped a living doing odd jobs—working in a pub, typing theses, copyediting books. “Careless of her material well-being and wholly without self-pity, she never complained of her breadline conditions,” wrote Jay (“Obituary: Sally Purcell”).

Purcell’s poems show her fascination for the writers of medieval France, Italy and the early Renaissance, as well as her deep knowledge of the classics. Her first poem in *Carcenet* 6 (Winter 1967–1968) is dedicated

<sup>16</sup> Garfitt, Interview with author, Aug. 16, 2018.

to the French scholar Étienne Dolet (1509–1546), who was convicted of heresy, strangled and burned at the place Maubert in Paris. In the same issue, a short notice announced the forthcoming publication of a collection of Purcell's poems in the new Anvil Press series. This pamphlet, *The Devil's Dancing Hour*, was followed by the publication of *Provençal Poems*, one of the first booklets published by Carcanet Press.

A total of eight Carcanet booklets appeared in 1969—including titles by Schmidt's partner Peter Jones, his friends and fellow students Grevel Lindop, Gareth Reeves and Ishan Kapur (a 21-year-old Indian poet who was then studying at Pembroke College, Oxford). The collected poems of Robert Needham—an Oxford contemporary who committed suicide at the age of 20—was also published in this series, alongside Schmidt's own poems, *Black Buildings*. All books were sold for 7 s.

Why did Michael Schmidt decide to transform *Carcanet* magazine into a fully-fledged publishing enterprise? This transformation did not happen overnight, but several factors pushed Schmidt to launch the series of booklets which then developed into a small press. The first factor was the model set up by T. S. Eliot, perhaps the most famous poet-turned-publisher. Schmidt was in New York on 5 January 1965—the day the writer's death was announced. He remembered buying the newspaper—the *Times*—which had Eliot's death on the front page.<sup>17</sup> In Schmidt's narration, Eliot's extraordinary talent was intertwined with his celebrity. After one year spent at Christ's Hospital (a prestigious public school in Sussex), Schmidt went to Harvard in Autumn 1966. As a young student, Schmidt had not yet decided that he wanted to be a publisher, but he knew that he wanted to emulate the great modernist poet. Eliot had contributed to and was on the editorial board of the *Harvard Advocate*, and Schmidt decided to apply. After being rejected, he set up his own magazine called the *Island* which only ran for three issues. Following the *Island's* disappearance, Schmidt became aware that a little magazine was a fragile endeavour. One way to avoid failure was to change the business model from magazine to press—a model that the modernist patron Harriet Weaver Shaw had pioneered with the *Egoist* in the early twentieth century.

<sup>17</sup> Schmidt, Interview with author, Nov. 24, 2015.

The promise of financial rewards was the second factor that convinced Schmidt to launch the booklets. An advertisement inserted in the magazine explained that the series would be funded by subscription and patronage. In 1969, subscription to the entire series was 42 s or \$8.00. Patrons were asked to pay £8 or \$20.00 for signed and numbered editions of each pamphlet as it appeared, as well as copies of *Carc Janet* magazines. This system of patronage would allow young poets “an outlet for their work.”<sup>18</sup> Once again, Schmidt was turning towards the modernist precedent to design a business model that would ensure the survival of his enterprise and maximise the aura of his new press. Between 1919 and 1923, books published by Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press were available by subscription, and A list subscribers would sometimes receive signed copies. In the United States, the signed copies of Woolf’s *Orlando* published by Crosby Gaige were also numbered, to distinguish the book from mass-produced editions. Likewise, the print run of each Carcanet booklet was limited to 300 to 500 copies. “We had over 160 subscribers to the first series of seven pamphlets,” wrote Schmidt. “They were widely and positively reviewed and did so well we decided on a second and then a third series” (“Introduction” xxv).

The Carcanet pamphlets were also available individually from bookstores in Oxford (Blackwell’s, Museum of Modern Art, Turl Cash Bookshop), London, Brighton, Bristol, and Manchester. To display his publications, Schmidt created special racks, which were long and narrow. He used to cycle to the Oxford bookshops with the racks sticking out. At Blackwell’s Bookshop, “those racks survived for two decades, though they were used for other publishers’ produce later on” (“Introduction” xxiv). The racks attracted the attention of customers and promoted the series as a whole. This was not a new idea: in the interwar period, the Modern Library (an American series of reprints) was displayed on racks that encouraged readers to collect all the books and build their own libraries.<sup>19</sup>

The third factor that convinced Schmidt to publish booklets was the model set by Peter Jay. Born in 1945, Jay read Classics and English at Oxford, where he founded the poetry magazine *New Measure*. Ten issues appeared between 1965 and 1969. From the start, *New Measure*

<sup>18</sup> Carcanet subscription leaflet, 1969, British Library.

<sup>19</sup> See Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon*.

was a much more ambitious magazine than *Carcenet*. It was priced at 6 shillings (versus 2 to 3 shillings for *Carcenet*) and had an average of 68 pages (38 pages for *Carcenet*). At the time when Schmidt was still in high school, Jay was already publishing noteworthy poets including Gavin Bantock, Christopher Middleton and Sally Purcell. After helping to create *Carcenet* magazine, Richard Burns contributed to *New Measure* 4 and 5. The movements between the two periodicals went both ways. Jay started contributing to *Carcenet* magazine in Winter 1966, when the magazine was co-edited by Troy and Dhondy.

The two magazines became increasingly linked together after Schmidt took over *Carcenet* in late 1967. Purcell published texts in *New Measure* 2 and 9, and in nearly all the *Carcenet* issues edited by Schmidt. Gareth Reeves, who contributed to five *Carcenet* issues, was also published in *New Measure* 10. Schmidt himself developed a good working relationship with Jay, who accepted his first book (*Flower and Song: Poems of the Aztec Peoples*). He also contributed to *New Measure* 9, a special issue dedicated to the new Anvil Press.

In 1968, Jay announced that he would soon publish booklets, which had two objectives: to showcase “small collections of verse by new poets;” and to publish works “which are too short for standard book publication.”<sup>20</sup> The six first booklets featured poets that Jay had discovered through *New Measure*: Purcell, Bantock, Marcus Cumberlege, Peter Levi, Lavinia Mansel and W. G. Sheperd.

Jay also prepared an ambitious programme of expansion. He decided to publish hardbacks, including *First Born*—a collection of poems by Louise Glück, a 25-year-old American poet who had recently been awarded a Rockefeller grant. He also enlisted a US distributor, Unicorn Press in Santa Barbara, which agreed to handle 200 copies of each publication. And he applied for an Arts Council grant to support the development of his press.<sup>21</sup> In June 1969, the Arts Council awarded Anvil Press its first grant of £400. Jay, who was now running his press full-time, used the money to get books out on schedule and to improve distribution.

<sup>20</sup> Anvil Press Catalogue, 1968, ACGB/62/38 Anvil Press Poetry, Arts Council Archive, Victoria & Albert museum, London (hereafter referred to as V&A).

<sup>21</sup> Peter Jay, Grant Application, 1969–1970, ACGB/62/38 Anvil Press Poetry, Arts Council Archive, V&A.

After imitating Jay's idea to issue booklets, Schmidt decided that he, too, should apply for an Arts Council grant. In a prospective letter dated 13 December 1969, he wrote: "For three years the magazine *Carcanet* has been the sole regular poetry magazine at Oxford University."<sup>22</sup> Schmidt said nothing of *New Measure*: although it was started in Oxford, the last issues (7 to 10) were edited from Northwood in Middlesex. Having established his credentials as the sole literary leader in Oxford, Schmidt informed the Arts Council that his ambitions were national and international. *Carcanet* magazine published works from all over Britain, but also the United States. After raising money for a first series of pamphlets through subscription, the objective was now to obtain financial assistance for a second series and for the magazine.

In his letter of 18 December 1969, Charles Osborne, the Assistant Literature Director of the Arts Council, initially told Schmidt that there was no possibility of a grant at the present time. "Our allocation for magazines is overspent, and the Literature Panel intends, in any case, to review its policy towards magazines early in the New Year."<sup>23</sup> One month later, Osborne had a change of mind following the intervention of his boss Eric W. White. He asked Schmidt for the details of costs for the second booklet series, and an estimate of income from sales.<sup>24</sup> A grant of £150 towards the cost of *Carcanet*'s general activities was awarded a few months later.<sup>25</sup> This award was the first of a series of grants that enabled the expansion of *Carcanet*, from small-scale student magazine to leading poetry publisher.

## CONCLUSION

If *Carcanet* magazine was a site of struggle between various players, it is clear that Oxford won over the Cambridge literary set, and that the British/ European influences prevailed over postcolonial groups. Under

<sup>22</sup> Schmidt to Arts Council, Dec. 13, 1969, ACGB/62/40 *Carcanet* Press, Arts Council Archive, V&A.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Osborne to Schmidt, Dec. 18, 1969, ACGB/62/40 *Carcanet* Press, Arts Council Archive, V&A.

<sup>24</sup> Osborne to Schmidt, Jan. 27, 1970, ACGB/62/40 *Carcanet* Press, Arts Council Archive, V&A.

<sup>25</sup> Arts Council to Schmidt, July 8, 1970, ACGB/62/40 *Carcanet* Press, Arts Council Archive, V&A.

the impulse of Michael Schmidt, the magazine morphed into a fully-fledged press that issued a series of seven booklets. In 1969 and 1970, the two enterprises (the magazine and the press) co-existed, before the disappearance of the magazine in Summer 1970. Schmidt understood that the survival of his press depended heavily on pleasing the Arts Council and its Director. Why did Eric White decide to help Schmidt and his new press? Why did the Literature Director of the Arts Council start a correspondence with a 22-year-old Oxford student? As we will see in the next chapter, White and Schmidt bonded over their shared interest in H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)—a modernist poet that was neglected in the 1960s. It was in large part thanks to Carcanet Press, with funding from the Arts Council, that H. D. emerged from oblivion in the UK.

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## Turning H. D. into a Classic: The Role of Carcanet Press

Michael Schmidt played an important role in re-discovering the work of neglected women writers. He was determined to become the publisher of the modernist writer H. D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886–1961) whose work was being rediscovered in the United States. Schmidt enlisted the help of Eric Walter White, the Literature Director of the Arts Council, who had been a friend of H. D. Thanks to White, Schmidt managed to convince the American professor Norman Holmes Pearson—H. D.’s agent and literary executor—to sell the rights to *Tribute to Freud*, that Carcanet published in 1971. This publication was followed by other H. D. titles: *Hermetic Definition* (1972), *Trilogy* (1973), *End to Torment: A Memoir of Ezra Pound* (1980), *Hedylus* (1980), *Collected Poems* (1984) and *Helen in Egypt* (1985).

This chapter shows that Carcanet Press constructed an image of H. D. not as a feminist trailblazer, but as a rigorous writer dedicated to poetic form and tradition. With the Arts-Council-funded publication of H. D.’s work, Carcanet Press opened the door to the publication of other neglected modernist texts by Wyndham Lewis and Ford Madox Ford. Rather than being presented as a female writer neglected by a patriarchal literary establishment, H. D. was tied to a more conservative reading of modernism—a movement intertwined with controversial figures (from Ezra Pound to Wyndham Lewis).

Section “[Eric Walter White: Friend and Supporter of H. D.](#)” looks at the relationship between Eric Walter White and H. D., and at his effort to revive interest in her work in the 1960s, at the time when her books were mostly out of print. Section “[Carcanet: Saving H. D. from Oblivion](#)” examines the role that Carcanet Press played in turning H. D. into a classic. However, Carcanet’s monopoly on H. D.’s work was challenged in the 1980s, at the time when women’s studies university courses contributed to a growing market for women poetry. Virago and other publishers presented H. D. as a radical feminist, in contrast to the image that Carcanet had conveyed—as a neglected classic anchored in a long poetic tradition.

### ERIC WALTER WHITE: FRIEND AND SUPPORTER OF H. D.

Eric Walter White had met H. D. in Berlin in December 1931, when she visited the flat of the married couple Lotte Reiniger and Carl Koch.<sup>1</sup> The twenty-six-year-old White had written a book on Reiniger, who was already well known as a film director and pioneer of silhouette animation. *Walking Shadows: An Essay on Lotte Reiniger’s Silhouette Films* was published by the Hogarth Press in 1930. Having published three books with Virginia Woolf’s press in just two years, White was getting established as a leading commentator on the modernist movement, with particular expertise on music and film. He also wrote poetry and published it in small-scale venues (little magazines and small presses). As his friendship with H. D. developed, he found himself becoming increasingly attracted by her poems. He particularly liked some of her early lyrics, and he would later relish her translation of the *Ion* of Euripides, and her trilogy of wartime poems.<sup>2</sup>

H. D., who was nineteen years older than White, acted as a mentor, suggesting a possible publisher for his poetry. “Poems. Yes. So difficult to find the right publisher,” she wrote in March 1932, before explaining that her involvement with the London firm Chatto & Windus had largely been facilitated by her former husband, Richard Aldington (who was published by Chatto).<sup>3</sup> H. D. offered to recommend White’s poetry to a Chatto

<sup>1</sup> Eric White, Notes, nd, Box 50, EWW, HRC.

<sup>2</sup> White, Diary, Oct. 5, 1970, Box 41, Folder 11, EWW, HRC.

<sup>3</sup> H. D. to White, March 6, 1932, Box 50, EWW, HRC.

editor. Writing in his diary nearly four decades later, White regretted that his career as a poet had never taken off: “nothing very exciting ... in my own poetry. Two collections of short pieces in the course of nearly 40 years. *The Room* published by The High House Press, Shaftesbury, in 1929. And *A Tarot Deal* published by the Scorpion Press in [1962].”<sup>4</sup>

Although White never had an established reputation as a poet, he played an important role in supporting other poets, and in reviving interest in H. D.’s work. In the immediate post—Second World War period, H. D.’s reputation had collapsed: while T. S. Eliot was celebrated as a literary lion, H. D. was largely neglected. Feminist scholars have interpreted this marginalisation as the price she had to pay for her gender: “as woman and artist, she was not taken seriously by mainstream scholars establishing the canon,” writes Caroline Zilboorg (“Hilda Doolittle”). Other scholars have pointed out that H. D. was not as productive and ambitious as her contemporaries. “From 1916 until her death in 1961, H. D. published only forty-three articles – less than one per year,” notes Lawrence Rainey before adding: “she felt little impetus to engage in an active or genuine dialogue with her contemporaries” (155).

Eric White was determined to use his prominent position at the Arts Council, and his extensive network of contacts, to rescue H. D.’s work from oblivion. In 1960, he wrote to Oxford University Press to encourage them to publish H. D.’s *Trilogy*.<sup>5</sup> He emphasised the link with Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and insisted that the trilogy should not be an expensive limited edition since the original poems had been published at a cheap price. However, OUP rejected White’s request due to commercial failure of H. D.’s works: “We had to waste 500, 1200 and 500 respectively of *Walls do not Fall*, *Tribute to the Angel* and *The Flowering of the Rod*.”<sup>6</sup>

Writing to Norman Holmes Pearson, White complained that although OUP had remaindered H. D.’s work, her books were becoming so rare that “second-hand copies fetch about two guineas today as against the published price of 3 s. 6d.”<sup>7</sup> His own feeling was that it would be best to avoid a limited edition and to try to persuade a London publisher—perhaps Deutsch or Faber—to issue an ordinary edition at a reasonable

<sup>4</sup> White, Diary, Oct. 5, 1970, Box 41, Folder 11, EWW, HRC.

<sup>5</sup> White to John Bell [Oxford University Press], May 26, 1960, Box 13, EWW, HRC.

<sup>6</sup> Bell to White, June 3, 1960, Box 13, EWW, HRC.

<sup>7</sup> White to Norman Holmes Pearson, June 15, 1960, Box 13, EWW, HRC.

price. Eventually, none of the larger London firms were willing to issue H. D.'s work. Only the new Carcanet Press, with financial help from the Arts Council, took the risk of publishing a woman poet who had been largely forgotten.

### CARCANET: SAVING H. D. FROM OBLIVION

On 12 December 1969, Michael Schmidt wrote directly to the Arts Council Literature Director on the recommendation of Jon Stallworthy (whose book *Root and Branch* had recently been reviewed in *Carcanet* magazine 9).<sup>8</sup> Through Stallworthy, Schmidt had heard that Eric White had been a friend of H. D. He explained that he was setting up a press and he wanted to issue a selection of H. D.'s prose and poetry, with an introduction by Peter Jones. He also asked White for information concerning the literary executors of the modernist poet.

Although Carcanet could only offer meagre royalties to the literary executors, Schmidt hoped they would nevertheless accept his offer as a first step in reintroducing the work of an important and neglected figure:

The neglect of H. D. in Britain seems a shame. Our small book, which would be paper-back, could be on a small scale only (we visualize 1,000 copies) – but it might serve to reawaken interest in her, and perhaps spark off larger publishers to reissue her work. There is also a not small demand for her poems already.<sup>9</sup>

The project of reintroducing H. D. in Britain came at a perfect time. Indeed, by the late 1960s, the rise of the women's movement led to renewed interest in H. D.'s work. In Autumn 1969, the American scholarly journal *Contemporary Literature* published a special issue "to examine and reevaluate a writer who, in our opinion, is of much greater significance than has commonly been supposed" (Dembo 433). Norman Holmes Pearson played a major role in shaping her republication and reception in the United States and abroad. One of the first academics to

<sup>8</sup> Schmidt to White, Dec. 12, 1969, ACGB/62/40 Carcanet Press, Arts Council Archive, V&A.

<sup>9</sup> Schmidt to White, Dec. 12, 1969, ACGB/62/40 Carcanet Press, Arts Council Archive, V&A.

teach literary modernism in the Ivy League, Pearson encouraged his institution to collect the archives of female American modernists, including Gertrude Stein. After the Second World War, he became H. D.'s agent and literary executor in the United States, working tirelessly to establish her as a major poet. For example, his long interview on H. D. appeared as the first essay in the 1969 special issue of *Contemporary Literature*.

Why did Michael Schmidt become interested in H. D.? At that time, he was living with Peter Jones, who was writing imagist-inspired poetry and doing research on H. D. The term Imagism often appeared in *Carcanet* magazine. For instance, the Summer 1969 issue reassured readers and prospective contributors that “none of the poets included is a doctrinaire imagist, nor is selection made on any ideological basis.”<sup>10</sup> Schmidt sensed that there was a market for H. D.'s work—and an opportunity to transform *Carcanet* magazine into a small press on the modernist model.

Eric White responded enthusiastically to Schmidt's suggestion. He arranged to have lunch with Schmidt in January 1970 and was so impressed by the young man's “enthusiasm and judgement” that he immediately wrote to Norman Holmes Pearson.<sup>11</sup> He also lent Schmidt a copy of *Tribute to Freud*, which had become extremely rare. Shortly after, Holmes gave *Carcanet* permission to use H. D.'s copyrighted material.

White helped *Carcanet* secure an Arts Council grant and copyright permissions for H. D.'s work, and he also advanced Schmidt's own career as a poet. In February 1970, he helped with the submission of poems to the Poetry Book Society and arranged for *Carcanet* to be added to the Society's mailing list. As Schmidt was anxious to find a job after graduating from Oxford, White even offered to meet with him again to discuss possible options. Without a good business idea, Schmidt would probably not have caught the attention of the Arts Council Literature Director. A core talent of the young publisher was his ability to use other people's ideas, and to drive the projects to completion. He did not come up with the idea of reissuing H. D.'s work (Peter Jones did),<sup>12</sup> but he had the drive, energy and focus that Jones lacked. Likewise, none of the

<sup>10</sup> Editorial Note, *Carcanet* magazine, Summer 1969.

<sup>11</sup> White to Pearson, Jan. 30, 1970, ACGB/62/40 *Carcanet* Press, Arts Council Archive, V&A.

<sup>12</sup> Schmidt, Interview with author, Nov. 24, 2015. See also Sisson (“H. D.”).

original *Carcenet* magazine team and contributors had Schmidt's ambition when it came to the magazine. They did not *own* the project, they just contributed to one or two issues and moved on with their lives. No wonder that Schmidt's narrative has become dominant. There was no challenger to tell an alternative story, no one to say: by the way, *Carcenet* magazine was not such an insignificant project.

Since Eric White had been a friend of H. D. and was eager to help a project of rediscovery, Schmidt decided to push his advantage. In his next grant application, submitted in December 1970, he explained his project "to bring the work of neglected poets" including Elizabeth Daryush and Charlotte Mew "back into circulation through judicious selections and collections."<sup>13</sup> In the next two years, Schmidt continued to consolidate his links with the Arts Council before moving the press from Oxford to Manchester and establishing *Carcenet* as a leading poetry publisher.

*Carcenet* Press positioned H. D. as a modern classic, at the crossroads between tradition and modernity. Modernist writers are often associated with the violent destruction of artistic and social forms—think of Filippo Marinetti and the Futurists, who wanted to "demolish museums and libraries" (Joll 182). H. D. was not as outspoken as Marinetti, but her work and her personal life shows a similar attempt to break free from established norms. Her early poetry in the anthology *Des Imagistes* (1914) was strikingly new and experimental. In 1919, she left her husband Richard Aldington to start a long relationship with Winifred Ellerman (known as Bryher), the daughter of British shipping magnate Sir John Ellerman. Encouraged by Bryer, H. D. underwent periods of analysis with Sigmund Freud in 1933 and 1934 (Zilboorg). She developed an identity that was truly modern in its embrace of artistic change, its defiance of conventional gender roles and its fascination for the subconscious.

With the renewed attention to modernism and the advent of the women's movement in the 1960s, H. D. enjoyed a revival of interest. Her experimental literary style, her bisexual identity and her interest in psychoanalysis attracted scholars, cultural radicals and feminists. But this is not the primary market that *Carcenet* targeted. Instead, the publisher positioned H. D. as a rigorous writer who combined tradition and modernity. Strongly influenced by the Classics, she was nevertheless immersed in

<sup>13</sup> Schmidt to Arts Council, Dec. 30, 1970, ACGB/62/40 *Carcenet* Press, Arts Council Archive, V&A.

twentieth-century movements. For Carcanet, the modernist poet could be of interest to a mainstream market of readers interested not only in literature but also history and psychology. In a letter to the London Clinic of Psychoanalysis, Schmidt wrote: “this is our first book which is of wider than literary interest.”<sup>14</sup> And in 1973, two years after the publication of *Tribute to Freud*, Schmidt wrote to Frederick Martin of New Directions (an independent press which published H. D.’s work in the US): “Initially the market was hirsute and ‘metaphysical,’ but the book has gained in respectability and cruises on in sales so that we are contemplating reissuing it.”<sup>15</sup>

A key ally in the H. D. revival, Eric W. White helped Carcanet enlist the support of established institutions—from the Arts Council to the BBC. In a letter to suggest a radio programme to celebrate the publication of *Tribute to Freud*, White told the story of his friendship with H. D.:

I first met H. D. in Berlin in December 1931, and I saw a fair amount of her during the next few years while I was living and working in Geneva and she was at the other end of the lake. There was a gap in our friendship during the war; and in the 50s I visited her several times when she was living in a clinic just outside Geneva; and we corresponded frequently.<sup>16</sup>

Eric White also discussed the idea of the BBC radio programme with Bryher when she visited him in July 1971, and she said she would be quite prepared to take part if invited.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on his professional status and network of distinguished contacts, White used—in Pierre Bourdieu’s words—his “power to consecrate” to “win assent” and to present H. D. as a major writer who had been unjustly neglected (42).

The support of the Arts Council Literature Director benefited Carcanet at several levels: not only did the young publishing house receive financial help, but it also got reviews in prestigious magazines and newspapers. Not all of these reviews were positive, however. Shortly after the publication of the *Trilogy*, Robert Nye wrote in the *Times*: “A blitz of apocalyptic imagery blurs the Hellenic style and the most that can be said

<sup>14</sup> Schmidt to Helen Boxall (London Clinic of Psychoanalysis), May 25, 1971, CPA 2/1/55, JRL.

<sup>15</sup> Schmidt to Frederick Martin (New Directions), Apr. 20, 1973, CPA 2/3/100, JRL.

<sup>16</sup> White to George MacBeth (BBC), Nov. 8, 1971, CPA 3/50, JRL.

<sup>17</sup> White to Michael Schmidt, July 29, 1971, CPA 2/1/55, JRL.

of these effusions is that they are not as bad as Edith Sitwell's *Still Falls the Rain*, with which rhetoric they deserve to be compared." For Nye, the two women poets had failed to convey the dramatic events of World War II in a restrained manner. While Sitwell's poems compared the sufferings of Londoners during air raids to the martyrdom of Christ, H. D. was "translating bombs into angels"—an imagery that Nye described as "too much" (10). The *Times* review thus drew on deep-seated associations between female poets and over-emotional rhetoric.

In a letter to Norman Holmes Pearson, Michael Schmidt wrote that he had hopes that the *Guardian* would be more supportive. He was also waiting for a solo review in the *Times Literary Supplement* "though their new man [Peter] Porter is ill-disposed towards Carcanet."<sup>18</sup> Schmidt was right to fear the worst. In March 1974, the poet and critic Geoffrey Grigson wrote an unsigned review in the *TLS*:

It is not that these poems are ludicrous, only that they are, as poems, colourless, tasteless, insensitive, unearth, indefinite, bare, and useless. They are only length and wordage. As for reviving them, this is a free world, if some publisher has money to spend, or waste; and it is a good thing, certainly, to look through the discards of the century to see if they haven't, by any chance, been unjustly discarded. There should be responsibility in resurrection, all the same. Digging up the worthless poems and then promulgating them as poems of "a range of language and experience, accessible only to a major poet" – it is that which is ludicrous. It gets in the way. (267)

Here, Grigson questioned the entire rationale behind Carcanet's programme of rediscovery: what was the point of rediscovering a second-rate poet? And why spend money (particularly taxpayers' money) on a useless programme?

Unsurprisingly, Michael Schmidt found this review annoying, but he received support from fellow *PN* editor Charles Sisson. "Really the worst thing in it is the attack on you as a publisher," Sisson wrote, "with (particularly) the bit about 'money to waste,' which suggests someone who knows too much about the Arts Council and is perhaps jealous."<sup>19</sup> Here, Sisson suggested that the support from Eric White had perhaps backfired:

<sup>18</sup> Schmidt to Pearson, Dec. 29, 1973, CPA 2/1/55, JRL.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Sisson to Schmidt, Mar. 18, 1974, CPA 4-2, Box 2, JRL.

it had opened up opportunities for the young press, but it had also stirred up jealousy in the literary field. In a letter to the *TLS*, Sisson criticised the reviewer. “H. D. is not a major writer, but she is a genuine one,” Sisson declared. *TLS* readers were thus encouraged to make their own opinion on the poet by reading the Carcanet editions. In a 1975 review of H. D.’s work in *PN Review*, C. H. Sisson wrote that “the twentieth century is not a happy time for a writer who has formal gifts but has to seek his material” (“H. D.”). In this view, H. D. was a formally rigorous poet that had been unjustly neglected by readers in search of immediate satisfaction and sensational content.

While first editions of modernist texts had often appeared in expensive limited editions, Carcanet in the UK and New Directions in the US were instrumental in opening up a large market for H. D.’s work. Their relatively cheap editions appealed particularly to scholars and students, at a time of rising interest in alternative modernist voices. These books allowed a new generation of women academics to (re)discover H. D., and to position her as a counterpart to the “men of 1914” (T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis).<sup>20</sup> In 1983, the *New York Times* published an article on H. D. by the feminist scholar Sandra Gilbert. Shortly after, Griselda Ohannessian of New Directions wrote to Michael Schmidt:

I’d like to know where [Gilbert] and her academic colleagues who are making careers for themselves as H. D. authorities would be, if ND [New Directions] hadn’t brought so much into print and kept it so despite not exactly stellar sales. Huff, huff...<sup>21</sup>

The same could be said for the British market, replied Schmidt. “Credit is seldom given to publishers, even when they have done the kind of work you and Carcanet have done for H. D.”<sup>22</sup>

In the mid-1980s, H. D.’s *Collected Poems* was chosen as a set text for a women literature course at Oxford.<sup>23</sup> This was a radical departure from

<sup>20</sup> Biographical studies on H. D. include Robinson; Guest; Zilboorg (ed.). Important critical studies include Friedman; DuPlessis; Kloepfer; Burnett; Hollenberg. Significant collections of essays include King (ed.); Friedman and DuPlessis (eds).

<sup>21</sup> Griselda Ohannessian to Schmidt, Aug. 8, 1983, CPA 3/267, JRL.

<sup>22</sup> Schmidt to Ohannessian, Aug. 30, 1983, CPA 3/267, JRL.

<sup>23</sup> Schmidt to Ohannessian (New Directions), March 6, 1984, CPA 3/267, JRL.

the kind of audience that H. D. had encountered. Supported by a wealthy patron, H. D. did not feel the need to publish a lot and engage with critics in the public sphere. As Lawrence Rainey points out, patronage from Bryher “cast H. D. in the role of a coterie poet, one whose writings circulated, like bonbons at a dinner party, among a *cénable* of friends and hangers-on in wealthy Bohemia. Bereft of a genuine public, deprived of critical give-and-take, she wrote against the backdrop of travel between her psychoanalyst in Vienna, Sigmund Freud, and the beaches of Capri and Greece, between the villa overlooking Lake Geneva and the furnished apartment that awaited her in London” (148–149).

Michael Schmidt toyed with the idea of publishing limited editions, targeting a small audience similar to the coterie that had formed H. D.’s readership during her lifetime. In September 1971, he told Norman Holmes Pearson that he saw the limited edition of the war trilogy as “a set of 1,000 copies of each of the sequences, to be attractively boxed.”<sup>24</sup> In July 1972, he added that he wanted to take advantage of the publication of Peter Jones’s Penguin book on Imagism to create further interest in H. D. It was the right time to publish a limited edition of H. D.’s memoirs about her relationship with Ezra Pound, Schmidt thought.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to these expensive editions, Schmidt wanted to publish cheaper books for a larger market. He thus requested permissions to publish *Ion* and the *Choruses* in a popularly-priced edition. “We feel it is particularly important for us to follow up the *Tribute to Freud*, especially as it is avidly awaited, I know, by some of the critics,” Schmidt wrote. “It is the right time to bring the work of H. D. back into British circulation – best of all if we do it at well-timed intervals, filling a gap and creating a demand at the same time.”<sup>26</sup>

This dual strategy of publishing both limited editions and cheap editions did not materialise. Instead, Carcanet—following the example of New Directions—published inexpensive books that targeted, in Lawrence Rainey’s words, “a large new public commanded by the professoriate and the agency of university curricula – a readership quite alien to the limited circle of friends and hangers-on who formed the coterie audience for H. D.’s works during much of her lifetime” (152). Academia offered multiple

<sup>24</sup> Schmidt to Pearson, Sep. 15, 1971, CPA 2/1/55, JRL.

<sup>25</sup> Schmidt to Pearson, July 10, 1972, CPA 2/1/55, JRL.

<sup>26</sup> Schmidt to Pearson, Sep. 15, 1971, CPA 2/1/55, JRL.

opportunities for Carcanet, since H. D.'s books could be selected for courses on the history and practice of psychoanalysis, on women poetry and on literary modernism.

In 1971, *Tribute to Freud* was published simultaneously in hardback (£1.50) and paperback (90p). An advertisement in the *TLS* emphasised the modernist credentials of H. D., "one of the founders of the Imagist movement, with Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington," as well as her relationship with Freud in Vienna.<sup>27</sup> In 1972, Carcanet priced *Hermetic Definition* at £2.20 for the hardback edition, and £1 for the paperback. The following year, the *Trilogy* sold for roughly the same price (£2.50 hardback; £1 paperback) and was advertised as "H. D.'s most important poem, published for the first time on one volume."<sup>28</sup> These modest prices made the books accessible to a relatively large audience. In May 1974, Carcanet had already sold 1,568 copies of the three H. D. books on its catalogue—a number that continued to grow as the books stayed for years on its back list.<sup>29</sup> H. D. became a "long-seller" with steady sales over a long period of time.

As H. D.'s reputation grew in Britain, Carcanet had to defend its monopoly in a very competitive landscape. Threats came first from Faber and then from the newly-created Virago Press. In 1974, New Directions claimed that they had entered into a contract with Faber (Ezra Pound's publisher in Britain) to publish H. D.'s memoirs of Pound, *End to Torment*. Michael Schmidt reacted quickly to this "bombshell."<sup>30</sup> "This book is not Pound's work," he wrote to Frederick Martin at New Directions. "It is H. D.'s work. And we are H. D.'s publishers."<sup>31</sup> He then cleared the issue with the Pound trustees, namely Peter du Sautoy at Faber.

Born in 1912, du Sautoy had been a mentor for Schmidt since the late 1960s, when the young publisher was establishing his small press. "I found that only Peter among the publishers whose counsel I sought was willing to advise, caution, lunch and believe in what I was then attempting," Schmidt recalled. "He had the time and interest to nurture

<sup>27</sup> Ad for Carcanet, *TLS* (Apr. 21, 1972): 450.

<sup>28</sup> Ad for Carcanet, *TLS* (Oct. 12, 1973): 1242.

<sup>29</sup> Schmidt to Eugene Winick, May 15, 1974, CPA 2/1/55, JRL.

<sup>30</sup> Schmidt to Pearson, Aug. 25, 1974, CPA 2/1/55, JRL.

<sup>31</sup> Schmidt to Frederick Martin (New Directions), Aug. 25, 1974.

what could be of no benefit to his firm” (“News & Notes”). In the 1970s, Peter du Sautoy became Faber’s Chairman. As “a long-standing friend of the Press,” the older man recognised that Schmidt had established himself as the publisher of H. D. in Britain.<sup>32</sup> Du Sautoy had absolutely no objection to a Carcanet edition of *End to Torment*. “It had his blessing,” Schmidt said.<sup>33</sup> Having cleared this hurdle thanks to his well-developed network of contacts, Schmidt was finally able to publish the book in 1980.

In 1984, Carcanet published H. D.’s *Collected Poems*—a clear sign that the modernist poet had gained an established place in the literary canon. By the mid-1980s, the new generation of feminist scholars had risen to powerful positions in academia, and courses in women’s studies had developed on both sides of the Atlantic. Sensing that there was a growing market for women modernist poets, the feminist press Virago announced a forthcoming H. D. programme. Schmidt wrote to Ursula Owen at Virago, asking for more information about this programme. He added: “We have had astonishing good luck with the *Collected Poems* and are printing *Tribute to Freud* quite soon.”<sup>34</sup> Schmidt made it clear that Carcanet was the leader in the UK market for H. D.’s books, a position that he had held since the early 1970s. That did not stop Virago from issuing several titles in its Modern Classics series in 1984, after obtaining rights from New Directions: *Bid Me to Live*; *Her* with an afterword by H. D.’s daughter Perdita Schaffner; and *The Gift* with an introduction by the British feminist scholar Diana Collecott. Having made H. D.’s books available to British readers, Carcanet could not in the end prevent other publishers to enter the same market. It lacked the feminist credentials of Virago, and the network of contacts among feminist scholars who could write introductions and consolidate H. D.’s position as an unconventional classic.

Sympathetic reviewers praised Virago’s editions precisely because the press positioned H. D. in relation to feminism. In a *TLS* review, Claire Buck wrote that the three Virago books “reveal that H. D.’s reputation as the quintessential Imagist poet is in some ways a misrepresentation; and highlight, instead, her links with other female writers of the period and with contemporary concerns – particularly psychoanalysis” (“On and

<sup>32</sup> Schmidt to James Laughlin, Aug. 1, 1979, CPA 2/3/121, JRL.

<sup>33</sup> Id.

<sup>34</sup> Schmidt to Ursula Owen, June 6, 1984, CPA 3/7, JRL.

off the Couch”). While Carcanet presented H. D. as a rigorous artist devoted to a long poetic tradition, Virago positioned her as a rebel that had gained her place in the canon through dissent rather than conformity. After writing the preface to the Virago edition of *The Gift*, Diana Collecott went on to publish a book on *H. D. and Saphic Modernism*. On Virago’s catalogue, H. D. gained an edgy image as bisexual trailblazer.

For Carcanet, the rediscovery of H. D. opened the door to the publication of other neglected modernist texts by Wyndham Lewis and Ford Madox Ford. Lewis’s *Poems and Plays* (1979) was followed by *Self-condemned* (1983). And after publishing Ford’s *The Rash Act* (1982), Carcanet went on to issue *The English Novel: From the Earliest Days to the Death of Joseph Conrad* (1983) and *A Call: The Tale of Two Passions* (1984). C. H. Sisson wrote the introduction to Lewis’s *Poems and Plays* and the afterword to Ford’s *A Call*. A deeply conservative poet and critic, Sisson had no sympathy for countercultural movements. After writing a controversial essay on the French monarchist writer Charles Maurras for *PN Review* 1, he told Schmidt:

I am sorry you have had unfavourable reactions to the mere idea of a Maurras book. You can at least assure people that it is no part of my objective to put the Bourbons back on their throne (not that your present critics are worried about that) or to resuscitate political corpses of any kind & I devoutly wish to avoid fighting over again battles which were in their time conducted with more frenzy than light, as political battles usually are. On the other hand, the liberal left censorship is intolerable & there will be no sensible discussion until certain elements they have banned are allowed to be seen.<sup>35</sup>

Sisson saw himself as an outcast in a leftist literary field: “There are certainly quarters which dogmatically abstain from any mention of my work because I am believed to be ‘reactionary’” (Id.). Carcanet’s collaboration with Sisson on the Lewis and Ford books highlights a key characteristic of this programme of rediscovery, a programme that can be described as reactionary (“in favour of a reversion to a former state of affairs” according to the Oxford English Dictionary definition). Indeed, Carcanet’s publication of neglected modernist writers can be read as an

<sup>35</sup> C. H. Sisson to Schmidt, Sep. 12, 1974, CPA 4–2, Box 2, JRL.

intervention in a frivolous literary scene obsessed with leftist ideals and pointless stylistic experimentations.

Carcenet's programme of rediscovery was positioned as a reversion to the early twentieth century, a time prior to the noxious cultural revolution of the Sixties. In a 1988 report, Michael Schmidt connected this literary ambition with a conservative agenda that fitted well with the Thatcherism of the time. "In an age when the wider tradition is neglected," Carcanet wanted "to make available past writers ... important to an understanding of the present, whose absence from the general feast is clearly an impoverishment." Schmidt gave the example of the *Fyfield Series* (new translations of the Classics) and of the "recovery of writers of this century whom fashions or accident have obscured." And he added: "We resist the growing disapprobation and neglect of the great Anglo-American modernists, from Ford and Lewis to H. D. and [William Carlos] Williams."<sup>36</sup>

Writing to David Pease of the Arvon Foundation in 1989, Michael Schmidt again prided himself on publishing H. D., Williams, Ford, Lewis and other major modernists. The Arvon Foundation had offered creative writing courses to young people for two decades, and Schmidt reminded Pease of Carcanet's distinctive position in the literary field:

Can you suggest in the brochure that anyone wishing to submit poetry that is gritty and edgy should send it to Neil [Astley at Bloodaxe] and not to Carcanet? I'm only interested in major work with a patent debt to modernism. It must be obscure, it must scan part of the time, and generally speaking it must be either High Tory or Trotskyite. Or both, like me.<sup>37</sup>

Here, Schmidt explicitly connected Carcanet to literary modernism, a positioning radically different from that of its competitor Bloodaxe in Newcastle. Both "High Tory" and "Trotskyite," Carcanet rejected mainstream political and literary trends. It turned its back against the political correctness born in the 1960s, to (re)discover neglected poets and traditions.

<sup>36</sup> Carcanet Press Limited Report, Dec. 20, 1988, CPA 4-2, Box 10, JRL.

<sup>37</sup> Schmidt to David Pease, June 9, 1989, CPA 4-3, Box 1, JRL.

## CONCLUSION

Under the Carcanet imprint, H. D. appeared as a conservative poet, whose work was characterised by traditional themes, rigorous form and emotional control. Paradoxically, this conservative image of H. D. was created by a new press led by a young publisher. In contrast, Faber—a very traditional publishing house—pushed a completely different vision of women’s poetry. On the Faber list, Sylvia Plath became the archetype of the confessional poet. Her poetry was presented as radically new, formless and emotionally extreme—a perfect fit for the upheavals of the cultural revolution (see Chapter 7). Conservative critics at *PN Review* and elsewhere denounced the nihilism of the present and looked towards the past for solace. In Schmidt’s words, the Carcanet list was “marked by its resistance to conventionality and dedication to a ‘live tradition,’ hence the stress within the lists on antecedents and the neglected classics (major and minor) of our tradition.”<sup>38</sup> In this framework, H. D. was a neglected classic anchored in a long poetic tradition, rather than a radically new poet like the Sylvia Plath marketed by Faber. As we will see in the next chapter, this commitment to tradition soon came under threat. With growing pressures from the market and funding agencies to move to a more diverse list of authors, Carcanet Press and *PN Review* increasingly embraced new voices.

<sup>38</sup> Carcanet Press Limited Report, Dec. 20, 1988, CPA 4–2, Box 10, JRL.

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## *PN Review*, Feminism and the Arts Council of Great Britain

In 1983, the Manchester-based poetry magazine *PN Review* celebrated its tenth anniversary. While its predecessor *Carcanet* magazine had always remained a modest enterprise, *PN* was now a well-established periodical with a right-wing flavour. Marxists and feminists were generally not welcome in a magazine dominated by male contributors who thrived on controversy. In September 1983, *PN* published a scathing review of women's poetry. For the reviewer, Dick Davis, the poems of Michèle Roberts and Michelene Wandor were simply beyond redemption. "This is the kind of 'women's poetry' that makes one think there might be something in the etymology of the word hysteria after all," wrote Davis. The two women were not the only writers that Davis attacked in his review. He also dismissed Diana Scott's anthology of women's poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as full of "rubbish" and "third-rate rant." Only the ignorant could find an interest in such a dreadful anthology, Davis claimed. He encouraged *PN* readers to turn away from this "tendentious rot" ("On Anthologies of Women's Poetry").

The review led to a controversy on the role of women in the poetry scene. Michèle Roberts felt deeply hurt by Dick Davis's assessment of her work. Refusing to suffer this abuse passively, she took on the role of the "shrill, whining, strident feminist" and wrote a response that was published in January 1984. This letter highlights the marginalisation of women in *PN Review*. "So very few of your contributors (poets and reviewers) are female and ... so very few of the books reviewed are by

women,” wrote Roberts. “You may consider that this unbalanced situation merely reflects the current distribution of intellectual and poetic prowess between the sexes; to me it suggests an unconscious gendered assumption on your part about whom you deem capable of writing good reviews and poetry.” The few women who dared to write and publish poetry were mocked and treated with contempt by male reviewers. Roberts compared this marginalisation to the censorship imposed by authoritarian regimes, in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. The “ignorant and frightened” reviewer was a force of repression, a figure to which feminist writers in the West were accustomed (Roberts, Wandor and Davis, “Letters”).

In his reply, Dick Davis dismissed the rhetoric of repression: how could Michèle Roberts compare herself to victimised writers in oppressive regimes? After all, she was published by a reputable publisher, and her poems were read at literary festivals and on radio programmes for a large audience. For Davis, she had the “tone of someone to whom rhetoric is more comforting and more important than truth” (Roberts, Wandor and Davis, “Letters”). The *PN Review* editors sided with Davis. The comparison with authoritarian regimes was meaningless, “a rather worthless luxury” that prevented people from identifying real problems.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on extensive archival work, this chapter builds on the growing interest in the material conditions in which “feminism” and women’s literature appeared. In particular, as we have seen in the introduction, the feminist press *Virago* (created in 1973) has recently attracted a great deal of attention.<sup>2</sup> This focus on feminist publishers has obscured other publishing enterprises that were initially male-dominated but evolved to include more women and minorities on their list. Small publishers heavily relied on funding from the Arts Council. While this organisation has often been studied from a visual arts perspective (Wu; Alexander), Asha Rogers’s monograph *State Sponsored Literature* explores the role of the modern British state on literary production. Whereas Rogers’s focus is mostly on ethnic minorities, this chapter explores the role of publishers and funders on the production of women’s poetry and the dissemination

<sup>1</sup> “Editorial,” *PN Review* 42, vol. 11, no. 4 (March–April 1985).

<sup>2</sup> See Withers; Riley; Murray.

of feminist ideas. *PN Review* offers a good example of a literary institution that was directly pushed towards gender diversity through external pressures from the Arts Council and the market.

The 1983 controversy highlights a turning point in the history of *PN Review*, and, more broadly, of the UK poetry scene. Women were taking a more visible role in the publishing world: Virago published the anthology of women's poetry that Davis criticised. Female poets were becoming more vocal and openly denounced their marginalisation in the poetry scene. In the 1970s and early 1980s, *PN* contributors and editors often dismissed these claims and ridiculed the feminist movement.<sup>3</sup> But the appointment of Marghanita Laski as Chair of the Arts Council literature advisory panel in 1980 signalled a changing era. The funding cuts decided by Margaret Thatcher's government led to profound changes as Arts Council "clients" competed fiercely to survive in a tough landscape. Following the Council's organisational review of 1984, the axe fell on the literature department. The literature director of the Arts Council, Charles Osborne, left his post in early 1986, depriving Carcanet Press and *PN* of a powerful protector.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter argues that financial considerations were central to *PN Review*'s growing inclusion of women voices. Changes in public funding, and increased market opportunities for women authors and feminist ideas, forced the magazine to evolve and adapt. At the time when public funding for the cultural sector was shrinking, *PN* could not take the risk to antagonise the Arts Council with attacks on women and other marginalised groups. Concurrently, the marketplace for feminist publishing was growing, as the success of the Virago Press showed. From the mid-1980s, established and emergent women poets such as Eavan Boland and Sujata Bhatt became increasingly visible in *PN* and on the list of its parent company Carcanet Press. Gone were the days when women's poetry was ridiculed for its descriptions of menstruation and childbirth. *PN* buried its masculinist past and reinvented itself as a tolerant forum for diverse voices: women but also homosexuals and ethnic minorities.

<sup>3</sup> See Pugh. For consideration of the role of women poets in Britain, see Dowson (ed.); Dowson and Entwistle; Bertram; Dooley (ed.); Montefiore.

<sup>4</sup> As we have seen, Michael Schmidt set up Carcanet Press in 1969 as a small press specialising in poetry. He then edited *PN* magazine from 1973. The two publishing enterprises were thus closely connected.

In retrospect, this evolution seems inevitable. Could *PN* have remained dominated by male voices were it not for the Arts Council funding policies? Would the magazine have survived over the long term if it had continued to oppose broader trends towards gender equality? Probably not. But the point of this chapter is not to ask whether this evolution towards diversity would eventually have taken place. It is to understand why this evolution took place so quickly, in just a few years in the 1980s. My central claim is that this change was directly triggered by Conservative policies channelled through the Arts Council, combined with growing market opportunities for diverse lists. Here, it is important to note that *PN* could well have disappeared in the 1980s in the wake of radical funding cuts to the Arts Council Literature Department. The literature budget was cut by 40% from £898,500 in 1985 to £450,000 in 1986, amounting to just half a percent of the Arts Council's income that year (Rogers 90). This disengagement was paralleled by a growing focus on a diverse and multiculturalist agenda. *PN* editors and contributors did not have the luxury to wait. They needed to act swiftly and move away from the magazine's image as a male-dominated forum. At a time when the Thatcher government was pushing for diversity and entrepreneurialism, *PN* managed to survive and thrive in a radically new landscape.

### A MALE-DOMINATED FORUM

In March 1972, Professor Brian Cox applied for a grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian foundation to bring the young Michael Schmidt and his fledgling Carcanet Press to the University of Manchester. Cox explained that the overall objective was to build "one of the most exciting poetry centres in the English speaking world." And he added: "The Arts in the North would benefit enormously and we already have backing from the North West Arts Association."<sup>5</sup> Cox had already obtained the support of the Arts Council of Great Britain, which had agreed to award the Compton bequest to fund Schmidt's poetry fellowship for three years.<sup>6</sup> The development of a leading poetry centre in Manchester fitted well with

<sup>5</sup> Brian Cox to A. Wraight, March 7, 1972, COX 5/1, Brian Cox papers, John Rylands Library, Manchester (hereafter referred to as JRL).

<sup>6</sup> Cox to Charles Osborne, April 21, 1972, COX 5/1, Brian Cox papers, JRL. In 1964, a bequest was made by Joseph Compton, one of the first directors of the Poetry Book Society, to the Arts Council with the aim of helping poets and of bringing poetry to

the Arts Council's strategy. From 1964 to 1970, the Labour Minister of the Arts Jennie Lee had fostered provincial initiatives and installed her friend Arnold Goodman to run the ACGB along these lines.<sup>7</sup> The creation of the Manchester Poetry Centre would build on existing initiatives in the provinces and balance the domination of the London literary scene.

From the start, *Poetry Nation* (which later became *PN Review*) was conceived as an offensive on the London poetry establishment. In September 1972, Michael Schmidt told the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan that he was thinking of reviving the old *Carc Janet* magazine, that had disappeared following his move to Manchester. It would be a forum for the non-London scene, a provincial podium for poets with national and international ambitions.<sup>8</sup> Schmidt and his mentor Brian Cox wanted to defend their own tribe of writers, often based in the provinces.

In their fight against the literary elite, Brian Cox and Michael Schmidt enlisted the help of members of this same elite—including Eric W. White, who had served as the Arts Council's first literature director until 1971, and his successor Charles Osborne. In February 1973, White responded to Schmidt's project to launch a new magazine. "I suppose it's always good to try to stage a kind of test match between two opposing teams of writers," White said, "particularly if it results in some general publicity."<sup>9</sup> For those who found themselves in a lowly position that offered little opportunity to draw attention, an effective method was to attack the most visible, most famous, most powerful literary clique. The resulting publicity would elevate the player to a more favourable position—a position that could then be used to launch more attacks.

*Poetry Nation* went one step further. Discarding the polite rules of the game, it launched a total war on the London literary establishment. Like Wyndham Lewis in his modernist magazine *BLAST*, *PN* editors identified clear enemies and "blasted" them. These enemies included Peter Porter (the influential Poetry Editor at the *Times Literary Supplement*),

a wider audience. See <https://jerwoodarts.org/projects/jerwood-compton-poetry-fellowships/> [accessed Jan. 6, 2021].

<sup>7</sup> See Hollis; Brivati and Freeman.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Schmidt to Edwin Morgan, Sept. 18, 1972, CPA 2/1/51, *Carc Janet* Press archive (hereafter referred to as CPA, JRL).

<sup>9</sup> Eric W. White to Schmidt, Feb. 24, 1973, CPA 3/50, JRL.

D. J. Enright, Anthony Thwaite, Clive James and Ian Hamilton.<sup>10</sup> To win the war, the *PN* team needed influential allies who were not tainted by the London clique.<sup>11</sup>

In November 1972, Schmidt wrote to Donald Davie to explain his plans for a magazine that would demand and command attention.<sup>12</sup> Davie was then fifty years old. After establishing himself as a Movement poet, he had left England to take up a professorship at Stanford University. During a trip to Europe in 1972, he gave a reading at the Manchester Poetry Centre, where he met Schmidt. The young man immediately courted attention from the more famous poet. Schmidt praised his critical work (including *Thomas Hardy and British poetry*) and sent him several Carcanet publications. This courtship was successful, and Davie agreed to lend his name to the new magazine, eventually joining Schmidt, Brian Cox and the poet C. H. (Charles Hubert) Sisson as joint editor.

The correspondence between Schmidt and Davie, preserved at Yale University's Beinecke Library, is rich in military metaphors. In March 1974, Schmidt gave an overview of the *PN* battle plan. There were some enemies within, including an eminent publisher and an eminent Arts Civil Servant who were extremely unkind about certain contributors to *Poetry Nation*. Multiple obstacles had not prevented the magazine from securing a grant of £6,000, plus £500 per issue of *PN* to cover contributors' fees and production costs.<sup>13</sup> The *PN* army may have been small, but it included powerful players in the literary field—including Brian Cox, who had convinced Charles Osborne at the Arts Council to fund the new review.<sup>14</sup> Thanks to this support, *PN* was well placed to win

<sup>10</sup> For more on these critics and the London literary scene, see May, *Critical Times: The History of the Times Literary Supplement*—particularly the introduction and the chapters about the post-Second World War literary scene.

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that many of these metropolitan enemies were colonials (Peter Porter and Clive James were Australian) or provincials (like Ian Hamilton) who had done well in Fleet Street and London literary circles.

<sup>12</sup> Schmidt to Davie, Nov. 10, 1972, Box 6, Donald Davie papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven (hereafter referred to as DD).

<sup>13</sup> Schmidt to Davie, March 9, 1974, Box 6, DD.

<sup>14</sup> Cox to Osborne, Dec. 3, 1973, CQA 2/2/21, *Critical Quarterly* archive, JRL. Cox continued to lobby for *PN* in the 1970s (see his letter to Osborne, June 15, 1976, Brian Cox papers, COX 5/1, JRL). He stepped down from the *PN* editorial board in 1978 after a controversy involving the Sylvia Plath Estate (see Schmidt, "The Plath Letters").

the war. As Davie envisaged it, the magazine would be “a sharp wedge driven from the North with maximum force against and into the London ‘establishment’”.<sup>15</sup>

Like Brian Cox, Donald Davie had studied at Cambridge and was influenced by the famous literary critic F. R. Leavis. In his quarterly periodical *Scrutiny* and other publications, Leavis used increasingly belligerent vocabulary. Stefan Collini describes Leavis’s contest with metropolitan critics as following “a strategy of small, nagging engagements that slowly undermine the position of an enemy much stronger in conventional terms.” As a Cambridge academic, Leavis was not self-consciously provincial, but he had the same target, a metropolitan elite clustered around the *Times Literary Supplement* and the Sunday papers and characterised by mediocrity, superficiality, and backscratching.<sup>16</sup>

Designed as a military offensive against the London poetry clique, *PN* was not a welcoming environment for women. In the 1970s, only 11% of contributors were female, and they wrote fewer articles and reviews than men. 91% of the content of the magazine was written by men (Appendix: Figs. 5.1 and 5.2). In the 1980s, the share of female contributors rose slightly, reaching 18%. Men still wrote 86% of the content of the magazine (Appendix: Figs. 5.3 and 5.4).

How can we explain this marginalisation of women? Was Michèle Roberts right to denounce “unconscious gendered assumption” about who was deemed “capable of writing good reviews and poetry”? I would argue that the marginalisation of women was consistent with *PN*’s battle plan. The fight against London enemies had to be carried out by ferocious soldiers—men like Donald Davie, whose expatriate position left him less vulnerable to attacks. “My purposes are polemical,” said Davie, “because I consider that bitter and unsparing polemic is what is called for, to rally a principled and informed opposition to the Clive Jameses and Douglas Dunns, the Robert Robinsons and Anthony Thwaites et hoc genus omne.”<sup>17</sup> Women were liabilities on the front line, although their help was essential to produce and distribute the magazine and other publications.

<sup>15</sup> Davie to Schmidt, Oct. 28, 1975, CPA 2/1/22, JRL.

<sup>16</sup> See Hilliard; and Mulhern.

<sup>17</sup> Davie to Schmidt, Oct. 28, 1975, CPA 2/1/22, JRL.

In the 1970s, there was no financial pressure to include more women in an Arts-Council-funded magazine. The literature director Charles Osborne championed excellence independently of any other considerations: after leaving the Council, he ridiculed some of the projects that had been funded without his approval, including £500 to Jill Bruce “towards the cost of a study visit to Australia to look at the journeyings of Aboriginal women and visit sites of special significance” (149). Moreover, the market for women’s poetry had only recently started to emerge in the United States. There was nothing that discouraged publishing enterprises to include a vast majority of male authors.

Women clearly occupied a marginal place in *PN*, but they were not entirely absent. In February 1973, Schmidt told Davie that he greatly admired the poetry of Elaine Feinstein.<sup>18</sup> At a time when the young man was eagerly courting the attention of the older poet, this confidence strengthened their relationship, since Davie was a friend of Feinstein. Born in 1930, Feinstein studied at Newnham College, Cambridge, before marrying and starting a family. She met Schmidt in the late 1960s, at the Oxford English Club. “I transfixed him with a poem – ‘Mother Love’ from *In a Green Eye* [Goliard Press, 1966] – which mentioned baby shit smelling of curd cheese” (*It Goes with the Territory* 226). In 1967, Donald Davie helped secure Feinstein’s appointment as Lecturer at the University of Essex, where she worked until 1970. Both Schmidt and Davie kept abreast of her poetry. In his essay on recent British Poetry by women (written under a female pseudonym), Schmidt analysed Feinstein’s volume of poems *The Magic Apple Tree*, published by Hutchinson in 1971. He praised her poetry of the everyday: “continually she discovers, in a sense like early Rilke, things in the everyday to praise, to sing” (Byers 79). And in 1973, after discovering that Philip Larkin had not included Feinstein in his *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse*, Davie wrote to the *Listener* to denounce her exclusion of the emergent canon of contemporary poetry (“Larkin’s Choice”).

Despite this support, Elaine Feinstein was not closely involved with either *PN* or Carcanet Press. She contributed only two pieces to the magazine in the 1970s: a short poem (“Coastline”) in 1976 and a book review in 1979. Her name did not appear on the Carcanet list until 1979, when she edited *Three Russian Poets*. Motherhood—a recurrent

<sup>18</sup> Schmidt to Davie, Feb. 7, 1973, Box 6, DD.

theme in Feinstein's poetry—was hardly mentioned in *PN*. The term itself appeared only twice in the 1970s, including in Edward Levy's review of the poetry of Elizabeth Jennings, who had no children but whose poetry reveals "a desire for innocence as, perhaps, for motherhood" ("The Poetry of Elizabeth Jennings"). This male-only environment was not particularly hospitable for Feinstein's poetry, a poetry of the everyday and of family life.

In her autobiography *It Goes with the Territory*, Feinstein wrote about her sense of exclusion from the male-dominated poetry scene of the 1970s. "I remember watching [Michael Schmidt] at the first Cambridge Poetry Festival, surrounded by a group of formidably assured young men, laughing and challenging each other." And she added: "I was not part of that inner circle" (*It Goes with the Territory* 226). Isolation was not a new experience for Feinstein. When she was a student in the early 1950s, the dominant poets were gathered in *Delta* magazine—set up by Peter Redgrove and Roger Bannister. Philip Hobsbaum, who also contributed to *Delta*, was later involved with The Group in London, which included poets Peter Porter, Edward Lucie-Smith and Ted Hughes. As a student and later a married woman, Feinstein did not participate in these literary activities and networks:

For me, poetry was essentially a lone activity. I remember after the birth of my first child waiting glumly for a bus on the Arbury Estate with a pushchair and a shopping bag while studying the trunk of a wet tree coloured by streetlights. When I got home, I tried to find words to catch this experience with a sudden, almost forgotten excitement. It was like coming back to life. (*It Goes with the Territory* 228)

Feinstein tends to exaggerate her isolation. She excelled at creating opportunities for herself in a male-dominated environment. In 1964, after learning that Donald Davie had become professor of literature at the University of Essex, she boldly rang him and asked if he would take her as his research assistant. Davie did more than that: he also asked the American poet Ed Dorn to become her mentor. It was Dorn who connected her with Tom Raworth and Barry Hall, who agreed to publish her first volume of poems with Goliard Press in 1966. Yet, Feinstein remained on

the margins of these literary networks, and Schmidt described her as a neglected poet in his 1973 letter to Davie.<sup>19</sup>

Feinstein found literary companionship among fiction writers, rather than poets. “In the Seventies I did find the women’s movement very sustaining, notably a group of writers who wrote for Emma Tennant’s magazine *Bananas*, such as Angela Carter who was a friend,” she said.<sup>20</sup> Launched in 1975, *Bananas* rejected conventional literary realism and embraced more experimental fiction. It was a welcoming environment for feminist writers such as Carter. In contrast, *PN* largely dismissed the women’s movement, even though editors and contributors supported a few female poets.

It was a time of intense activity for feminists in the UK. Between 1970 and 1978, there were eight national Women’s Liberation Movement conferences (including two in Manchester) which focused on subjects such as feminist history, sexuality, socialist feminism and patriarchy. These debates on the place of women—including in the literary canon—did not go unnoticed in poetry circles. In September 1978, Michael Schmidt asked Donald Davie for suggestions of poets who would be celebrated in *PN*. This series of festschrifts featured the British poet Charles Tomlinson. For his fiftieth birthday, *PN* published a special issue with a selection of his poems, an interview and fifteen critical assessments of his work. Schmidt thought that Sylvia Townsend Warner, who had recently died, might be a good candidate for the next festschrift.<sup>21</sup> Davie replied:

In this, as in other aspects of policy, it’s surely important to forestall feminist animosity by having, as early as possible in the series, a WOMAN. Your suggestion of Sylvia Townsend Warner is from this point of view a good one, and should be given high priority. I rack my brains for another woman candidate, and come up with nothing better than (a very special case) that woman poet printed in *PN*, crippled and bedridden, I can’t even remember her name.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Schmidt to Davie, Feb. 7, 1973, Box 6, DD.

<sup>20</sup> Elaine Feinstein, Interview by Lidia Vianu, 2006, [http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/elaine\\_feinstein.htm](http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/elaine_feinstein.htm).

<sup>21</sup> Schmidt to Davie, Sept. 5, 1978, Box 6, DD.

<sup>22</sup> Davie to Schmidt, Sept. 11, 1978, CPA 2/3/35, JRL.

Davie was not the only one to scorn the woman's movement. Earlier in 1978, *PN* published a review of *Contemporary Women Poets*, a volume edited by Trevor Kneale. The reviewer, Andrew Waterman, described it as a "sexist anthology" whose focus on female poets revealed a "fanatical editorial eclecticism." He was particularly struck by Penelope Shuttle's reference to menstrual blood, as a way to connect to a deeper reality. If this was true, Waterman asked, how did "Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Hardy, Lawrence, etc., etc. got it all done" ("On New Anthologies")?

Menstruation was also mentioned in a review of the pamphlet *Women their World*, edited by Eva Figes, Abigail Mozley and Dinah Livingstone. This selection from entries in the 1980 Lancaster Literature Festival national poetry competition was savaged by Dick Davis. The influence of Sylvia Plath "on young or what one may call 'Sunday' poets (which includes most of those in this anthology) appears to have been wholly disastrous," Davis wrote. The emotional overflow of this poetry was difficult to bear:

There's quite a lot of blood (much of it menstrual) and passion in *Women their World* too. There are, to be fair, also glimmerings of wisdom, but they do tend to flicker a little hopelessly in the general maelstrom of feminist angst. ("On Women's Poetry Anthologies")

Here, menstruation was closely connected to feminism, conveying the sense that women poets were not in control of their body and their emotions. For Davis, "feminist angst" produced dreadful poetry.

Dick Davis and Andrew Waterman were among the most prolific *PN* contributors, with a total of 111 contributions to the review in the 1970s and 1980s. Their names appeared in a 1979 list of regular contributors who could be trusted. The others included Neil Powell, John Pilling, Alan Munton, Michael Vince, David Levy, Michael Hamburger, Clive Wilmer, Dudley Young, Alan Young, Jeremy Hooker, Michael Cayley, Paul Wilkins, Neil Corcoran and Lawrence Sail. There were no women on this list.<sup>23</sup>

Not everyone agreed with *PN*'s dominant view on feminism and its reluctance to include more women poets and contributors. The poet and translator Daniel Weissbort told Michael Schmidt: "in my view, there is

<sup>23</sup> Memorandum, July 2, 1979, Box 6, DD.

such a thing as women's poetry." He added: "I personally do not think a ladies' anthology is quite like doing a book of red-haired people." But even Weissbort agreed that publishing women's poetry was risky: "All the critics, they being in the main male, would take your view and negative reviews are predictable."<sup>24</sup> For Weissbort, the poetry scene was not yet ready to make more room for women as a group (rather than individual female poets).

For the *PN* editor Charles Sisson, the women's movement could not be separated from the gay rights movement. Both tried to control language to impose their worldview. "What is particularly gay about homosexuals?" asked Sisson in a 1980 editorial. "How idiotic to attach to that adjective a meaning so irrelevant that the word has been more than half-killed and we are left without a substitute!" The same impoverishment of language occurred when feminists insisted on gender-neutral pronouns ("his or her") and nouns ("person" rather than "man"). "There is a good deal of philosophical nonsense about the feminist oppression," Sisson wrote. This political use of language was leading away from reality, towards metaphysical notions. Whereas "man" is the name of a species, "person" is an abstraction born with the Enlightenment ("Editorial"). For Sisson, defending the language against the attacks of feminist and gay activists was essential to preserve a stable social order—or what remained of it after the radical individualism of the 1960s and 1970s.

The same association between women and gay people can be found in a controversial 1981 article by Dudley Young. Homosexuality was influencing all aspects of modern urban life, Young argued. "For some time now," wrote Dudley, "urban stylishness has increasingly become the exclusive preserve of the fags. Not only do they dominate what's left of the arts (theatre above all, being the most parodic) but wherever two or three are gathered together in search of the glamorous, it's almost bound to be Fag City – everybody wants to be Boys in the Band [a 1968 play about homosexuality]." For Dudley, gay activists were on a mission to control much more than the artistic world. What they really wanted was to erase gender and transform everyone into neutral creatures: "this business of gender is increasingly becoming a distinction without a difference (as indeed the subsequent developments of Women's Lib and unisex would suggest)" ("Still Life Inside the Whale").

<sup>24</sup> Weissbort to Schmidt, undated, CPA 2/1/77, JRL.

Reacting strongly to Dudley Young's and Charles Sisson's articles, Thom Gunn spearheaded gay readers to desert *PN*. The British-born poet was then 51 years old and had lived in California for more than two decades. His career had initially been intertwined with the Movement. He was included in *New Lines* (1956), an anthology that brought together nine poets, including Donald Davie and Philip Larkin, whose work used a traditional form to describe modern life with wit and irony. In the 1960s and 1970s, he immersed himself in the San Francisco countercultural scene. He "came out" as gay in his collection of poems *Jack Straw's Castle* (Faber, 1976). Gunn was well aware of the steady progress of gay rights in Britain. When he had left the country, homosexuality was still illegal. In 1967, homosexual acts were decriminalised in England and Wales,<sup>25</sup> followed by Scotland in 1980. In this context of growing tolerance, Gunn was shocked by Young's article. It "is so outrageous I am surprised it was not accompanied by an editorial disclaimer," he told Schmidt, before criticising Sisson's editorial on the world "gay." Gunn refused to contribute any more to *PN Review*, a magazine that he described as having the habit of sneering at a segment of the human race of which he was a part and which had always contained a number of good poets.<sup>26</sup> Schmidt tried to reassure Gunn that *PN* was not anti-gay, and he later sent him *The Colonist*,<sup>27</sup> his novel on two boys who are attracted to each other (first published in 1980, the novel was reprinted by Gay Men's Press in 1993). Eventually, Gunn relented and continued to contribute to the magazine until 1999 (Marsack, *Fifty Fifty* 81).

## ADAPTING TO A CHANGING WORLD

### *New Decade, New Literary Networks: Rediscovering Neglected Women Poets*

Schmidt's flexibility served him well: he did not openly defend any controversial views on homosexuals or women, remaining more or less neutral as fellow *PN* editors and contributors fought controversial battles.

<sup>25</sup> The Sexual Offences Act decriminalised homosexual acts in most settings, but it could still be a crime to "promote" sex between men, for example through personal ads. See Cocks.

<sup>26</sup> Gunn to Schmidt, Feb. 5, 1981, CPA 3/193, JRL.

<sup>27</sup> Schmidt to Gunn, May 6, 1982, CPA 3/193, JRL.

In the 1980s, this flexibility became a matter of survival for *PN Review* and Carcanet, in a context of rapid changes in the funding landscape. With the publication of Charlotte Mew's *Collected Poems and Prose* (1981), Carcanet and *PN* strengthened their links with distinguished and emergent women in the literary field such as Marghanita Laski, Carmen Callil and Robyn Marsack.

In 1980, Marghanita Laski was appointed Chair of the Arts Council literature advisory panel. Born in 1915, Laski studied at the University of Oxford, where she met her future husband, the publisher John Eldred Howard. She became a novelist in the 1940s and later wrote critical books—including a series of studies of the work of Jane Austen (1969), George Eliot (1973) and Rudyard Kipling (1974). She was also active as a television and radio broadcaster—including BBC Radio 3's *Critics' Forum*, where she met Schmidt.<sup>28</sup> Laski did not define herself as a feminist, but her work often deals with the condition of women. For example, her novel *To Bed with Grand Music* is about female sexuality during World War II. Pseudonymously published in 1946, the novel was reprinted in 2009 by Persephone Books, a press that specialises in the work of neglected women writers.

As Chair of the literature advisory panel at the Arts Council, Laski soon became an ally for *PN Review* and Carcanet. In February 1982, she wrote to Schmidt to praise *PN*, which was “as good a model as anyone could wish of the value of spending public money on literary magazines.” She was pleased to have discovered Alison Brackenbury's poetry thanks to *PN*.<sup>29</sup> In his response to this fan letter, Schmidt told her about his plans to launch a *PN Review* award to celebrate the entire work of major poets with international ambitions. Would she agree to endorse this award?<sup>30</sup> Laski was not interested in sponsoring yet another literary prize, but she was eager to support women's literature. She had recently written about the poet Charlotte Mew for the magazine *Country Life*, following the 1981 publication of Mew's *Collected Poems and Prose*—a joint publication between Carcanet and Virago Press.

<sup>28</sup> Laski to Schmidt, Feb. 28, 1982, CPA 3/161/2, JRL. See also Burchfield; and Hopkins.

<sup>29</sup> Laski to Schmidt, Feb. 28, 1982, CPA 3/161/2, JRL.

<sup>30</sup> Schmidt to Laski, March 5, 1982, CPA 3/161/2, JRL.

How can we explain the unlikely association between Virago and Carcanet? Created in 1973, Virago was presented as “the first mass-market publisher for 52 per cent of the population – women. An exciting new imprint for both sexes in a changing world” (Murray 34). In contrast, Carcanet published around nine men for one woman. From 1969 to 1979, only 11% of its authors were women (the same proportion as female *PN* contributors in the 1970s). The women published by Carcanet and *PN* were often historical figures rather than contemporary poets. In particular, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) was central to Carcanet’s strategy to recover neglected poets. Elizabeth Daryush was another poet that Michael Schmidt rediscovered in the 1970s. Carcanet published her *Verses* (1971), *Selected Poems* (1972) and *Collected Poems* with an introduction by Donald Davie (1976). This work of rediscovery was not gender-specific, and Carcanet also contributed to the revival of male writers such as Wyndham Lewis.

Michael Schmidt created an audience for these Carcanet books by commissioning articles for *PN*. Charles Sisson’s article on H. D. appeared in the fourth issue of *Poetry Nation* in 1975. The next article in this issue was Val Warner’s article on the work of Charlotte Mew. And Donald Davie’s article on the eighty-seven-year-old Elizabeth Daryush appeared in *PN* 5. Davie presented the rediscovery of Daryush as a moral imperative: “When an unprejudiced literary history of our century comes to be written, our failure to recognize Elizabeth Daryush will be one of the most telling and lamentable charges that can be laid at our door.” If literary history had been prejudiced, the reason for this prejudice was not related to gender. Davie stayed away from any discussion of Daryush as a woman poet (the terms “woman,” “women,” “gender” and “female” do not appear in the article). Instead, he explained the neglect of Daryush’s poetry by her traditional style and form, which did not appeal to frivolous contemporary readers. He included himself among these flawed readers: encouraged by his mentor Yvor Winters to read Daryush, he had nevertheless failed to champion her work, perhaps due to “an anxiety not to be too far out of the fashion” (“The Poetry of Elizabeth Daryush”).

Unlike Davie, Val Warner placed gender at the centre of her discussion on neglected poets. To explain Charlotte Mew’s slender poetic output, Warner wrote: “her position as a woman and tendency to dilettantism moulded her attitude to her work.” Born in 1869, Mew spent most of her life in Bloomsbury, London. When her father died in 1898, she was left, with her sister Anne, to look after their demanding mother. Her domestic

duties meant that she had little time to write, and she self-sabotaged by presenting herself as a dilettante rather than a professional writer. “Only her sister Anne took her writing seriously.” For Warner, it was clear that Mew never overcame the obstacles of being a woman. Overwhelming caring duties, a low sense of self-worth and a prejudiced society were the three main reasons that led to Mew’s oblivion. It was now time to rediscover a poet that had greatly suffered from her female position (“Mary Magdalene and the Bride—The work of Charlotte Mew”).

It is precisely this work of rediscovery that appealed to Carmen Callil of Virago press. Starting in 1976, a statement of page 2 of every book declared: “Virago is a feminist publishing house.”<sup>31</sup> And two years later, the Virago Modern Classics was created. This uniform series of reprints was dedicated to the rediscovery and celebration of women writers, challenging the traditional literary canon. Like Michael Schmidt, Callil was an entrepreneurial publisher, and she excelled at convincing influential men to back her business. As D.-M. Withers puts it, her “friendship with publisher Paul Hamlyn and printing entrepreneur Robert Gavron embedded Virago in networks of male entrepreneurial knowledge that helped shape the evolution of the company” (“Enterprising Women” 479). Gavron would later acquire Carcanet Press, and his wife Kate became Chair of the boards of both Virago and Carcanet.

To accompany the joint edition of Charlotte Mew’s *Collected Poems and Prose*, Callil and Schmidt commissioned an introduction to Val Warner. To their disappointment, Warner’s original introduction stressed the dark side of her poems and prose, and the distress that marred Mew’s life (she suffered from frequent depressive episodes and committed suicide after the death of her sister Anne). Callil and Schmidt ended up rewriting the preface to highlight the wit, charm and irony of Mew’s work.<sup>32</sup> To promote the book, Carcanet issued a traditional press release, while Virago designed a postcard with Mew’s photograph and brief biography as part of a series of six collectors’ cards. The *Observer* compared them to the cigarette cards of the 1930s and praised “this enterprising publishing house.”<sup>33</sup> Charlotte Mew’s work had now emerged from oblivion, with

<sup>31</sup> “Virago Timeline.” *Virago—International Publisher of Books by Women*, July 3, 2019, <https://www.virago.co.uk/imprint/lbbg/virago/page/virago-timeline/> [accessed Jan. 6, 2021].

<sup>32</sup> Callil and Schmidt to Warner, undated [c. 1981], CPA 3/44, JRL.

<sup>33</sup> “Observator,” *Observer*, Sept. 5, 1982, 26.

the *Collected Poems and Prose* attracting the attention of the *London Review of Books* (Fitzgerald) and the *Times Literary Supplement*. The *LRB* reviewer, Penelope Fitzgerald—a member of the Arts Council literature advisory panel—published a biography of Mew two years later, in 1984.

The association with Virago boosted Carcanet's credentials as an ally in the fight to recover lost female voices. Schmidt had friendly relations with powerful women such as Carmen Callil and Marghanita Laski, and he also surrounded himself with dedicated female staff. In 1982, the young Robyn Marsack joined the Carcanet/*PN* team and understudied the sales and marketing manager Helen Lefroy. Although Marsack had a junior role, she contributed to the evolution of Carcanet and *PN* towards a more female-friendly image throughout the 1980s.

Born in New Zealand, Marsack moved to Britain when she was 20 to study at Oxford. For her first degree, she wrote a short thesis on Philip Larkin. Her interest in British and Irish poetry led to a doctoral thesis on Louis MacNeice. Her supervisor at Magdalen College, Oxford, was the poet John Fuller, who had set up Sycamore Press in 1968. This small press published established authors, such as Larkin, W. H. Auden and Peter Porter, as well as promoting young poets, including James Fenton and Alan Hollinghurst. Marsack kept a close eye on poetry presses, and she was delighted to see that the prose and poetry of Charlotte Mew was to be issued by Carcanet. Having gained a research fellowship at Wolfson College, Oxford, she discovered that the work of Edmund Blunden (1896–1974) was mostly out of print, the only exception being his 1928 memoirs of the First World War, *Undertones of War*. She then decided to write to Michael Schmidt to suggest a Carcanet edition of Blunden's poems.<sup>34</sup>

Schmidt paid close attention to this letter written on the letterhead of the University of Oxford—his alma mater.<sup>35</sup> He replied to “Mr Marsack” to express his interest and to ask for clarification on the question of rights.<sup>36</sup> In her next letter signed “Robyn Marsack (Ms),” the young woman gave an overview of her credentials and her plans for the Blunden edition, which involved liaising with the literary agent A. D. Peters to

<sup>34</sup> Marsack to Schmidt, May 14, 1980, CPA 2/3/97, JRL.

<sup>35</sup> The letterhead states “Wolfson College, Oxford.” Schmidt had studied at Oxford, but in a different college (Wadham College).

<sup>36</sup> Schmidt to Marsack, May 22, 1980, CPA 2/3/97, JRL.

gain necessary permissions.<sup>37</sup> But the key decision maker was Blunden's widow, who could facilitate or block the project. Eager to use his old boy network, Schmidt told Marsack to inform Mrs Blunden that he was an Old Blue, i.e. a former pupil of the independent school Christ's Hospital in Sussex.<sup>38</sup> Edmund Blunden had been devoted all his life to this school, where he had studied thanks to a scholarship. Unfortunately for Schmidt and Marsack, Mrs Blunden informed them that a *Collected Poems* was already being prepared by a former student of Blunden.<sup>39</sup>

What happens next reveals Schmidt's entrepreneurial nature. He refused to take "no" for an answer, or to publish a book that would be too academic for his taste. A *Collected Poems* with hundreds of poems "would be a kind of tombstone, and nobody would ever open it."<sup>40</sup> The project proposed by Marsack was much closer to his ambitions for Carcanet, a press that appealed to the general reader of poetry. In 1982, Blunden's *Selected Poems*, edited by Marsack, appeared on the Carcanet list. That same year, Marsack left a promising academic career to join the press as an assistant.

Robyn Marsack soon brought new ideas for the press and its magazine, contributing to a more welcoming environment for women. In 1983, for example, she wrote a review of the Cambridge Poetry Festival, praising the contribution of women poets. She particularly enjoyed the *Bread and Roses* session (named after the title of Diana Scott's anthology of women's poetry), which "attracted a large and noticeably younger audience of both sexes, including a solemn couple who knitted throughout." During this session, "Michèle Roberts and Elaine Feinstein gave some powerful readings of their own and other female poets' work – Feinstein smouldering away as [Marina] Tsvetaeva – and Frankie Armstrong sang unaccompanied ballads of women's struggles that were unaffected and sometimes touching" ("The Cambridge Poetry Festival").

This account appeared in the same *PN* issue that featured Dick Davis's devastating review of Diana Scott's and Michèle Roberts's work. In her letter of complaint to the magazine, Roberts confirmed the popularity of the *Bread and Roses* event, "an event which (in the same issue of *PNR*)

<sup>37</sup> Marsack to Schmidt, May 26, 1980, CPA 2/3/97, JRL.

<sup>38</sup> Schmidt to Marsack, May 30, 1980, CPA 2/3/97, JRL.

<sup>39</sup> Marsack to Schmidt, June 8, 1980, CPA 2/3/97, JRL.

<sup>40</sup> Marsack, Interview by author, Aug. 11, 2018.

another of your reviewers admitted drew one of the largest crowds seen at the festival" ("Letters"). There are two interesting things here. The first one is that Marsack's review undermined Roberts's complaint, by showing that not all *PN* contributors were hostile to women's poetry. *PN* was no longer the masculinist bastion of its early days. The magazine had become more open to younger women such as Marsack, who were interested in new poetic voices. The second interesting thing is the growing awareness that women's poetry was now appealing to a large market. The literary world was changing, and *PN* was starting to evolve to leave more room for women.

In May 1985, Robyn Marsack wrote to the eighty-four-year-old Madge Hales, the author of several collections of poems including *Dark Landscape* (Chatto and Windus, 1954). Hales's manuscript *Flight Delayed* had been passed on to Marsack, since she was "now the only woman available at Carcanet" after the retirement of Helen Lefroy. Although Carcanet could not offer publication, Chatto and Windus might be interested. "As one of their former authors, you would have a prior claim on their attention, and their poetry list is expanding again under Andrew Motion's direction," Marsack told Hales before adding: "They seem to be particularly interested in women poets at present."<sup>41</sup> The letter shows Marsack's deep awareness of her condition as sole remaining woman at Carcanet, and her advocacy for female poets, at a time of expanding opportunities.

Chatto and Windus was not the only publisher interested in women's poetry. In 1984, Virago Press launched a new series of individual collections, Virago Poetry. This offered readers "the chance to enjoy a deeper acquaintance with individual poets than anthologizing allows," as an announcement in *PN Review* put it.<sup>42</sup> The series included work by lesser-known poets as well as those with an international reputation, such as Judith Wright and Maya Angelou. Although Madge Hales's poetry often dealt with family relationships and domestic life, the revival of interest in women's poetry did not benefit her. She died in 1985, and her personal papers can now be consulted at the University of Nottingham Manuscripts and Special Collections.

<sup>41</sup> Marsack to Madge Hales, May 2, 1985, CPA 3/237, JRL.

<sup>42</sup> "Virago," *PN Review* 56, vol. 13, no. 6 (Aug. 1987).

When I met Robyn Marsack in 2018, I asked her what it was like to be a young woman in the poetry publishing scene of the 1980s. Referring to her gender-neutral first name, she told me:

Often when I was writing to people then they'd be surprised when I turned out to be a woman. Because of my name... . People treated me, on paper anyway, without thinking about what I was. And then you could, sometimes, see people's eyebrows go up, or a certain amount of astonishment when they met me, that I turned out to be a woman.<sup>43</sup>

In her position as publisher's assistant and then manager, Marsack was in charge of basic publicity, review lists, editing books, copy-editing and proofreading *PN*, catalogue material and literary prizes. "I didn't feel very alert to my position as a woman," she said, "because there were loads of women in publishing at my level, so other people I would meet, if I met editors or publicists, they were often young women. So, at that level, not at the directorial level." Publishing was dominated by women at entry- and mid-levels but making the move to a more senior position was hard.

In the mid-1980s, Marsack joined the Board of Carcanet. At around the same time, she was promoted to editorial manager. "I was only managing myself," she said. "But I was manager in the sense that I put things out to other people to proofread and that kind of thing, and I had involvement with *PN Review* as well."<sup>44</sup> Although Marsack was progressing as an editor, she decided to leave her job to follow her husband who had obtained an academic post in Scotland. She remained involved with Carcanet as a freelance editor in the 1990s, before becoming the director of the Scottish Poetry Library in 2000, a post she held until her retirement in 2016.

Robyn Marsack, Carmen Callil and Marghanita Laski had one thing in common: they admired the poems of Charlotte Mew and were delighted by the rediscovery of her work, starting with Val Warner's 1975 article in *PN*. All of them contributed to Carcanet and *PN*'s evolution towards equal treatment for women poets. Even as a junior member of staff, Marsack defended women's poetry in *PN Review* and supported female poets with suggestions and encouragements. Callil pushed for the publication of Mew's *Collected Poems and Prose*, following up with Schmidt

<sup>43</sup> Marsack, Interview by author, Aug. 11, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Marsack, Interview by author, Aug. 11, 2018.

when queries remained unanswered. The Virago “brand” then helped launch Mew as an unjustly neglected female poet that everyone should read. Marghanita Laski used her well-known name to endorse the edition of Mew’s work and supported *PN Review* and Carcanet as exemplary enterprises that deserved public funding at a time of profound changes for the Arts Council.

### *Surviving Turbulences at the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB)*

Michael Schmidt’s close relationship with the Arts Council literature director Charles Osborne contributed to his funding success in the 1970s and early 1980s. While the poetry publisher Anvil Press initially received larger grants than Carcanet, the situation changed in 1973 with the launch of *PN*. In the rest of the decade, Carcanet/*PN* received 47% more funding on average than Anvil. In 1981, Osborne decided to cut grants for individual writers and to increase grants for publishing enterprises such as Carcanet.<sup>45</sup> By 1983/84, Carcanet and *PN* received £52,000 and £16,850, respectively, from the Arts Council (Appendix: Fig. 5.5).<sup>46</sup>

For Charles Osborne, Carcanet and *PN* deserved a high level of public funding because of their outstanding standards for poetry publishing. During his twenty-year career at the Arts Council, he unashamedly championed “elitism” in literature and had little time for pleas for diversity. He had joined the Arts Council in 1966, initially as assistant to Eric W. White, taking over as literature director in 1971. Osborne was vehemently opposed to grants to individual writers, which too often went to the wrong people. “Spending hundreds of thousands of pounds on encouraging mediocrities to think of themselves as ‘full-time’ writers was both pointless and cruel,” he wrote in his memoirs (157).

Schmidt shared Osborne’s disdain for individual writer grants and made it publicly know. In April 1981, the *Sunday Times* asked if it was worthwhile paying writers. Osborne had just announced that the Council was stopping its grants to writers—issued at a rate of nearly forty a year. In response, the Writers’ Guild was demanding Osborne’s resignation, and the Society of Authors had written to the Arts Council Secretary

<sup>45</sup> For a contemporary perspective, see McGuigan.

<sup>46</sup> ACGB, Annual Reports, <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/our-organisation/annual-reports> [accessed Jan. 6, 2021]. See also ACGB-62-40 (Carcanet Press), Arts Council of Great Britain archive, Victoria & Albert museum, London.

General, Sir Roy Shaw, asking for an urgent meeting to discuss literature policy. These organisations had 4,000 members in total and represented a serious threat for Osborne, whose maverick nature did not fit well with his civil servant role. He had many enemies in the literary field, but also a couple of friends—including Schmidt, who told the *Sunday Times*:

Not a single poet I know could guarantee that he would write anything in that year. Writing must be related to life, and artificially setting a writer aside can't be good. Everybody else gets a salary after the work is done. It sickens me that fine writers, often elderly, are living in poverty, while a 21-year-old gets £7,500 for a project. It can't be good for him. (Geddes-Brown)

Although Carcanet and *PN* were heavily subsidised by the Arts Council, Schmidt was not grant-aided as a poet—a situation that suited him perfectly.

Schmidt enjoyed a close relationship with Charles Osborne, and he also actively cultivated Marghanita Laski's support. As Chair of the Arts Council literature advisory panel, Laski had less power than the literature director. Indeed, Osborne had always insisted on the *advisory* nature of the panel. He alone was in charge of making decisions, even though he sometimes had to make concessions. In the early 1980s, however, the panel became increasingly vocal and confrontational—an evolution initially encouraged by Laski before she decided to side with Osborne. For Schmidt, it was clear that Laski was not a person to ignore.

Funding for literary institutions (including publishers and libraries) rather than individual writers was at the heart of Schmidt's agenda. He tried to convince Laski that public libraries needed Arts Council grants to buy quality periodicals such as *PN*. The way of getting more money to writers was not to give them grants directly, but to increase the circulation of literary magazines. With more cash in their coffers, the magazines could then be more generous with their authors. This wider readership for magazines should include unprivileged readers in provincial libraries, Schmidt argued.<sup>47</sup> Following funding cuts to local authorities, many of these provincial libraries no longer subscribed to literary magazines—depriving poor people of quality reading materials. For Schmidt, the best work available should be circulated to all and accessible to all. Although

<sup>47</sup> Schmidt to Laski, Aug. 24, 1982, CPA 3/161/2, JRL.

Laski failed to show much interest in the plight of public libraries, she eagerly supported Schmidt's plans for his own publishing enterprises.

Why did Laski and Osborne favour some literary institutions (including Carcanet and *PN*) while rejecting others, such as libraries? Their central idea was that publishers actively discovered new talents, they showed entrepreneurial qualities that more passive institutions lacked. In his memoirs, Osborne conceded that "perhaps 95% of our literature is provided by commercial publishers." But the remaining 5% of literature was important:

Much contemporary poetry and some (not much) new fiction will remain unpublished if there are no subsidized publishing houses to introduce it: publishers such as Carcanet, Anvil and Calder. And even such publishers, to say nothing of the commercial houses, will find new writers of quality more difficult to identify without such literary magazines as *PN Review*, *The London Magazine*, *Granta* or *Stand*, the majority of which could not exist without subsidy. (230)

At a time when Margaret Thatcher's government was celebrating individual enterprise, the Arts Council favoured strong-willed entrepreneurs at the head of literary publishing houses and magazines. Schmidt's image as an American-born entrepreneur fitted well with this new ideology and benefited Carcanet/*PN*. Other trade publishers increasingly turned to glitzy, celebrity-led marketing (as the rise of the Booker Prize and literary festivals during the 1980s shows).<sup>48</sup> But not all literary institutions benefited from the celebration of enterprise. Thatcher famously said "there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families" (Moore, *Margaret Thatcher* 349). In this context, the discourse on libraries as socially beneficial centres, where underprivileged people could access quality reading materials, became inaudible.

Embracing an entrepreneurial role, Michael Schmidt looked for commercial sponsorship for Carcanet/*PN*, at a time when public-private partnerships were becoming central for the Arts Council. Following the notion of enterprise culture that Thatcher sought to instil throughout the country, Arts Council clients were "required to seek supplemental funding from private sources in what is now called a 'mixed-economy' approach" (Alexander, "State Support of Artists" 188). As early as

<sup>48</sup> On the rise of the Booker Prize, see Todd; on literary festivals, see Giorgi et al.

1981, Schmidt was looking for an external partner who could invest in Carcanet/*PN*. The objectives were twofold: first, to reduce his dependency on the Arts Council and second, to scale up the company to a mid-level size. He sought the advice of Matthew Evans, the managing director of Faber, who told him that there were not many philanthropists who were interested in poetry publishing.<sup>49</sup> Evans suggested approaching Robert Gavron, a wealthy businessman who owned large printing works and was also interested in the Arts and literature, particularly literary publishing. Gavron sat on the Arts Council literature panel and was one of the first investors in *Virago*. Following Evans's advice, Schmidt met Gavron in early 1982. The meeting was so successful that in 1984, Gavron purchased Carcanet Press and *PN*, becoming Chairman.

For Carcanet and *PN*, the support of key decision makers at the Arts Council proved particularly useful during uncertain times. With the Conservative government pushing for funding cuts, the Council decided in November 1983 to undertake a thorough review of its policies and the allocation of its grant-in-aid. The objective was to redefine its priorities and develop a strategy of development for the arts during the remainder of the 1980s and beyond. In particular, the Council was thinking of transferring part of its activities to local agencies. These plans for devolution worried Schmidt, who had always cultivated close links with London-based funders. Following a lunch with Laski in January 1984, he told her that devolution could result in lower literary quality and second-rate projects, as local panels would feel pressured in supporting regional writers independently of their talent. Another danger was that panellists would support their own friends (this was also the case in London, but the risk of being exposed was perhaps higher).<sup>50</sup>

By March 1984, there were rumours that the Arts Council literature department might be closed altogether. For the first twenty years of its existence, the Council had no literature department, and since its establishment in 1965 that department had never been allocated more than 1.5% of the Council's grant-in-aid. If the department disappeared, Schmidt told Dick Davis that Carcanet or *PN Review* would not be in immediate danger. The function of the department would be assumed by a literature director, probably Charles Osborne, and grants would be

<sup>49</sup> Matthew Evans to Schmidt, Dec. 7, 1981, CPA 3/193, JRL.

<sup>50</sup> Schmidt to Laski, Jan. 31, 1984, CPA 3/161/2, JRL.

dispensed to a few select clients—including, presumably, Carcanet and *PN*.<sup>51</sup> For Schmidt, the real threat was not organisational changes in the London offices of the Arts Council, but a possible devolution to local agencies. As long as he kept the support of Osborne, Laski and other decision makers, his publishing enterprises were safe.

The results of the review came out in Spring 1984 under the title *The Glory of the Garden*—a reference to a poem by Kipling. The garden was “a fair metaphor to describe the work of the Arts Council,” declared Sir William Rees-Mogg, the Chair of the Arts Council and an outspoken supporter of Thatcher’s economic policy. “We can dung and we can water, but we cannot create a single flower.”<sup>52</sup> It was up to individuals and selected institutions to create these flowers and to demonstrate their success. In a period when the Council was seeking to maximise the benefit from available funds, it had decided to cut funding for the English Centre of International PEN and the National Book League. Writers’ bursaries would soon be reviewed. “The Council expects the above changes to yield savings from the literature allocation in 1985/86 of about £350,000,” declared the report.<sup>53</sup>

Following this report, the Arts Council moved away from a democratic model of funding, with a multiple of small clients. Instead, scarce resources went to a few select clients. Carcanet and *PN* benefited from this “winner takes all” tendency of public funding, even though their impact was limited to a relatively small audience. Print runs for Carcanet titles were typically 500 to 1,000. The institutional sale per *PN* issue was approximately 400 in 1986. The individual sale was approximately 800. In addition, 100 and 200 individual single copy were sold through shops.<sup>54</sup> This combined circulation of 1,300–1,400 was not much higher than in the 1970s, when *PN* was selling c. 1,000 copies.<sup>55</sup> The strength of Carcanet and *PN* did not lie in their commercial appeal, but in their aptitude to fit with Arts Council priorities geared towards entrepreneurial non-profits.

<sup>51</sup> Schmidt to Dick Davis, March 5, 1984, CPA 3/113, JRL.

<sup>52</sup> *The Glory of the Garden* (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1984), vii.

<sup>53</sup> *The Glory of the Garden*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> Schmidt to Peter Verwey, Aug. 7, 1986, CPA 4/2, JRL.

<sup>55</sup> Brian Cox to F. J. L. Duncan, Aug. 28, 1975, COX 5/1, Brian Cox papers, JRL.

Remarkably, the grant for Carcanet and *PN* increased to reach £52,000 and £15,450, respectively, in 1984/85 (15% of the overall Arts Council budget for literature). More impressive still, funding continued to grow—reaching £54,000 and £16,750 in 1986/87. This remarkable success does not mean that *PN* and Carcanet could rest on their laurels. In 1984, Marghanita Laski resigned from her position at the Arts Council. And in early 1986, Charles Osborne was forced to leave his post following years of controversies. In particular, he was criticised for failing to defend his literature department against funding cuts. The *Observer* declared: “Mr Osborne, who has been sceptical about literature subsidy, seems to have colluded in his own departure.” The *Times* added that Osborne needed a holiday to recover “from his exertions in undermining his department” (Osborne 228). The departure of the little-loved literature director deprived *PN* and Carcanet of their most powerful protector, leaving them vulnerable to changing priorities at the Arts Council—including the need for more diversity in publishing.

In 1983, the European Association for the Promotion of Poetry conducted a survey on the production of poetry in each of its member nations. As part of this survey, the London-based Poetry Society asked Michael Schmidt for information on his poetry list and on the changing market for poetry. “Do you have any comments on the particular problems of publication facing the following groups of poets: (a) foreigners; (b) beginners; (c) minorities (eg gay, black, feminist poets)?”<sup>56</sup> Schmidt responded that he was himself a foreigner and many of the writers on his list were. His case was hardly unique: many of the major British publishers were foreigners or second or third generation immigrants. When it came to select for poetry for Carcanet and *PN*, the only thing that mattered was literary quality, without reference to gender, race or sexual proclivities of the writer.<sup>57</sup>

The Arts Council’s concern with gender and racial diversities can be traced back to the late 1970. The terms “ethnic minorities” and “feminist” first appeared in an ACGB annual report in 1978. That year, Onlywomen Press received £1,000 for *One Foot on the Mountain*, an anthology of contemporary British feminist poetry. Other independent publishers born of the UK women’s movement (Virago, Women’s

<sup>56</sup> David Green to Schmidt, Sept. 13, 1983, CPA 3/169, JRL.

<sup>57</sup> Schmidt to Green, Sept. 19, 1983, CPA 3/169, JRL.

Press and Sheba Feminist Press) regularly received ACGB funding. For example, in 1983, Virago was awarded £1,900 to publish *The Writings of Anna Wickham: Free Woman and Poet*. That same year, the Council also sponsored the Edinburgh Feminist Writers' Conference.

The Thatcher government was starting to promote "a neoliberal approach to multiculturalism by setting English identity within a mosaic of other particularities that required protection and promotion" (Rogers 162). The first government enquiry into the schooling of ethnic minority children was published in 1985. Led by Lord Swann, it encouraged understanding of "the range of cultures and lifestyles" that constituted modern Britain.<sup>58</sup> Three years later, the Conservative government appointed Brian Cox to chair a panel reviewing the English curriculum (Cox, *The Great Betrayal*). Cox had edited the controversial Black Papers on education published from 1969 to 1977 in *Critical Quarterly*, the magazine he had co-founded. This series of pamphlets on national education criticised the expansion of comprehensive education and the lowering of standards, and Cox earned a reputation as a reactionary educationist, deeply hostile to the counter-revolution of the 1960s. Michael Schmidt later called him "a genuine radical conservative."<sup>59</sup> As Chair of the English Working Group, Cox surprised many by making a case for introducing cultural diversity through the curriculum. "Today literature in English in the classroom can - and should - be drawn from different countries," declared the report.<sup>60</sup> In a letter to Cox, Schmidt praised his mentor for his "persuasive tact" in handling the topic of diversity—a topic that, whether one liked it or not, had become a "fact."<sup>61</sup> It is in this context that the Arts Council began to focus particularly on the inclusion of ethnic minorities.

In February 1986, shortly after the departure of Charles Osborne, Michael Schmidt wrote to the Secretary General of the Arts Council, Luke Rittner. Schmidt did not want his editorial judgements to be affected by ethnic considerations. Besides, Carcanet and *PN* already published works translated from French by Caribbean and North African

<sup>58</sup> *Education for All: The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups* Cmnd. 9453 (HMSO, 1985), 320.

<sup>59</sup> Schmidt to Cox, Sept. 15, 1989, COX 6/10, Brian Cox papers, JRL.

<sup>60</sup> DfES, *English for Ages 5 to 16* (DfES, 1989), sec. 7.5.

<sup>61</sup> Schmidt to Cox, Sept. 15, 1989, COX 6/10, Brian Cox papers, JRL.

writers. What interested him as a publisher was this European tradition in all its complexity—a complexity which extended into formerly colonial areas.<sup>62</sup> Three months later, Schmidt wrote again, to try to revive the library subscription scheme. Would the Arts Council consider giving free subscriptions of *PN Review* to local libraries? Ethnic minorities would then familiarise themselves with the magazine and submit their own work. For Schmidt, this would help with his role as discover of new talents, since minorities usually made themselves known after identifying the publisher or magazine they felt suitable for their work.<sup>63</sup>

### *Publishing more Women Poets*

In 1987, the ethnic minority policy had become a priority reflected in the Arts Council literature advisory panel. ACPB Clients were required to reflect, not only in employment but also in artistic policy, the ethnic diversity of the country. That same year, *PN* started publishing Sujata Bhatt, a poet who went on to a distinguished career. Born in Ahmedabad, India, in 1956, Bhatt grew up in a multilingual environment. After studying creative writing at the University of Iowa, she moved to Germany where she worked as a freelance writer. She was 32 years when her first collection of poems appeared. *Brunizem* (Carcamet, 1988) fitted well in a larger literary context characterised by more diverse voices—a trend encouraged by the Arts Council.

Sujata Bhatt joined a growing roster of women poets published by *PN Review* and Carcamet—including Eavan Boland, an Irish poet born in 1944. Though born in Dublin, Eavan Boland grew up largely in London and New York, and she started writing and publishing poetry from an early age. In the first two decades of Boland's career, *PN Review* mentioned her work only once (Smith, "On Irish Poetry"). By the mid-1980s, the magazine was paying increased attention to women's poetry. The words "feminism" and "feminist" appeared more frequently. It is in this context that the forty-one-year-old Boland published her first poem in *PN*, "This is the Noise of Myth" (1985). Her association with Carcamet started two years later, with the publication of *The Journey and other Poems* (1987) followed by *Selected Poems* (1989). Boland continued

<sup>62</sup> Schmidt to Luke Rittner, Feb. 7, 1986, CPA 4/2, JRL.

<sup>63</sup> Schmidt to Rittner, May 19, 1986, CPA 4/2, JRL.

to write for *PN*, including a review of *Beyond this Limit* by the feminist, Scottish and Socialist writer Naomi Mitchison. And in 1990, *PN* published Boland's essay "Outside History," in which she writes about her feeling of alienation as a woman poet. Boland succeeded in carving more space for women in the canon of Irish poetry. In doing so, she was helped by multiple literary institutions—including Irish and British publishers. As a middle-aged poet, when her reputation was already established, she found a home at Carcanet and *PN*, which allowed her to escape the confines of the Dublin literary scene and consolidate her international audience.

The reinvention of *PN*/Carcanet from male-dominated to women-friendly forums was largely due to external pressures to change. Publishing nine men for one woman was still possible in the 1970s and early 1980s, but it presented a risk in the mid-1980s, a time of turbulences at the Arts Council. The ACGB was morphing into an economically liberal institution that encouraged public-private partnerships. But it also became socially and culturally liberal, pushing its clients to embrace diversity. At the same time, the growing market for women's literature and feminist ideas offered opportunities for publishers. Michèle Robert's 1983 accusations on the scarcity of female contributors to *PN* had become less true by the end of the decade. Thanks to this evolution, both *PN Review* and Carcanet survived the battles of the mid-1980s, with their funding at a record high level. The emphasis on diversity and entrepreneurialism, embraced by the Thatcher government, continues to shape the Arts Council and its clients to this day.<sup>64</sup>

## APPENDIX

See Figs. 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5.

<sup>64</sup> For more on the UK creative industries, see the work of Mark Banks.

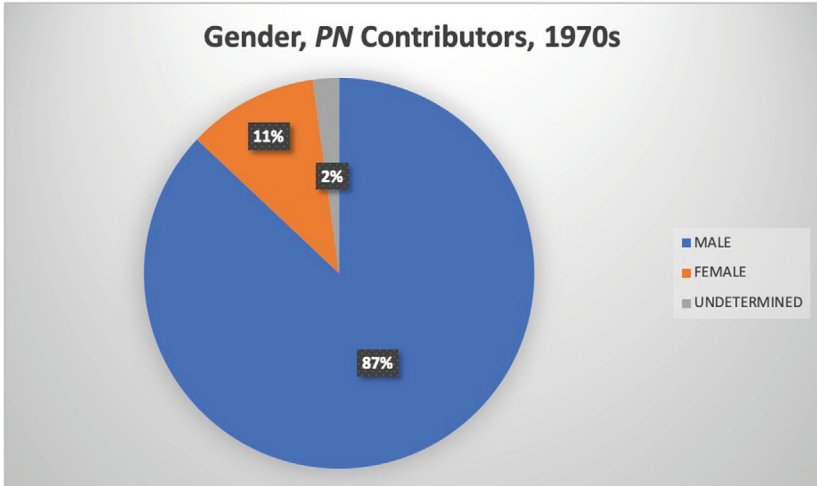


Fig. 5.1 Gender, PN contributors, 1970s

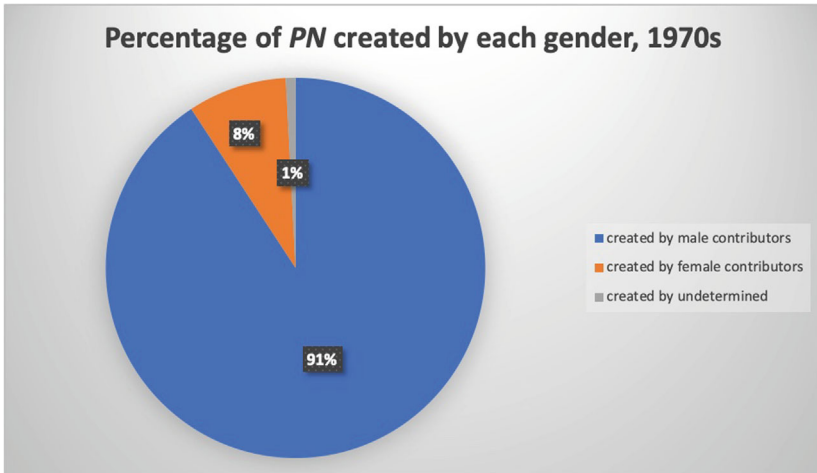


Fig. 5.2 Percentage of PN created by each gender, 1970s

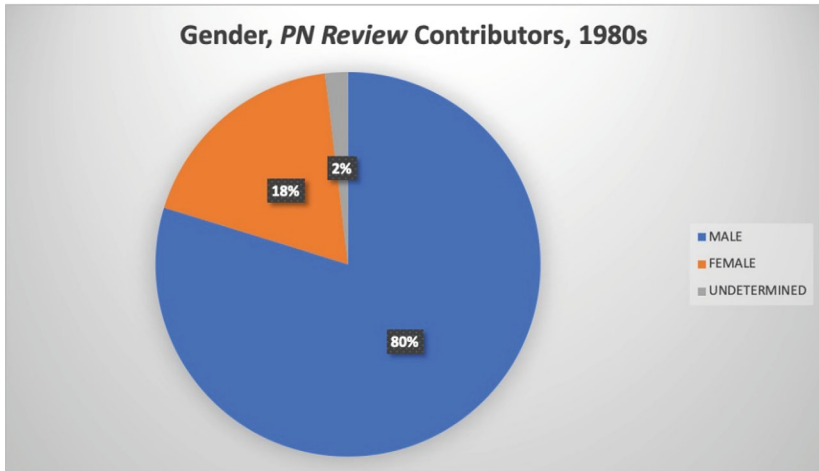


Fig. 5.3 Gender, *PN* contributors, 1980s

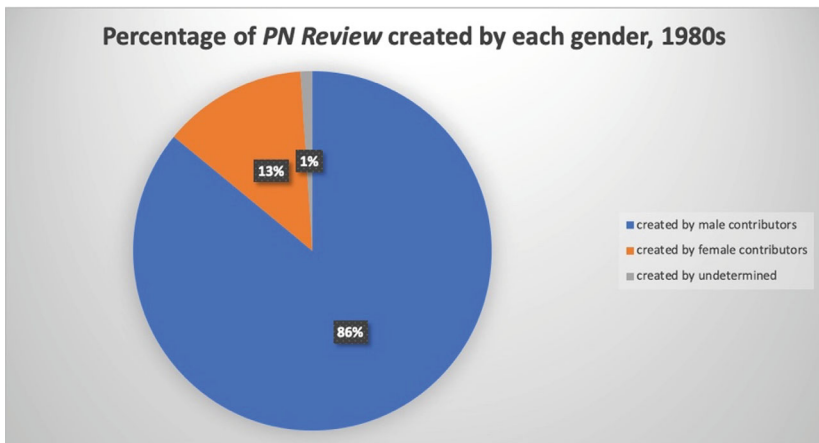


Fig. 5.4 Percentage of *PN* created by each gender, 1980s

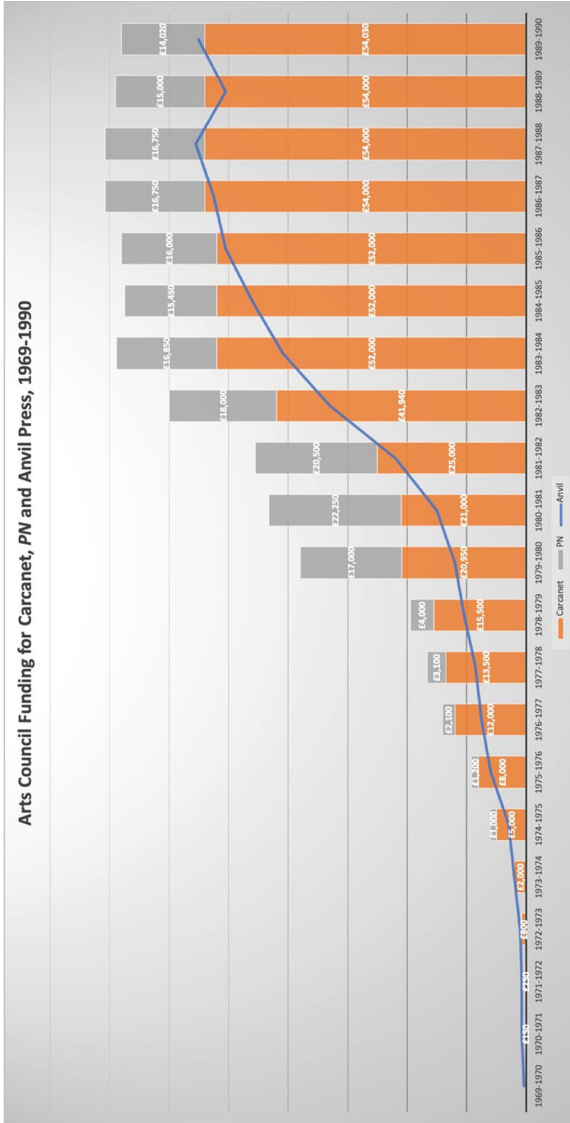


Fig. 5.5 Arts Council funding for Carcanet, PN and Anvil Press, 1969–1990

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## Elizabeth Jennings and the UK Poetry Market

In January 1987, the sixty-year-old poet Elizabeth Jennings won the W. H. Smith Literary Award for her *Collected Poems* published by Carcanet. She was delighted with the money (£4,000) and with the publicity that came with the prize.<sup>1</sup> BBC radio invited her on its Woman's Hour programme. "Hope they don't get onto Women's Lib which I am pretty strongly against," Jennings told her publisher Michael Schmidt. "I shall steer them back to poetry."<sup>2</sup> Despite her lack of interest in feminism, Jennings benefited from the increased interest in women's poetry in the 1980s. She received a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 1992, confirming her literary comeback. Both her *Selected Poems* of 1979 and *Collected Poems* of 1986 were bestsellers on the Carcanet list—a rare example of commercial success in poetry.<sup>3</sup>

Jennings's career exemplifies the tribulations of the UK poetry market in the second part of the twentieth century. At the start of her career

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Jennings to Michael Schmidt, Jan. 31, 1987, CPA 3/277, Carcanet Press Archive, John Rylands Library, Manchester (hereafter referred to as CPA, JRL). See also Derwent May, "Exploiting Literary Awards," Box 3, Jennings papers, JRL.

<sup>2</sup> Jennings to Schmidt, Jan. 9, 1987, CPA 3/267, JRL.

<sup>3</sup> In 1989, Schmidt wrote her: "Statistically speaking, you are now unrivalled as our best-seller. Indeed you must be one of the best-selling poets in England ... Few authors can claim the earned popularity that you now enjoy." Cited in Greene 157. By 2002, her *Selected Poems* (1979) has sold over 50,000 copies and her original *Collected Poems* (1986) 35,000. Schmidt, "Preface," in *New Collected Poems, by Elizabeth Jennings*, xx.

in the 1940s, she benefited from powerful literary networks associated with the University of Oxford. As a student at St Anne's College between 1944 and 1947, she networked with young people who would become successful writers (including Kingsley Amis). Her poems appeared in the annual anthology *Oxford Poetry* for 1948 and 1949. Oscar Mellor's Fantasy Press then published her first collection, *Poems*, alongside titles by Donald Davie and Thom Gunn. By the mid-1950s, she was grouped together with Amis, Davie, Gunn and Philip Larkin as part of the Movement. The only woman in the group, Jennings also distinguished herself with an unfashionable commitment to religion. When she won the Somerset Maugham award for *A Way of Looking* (André Deutsch, 1955), she used the money to travel to Italy and meet other Catholics. Rome offered the perfect setting for her next book, *A Sense of the World* (Deutsch, 1958).

By the 1960s, Jennings was already well established. Deutsch published her third collection, *Song for a Birth or a Death* in 1961. The following year, she was one of three writers included in the first volume of Penguin Modern Poets. Despite this success, it was a difficult personal time for Jennings: she suffered from severe depression, which led to suicide attempts and hospitalisation in a mental health centre, a traumatising experience which inspired her collections *Recoveries* (Deutsch, 1964) and *The Mind has Mountains* (Macmillan, 1966). But it was also a time of great opportunities for British poets, with mainstream publishers paying close attention to their poetry list. In 1967, Penguin published its tenth volume in the Modern Poets series, with an initial print run of 20,000, and Ted Hughes founded the Poetry International festival in London.<sup>4</sup> That same year, Macmillan issued Jennings's *Collected Poems*, followed by *The Animals' Arrival* (1969), *Lucidities* (1970), and *Relationships* (1972).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the market for poetry was increasingly saturated, and commercial publishers started slimming down their list. This poetry recession left many established authors with publishers who were no longer committed to their work. In 1974, the literary agent Bruce Hunter wrote to Michael Schmidt: "Macmillan have been doing quite well with [Jennings] both in hardcover and in paperback and the

<sup>4</sup> See Special Collections & Archives at the University of Liverpool Library, "New Exhibition: *The Mersey Sound*," *Manuscripts and More*, 2017, <https://manuscriptsandmore.liverpool.ac.uk/?p=2959> [accessed Aug. 31, 2020].

last book was a Poetry Book Society Choice. But as you know they're running out of steam altogether on poetry and I'd be delighted if you'd like to take her over."<sup>5</sup> Carcanet Press published Jennings's next book, *Growing Points*, in 1975—the start of a long and financially rewarding collaboration between the author and her new publisher.

For Schmidt, enlisting Elizabeth Jennings was a big coup, a coup which had been prepared by years of networking and influencing. Schmidt was still a student at Oxford when he sought her out in 1968. He later wrote: "She was lonely. We had 'tea,' which at that time consisted of a tumbler of puckering white wine. Our conversation was wide-ranging and tangential, a fascinating series of strayings off the subject. As I got up to leave she tied me down to a tea date the following week, and so we met weekly for three years" ("Obituary"). Schmidt's friendship with the older poet exemplifies a key rule of survival in the literary scene: the need to win friends and influence people. If Schmidt had not known Jennings personally, it is likely that she would have found a more established publisher when Macmillan ceased to be interested in her work. She was in touch with Charles Monteith at Faber, for example. Instead, she accepted Carcanet's offer to take on her work, granting her established name to a fledgling publishing enterprise.

Elizabeth Jennings and Michael Schmidt had several things in common: their total devotion to their poetry career, their ability to network among a wide range of people, and their distaste for openly recognising the power of these networks. Unlike many other women poets, Jennings was able to sustain her investment in the poetry field: she not only made friends during her student years, but she also stayed in touch with the young poetry scene in the 1950s and 1960s. An extremely well-connected poet, Jennings nevertheless resented being grouped together with other writers (including Movement writers). Yet, it was this strong network that enabled her survival in a tough literary field and provided emotional and even financial support during difficult times in her life. Following a tumultuous period, she then reaped the benefits of her earlier investments in the 1980s and 1990s, when she was awarded literary prizes and honours as well as financial gains.

Compare this situation with that of Elaine Feinstein, who was only four years younger than Jennings. In her memoirs, Feinstein wrote about her

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Hunter (David Higham Associates) to Michael Schmidt, Feb. 14, 1974, CPA 2/1/41, JRL.

sense of exclusion from the male-dominated poetry scene of the 1970s (*It Goes with the Territory* 226). As a married woman with young children, Feinstein had less time to grow her own network of contacts. It is only when she was in her forties that she managed to devote more energy to her literary career. The centrality of literary networks benefited single women such as Jennings, and hindered all those who had less time or were at a geographical disadvantage to socialise with the right people. Winning friends and influencing people proved central to Jennings' success in a poetry scene dominated by powerful male writers and publishers.

But as a deeply religious, anti-feminist poet, Elizabeth Jennings was not well suited to the critical climate of the late 1990. Her reputation started to collapse—a trend that accelerated after her death in 2001. In the past few years, there has been a renewal of interest in a poet whose career was intertwined with some of the biggest names in UK poetry. Jane Dowson (a scholar of women's poetry) and Emma Mason (the editor of *Elizabeth Jennings: The Collected Poems*, Carcanet, 2012) organised a conference at St Anne's College in Oxford in 2016. The publication of a biography, *Elizabeth Jennings: The Inward War* by Dana Greene (Oxford University Press, 2018) confirms this growing interest.

This revival has come mostly from women's studies, and book historians have paid almost no attention to Jennings. Yet, her career spanned half a century and illustrates the boom-and-bust years of the British poetry market. Initially published by a small press (Fantasy Press), Jennings then joined a mid-size publisher (André Deutsch). In the 1960s, she was sufficiently established to attract large publishing houses (Macmillan and Penguin), at a time of extraordinary growth for the poetry market. The following recession led to her joining Carcanet, helping the small press to establish its reputation in the literary field.

Drawing on extensive work in paper and digital archives, this chapter makes a contribution to current research on women and book history. As we have seen, a growing number of scholars have paid attention to feminist publishing houses such as Virago Press and women's bookshops.<sup>6</sup> Although Elizabeth Jennings did not identify with the feminist movement, she had to play by the rules of a male-dominated literary field. This chapter analyses her publishing trajectory and shows the role that

<sup>6</sup> See Riley; Withers; Murray; Onosaka.

publishers played in branding Jennings as an unusual poet in a field dominated by male voices. Like the previous generation of modernist writers, Jennings carved a name for herself by harnessing the power of literary networks—while also emphasising her artistic originality.

### OXFORD POETRY AND FANTASY PRESS: JENNINGS AND THE MODERNIST MODEL

Like other Movement poets, Elizabeth Jennings has often been positioned as anti-modernist, but her career resembled that of modernist writers such as Wyndham Lewis: “discovered” by little magazines and small presses, and deeply embedded in literary networks, both Jennings and Lewis were then published by mainstream publishers, before going back full circle to smaller presses as their reputations waned.

The first step in this trajectory was a little magazine, *Oxford Poetry*. As an Oxford student in the 1940, Jennings had little chance to attract the attention of the mighty Oxford University Press, which focused on established and canonical poets. But University writers have long had opportunities to publish with local presses. The bookseller Basil Blackwell published the annual volumes of *Oxford Poetry*, which were often reviewed by mainstream media. The 1948 and 1949 volumes, with verses by Jennings, were reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Listener*, giving valuable exposure to the young poet.

Shortly after, *Oxford Poetry* was taken over by Oscar Mellor, who founded a small press in Swinford, near Oxford, in 1952. Mellor’s Fantasy Press was closely associated with the University Poetry Society: it printed its term cards and flyers and published its members’ work in the Fantasy Poets pamphlet series. Elizabeth Jennings was number one in this series and won a £225 prize from Arts Council for original English verse (Fig. 6.1).

The Fantasy pamphlets also included Thom Gunn (number sixteen in the series), Anthony Thwaite (number seventeen), Donald Davie (number nineteen), Philip Larkin (number twenty-one) and Kingsley Amis (number twenty-two). The back cover of Jennings’s pamphlet stressed her position as a member of a broader collective who came of age in wartime Oxford:

This publication is the first of a series to be issued by the Oxford University Poetry Society, the writers featured being, in most cases, undergraduates.

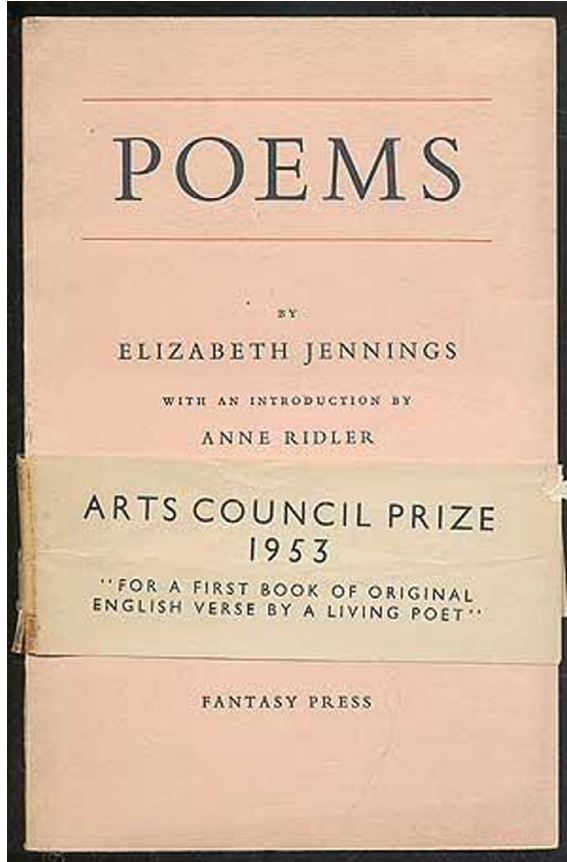


Fig. 6.1 Cover, Elizabeth Jennings's poems (Fantasy Press, 1953)

It is intended to appeal, not only to those concerned purely with the excellence of poetry, but also to those interested in the thoughts and techniques of the newest generation of English writers – the generation who grew up in wartime. Interest in the ideas of this generation is now perhaps more widespread than ever before; we therefore hope that the circulation of this series will not be confined to our University.

Kingsley Amis's Fantasy pamphlet coincided with his novel *Lucky Jim* (1954) and attracted attention from the *TLS*. In an article entitled "The

Shield of Irony,” George Sutherland Fraser wrote that the Fantasy poets “lack the obvious naivety, the weakness for the sentimental or grandiose gesture, which is one of the main pitfalls in the young poet’s path” (218).

This group identity lay the ground for the Movement, a term coined in 1954 by the literary editor of the *Spectator*, J. D. Scott. Two anthologies—D. J. Enright’s *Poets of the 1950s* (Kenkyusha, 1955) and Robert Conquest’s *New Lines* (Macmillan, 1956)—described the new poetry as ironical, unsentimental, down to earth, and anchored in a nostalgic idea of English identity. Yet, the coherence of the Movement was not obvious. In a letter to his friend Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis wrote: “What a load of bullshit all that was in the Spr about the new movt. etc.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth Jennings showed no enthusiasm for this label, which she described as a “journalistic gimmick” (Greene 45). As the only woman and Roman Catholic in the group, she considered herself distinctive, and she refused to “be grouped and criticized” with Movement writers (Greene 45).

Although Jennings published her poems with a small press and in little magazines, her work was not confined to a coterie of readers. In 1952, she appeared on the BBC Third Programme after publishing poems in *New Soundings*. Edited by John Lehmann, this new magazine provided an opening for young writers who found little or no market for their work “in the present dearth of literary magazines.”<sup>8</sup> The *Listener* criticised the quality of the radio broadcast that accompanied the print publication. Unaccustomed to hearing women read their poetry, the reviewer struggled with the poems of Lynette Roberts and Elizabeth Jennings. Many words were lost, and the meaning was unclear. “I had no difficulty in hearing Mr Lehmann’s introduction before them nor the men’s readings afterwards. But the microphone is notoriously unfair in its treatment of women’s voices.”<sup>9</sup> For this reviewer, women’s poetry was literally inaudible. Not everyone agreed. In 1958, the *Observer* described Jennings as “eminently conversational”—unlike other poets on the Third Programme with a more obscure style (Ferris). Throughout the 1950s, radio broadcasts allowed Jennings to share her work with diverse audiences who had little experience of poetry by women.

<sup>7</sup> Kingsley Amis to Philip Larkin, Oct. 18, 1954. Cited in Leader 311.

<sup>8</sup> “The Spoken Word,” *Listener* (Jan. 17, 1952): 115.

<sup>9</sup> Id.

Jennings's quest for artistic originality, combined with heavy reliance on literary networks, is reminiscent of Wyndham Lewis's strategy. Shortly before the First World War, Lewis rejected the Futurist movement of Filippo Marinetti, and built his own artistic movement which he called "Vorticism." His first novel, *Tarr* (published in 1918 by the Egoist Press in London) was reissued in 1928 in the Phoenix Library, a cheap series of reprints published by Chatto & Windus.<sup>10</sup> Moving from small press to mainstream publisher, Lewis reached new audiences eager to familiarise themselves with the new literature. He defined himself among the "men of 1914," while also attacking other modernist artists and writers (including Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group). Jennings lacked Lewis's aggressiveness, but she understood the importance of climbing the publishing ladder and carving a name for herself.

### FROM SMALL PRESS TO MID-SIZE PUBLISHER: THE ROLE OF ANDRÉ DEUTSCH IN JENNINGS'S CAREER

Elizabeth Jennings's reputation increased throughout the 1950s to reach a peak in the 1960s when she was in her thirties and early forties. In 1956, Philip Larkin described her as "very church-mousey to the point of affectation,"<sup>11</sup> and the press often mentioned her shyness and lack of appetite for publicity. Yet, Jennings was not shy when it came to seizing publishing opportunities. As her fame grew, she skilfully climbed up the publishing ladder, moving to larger and more established presses that in turn allowed her to reach different markets.

In 1955, André Deutsch published Jennings's *A Way of Looking*, four years after creating his own publishing house. He remained her publisher for nearly a decade, until 1964. During that time, Jennings consolidated her reputation as a key member of the post-war literary generation, a generation rooted in their common education at Oxford. Her refusal to dwell on emotions resembled Larkin's detached style. By the early 1960s, however, Jennings had more in common with confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath than with her former fellow students at Oxford.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See Jaillant, *Cheap Modernism*, 71–93.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Larkin to Monica Jones, March 11, 1956, *Letters to Monica* (201).

<sup>12</sup> Jennings and Sylvia Plath met in early 1960. See Plath's letter to her mother Aurelia Schober Plath, March 3, 1960, *Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume II*, 431–2. "I met the

When Deutsch became Jennings's publisher, he was a thirty-eight-year-old man with an eventful past. Born in Budapest in a Jewish family, he was educated there and in Vienna. Following the Anschluss, he left for Zürich, where he had family, and he eventually reached England. At the start of the Second World War, he was interned on the Isle of Man as an enemy alien. He was soon released, and thanks to an introduction from a fellow internee, he met the managing director of the publishers Nicholson and Watson. This led to Deutsch joining its sales team, an experience which gave him a thorough education in all aspects of the book trade. Living in London allowed Deutsch to network with fellow refugees from Europe, including George Weidenfeld who went on to co-found the publishing firm Weidenfeld & Nicolson. In 1945, Deutsch started his own publishing firm, but he lost control to his fellow directors in 1951. He soon formed a new company, André Deutsch Ltd.<sup>13</sup>

The editor Diana Athill, who had worked with Deutsch at his former firm, joined the new company and remained there until the end of her career. In *Stet: A Memoir*, Athill wrote that Deutsch's poetry list finds its origins in a meeting with the novelist and poet Lawrence "Laurie" Lee. Deutsch agreed to publish Lee's collection of poems *My Many-Coated Man* in 1955. Lee recommended they publish Elizabeth Jennings, and the poetry list grew—even though "poetry was never easy to sell, and we were not among the houses that were best at it" (Athill n. pag.).

Jennings was still in her twenties when she joined André Deutsch Ltd, and the publisher emphasised her youth as a selling point. "Forty-eight poems by one of the youngest and most distinguished English poets," declared an advertisement in the *Times Literary Supplement*.<sup>14</sup> Deutsch was not the first publisher to stress the appeal of a young writer. As early as the 1920s, UK "publishers targeted and advertised youth"—as Marius Hentea has shown in the case of novelists (168). Deutsch knew that post-Second World War audiences were eager for new writers, and he positioned Jennings as an emerging poet in touch with current literary trends.

popular British Oxford-graduate poetess Elizabeth Jennings, a Catholic who reads for a London publishing house & lives in a convent while here, returning to her rooms in Oxford on weekends to write (she has three volumes out) - we got along very well."

<sup>13</sup> For more information on André Deutsch, see Curtis.

<sup>14</sup> Advertisement for André Deutsch Ltd, *Times Literary Supplement* (Oct. 14, 1955): 603.

This marketing strategy worked well with reviewers, who often grouped together Elizabeth Jennings and Philip Larkin as young poets representative of a generation who had come of age during the war. Larkin had just released a new collection of poems, *The Less Deceived*, with the Marvell Press. The volume was sold for 6 shillings, less than Jennings's *A Way of Looking*, sold for the relatively high price of 8 s. 6d. Michael Hamburger reviewed the two books for the *Times Literary Supplement* in December 1955, focusing on Larkin's and Jennings's similar age, worldview and attitude towards emotions:

Both Miss Jennings and Mr Larkin are serious poets; but like other poets of their generation—those born in the 1920s—they are careful not to take their seriousness too seriously. The refusal to be taken in, even by one's own feelings, can lead to a posture no less false than any other, a posture of cynical toughness; but, greatly as they differ in other respects, both Miss Jennings and Mr Larkin avoid this pitfall. (762)

Larkin and Jennings were also grouped together in a review in the *Observer*, which focused on their restrained expression of feelings. "Manner and manners are almost identical in much new poetry, and this need be no bad thing," noted the reviewer, Naomi Lewis. "Tears are unwept, ranting is out, complexity of thought balances the ordered verse." Like the *TLS* reviewer, Lewis did not discuss Jennings's poetry in terms of gender, preferring to stress its actual content and "distance from violent human expression" (11).

The poet Ann Ridler, who reviewed the two books for the *Guardian*, was also struck by the new generation's refusal to dwell on emotions. "Sobriety of expression" characterised Jennings's poems, while Larkin's detachment often resembled superficiality (6). Interestingly, Ridler reminded readers that both Jennings and Larkin had started their careers with "a small private press" and "had an immediate success among those for whom contemporary poetry exists" (6). In this narrative, small publishing ventures enabled literary experimentation while larger firms were much more conservative.

This narrative was particularly influential after the Second World War. Like modernist writers before them, Jennings and Larkin could boast that their writings were designed for a small audience of enlightened readers. In fact, their poetry was reviewed in mass-market newspapers, attracting the attention of powerful literary figures. In March 1956, the *Guardian*

announced that Elizabeth Jennings had won the Somerset Maugham prize. André Deutsch issued new dustjackets that mentioned the award, reinforcing the market appeal of the book (Fig. 6.2).

Kingsley Amis had won the same prize the previous year. “Both have been supported by the same people and have appeared in the same periodicals,” the *Guardian* declared. “Both belong to roughly the same Oxford

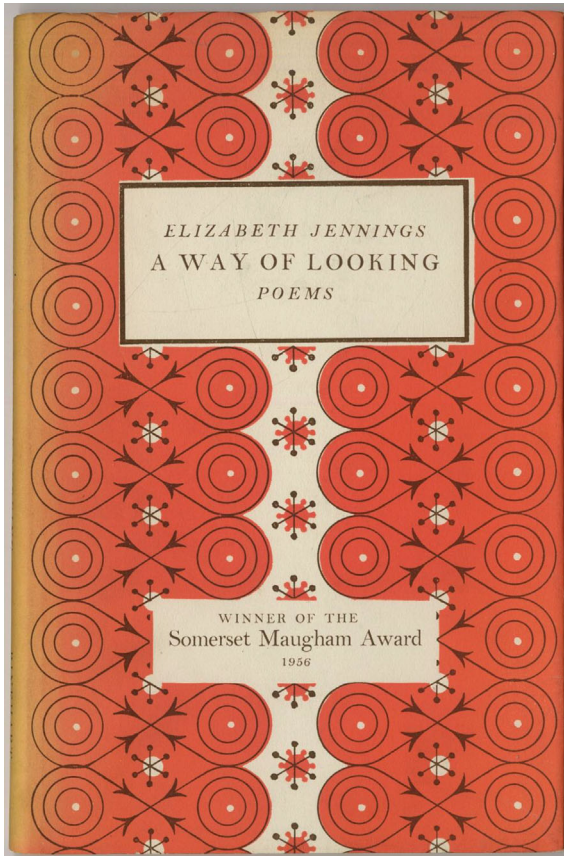


Fig. 6.2 Cover, Elizabeth Jennings’s *A Way of Looking* (André Deutsch, 1955)

generation.”<sup>15</sup> The prize came with £400 to travel abroad. Having established herself as a rising star of British poetry, Jennings took the money to travel to Italy—a journey that had a profound impact on her work.

The Somerset Maugham award revealed contradictions at the centre of Jennings’s public image. On the one hand, she was presented as “a quiet and exact poet who works in the Oxford Central Library.”<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, she excelled at networking and creating opportunities for herself. As a key member of the young generation of British writers, she appeared in Robert Conquest’s *New Lines* anthology which launched the Movement. A *Sunday Times* review entitled “Young Poets” summarised the key characteristics of the Movement:

Unlike the poets of the 1930s, these writers shun political comment; indifferent rather than hostile to Christian doctrine, they also turn a blind or a sceptical eye upon contemplative mysticism and upon the myths alleged to be floating around in the collective unconscious. Wary and alert, intent upon eliminating all that is lax, loose and inflated, they aim at an uncompromising exactitude, even if this should entail a bleak harshness of thought and a corresponding deficiency in musical and emotional richness. (Press 5)

This summary applied well to poets such as Philip Larkin or Thom Gunn. But indifference to Christian doctrine was certainly not a characteristic of Elizabeth Jennings. Her love of Italy was inseparable from her commitment to Catholicism. The *New Lines* selection included her poems “Afternoon in Florence,” “Florence: Design for a City,” “Not in the Guide-books,” and “Piazza San Marco.”

Jennings’s position in the literary field remained deeply tied to her association with Oxford. In 1957, ten years after her graduation from St Anne’s College, the *Sunday Times* published the portrait of twenty-four Oxford alumni. Looking back in nostalgia, Godfrey Smith—who had studied at Worcester College before becoming a journalist—remembered that “while the world took an uneasy breath between Hiroshima and Korea, Oxford was vastly enjoying itself” (Smith 11). Many former

<sup>15</sup> “Our London Correspondence: Fleet Street, Friday Night,” *Guardian* (March 24, 1956): 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

students had become academics, civil servants, scientists and other professions that preclude notoriety. But some had chosen a more public life—including Jennings, who appeared next to Kingsley Amis. There was only one other woman among this portrait of the artistic establishment: the actress Yvonne Furneaux. Here, the contrast between Jennings's image as a shy librarian and the reality of her literary career could not be starker. Whereas women were traditionally confined to domestic roles, she had chosen public exposure as a famous poet.

With men dominating the writing and performance of poetry, women poets were often in an uncomfortable place. In May 1958, Jennings wrote about her experience of reading a selection of poems in front of a typical audience. "It was the usual collection of people – about forty of them, mostly women and mostly over forty-five." Whether the reading took place in London or in the provinces, Jennings found the same sort of gathering—which included archetypes such as eccentric women who do not read poetry but "have come determined to lead the question-time on to subjects like Yoga, Freud or Nuclear Energy." In addition to these precursors of 1960 New Age, poetry readings often included a few middle-aged men who had come to talk about sex. Jennings dreaded questions such as "Do you think poetry springs from frustration?" She felt she was "taking part in a kind of striptease act and revealing altogether too much." As a single woman in her early thirties, Jennings attracted unwanted attention from these male readers, and "pity" from married women who attended her poetry readings (14). The poetry scene was not a welcoming place for a young woman and yet, Jennings persevered. She was determined to succeed in her chosen career, whatever the obstacles.

In September 1958, Deutsch released Jennings's new collection of poems, *A Sense of the World*. At around the same time, the publisher Hamish Hamilton issued *To Whom it May Concern*, by the poet and journalist Alan Ross who (like Jennings, Larkin and Amis) had studied at Oxford in the 1940s. Reviewing the two books in the *Guardian*, Larkin wrote: "Miss Jennings is still an explainer rather than a describer ... Mr Alan Ross, on the other hand, has always been a describer" (6). Jennings, Ross and Larkin had different styles, but they belonged to the same literary networks rooted in a common education at the University of Oxford.

Whereas Ross rejected religiosity, Jennings's poems celebrated her 51–52 Catholicism. For Larkin, her religious poems at the end seemed new. In fact, as Dana Greene points out, Jennings had already intuited a link

between religion and poetry, which “clearly marked her off from her religiously allergic Movement colleagues” (). This religious tone did not appeal to Alan Ross. In a *TLS* review, he wrote that Jennings’s work would be stronger if she could “free herself of religiosity” and anchor her work in real life. These poems “are products of a mind which, for all its sensitivity, its intelligence and clarity, is not, in the last resort, at the moment very interesting” (628).

For Alan Ross, what made Jennings’s work unappealing was not only her religious beliefs but also her self-effacement. This “unobtrusiveness of personality ... tends almost to mousiness,” he wrote. As an unmarried woman in her thirties, Jennings lacked the experience of the world necessary for great poetry. *A Sense of the World* seemed too remote from contemporary reality: “Miss Jennings’s Italian poems could have been written any time in the past 300 years.” Whereas T. S. Eliot had famously celebrated the erasure of personality, Ross condemned Jennings’s refusal to share any deep personal emotions:

The retreat from reality, involving reality of contemporary life, is common to more than one woman poet of our day, and it is because Miss Jennings has gifts of a kind that could well develop interestingly another way that one hoped for an extension, rather than an effacement, of personality. (628)

Here, Ross reveals his pre-conceptions on women poets who were confined to a quiet domestic space remote from the hustle and bustle of public life. In fact, at the time *A Sense of the World* was published, Jennings was working as reader for the London publisher Chatto & Windus. She later said: “I was poetry editor and masses of other things as well (Cecil [Day-Lewis], of course, had a much bigger say in the poetry accepted but they did take a lot of notice of what I said).”<sup>17</sup> She was financially independent, travelled alone to Italy, and led an active social life. Once again, her image as a shy and retiring woman did not fit with a more complex reality.

Alan Ross was not the only one to disparage Jennings on the grounds that she was too gentle and too well-behaved to make a great poet. The British literary scene was still influenced by the boisterous Dylan Thomas, who died in 1953, age 39, after a long history of alcohol abuse.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Jennings to Michael Schmidt, June 16, 1984, CPA 3/277, JRL.

Compared to these standards to unruliness, Jennings seemed very timid. “She is an introspective poet,” wrote the *Listener*, “who tries to make each poem a thought as well as an emotion.” Her poem about a church in Rome seemed “too tidy, an easy way out, an excuse to dodge the real issues of flesh and blood.”<sup>18</sup>

As a woman poet, Jennings was belittled for qualities traditionally gendered female: quietness, passivity and gentleness. Reviewers still saw her as a retiring woman poet, even when she performed at poetry readings and broadcasts. Commenting on a recording of her poems, J. W. Lambert declared: “Here is a woman’s voice, not a poet’s ... in listening one almost seems to see the rapture of feeling – not without an instinctive feminine undertone of complaint” (13). Although Jennings was limited by her female identity, she also stood out in a crowded poetry scene. In February 1959, a portrait of her appeared in the *Sunday Times*. “She is a warm and unassuming personality with many friends” including Kingsley Amis with whom she studied at Oxford.<sup>19</sup>

Praising Jennings’s work, some reviewers pointed out that great poetry was rarely built on loudness and violence. Her quiet voice “will be heard after the thunders of fashion have died away,” wrote Richard Church in the *Sunday Times* (6). Jennings’s “delicate subtlety” was celebrated in another *Times* review.<sup>20</sup> Writing in the *Spectator*, Anthony Thwaite also praised her “outstanding talent” (“Forms of Assurance”). Born in 1930, Thwaite had met Jennings when he was a student at Oxford. He published his poems with the Fantasy Press and later, with Philip Larkin’s publisher the Marvell Press. In a closely-knit literary field, Thwaite and Jennings’s friendship served to mutually reinforce their reputations.

Now in her early thirties and with three books published, Jennings still remained associated with her student days and the Oxford literary set. In October 1960, she reviewed Kingsley Amis’s *Take a Girl like You*. Calling it “the best novel Mr Amis has written,” Jennings praised its mix of “humour with a deep compassion for and understanding of people, particularly women” (591). This seems a surprising statement for a book that ends with the rape of a woman who has passed out after drinking

<sup>18</sup> “Review of *A Sense of the World* by Elizabeth Jennings,” *Listener* (Oct. 30, 1958): 699.

<sup>19</sup> “The Marginal Muse,” *Sunday Times* (Feb. 22, 1959): 5.

<sup>20</sup> “Four Living Poets,” *Times* (Sept. 11, 1958): 11.

too much alcohol. But Jennings did not see the novel as the story of a man (Patrick Standish) taking advantage of a woman (Jenny Bunn, a primary school teacher who falls in love with Patrick but is not ready to have sex yet). For Jennings, Jenny was not an innocent victim but rather “a match for the sex-obsessed Patrick” who “succeeds in breaking down her defences, though only when she is drunk.” Patrick is then “critical of his own behaviour,” a self-awareness that Jennings saw as evidence of compassion to women in the novel. As a distinguished woman poet, Jennings lent her reputation to help Kingsley Amis fend off accusations of misogyny. In doing so, she also failed to strongly condemn rape and violence against women.

While Amis thrived on controversy, Jennings was seen as a discreet, uncontentious poet—and her next publication *Song for a Birth or a Death* (1961) consolidated this image. Deutsch advertised the book widely. One *TLS* advertisement quoted a review by Peter Levi saying: “Has the freshness and strength of a steel bridge ... One could hardly ask more in honesty or intelligence or in closeness to the springs of her poetry.”<sup>21</sup> Levi had met Jennings when he was training to be a Jesuit at Campion Hall, University of Oxford. He became her life-long friend and supporter—a personal connection that was not visible to casual readers. In a 1982 article, the sociologist David Morgan used the example of Bloomsbury to illustrate the importance of friendship in the production of culture. Much of this “friendship work,” as he calls it, is hidden (18–32). The author is commonly seen as the sole creator, which obscures multiple actors that have brought the book to the attention of the reader (including reviewers, who are often friends with the author). While Bloomsbury was rooted in friendships tied at the University of Cambridge, Jennings and her friends shared a common education at the University of Oxford. In both cases, these close ties endured for decades, and helped writers navigate the ups and lows of a literary career.

With hindsight, it is difficult to see Jennings as a calm and serene poet. But this is the way many reviewers described her before the crisis that led to her hospitalisation in a mental health hospital. “Elizabeth Jennings’s work has always been in the nature of a self-discipline,” wrote the *Listener* in 1961. Her poems “are devoted to the idea of order; coolness, ritual, and order are her favourite concepts. She wants to make things fit, to find

<sup>21</sup> Advertisement for André Deutsch Ltd, *Times Literary Supplement* (Aug. 11, 1961): 523.

a ritual or devise an emblem for whatever she experiences” (Furbank 214). This search for order was severely tested with the onset of Jennings’s suicidal depression in 1963. For more than two years, she was a patient at Warneford Hospital, Oxford, and she wrote about her experience in *Recoveries* (1964)—her last collection of poems published with Deutsch. In the poem “Patients” in “Sequence in Hospital,” she declared:

Violence does not terrify.  
 Storms here would be a relief,  
 Lightning be a companion to grief.  
 It is the helplessness, the way they lie

Beyond hope, fear, love,  
 That makes me afraid. I would like to shout,  
 Crash my voice into the silence, flout  
 The passive suffering here ... (*Collected Poems* 80)

In a *Times Literary Supplement* review, her friend Anthony Thwaite described the evolution of her poetry—from the self-effacement of earlier poems, to the confessional tone of *Recoveries*.

She has progressively drawn closer to the real situation, the real impulse, so that now one is not only satisfied intellectually but also often deeply touched by her directness, her eloquent involvement with private circumstances which through her skill she makes general and public. (“How to Confess” 512)

Using the pentameter to structure her poems, Jennings wrote about the boredom, the fear and the grief associated with her hospital experience. Although she claimed that her work was not autobiographical, she drew on her own experience in these hospital poems and continued to do so in her next collection published with Macmillan.

### MOVING TO LARGE PUBLISHING HOUSES (MACMILLAN AND PENGUIN)

In the early 1960s, Jennings’s established reputation attracted the attention of large, commercial publishing houses. In turn, these publishers helped her reach new readers, including readers unfamiliar with poetry. In April 1962, the *TLS* reviewed the first two volumes in the new

Penguin Modern Poets series. Elizabeth Jennings appeared in the first volume, alongside Lawrence Durrell and R. S. Thomas. The second volume included Kingsley Amis, Dom Moraes and Peter Porter. For the *TLS* reviewer Roy Fuller, the Penguin series was “a publishing enterprise of quite stirring courage and purpose” (266). The three poets in each volume were generously represented, the cover and type were attractive, and the price was modest (2 s. and 6 d., compared with 10 s. and 6 d. for Jennings’s *Song for a Birth or a Death*).

This made the series well-suited for an audience of secondary school pupils, undergraduates and teachers. “It is an audience already prepared by the postwar changes in our educational system,” wrote the *TLS* (Fuller 266). Penguin was not the only paperback publisher to target the booming educational market. In the 1950s, US quality paperback collections such as Anchor Books, Vintage Books, and the Modern Library Paperbacks became popular in universities—in a context of growing student enrolment following the GI Bill. But these series generally included fiction rather than poetry. Indeed, the business model of paperback publishers relied on huge print runs, whereas poetry remained a niche market.<sup>22</sup> With its Modern Poets series, Penguin hoped to convince non-readers of poetry to give it a try. For Roy Fuller, this was a risky strategy:

In their announcement of the series the publishers go so far as to characterise it as an attempt to change both British poetry-buying habits and the obscurity in which our poets languish. Can such things be done, or even partly done, by a mere act of publishing, however comprehensive? Or is poetry’s minority audience and private voice fixed unalterably by the social and cultural forces of the age? (266)

Other reviewers backed the Penguin initiative and criticised other publishers for confining poetry to a niche market. Martin C. O. Bax deplored the fact that poetry collections rarely sold more than a thousand copies. “There are undoubtedly many people in the country who, given the least bit of encouragement, would have become poetry readers,” he wrote. “That they haven’t is partly the fault of the publishers” (1–2). For Bax, it was good news that Penguin was putting their full sales ability

<sup>22</sup> Allen Lane, the creator of Penguin, estimated that 17,000 to 20,000 copies were necessary for a Penguin title to break even. See Jaillant, *Cheap Modernism*, 64.

behind the Modern Poet series. A. E. Dyson was equally excited about the initiative, celebrating the new series as “the main event of 1962.” “The dark nights of slender volumes at 12 s. 6d. a time for the élite may be nearing (who knows?) the end” (10–15). The Modern Poets series did succeed in creating new markets for poetry. The first two volumes were issued in print runs of 30,000 copies each, and reprints were scheduled in November 1962 (Wootten 89). Five years later, *The Mersey Sound* (number ten in the series) featured the work of the Liverpool poets Roger McGough, Brian Patten and Adrian Henri, and sold over 500,000 copies.<sup>23</sup>

Not everyone was convinced that contemporary poets should appear in a publisher’s series, a format traditionally associated with enduring classics. Writing in the *Observer*, Philip Toynbee lamented that he was “in the position of an art critic who is not allowed to stand more than a few inches from the picture.” Critical distance required distance in time. Who knew what would happen of Elizabeth Jennings and Kingsley Amis in a few years? For Toynbee, they were “little more than fairly skilled technicians” (20). Yet, Penguin was not the first publisher to include living writers in its series and to market them as classics. On the other side of the Atlantic, the Modern Library started publishing fiction and poetry by contemporary writers in 1917, two decades before the creation of Penguin in the UK.<sup>24</sup>

The first two volumes in the Modern Poets series appeared the same month as Al Alvarez’s anthology *New Poetry* s that Penguin sold for 3. 6d. In his introduction “Against Gentility,” Alvarez attacked the self-effacement and emotional restraint associated with the Movement: “gentility is a belief that life is always more or less orderly, people always more or less polite, their emotions and habits more or less decent and more or less controllable; that God, in short, is more or less good” (25). He promoted poets who fully embraced their emotions and unconscious drives, including Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn. Jennings wrote a harsh review of the anthology in the *Listener*. Alvarez was “most interested in the sort of poetry which is rough in texture and which communicates a sense of tamed violence or disturbance,” she declared. She added that

<sup>23</sup> “50 Years of *Mersey Sound*,” *National Museums Liverpool*, <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/stories/50-years-of-mersey-sound> [accessed Sept. 9, 2020].

<sup>24</sup> See Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917–1955*.

this dogmatism “proves to be little more than a collection of emotionally charged prejudices” (“Review of *The New Poetry*, by A. Alvarez” 782).

Despite Jennings’s overt condemnation of Alvarez and the confessional school of poets, she was increasingly seen as part of this group. In 1966, Macmillan published her new collection *The Mind has Mountains*, which explored the suffering of mental hospital patients. Her own experience of mental illness made this collection particularly “poignant,” wrote Bernard Bergonzi in the *Guardian* (9). He compared Jennings with the American Anne Sexton, who was included in the second edition of *New Poetry* (1966) alongside Sylvia Plath. Depression and despair were common themes, but unlike Sexton and Plath, Jennings tried to keep these emotions at a distance in her poetry. She was careful to avoid self-pity, preferring to observe the hospital environment and the other patients around her. In a hospital sitting room, she wrote:

Too many people cry, too many hide  
And stare into themselves...

The only hope is visitors will come  
And talk of other things than our disease...  
So much is stagnant and yet nothing dies. (*Collected Poems* 87)

Many reviewers found this style too distant to be entirely convincing. “The effect is sometimes to remove the experience of breakdown too far from the reader, who glimpses it as through a telescope in reverse,” wrote Graham Martin in the *Listener* (100). For Bergonzi, Jennings lost intensity because her poetry was too reflective and analytical. In contrast, Sexton “seems to be mastering her experiences by re-enacting them in poetry” (9).

When Macmillan published her *Collected Poems* in 1967, Jennings excluded 36 poems that had previously been published in book form. Most of these excluded poems came from *Recoveries* and *The Mind Has Mountains*—including nine free-association poems from the latter. Jennings did not wish to hide her experience of mental illness, but she was well aware that a Collected edition would be marketed as a classic, and she refused to be remembered as a confessional poet. “Art,” said Jennings, “is not self-expression while, for me, ‘confessional poetry’ is almost a contradiction in terms” (*Collected Poems* 13). In 1969, she reviewed Sexton’s *Love Poems* for Carcanet magazine, the student publication edited by the

young Michael Schmidt in Oxford (see Chapter 3). “Anne Sexton, like Sylvia Plath, has written sensitively about mental sickness,” she wrote. But Sexton’s poems were sometimes “too private” and “slightly embarrassing to the reader” (37). For Jennings, Sexton succeeded when she used formal stanzas, not when she poured rough feelings onto the page.

Collected editions are designed to be long-sellers, remaining on a publisher’s list for years or even decades. Their function is to position a writer as part of the literary canon—which is why Ford Madox Ford so desperately wanted a Collected work, and Virginia Woolf published her own Uniform edition with the Hogarth Press.<sup>25</sup> Many authors that we now see as canonical failed to obtain a Collected—often because the rights to earlier works were scattered among several publishers, and no agreement could be reached. Elizabeth Jennings was not in this situation, in part because she had stayed with André Deutsch for nearly a decade. Yet, as Dana Greene points out, the publication of *Collected Poems* was not without problems (100). Jennings had assumed that she owned the rights to her first book, *Poems*, which was out of print. In fact, it seems that the original publisher, Oscar Mellor, still owned the rights. The possible breach of contract worried Jennings, but the worst did not happen. Still in her early forties, she was in the fortunate position to be marketed as a classic writer.

Yet, in 1974, Macmillan decided to discontinue the publication of the *Collected Poems*. Bruce Hunter of David Higham literary agency wrote to Jennings: “we have now recovered the rights. It’s rather sad.”<sup>26</sup> This decision seems all the more surprising than two years before, Jennings had been part of the contenders to succeed Cecil Day-Lewis (her former colleague at Chatto & Windus) as Poet Laureate. Among the other names that circulated were Kathleen Raine (age 64) and Ruth Pitter (age 74). “Elizabeth Jennings is the youngest of this trio (she is 45), but has suffered from ill-health of late,” wrote the *Times*.<sup>27</sup> There was nothing to prevent a woman being appointed, except precedent. “How do they feel about tackling the job no woman has ever done before?,” asked the *Daily Mail*, a newspaper that rarely mentioned poetry (Lee-Potter 7).

<sup>25</sup> See Jaillant, “Ford, Book History, and the Canon”; and Jaillant, *Cheap Modernism*, 120–39.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Hunter to Elizabeth Jennings, April 1, 1974, CPA 2/1/41, JRL.

<sup>27</sup> “The Times Diary,” *Times* (June 29, 1972): 16.

Jennings was confident that she would thrive as Poet Laureate, but the *Mail* seemed unconvinced, citing her illness as well as her shyness and fear of large crowds.

Macmillan's decision to drop Jennings off its list was due to two main reasons. First, her three volumes of poems published between 1969 to 1972—*The Animals' Arrival*, *Lucidities*, and *Relationships*—attracted few reviews, many of them negative. Alasdair Maclean wrote in the *Listener*: “Elizabeth Jennings has been a poet of solid if modest achievement, but her decline here is catastrophic” (389). For Peter Porter, writing in the *Guardian*, Jennings had “been a hit-or-miss poet and [*Lucidities*] was full of misses of the most disquieting kind” (14). Years later, when Jennings prepared the selection for a new Collected edition, she included only a few poems from these “interim books,” as Michael Schmidt called them.<sup>28</sup>

The consensus was that Jennings no longer wrote her best poetry, and that she was out of touch with the literary trends of her time. Her dogged refusal to be grouped together with the confessional poets puzzled many reviewers. In a review of her *Collected Poems*, the *TLS* wrote that her poetry was “often astonishingly, and even embarrassingly, open, as ‘confessional’ as anything one finds in Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton.”<sup>29</sup> As an English poet so strongly associated with the Movement, she felt no affinity with the group of American confessional writers. But with a growing audience for “extremist” poetry (as Al Alvarez called it), there was an opportunity to reinvent herself as a kind of English equivalent to Sexton.<sup>30</sup> Jennings missed this opportunity, and paid a heavy price in terms of critical neglect.

The second reason that explains Macmillan's disinterest in Jennings's poetry is the poetry recession of the early 1970s. After the boom years that saw the arrival of mass-market enterprises such as the Penguin Modern Poets series, many publishing houses turned away from their poetry lists. This opened up opportunities from entrepreneurial presses such as Carcanet Press. Starting in 1972, Michael Schmidt persuaded

<sup>28</sup> Michael Schmidt to Elizabeth Jennings, Nov. 15, 1985, Box 1, Elizabeth Jennings papers (part 1), Georgetown U, Washington DC.

<sup>29</sup> “Cool Comfort,” *Times Literary Supplement* (Sept. 21, 1967): 840.

<sup>30</sup> See Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*.

established poets such as Edwin Morgan and Elizabeth Jennings to join his fledgling firm.

### THE APPEAL OF A SMALL PRESS: CARCANET PRESS, ELIZABETH JENNINGS AND THE LITERARY CANON

Michael Schmidt discovered Jennings's poetry when he was still a student at Oxford. "Clutching her first *Collected Poems*, I sought her out in 1968," he wrote ("Obituary" 6). The Macmillan edition convinced him that Jennings was an important writer that deserved her place on the literary canon. He remained Jennings's publisher for a quarter of a century, offering individual attention, extensive editorial advice, and the promise of long-term impact through the publication of Selected and Collected editions.

In the early 1970s, Carcanet Press benefited from the structural changes in the publishing industry in a general context of economic crisis. Following a wave of mergers, many mainstream publishers disengaged from poetry to focus on more profitable genres. In a 1975 letter to the Scottish poet, editor, critic and historian Maurice Lindsay, Schmidt explained the impact of these deep corporate changes on poetry lists:

In the old days, the ideal was to have a steadily selling back-list. Now, with the quick-money kids, the ideal is to have quick sellers, which sell out, and are never heard of again. Publishers seem to loathe holding stock, because it "depreciates." If they are in trouble (as Routledge and Cape reportedly are) it is because they have no adequate up-pricing policy on their back list, and have let their ideals and common, traditional sense deteriorate in the face of the American challenge. The whole notion of huge profits is the product of the American Influx and the enormous Corporation Tax.<sup>31</sup>

The wave of mergers in the publishing industry started in the early 1960s in the United States, and later in the same decade in Britain. In 1969, Chatto & Windus and Jonathan Cape merged to protect themselves from being swallowed up by corporate conglomerates (Rose). Two years later, the Cape Editions (edited by the poet, essayist, anthropologist and translator Nathaniel Tarn) were discontinued. The series included essays or groups of poems that would have been unlikely to

<sup>31</sup> Michael Schmidt to Maurice Lindsay, March 12, 1975, CPA 2/1/46, JRL.

come to English readers otherwise—including Charles Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael* (number two) and *Mayan Letters* (number seventeen), and Yves Bonnefoy’s *Selected Poems* (number twenty-four). Ted Hughes later tried to convince Michael Schmidt to revive the series under the Carcanet imprint. “It struck me that a very flimsy cheapest possible production edition of such things need cost very little, in your size company and might even be profitable,” wrote Hughes.<sup>32</sup> The project went nowhere, in part because Schmidt was unwilling to abdicate his editorial role and work under the authority of Tarn as series editor.<sup>33</sup>

With many publishers moving away from poetry, Schmidt seized opportunities to grow his list. In 1972, the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan wrote to Schmidt about his difficulties with Edinburgh University Press.

After keeping my second collection of poetry for a year and a half the Edinburgh University Press now tells me that the academic committee it gets its money ration from has ordered it (in the present tight university money climate) to stick to academic works and cut out fripperies like poetry – so my typescript comes back and I have to start all over again with some other publisher.

This was all the more frustrating given that his 1968 selected poems *The Second Life* had sold nearly 2,000 copies.<sup>34</sup>

Schmidt offered to become Morgan’s publisher, an offer that was reluctantly accepted. “You will understand that I would still have preferred to be brought out by a Scottish publisher if this was at all possible,” wrote Morgan, “but in the absence of EUP there is virtually no poetry publishing now within Scotland.”<sup>35</sup> Scottish poets had to turn to the big London publishers (Chatto & Windus and Gollancz for example) at a time when these firms were disengaging from their poetry list. As a Scottish nationalist, Morgan found the Manchester-based Carcanet Press more appealing than the London firms. “You are now poised 200 miles from both Glasgow and London, which must make you the hub of something,” he told Schmidt.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Ted Hughes to Michael Schmidt, May 16, 1976, CPA 2/1/39, JRL.

<sup>33</sup> Schmidt to Hughes, May 24, 1976, CPA 2/1/39, JRL.

<sup>34</sup> Edwin Morgan to Michael Schmidt, April 29, 1972, CPA 2/1/51, JRL.

<sup>35</sup> Morgan to Schmidt, May 18, 1972, CPA 2/1/51, JRL.

<sup>36</sup> Morgan to Schmidt, July 29, 1972, CPA 2/1/51, JRL.

In 1973, the year Carcanet published Edwin Morgan's collection of poems *From Glasgow to Saturn*, Schmidt suggested that it was time for Elizabeth Jennings to find a new publisher:

Doubtless it is the right time to leave Macmillan's sinking list. It's fortunate there are some good new lists around to try, and some sympathetic, sound old ones. I don't know whether Faber isn't the right place to try first. Charles Monteith is sympathetic.<sup>37</sup>

Jennings's reputation was not what it had been a decade before, and it is likely that Faber showed no interest in signing her up. In contrast, Carcanet was a much more modest enterprise that would benefit from an association with Jennings.

This collaboration had been prepared by several years of friendships between Schmidt and Jennings. In a 1972 article in *The Scotsman*, Jennings called Carcanet "certainly the most enterprising of the smaller publishers" and she praised two of their recent books.<sup>38</sup> Two years later, Bruce Hunter opened up negotiations with Schmidt for the publication of Jennings's new collection of poems, *Growing Points*:

You asked about terms and what I would suggest would be right now for Elizabeth is an advance of £200 on account of royalties of 10% to 2,500 and 12 ½% to 5,000 and 15% thereafter on a hardcover edition and 7 ½% of the published price on a paperback edition. Macmillan's policy has been to do about 1,000 copies in hardcover and about 3,000 copies in a quality paperback edition at half the price of the hardcover.<sup>39</sup>

Overall, these conditions seemed fine to Schmidt, and he only negotiated the amount of the advance.<sup>40</sup> At the age of only 27, he was delighted to sign up a poet who had once been compared to Philip Larkin. Elizabeth Jennings, after years of neglect on the Macmillan list, was equally pleased to join an enterprising publishing enterprise. She was also confident that her work could reach the American educational market, in a context of rising interest in women's poetry. She had recently been invited

<sup>37</sup> Schmidt to Jennings, June 15, 1973, CPA 2/1/41, JRL.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in Schmidt to Edmund Fisher, Feb. 15, 1972, CPA 3/198, JRL.

<sup>39</sup> Hunter to Schmidt, March 14, 1974, CPA 2/1/41, JRL.

<sup>40</sup> Schmidt to Hunter, March 15, 1974, CPA 2/1/41, JRL.

at the prestigious women's college Barnard in New York City, and she wrote to Schmidt:

I am so very happy to be on your discriminating list, I think Barnard people will be interested in *Growing Points*. I met so many lively, warm-hearted, kind and enthusiastic undergraduates and professors. There was a dinner in my honour (!) and I had more invitations than I had time to accept.<sup>41</sup>

However, there were few reviews of *Growing Points* in the United States. Writing in *Poetry* magazine, John Matthias criticised Jennings for writing too much and publishing all of it (348). He unfavourably compared her work with that of Peter Porter, who had also appeared in the Penguin Modern Poets series and had recently published a book of poems with Oxford University Press. In the UK, reviews were generally more positive. Writing in the *Observer*, Porter described *Growing Points* as “Elizabeth Jennings’s best book for many years” (“Elsinore Revisited” 34). One year after publication, nearly 3,000 copies had been sold, earning £400 in royalties for Jennings.<sup>42</sup>

Michael Schmidt was well aware that Jennings’s productivity sometimes came at the expense of quality. He designed a cautious strategy to reconquer old markets and create new ones. First, he weeded out inferior poems in Jennings’s prodigious output; second, he targeted the educational market through the publication of *Selected Poems* (1979) and *Collected Poems* (1986), positioning Jennings as a canonical poet. He explained this strategy in a 1976 letter to Jennings:

The key in the Elizabeth-Strategy is to be very cautious on the one hand, not flooding the market, and on the other, when we do publish the books, to make them as substantial in length and contents as possible. You have won back most of your earliest admirers and gathered a whole world of new admirers with *Growing Points*.<sup>43</sup>

In the first decade of her association with Carcanet, Jennings continued to publish a new volume of poems every two or three years, as she had done with her previous publishers. But unlike editors at Macmillan and

<sup>41</sup> Jennings to Schmidt, April 28, 1974, CPA 2/1/41, JRL.

<sup>42</sup> Schmidt to Jennings, April 8, 1976, CPA 2/1/41, JRL.

<sup>43</sup> Schmidt to Jennings, March 30, 1976, CPA 2/1/41, JRL.

Deutsch, Schmidt played a much more active role in the selection process and editorial work. For *Consequently I Rejoice* (1977), he selected what he saw as the best poems, and arranged them thematically. The collection began with personal poems on isolation and related themes, and moved on to love poems and celebratory poems, then season poems and people poems (about old and country people, and others); and finally plunged into the religious and sacramental poems.<sup>44</sup>

In 1976, Schmidt told Jennings of his intention to issue a Collected edition—but the book was not released until a decade later.<sup>45</sup> Jennings's sales slowed down after the publication of *Growing Points*. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Jennings had a small, but committed, readership. One fan told Jennings that her poems helped many people. "They are comfort in loneliness; there is hope in despair; courage without self-pity; there is love, compassion, humility and understanding even when relationships are sometimes finely balanced on a knife-edge."<sup>46</sup> She added that Jennings's poems were often shared for therapeutic reasons, including in her own group of people who read poetry while recovering from health problems.

In addition to these general readers, the *Selected* and *Collected* poems also reached an audience of teachers and pupils. Shortly after Jennings won the W. H. Smith Literary Award for the *Collected*, Schmidt informed her that one of her books might be made into an A level set text for secondary schools. This could contribute 4,000 sales per annum for the duration of its use. "I always feel that a poet's only immortal once he or she is on the syllabus!" Schmidt wrote.<sup>47</sup> In November 1987, Jennings received the good news that school boards had chosen *Selected Poems* and *Collected Poems*.<sup>48</sup> "Your books continue to sell amazingly well," Schmidt told Jennings two years later.<sup>49</sup> Widely read in schools, Jennings was now a well-known poet. She enjoyed signing her book and being treated as

<sup>44</sup> Schmidt to Jennings, Jan. 6, 1977, CPA 2/1/41, JRL.

<sup>45</sup> Schmidt to Jennings, March 30, 1976, CPA 2/1/41, JRL.

<sup>46</sup> Nancy Millward to Jennings, Aug. 30, 1980, Box 2, Jennings papers (part 1), Georgetown U, Washington DC.

<sup>47</sup> Schmidt to Jennings, June 1, 1987, CPA 3/267, JRL.

<sup>48</sup> Schmidt to Jennings, Nov. 23, 1987, CPA 3/267, JRL.

<sup>49</sup> Schmidt to Jennings, Nov. 24, 1989, CPA 5/2, Box 6, JRL.

a star.<sup>50</sup> In 1992, she went to Buckingham Palace to receive her CBE. “No poet merits the honour more than you do, since you have brought pleasure to so many with your writing,” Schmidt wrote in his letter of congratulations.<sup>51</sup>

In 2018, the publication of a new biography of Jennings led to a revival of interest in her work. The American poet Dana Gioia told a rise and fall story that ended in Jennings’s oblivion and an invitation to (re)discover her poetry. She gave several reasons to explain this critical neglect: Jennings’s history of mental and physical illnesses; her uneven literary output; her physical decline and eccentric appearance that many reviewers interpreted as a sign of artistic decline. But for Gioia, no discussion on Jennings should ignore her gender, and the price she had to pay for being a woman in a male-dominated poetry field. “In the mid-twentieth century, women had an established position in British poetry—second place,” she wrote (Gioia). Elizabeth Jennings did not become a Poet Laureate in 1972 (John Betjeman did), and no woman occupied this role until 2009.

As we have seen in this chapter, Jennings managed to offset some of the disadvantages of being a woman poet thanks to her uncommon ability to win friends and influence people. Her close connections with the Oxford literary set opened up publishing opportunities and the long-term support of sympathetic reviewers (including Anthony Thwaite and Peter Levi). Her friendship with Michael Schmidt helped her emerge from the poetry recession of the 1970s, and brought new impetus to her work. Thousands of copies of carefully edited poems reached teachers, students and general readers.

Despite her extended literary network, Jennings’s failed to become truly canonical. Although she was on the school syllabus in Britain, university professors were harder to reach. Her unpretentious poems did not fit well with literary studies (a field that overvalues difficult, experimental poetry), and her antifeminism alienated many scholars in women’s studies. Her refusal to be grouped with confessional poets confirmed the critical perception that she belonged to a previous era: pre-Sylvia Plath, pre-Women’s Lib and pre-cultural revolution. Although Jennings

<sup>50</sup> Jennings to Schmidt, June 23, 1988, CPA 3/267, JRL.

<sup>51</sup> Schmidt to Jennings, June 17, 1992, Jennings papers (part 3), Georgetown U, Washington DC.

appealed to only a handful of academics, she managed to survive and to continue to write in the face of huge obstacles. Like her last publisher Michael Schmidt, she endured the ups and lows of the literary marketplace, and nevertheless remained productive—and it is perhaps by these standards of survival that we should judge her life and work.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See Chapter 3 on the connection between literary productivity and canonicity: H. D. was accused of not being productive enough (which partly explained her exclusion from the literary canon, according to scholars such as Lawrence Rainey).

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## Sylvia Plath, Women's Poetry and the Canon Wars of the 1970s

In the first issue of *Poetry Nation* in 1973, Michael Schmidt wrote an article criticising the “confessional” poet and other “self-styled cultural radical” who paid no attention to traditional poetic forms. He opposed these radicals with conservative poets, whose work grew out of a discernible tradition. Donald Davie’s poems, for example, “do not usually cajole the reader, because they are not emotive in any facile way or modishly rhetorical on a superficial level” (“The Politics of Form”). For Schmidt, the radicals projected their own limited subjectivity on readers, whereas conservatives opened up new interpretations of the world.

The kind of poetry defended by Schmidt and the *PN* team was formally traditional, anchored in a long past. It was dominated by men (including Davie, Philip Larkin, Charles Tomlinson, C. H. Sisson, R. S. Thomas and Geoffrey Hill) but it also included a few women. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Elizabeth Jennings made no secret of her dislike for confessional poetry. She once wrote to Schmidt that Seamus Heaney was too laudatory about Sylvia Plath’s poetry.<sup>1</sup> For Jennings and Schmidt, the best poets harnessed their emotions in strict formal structures. They resisted “linguistic anarchy” but they were not necessarily socially conservative (Schmidt, “The Politics of Form”). Indeed,

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Jennings to Michael Schmidt, July 8, 1988, CPA 3/267, John Rylands Library, Manchester (hereafter referred to as JRL).

Larkin and Douglas Dunn wrote about contemporary issues, framing their perspective in a rigorous form.

The canon of women's poetry that emerged in Britain in the 1970s was not united. On the one side, Faber pushed Plath's poetry to the bestseller lists following her death by suicide in 1963. The poet that was presented for public consumption was a beautiful young woman with a tragic fate. Faber's marketing strategy drew heavily on Plath's image and personal story. Following the publication of Al Alvarez's *The Savage God* (1971), Plath became associated with the cultural revolution and the search for alternative ways of expressing emotions—including extreme emotions.

On the other side, Carcanet defended formally traditional poetry, reviving the reputation of neglected modernist writers such as H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) as we have seen in Chapter 4. Carcanet's strategy of modernist revival paralleled that of New Directions in the United States. Both publishers marketed H. D. to the academic market, successfully targeting the growing number of scholars and students in women's studies. Whereas feminist critics would later present H. D. as a bisexual trailblazer, Carcanet defended a much more conservative image of the poet.

Despite entire shelves of critical books on Sylvia Plath, very few scholars have paid attention to her publishers. Within the broad field of book history, Plath scholars have mostly focused on the texts themselves, their variations from one edition to another, and the controversial editorial choices made by her estranged husband Ted Hughes and her mother Aurelia Plath. This focus on textual scholarship has led to the publication of a two-volume edition of the *Letters of Sylvia Plath* in 2017–2018.<sup>2</sup> Karen V. Kukil, who edited the letters, wrote that:

there is no greater satisfaction for an editor than to release a great writer from the muzzle of competing family interests and allow her to tell her own story, in her own words, at her own pace; and in the process open up a world of new scholarship. (294)

Here, the central point is that the letters give us unmediated access to Sylvia Plath, freed from the interventions of previous, misguided editors.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956*, and *Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume II: 1956–1963*.

However, most readers do not access a writer's words without first encountering paratextual elements—including book covers, blurbs and other commentaries that frame the reading experience. Using an approach inspired by Material Bibliography, scholars such as Elena Rebollo-Cortés, Anita Helle, Lynda K. Bundtzen and Tracy Brain have studied the physical formats of Plath editions. In her recent chapter on the British and American editions of *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*, Rebollo-Cortés shows that these bestselling books have influenced generations of readers (340–349). This scholarship focuses on the physical books as material objects, rather than the publishers who had oversight over production and marketing. In Rebollo-Cortés's chapter, the influential Faber editor Charles Monteith is not even mentioned. Yet, it was Monteith who worked closely with Ted Hughes to release *Ariel* in 1965. It was Monteith again who pushed for Plath's name to appear on the 1966 Faber edition of *The Bell Jar* (the book had initially been published under a penname).

Books by Sylvia Plath did not appear magically in bookshops and library shelves in the 1960s and 1970s, at the time when the field of women's studies was emerging in universities. Publishers such as Faber, Carcanet and New Directions were instrumental in opening up markets for writers who had previously been neglected. As Eleanor Spencer puts it, “in February 1963, [Plath] was still relatively unknown outside of London literary circles, the majority of her writing unpublished” (23–32). Eight years after her death, she had become a “legend” in Britain—as a 1971 article in the *Daily Mail* noted (Mount 6). This transformation was largely due to Faber, a publisher that created a compelling Sylvia Plath story and quoted powerful critical voices such as Al Alvarez (the poetry editor of the *Observer*) in blurbs and advertisements.

This chapter gives credit to Faber for creating markets for Sylvia Plath, and positioning her in the emerging canon of women's poetry. The first section looks at Faber's crucial role in developing the Plath brand, a brand closely attuned to the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s. With rising suicide rates among women in England and Wales, the Plath brand resonated among readers unsettled by rapid social transformations. In 1976, Aurelia Schober Plath tried to offer a more cheerful image of her daughter in *Letters Home*, but the cuts and controversial selection of letters led to criticisms. Siding with Ted Hughes, Michael Schmidt attacked those who were disappointed and angry at the Estate's treatment of Plath. He also promoted alternative women poets, far from the

poetry that Al Alvarez called “extremist,” epitomised by Plath and Anne Sexton (Alvarez).

### FABER AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLATH BRAND

Publishers are often invisible in Plath studies, and yet, Faber played a major role in transforming Sylvia Plath from a little-known writer into a posthumous literary sensation. As long as she was alive, Sylvia Plath had only an indirect involvement with Faber, through her husband Ted Hughes. Encouraged by T. S. Eliot and Charles Monteith, Hughes became a Faber poet with his first book, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). A famous photo shows Hughes, Eliot, W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender at a Faber party in 1960 (Faber n. pag.). “Three generations of Faber poets there,” Monteith observed, “Wonderful!” The day after the party, Plath wrote to her mother that she had drunk champagne “with the appreciation of a housewife on an evening off from the smell of sour milk and diapers.” She presented herself as an admiring spouse, who revelled in the literary success of her husband. “Ted looked very at home among the great.”<sup>3</sup>

In his correspondence with Hughes, Monteith made clear that he would be interested in publishing Sylvia Plath’s poetry as well. He admired the poems that Plath had published in the *London Magazine* in 1959.<sup>4</sup> Later that year, he asked Hughes if Plath would like to send him some fiction.<sup>5</sup> Despite Monteith’s wooing, Plath chose to work with the publisher Heinemann. Her first collection of poems *The Colossus* appeared in 1960, followed by her novel *The Bell Jar* (initially published under a pseudonym).

In September 1963, seven months after his wife’s death, Ted Hughes mentioned the prospects of bringing out a volume of her last poems.<sup>6</sup> He wanted to get a good royalty for the book, since the money would

<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Schober Plath, June 24, 1960. Plath, *Letters of Sylvia Plath Vol. II*, 484.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Monteith to Ted Hughes, July 3, 1959 (Faber, *Faber & Faber: The Untold Story*, n. pag.).

<sup>5</sup> Monteith to Hughes, Oct. 30, 1959 (Faber, *Faber & Faber: The Untold Story*, n. pag.).

<sup>6</sup> Frank Pike to Monteith, Sept. 24, 1963 (Faber, *Faber & Faber: The Untold Story*, n. pag.).

go into a trust fund for his two children with Plath, then aged 3 and 1. He told Faber that Heinemann offered a rate of twelve and a half percent for the Plath books on their catalogue.<sup>7</sup> Hughes knew it would be difficult to convince Faber to offer a higher royalty rate. All things being equal, he preferred to work with his current publisher. Monteith reacted enthusiastically. Faber would be “absolutely delighted to publish” Plath’s last poems. “To judge from the ones I have seen in various magazines they seem absolutely magnificent,” Monteith wrote.<sup>8</sup>

In March 1965, *Ariel* appeared under the Faber imprint. Ted Hughes wanted to be involved not only in the selection of poems, but also in the design of the book. He asked for a red dustjacket, with a reference to the theme of the title poem *Ariel* (a horseman riding into the sunrise). The print had to be big and preferably black, like the print of *The Hawk in the Rain*.<sup>9</sup> But the Faber designer, Berthold Wolpe, paid little attention to Hughes’s suggestions.<sup>10</sup> He refused to use a drawing of a horseman on the wrapper, and the only concession he made was to use some of the colours that Hughes had suggested. After receiving a copy of the dustjacket, Ted Hughes wrote to Charles Monteith that it was “a bit of a shock.”<sup>11</sup>

Praises for Sylvia Plath’s poems on the first inner flap of the dustjacket paralleled Ted Hughes’s achievements on the second inner flap. When they opened the book, readers immediately saw a reference to Plath’s death: “The poems in this book were all written between the publication in 1960 of Sylvia Plath’s first book, *The Colossus*, and her death in 1963.” Two blurbs followed, including one by Al Alvarez who described Plath as an intense, extreme poet:

<sup>7</sup> In fact, Heinemann paid a royalty rate of 10% for *The Colossus*. See Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Schober Plath and Warren Plath, Feb. 11, 1960 (Plath, *Letters of Sylvia Plath Vol. II*, 415).

<sup>8</sup> Monteith to Hughes, Sept. 26, 1963 (Faber, *Faber & Faber: The Untold Story*, n. pag.).

<sup>9</sup> Hughes to Monteith, April 7, 1964 (Faber, *Faber & Faber: The Untold Story*, n. pag.).

<sup>10</sup> Berthold Wolpe “joined Faber and Faber at the beginning of World War II and used his typographical and lettering skills to produce thousands of layouts over a period of three decades” (Baylen).

<sup>11</sup> Hughes to Monteith, Jan. 13, 1965 (Faber, *Faber & Faber: The Untold Story*, n. pag.).

It was only by her determination both to face her most inward and terrifying experiences, and to use her intelligence in doing so - so as not to be overwhelmed by them - that she managed to write these extraordinary last poems.

Another blurb by Alvarez, this time for Hughes's *Lupercal*, appeared on the second inner flap. The impression was that Hughes and Plath had formed a golden literary couple before being separated by a cruel fate.

On the back of the dustjacket, Sylvia Plath appeared on the prestigious list of Faber poets, alongside Robert Lowell. Plath had attended Lowell's poetry seminars at Boston University in 1959. She learned a great deal from the "very serious, very personal emotional experience" that Lowell first handled in his fourth book of poems *Life Studies*.<sup>12</sup> Like other reviewers, Alvarez grouped together *Ariel* and Lowell's *For the Union Dead*. Faber had published these two books at the same time, and sold them in hardcovers (12 s. 6d for *Ariel*; 15 s. for Lowell's book). To a large extent, the confessional School of American poets was a marketing category, created by publishers and critics such as Alvarez.

This confessional poetry sold to a growing market of cultural radicals, who wanted to break free from stifling social constraints and find alternative ways of expressing emotions. In 1968, *Ariel* appeared in paperback form at 7 s. 6d—making it more affordable for young people.<sup>13</sup> "In Britain," declared the *Daily Mail* in 1971, "students are now rushing to buy [Plath's] poetry. The story of her suicide is told and retold in our Sunday newspapers" (Ferdinand 6). The *Economist* described Plath as "the Marilyn Monroe of the literary world."<sup>14</sup> Writing in the *Observer*, Al Alvarez noted that Plath had become "a cult figure and patron saint of the feminists" ("Inside the Bell Jar" 23).

<sup>12</sup> From an interview and reading of poems made by Plath for the British Council. Cited in Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath."

<sup>13</sup> "The first Faber and Faber paperbacks were published in 1957; the popularity of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* (1957–1960) proved that the firm had a back list which could rival Penguin in paperback sales. This success moved Faber and Faber to reclaim the rights to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and to publish the novel in a paperback edition in 1958. Golding's work and Ted Hughes's poetry provided excellent lead titles in the Faber paperback series." Cited in Baylen.

<sup>14</sup> "Plath & Co. Review of *The Savage God*, by A. Alvarez," *Economist* (Nov. 27, 1971): 59.

Faber played a major role in creating this cult and in connecting the Plath brand with women, despair and suicide. In 1971, it published two volumes of previously unpublished verses—*Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*. Plath's photo appeared on advertisements in the *Times*, the *Observer* and the *Listener*. One ad describes *Winter Trees* as a volume of "poems written in the last nine months of Sylvia Plath's life, part of the group from which the *Ariel* poems were chosen."<sup>15</sup> The book also included her radio play *Three Women*. Once again, Faber capitalised on Plath's image and untimely death to sell her poems to a large audience.

Sylvia Plath, the American poster girl for extremist poetry, and Faber, one of the most staid, conservative and prestigious British publishing houses of the post-war period—this has always seemed an improbable match.<sup>16</sup> In the introduction to *Letters of Sylvia Plath*, Frieda Hughes notes that not enough credit has been given to her father Ted: without him, *Ariel* would have remained unpublished following her mother's suicide. This is certainly true, but the focus on Ted Hughes as editor of *Ariel* obscures perhaps his most important role: the fact that he connected Plath's poetry with Faber. In doing this, he not only helped his dead wife get the literary consecration that she had lacked when she was alive. He also pushed his publisher towards a path that was both unfamiliar and lucrative. A publishing house closely connected with T. S. Eliot (who prided himself on his conservatism) (9) became associated with extreme poetry and cultural radicalism.

The nihilism of Plath's poems worried some commentators, who drew a parallel between her violent destructiveness and the unsettling social changes of the 1960. To understand the social transition that was going on at that time, it is useful to take the example of creative writing programmes—an institution that Sylvia Plath knew well. As Langdon Hammer points out, Plath took two prose writing courses in her second year at Smith College, a fiction writing course in her third, and another fiction writing course and a poetry writing tutorial in her fourth year (61–88). Later, as we have seen, she attended Robert Lowell's seminar at Boston University. Her experience of creative writing workshops deeply influenced her poetry, which was not to the taste of Ted Hughes's friends

<sup>15</sup> Advertisement for Faber, *Listener* (Sept. 23, 1971): 412.

<sup>16</sup> See James L. W. West III for a similar assessment of F. Scott Fitzgerald's improbable match with his publisher Scribner.

in Cambridge such as the writer Lucas Myers. “We didn’t think good poetry was produced in a workshop - it was finished and polished, but artificial,” Myers recalled (Herbert 37). In my book *Literary Rebels: A History of Creative Writers in Anglo-American Universities*, I show that early creative writing programmes were dominated by the values of humility, reticence and self-effacement. The radical individualism of the 1960s transformed the creative writing institution into a battlefield where students compete for positional goods (money, freedom and celebrity). This brutally competitive world was the world of Sylvia Plath: she was obsessed with literary success, and she had a tendency to respond to setbacks (even minor setbacks) with hopelessness and self-destructive despair.

When she was alive, Plath was already associated with violent poetic themes. In 1961, Walter Allen wrote in the *New York Times* that young poets such as Hughes and Plath “share [Thom] Gunn’s preoccupation with violence and vigorously express it” (Allen 44). Following her suicide, her poetry became intertwined with nihilism. It found a fertile ground in a society increasingly marked by extreme individualism, rejection of old social forms, and rising rates of suicides for women. In England and Wales, female rates peaked in the 1960s (11.8 per 100,000), declining afterwards (Thomas and Gunnell 1465). Plath killed herself using domestic gas, the preferred method of suicide for women between around 1935 and 1965 (barbiturate poisoning became more popular afterwards) (Thomas and Gunnell 1472). The ease of accessibility of these methods made commentators anxious. In the *Daily Mail* article “Could this be the start of a deadly new cult?” Ferdinand Mount wrote that these days, there was no need to summon up the courage to jump off a bridge or to slash a wrist. “The pills are on the bedside table. The gas is in the kitchen.” The example of Plath could be imitated by others. “We’ve had Women’s Lib, Gay Lib, Black Power, Pupil Power. Isn’t ‘Death Power’ the last taboo to be broken?” (6).

Al Alvarez’s *The Savage God*, published in November 1971, was a provocative, taboo-breaking attempt to study why people kill themselves. It included a long section on Sylvia Plath, who had been a friend of Alvarez. The book led to numerous reviews, articles and interviews, some of which show a disturbing fascination for violence. For example, Alvarez’s article “...Or Not to Be” gave graphic (and excessive) details on suicide methods used in the past, and concluded with a paragraph on novel methods of suicide—such as sleeping pills—and the search for

painless “oblivion” (25). Like other 1970s media commentators, Alvarez did not take particular care to avoid glamorising suicide and presenting it as an easy solution to personal problems. In contrast, today’s journalists must follow strict guidelines on the topic of suicide—including on reporting novel methods of suicide. In particular, they must prevent attention being drawn to a new method, where there is a risk of others using that method.<sup>17</sup>

The association between Faber and Alvarez did not survive the publication of *The Savage God*. As we have seen, Alvarez’s blurbs on Faber books played a key role in building Plath’s reputation as a major poet. *The Art of Sylvia Plath* (Faber, 1970) reproduced a memorial broadcast by Alvarez which went out on the BBC Third Programme in 1963. But with *The Savage God*, Alvarez went one step too far—including speculations about whether or not Plath had really intended to kill herself. Ted Hughes and his sister Olwyn wrote complaints letters,<sup>18</sup> pointing out that they had not been consulted and that Alvarez’s chapter on Plath contained multiple factual errors. The Plath Estate managed to stop the publication of extracts in the *Observer*. Unsurprisingly, Faber sided with Ted Hughes—a commercially successful poet in his own right, and the gatekeeper to Plath’s intellectual property.

*The Savage God* also triggered attacks from critics such as David Holbrook, who had studied under F. R. Leavis at Cambridge in the 1940s (Storer). Hatred and suicide were not the only responses to our time, argued Holbrook. “Entrapped in a pessimistic functional view of man, many people today ... seem to think it is only realistic to lose hope in civilisation,” he declared in *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (n.pag.). Writing in the *Guardian* in 1972, Holbrook denounced a “polluted culture” that exploited sex and violence for commercial gains. His study of Sylvia Plath had convinced him that an individual could be trapped in negative thoughts. Only a “nasty” society would encourage such destructive tendencies (9). In short, Holbrook denounced nihilism in its many forms: from sadistic sex on the stage and in cinemas, to the apology of violence and the glamorisation of suicide.

<sup>17</sup> See IPSO (Independent Press Standards Organisation), ‘Guidance on Reporting Suicide’, <https://www.ipso.co.uk/member-publishers/guidance-for-journalists-and-editors/guidance-on-reporting-suicide/> (accessed Sept. 25, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Olwyn Hughes to Editor, *Times Literary Supplement* (Dec. 3, 1971): 1525.

It was not the only time David Holbrook mentioned Sylvia Plath's poetry in connection with debates over pornography and the brutalisation of culture. In 1975, the *Listener* reproduced a discussion from the BBC programme "Newsday" opposing pro- and anti-pornography advocates. In Paris, record audiences were flocking to see *The Story of O*, and at a recent film festival the highlight was *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* by the murdered film-maker Pier Paolo Pasolini. The film depicted youths subjected to violence, torture, sexual abuse, and murder. For Holbrook, this was another example of the "sick" culture he was denouncing. Having immersed himself in the "work of the poetess Sylvia Plath, who killed herself," Holbrook declared: "I think the radical problem in pornography is death: although it seems to be about sex, I think it's about death, and whether life has any meaning."<sup>19</sup>

David Holbrook was not an archetypal conservative critic. As a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, he had been editor with Edgell Rickword of the communist cultural periodical *Our Time*. But Holbrook was infuriated by the attitude of liberals who refused any kind of censorship, and who dismissed any criticism of sexual exploitation, violence and suicide glorification as narrow-minded bigotry. New Left Philosopher Herbert Marcuse was as censorious of pornography as was Holbrook. While Holbrook feared that pornography was making men less human, Marcuse thought that it made them tame. To him, the relaxation of sexual taboos was a sort of capitalist plot to prevent people from exploding and breaking up the System.

The *PN Review* team sided with Holbrook against Alvarez and the confessional poets published by Faber. "I cannot but admire Holbrook's vigilance," wrote *PN Review* contributor Matt Simpson in 1978, "his positive stance against those ideas and agencies whose aim or effect is to trivialize and falsify or which thrive on the spirit of negation" ("Licorice and Brandy"). Simpson agreed with Holbrook that there was "a bleakness about much in contemporary art and a horrifying functionalism operating in much of our lives." Likewise, David J. Levy admired Holbrook's persistent attempt at challenging the liberal doxa. "Holbrook is a spirited polemicist whose passionate struggle against what he sees as the dark forces of intellectual and moral nihilism has made him many enemies in Britain's intellectual establishment," noted Levy ("Rational Insights").

<sup>19</sup> "No Victim, No Pornography—A Discussion from Newsday," *Listener* (Dec. 25, 1975): 857.

*PN Review* contributors shared the same enemies: the London-based elite obsessed with the cultural revolution and with the destruction of previous literary and social forms.

Donald Davie made a similar argument against Alvarez and extremist poetry in 1967. The vocabulary that Alvarez used (words such as “cool” and “square”) revealed the pathetic attempt of a middle-aged man to side with young cultural radicals. For Davie, great poets did not need “the hallucinations of psychosis and of LSD.” They did not need to drive themselves “to suicide or into the psychotic ward” (“Beyond All This Fiddle”). C. H. Sisson shared the same opinion. Following the publication of *The Savage God*, he dismissed Alvarez’s obsession with suicide as a destructive fad. “After the sex-drenched artist, the suicide-drenched. One frivolity after another,” wrote Sisson (1525).

To counter this image of Sylvia Plath as a suicide-drenched artist, Aurelia Plath decided to release a selection of letters that her daughter had sent her. The book was published in 1976 by Harper & Row and Faber on both sides of the Atlantic, and it soon became a literary sensation. The interest in Plath was such that reviews of *Letters Home* appeared in all the major newspapers. Reviews emphasised the contrast between Plath’s sunny, good-looking appearance and her tragic death. The *Sunday Times* published long extracts with illustrations—including two photos of the poet in a swimming suit.<sup>20</sup> A long assessment of the book appeared in the same magazine one week later. With these letters, argued Jonathan Raban, Plath created an image of herself as ambitious, focused and cheerful. This “work of self-mythologising fiction” did not reflect her darker side and her inability to endure setbacks (41).

While Aurelia Plath held the physical letters of her daughter, she had to obtain permissions from Ted Hughes who owned the copyright. The book was heavily edited, with series of dots indicating the sections that had been removed. Writing in the *Times*, Michael Ratcliffe criticised this heavy editing:

The almost total lack of reference to the marriage break-up in 1962 cannot be explained by tactful excisions alone and we have no way of knowing what pains have been eased by the frequent insertion of dots.

<sup>20</sup> “Sylvia Plath: The Story of an American Poet’s Love Affair with Europe,” *Sunday Times* (April 18, 1976): 33.

Nevertheless, Ratcliffe found the remaining selection fascinating. The letters gave a sense of Plath as a passionate woman with strong emotions:

racy, fluent, articulate and expansive, furious in depression, and wild with optimistic joy, first at Smith, then Cambridge and Europe, then marriage, children and nesting. (5)

Reviewing *Letters Home* in *PN Review*, Eric Hornberger was much more critical of the Plath family. In the fourteen years that followed Sylvia Plath's death, the Estate had repeatedly demonstrated tight control over her writing. Hornberger had three specific criticisms. First, there was still no Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath—a fact that Hornberger found “puzzling” (“The Unanswered Questions”). From 1971 to 1974, The Rainbow Press imprint (a small press managed by Olwyn Hughes) published three books—*Crystal Gazer*, *Lyonnesse* and *Pursuit*—which contained previously unseen poems by Plath. These poems were available in expensive limited editions, but ordinary readers had no easy access to this work in collected form.

Second, the long-awaited biography of Plath was still not available. There were suspicions of the biographer, Lois Ames, falling out with the Plath family.<sup>21</sup> This in turn fuelled rumours that the Estate had something to hide. Hornberger reported stories of Ted Hughes burning Sylvia Plath's last diaries, stories of husband battering wife, and “stories of the wife, in a rage, destroying the poet's manuscripts.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> In 2009, Lois Ames said: “I was the first one to be asked to do the biography of Sylvia Plath. I had a contract with the family. Harper and Row was my publisher. It became increasingly difficult for me to do this, as other biographers have found out. And I finally decided for the sake of my own sanity and my family; that it was better to pay back the advance to Harper's. I always felt it was a wise decision.” Cited in Holder.

<sup>22</sup> These stories have been repeated in various forms since Hornberger's 1977 review. In his foreword to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982), Ted Hughes confessed to destroying one of Sylvia Plath's diaries and losing another. They “continued the record from late '59 to within three days of her death. The last of these contained entries for several months, and I destroyed it because I did not want her children to have to read it (in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival). The other disappeared” (see Sylvia Plath, “Foreword,” in *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, xiii). Stories of Ted Hughes's violence towards his wife gathered new pace in 2017 after Plath's letters to her psychiatrist Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse re-emerged (see Plath, *Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I*, n. pag.). For an account of Plath destroying her husband's papers in 1962 after discovering he was having an affair, see Bundtzen, “Poetic Arson and Sylvia Plath's ‘Burning the Letters.’”

The absence of a collected edition and of a biography of Plath led to Hornberger's third criticism: the heavy editing of *Letters Home* showed, once again, that the Plath family was controlling what she wrote and what could be said about her life. Hornberger pointed out that the book was shaped by four censors who had cut the manuscript by more than one half. "There is no way of knowing which piece of individual censorship is at the behest of Mrs Plath, Harper & Row, Ted Hughes or the lawyers, but the text printed by Harper & Row, and reprinted here by Faber & Faber, represents a most thoroughly compromised piece of goods," Hornberger declared. It was unacceptable to publish this selection without explaining how the book had been edited. Hornberger wrote:

If the letters merited publication (as I believe they do), there can be no excuse for failing to indicate what, precisely, *Letters Home* represents: a continuing tug of war between Plath's mother, husband, sister-in-law and publishers for an "acceptable" version of Sylvia Plath for public consumption. ("The Unanswered Questions")

The angry reaction of the Plath Estate to this essay led to a crisis at *PN Review*. Brian Cox decided to leave the editorial board as he was unhappy with the fact that Michael Schmidt had published Hornberger's review without consulting him. The second part of the essay, originally scheduled for publication in *PNR 2*, was never published. Schmidt found the entire situation distressing. In a letter to the poet Elaine Feinstein, he wrote:

I feel that Olwyn has almost wilfully misread the Hornberger piece (she has an aversion to the man). The whole affair is worse than unpleasant and has soured me even more about the English Literary Life. Indeed, it has come near to making me want to pack it all in and go back to Mexico. I can't afford the fare. I hope you will defend me to her - but then you, too, might read as a malicious Hughes-bashing. I happen to like Ted very much, and after the shock of Olwyn's hysterical attack I realize that it's probably not worth having any literary friends... except you, it goes without saying.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Michael Schmidt to Elaine Feinstein, Dec. 16, 1976, EFP 1-1-4, Elaine Feinstein papers, JRL.

Here, the description of Ted Hughes's sister as "hysterical" conveys the impression of an irrational woman who had overacted to an unintended slight (hysteria was originally thought to be due to a disturbance of the uterus and its functions).

Mindful of the possible consequences of this scandal, Schmidt decided to publicly apologise to Olwyn Hughes and others of the Plath Estate who found Eric Hornberger's review of the Plath letters offensive. In his editorial, Schmidt quoted Olwyn Hughes's responses to Hornberger's three criticisms. First, the volume of *Collected Poems* was in preparation, and all the mature poems had already been published in trade and limited editions ("to be found in libraries" for those who could not afford expensive editions). Second, the absence of a biography was due not to the Estate's obstruction, but to Lois Ames's failure to deliver the book. Finally, *Letters Home* was not "edited" in the classical sense: readers were not told what to think, they were simply presented with a lot of documents and invited to read them. "Anyone who remembers his own letters home will recognize at once that if there is a censor's hand at work here, it is the daughter's, not the mother's" ("The Plath Letters").

In the war to control the narrative over the Sylvia Plath story, Michael Schmidt's willingness to side with the Hughes family is not surprising. Two years before, Carcanet had published János Pilinszky's *Selected Poems* translated by Ted Hughes and János Csokits. Since Pilinszky was prevented from leaving Hungary by the country's political regime, the two translators came to the Manchester Poetry Centre for a reading. Directed by Brian Cox, the Centre offered a hospitable environment for East European poetry—including the work of "Hungary's Greatest Living Poet," as a press release declared.<sup>24</sup> And in 1977, Ted Hughes wrote the introduction to the Carcanet edition of Vasko Popa's *Collected Poems*. Although Hughes remained faithful to his publisher Faber, he was a valuable ally for Schmidt's small press.

Ted Hughes and Michael Schmidt shared the same dislike of communist totalitarianism, and of feminist extremists. In 1989, Hughes was attacked for having left the grave of his first wife without a headstone (the grave had previously been vandalised as Plath fans were outraged that the name "Sylvia Plath Hughes" was engraved on the stone). A letter signed by famous writers and critics—including Al Alvarez, Peter

<sup>24</sup> Press Release, "Hungary's Greatest Living Poet in Manchester," Aug. 31, 1976, Brian Cox Papers, COX 5-1, JRL.

Porter and John Carey—demanded an explanation (18). Schmidt wrote to Hughes to denounce a “nasty and malicious” campaign and offer help:

You have staunch supporters, let me say, and if you felt it might be useful I would draft a short letter or a statement about this matter and get as many writers and others to sign it, simply to underline our disgust at the indecency of the vendetta and the maliciousness which, apart from doing no service to the dead poet, actually aims to harm her surviving family. I have not approached anyone yet, but people like Sisson, Spender, Davie, Beer, Tomlinson, Cox, Jennings and others who are not part of the London groups or the Feminist Claque would share my disgust, and be willing to say so.<sup>25</sup>

The fight against the London literary elite had always been at the centre of the *PN Review*/Carcanet positioning, and Schmidt was ready to launch his army against these enemies. This offer of help was not entirely disinterested. Indeed, a campaign in support of Ted Hughes (who was then Poet Laureate) would also strengthen the literary status of Schmidt and his followers. Hughes thanked Schmidt for his support, but he thought that a low-key response would be better for now. “One of the problems, at the root of the whole business, is that nobody in academia, and (in the US) no writer who hopes to be published, have upset feminists,” Hughes wrote. “The feminist theologians have established that mythology + doctrine + the Inquisition proceeds.”<sup>26</sup> Schmidt agreed with Hughes that the feminists had created a “theology” that no one dared criticise. “The damage actually done to women - in my view - exceeds the benefit, though initially some of the feminist insights were quite illuminating,” Schmidt noted before referring to his own experience of teaching at the University of Manchester. “Many of my classes have the tenor of Inquisition and almost any male writer is found wanting.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Michael Schmidt to Ted Hughes, April 21, 1989, CPA 4-3, Box-10, JRL.

<sup>26</sup> Hughes to Schmidt, April 25, 1989, CPA 4-3, Box-10, JRL.

<sup>27</sup> Schmidt to Hughes, May 2, 1989, CPA 4-3, Box-10, JRL. Schmidt has continued to side with Ted Hughes, more recently when the British Library included him in its list of writers with historical links to slavery. The list was then taken down from the website, and the BL apologised to Hughes’s widow. Schmidt wrote: “I am concerned about the spread of cancel culture and the damage to a lot of people in our ‘sector’ of false or maliciously construed or misconstrued connections” (“Editorial”).

## CONCLUSION

At a time of rapidly changing social norms, Plath's poetry was sold in cheap paperbacks for a mass market of students and other readers attracted to the "live fast, die young" myth. In 1971, Faber published two volumes of Plath's poems shortly before the release of Al Alvarez's study of suicide. That same year, Jim Morrison was found dead at the age of 27, following a series of musicians who had died at the same age (Brian Jones in 1969, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin in 1970). Tabloids worried that young people would imitate these role models and break the last taboo: death. Conservative critics at *PN Review* and elsewhere denounced the nihilism of the present and looked towards the past for solace. In Michael Schmidt's words, the Carcanet list was "marked by its resistance to conventionality and dedication to a 'live tradition,' hence the stress within the lists on antecedents and the neglected classics (major and minor) of our tradition."<sup>28</sup> In this framework, Carcanet Press promoted neglected classics (such as H. D.) anchored in a long poetic tradition, rather than radically new poets like the Sylvia Plath marketed by Faber.

<sup>28</sup> Carcanet Press Limited Report, Dec. 20, 1988, CPA 4-2, Box 10, JRL.

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## CHAPTER 8

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# The Survival of Carcanet Press

Like its competitor Bloodaxe, Carcanet had to re-invent itself to adapt to new markets and changing priorities from the Arts Council and other funders. Its fifty-year history is both an asset and a liability. An asset because not many poetry publishers have managed to survive for so long in a difficult funding landscape. And a liability because of its association with right-wing currents of thoughts that have fell into disfavour. In the 1970s, like today, few people openly embraced the work of Charles Maurras, a French royalist writer known for his virulent antisemitism and support for the regime of Maréchal Pétain during World War II. It is precisely because Maurras was so controversial that the Carcanet/*PN Review* group chose him as the poster boy of their rebellion against left-leaning intellectuals. When C. H. Sisson wrote sympathetically of Maurras, he received the support of Donald Davie. In a 1976 *PN Review* article, Davie presented Sisson as an heir to T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats and Wyndham Lewis. “With him, as with each of them, we have to recognize that ‘modernist’ and ‘traditionalist,’ so far from being opposed, are alternate faces of the one coin,” Davie wrote (“The Politics of an English Poet”).

Both modernist and traditionalist: this positioning served Carcanet/*PN Review* well in the 1970s. But as we have seen in Chapter 5, it became increasingly difficult to sustain in the 1980s onwards with the changes in the funding landscape. Michael Schmidt’s firm morphed into a more diverse enterprise, open to women and ethnic minorities. How did

this transition operate in practice? What is the legacy of the “reactionary right” positioning of the 1970s on today’s firm? What is the relationship between Carcanet’s old guard and the new generation that emerged in the 1980s?

These research questions emerged when I organised a workshop in January 2019 at the John Rylands Library in Manchester to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Carcanet. A roundtable on “Carcanet Press and the Literary Field – The First 50 Years” brought together Michael Schmidt, Grevel Lindop, Roger Garfitt and Judith Willson. While Schmidt, Lindop and Garfitt are now in their seventies and met fifty years ago at the University of Oxford, Willson belongs to a younger generation. She worked for Carcanet as managing editor from 2002 until 2012, before focusing on her writing career. Carcanet published her debut collection of poems *Crossing the Mirror Line* in 2017, and a second book, *Fleet*, is scheduled for 2021. Following the workshop, I asked participants for feedback. Most of the comments were very positive (75% of respondents found the workshop “very useful,” and 25% “useful”). However, one anonymous comment gave me pause for thought:

It would have been better if the event had felt less insular. The panel focused on Carcanet felt rather outdated, with the three men all being self-congratulatory - and the way they discussed their careers felt like it was celebrating the “old boys club.” The attitude towards women also felt slightly uncomfortable, as the men had all the praise whilst it was acknowledged that Judith did most of the groundwork. The final question about women involved in Carcanet might have hoped to redress the balance here but felt rather tokenistic. This may just have been a question of misrepresentation but it would have been better if there had been a bit more critical reflection at this point about the potential issues with Carcanet’s history, as well as celebrating Michael’s achievements.<sup>1</sup>

Here, the only woman in the group is presented as having been exploited while the three older men took all the credit. This is of course a problematic view. Judith Willson benefited from her association with Carcanet when she was looking for a publisher for her debut collection. Her work as managing editor may have gone unnoticed, but her poetry attracted the attention of distinguished reviewers. In other words, the Carcanet

<sup>1</sup> Anon., Feedback for workshop, “Carcanet Press and the Literary Field – The First 50 Years,” John Rylands Library, Manchester, Jan. 2019.

**Table 8.1**  
Interviewees, Poetry  
Survival project

<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
1. Alison Boyle	1. Anthony Rudolf
2. Alison Brackenbury	2. Gareth Reeves
3. Fran Baker	3. Grevel Lindop
4. Helen Tookey	4. Jim Keery
5. Janet Allan	5. Michael Rowan-Robinson
6. Judith Willson	6. Mike Freeman
7. Kate Gavron	7. Nicolas Tredell
8. Mimi Khalvati	8. Peter Jay
9. Robyn Marsack	9. Peter Robinson
	10. Roger Garfitt

brand—as well as Michael Schmidt’s network of contacts—transformed her into a published poet with an emerging reputation.

Yet, there are some underlying tensions between the older Carcanet generations and the newer generations, between people who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, and those whose association with Carcanet started in the 1980s onwards. Although Carcanet has become more diverse and more open to women, it is still led by Michael Schmidt.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter draws on interviews that we conducted in 2018 and 2019. We interviewed many poets, editors and other people associated with Carcanet and with the poetry scene in Britain. The overall objective was to understand how poetry has survived in a very tough marketplace in the past fifty years. The women and men we interviewed contributed in big and small ways to the poetry scene in Britain. Collectively, they tell a fascinating story about the enduring appeal of poetry and the ways in which publishers bring it to market. Overall, we interviewed 30 people. Not all interviews can be shared on the project’s open-access digital resource ([www.poetrysurvival.com](http://www.poetrysurvival.com)) due to permissions and copyright reasons. This chapter is based on the nineteen publicly-available transcripts, which have been checked and approved by interviewees (nine women and ten men) (Table 8.1).

A network graph is a good way to map the connections between various figures associated with Carcanet. First, I extracted names of people

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, Schmidt was assisted by two younger men: John McAuliffe, associate publisher and editor; and Andrew Latimer, managing editor.

mentioned in each transcript. I then added a “gender” column to build a “Nodes” spreadsheet. The next step was to prepare an “Edges” spreadsheet to show the connection between each node, and the frequency of these connections. For example, the poetry publisher Neil Astley is mentioned six times in the transcript of Alison Brackenbury. The final step was to build the network graph using Gephi in order to visualise the connections between the interviewees and the people mentioned during the interviews.

Data extracted from these transcripts show three different groups connected with Carcanet: (1) the Old Guard—those who belong to Michael Schmidt’s generation and were associated with the early Carcanet/*PN*; (2) the New Guard—people whose association with Carcanet/*PN* started after 1980; and (3) marginals, who gravitate away from Schmidt either by choice or as a result of falling into disfavour. This chapter argues that Carcanet’s survival can largely be explained by the alliance between Old and New Guard. Without the New Guard, the older generation would probably have run out of favour with funders and academic institutions. Carcanet books would have known the same fate as the work of Donald Davie, C. H. Sisson and Brian Cox—neglected and frequently out of print. Eventually, the press itself may well have disappeared. Allied with the New Guard but still firmly in control, the Old Guard incorporated dissent to build a more resilient company, aligned with contemporary social trends. For example, Carcanet is the publisher of the Jamaican poet Kei Miller, who edited *New Caribbean Poetry Anthology* in 2007 before winning the prestigious Forward Prize. Moving away from traditionalism but still rooted in modernism, Carcanet reinvented itself as a firm open to diverse voices.

### THE OLD GUARD: SURVIVING IN THE POETRY FIELD

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* offers a useful theoretical model to understand the conditions of survival in the poetry field. For Boltanski and Chiapello, capitalism needs criticism to evolve in order to stay relevant and engaging for a majority of people. In other words, critique is a catalyst for changes in the spirit of capitalism, defined as “the set of beliefs associated with the capitalist order that helps to justify this order and, by legitimating them, to sustain the forms of action and predispositions compatible with it” (n. pag.). For example, criticism of the hierarchical Fordist work structure in the 1960s and 1970s

led to new forms of organisations based on individual freedom, at the cost of material and psychological security. In the 1990s onwards, the rise of a digitally dominated world with fewer human contacts could have threatened capitalism, accused of lacking authenticity. Instead, capitalism has harnessed these criticisms, using human-centred approaches such as design thinking as a catch-all solution to all “wicked problems.”<sup>3</sup>

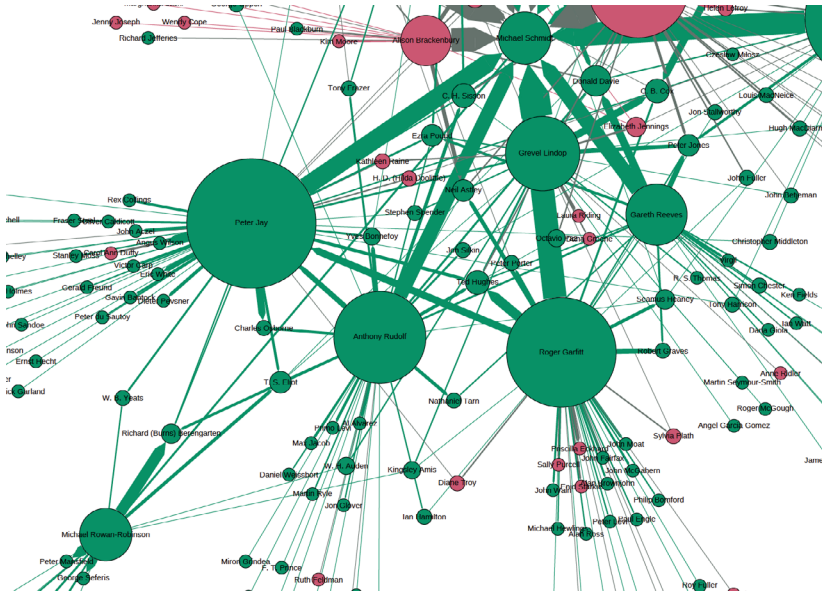
Poetry publishers position themselves on the margins of capitalism: they sell their books in the marketplace, but they also survive thanks to grants from publicly funded organisations. This marginal position does not insulate them from the rules of capitalism. Like other UK funders, the Arts Council relies on market mechanisms. *Reach new markets, reinvent yourself, do not take anything for granted*: this is the message that grant holders get. They need to prove that they successfully engage with certain groups (and particularly people from disadvantaged backgrounds). They also need to constantly enlarge their audiences. “We encourage our funded organisations to be more focused on audiences – to reach more people, broaden the groups they come from and improve the quality of their experience,” declares the Arts Council.<sup>4</sup> Replace “audiences” with “customers,” and you will find the same discourse at the heart of companies such as Amazon.com—which also thrive to reach more clients, broaden their markets and constantly improve the experience of customers.

In this funding landscape, Carcanet has managed to reinvent itself by incorporating dissent. Instead of resisting the New Guard of the 1980s, it has harnessed criticisms of the “old white male” model to explore new territories. Becoming a more diverse firm allowed the press to satisfy the Arts Council’s requirements and to keep its grant. It has also made it difficult for anyone to criticise Carcanet/*PN Review*. The current list is certainly not hostile to women or ethnic minorities. But intriguing questions linger: how can the press reconcile its past with its present? How can a publishing firm so closely connected with right-wing intellectuals in the 1970s satisfy the Equality and Diversity requirements of today’s funders?

<sup>3</sup> Design thinking is a human-centred method to solving business and social problems. See Brown. For an analysis of design thinking inspired by Boltanski and Chiapello, see Seitz.

<sup>4</sup> Arts Council, “Engaging Audiences Everywhere,” <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/how-we-make-impact/engaging-audiences-everywhere> [accessed Dec. 23, 2020].

Data from the transcripts show a distinct cluster of older male poets and publishers whose association with Carcanet/PN dates back to the 1970s. The “Old Guard” cluster shares common characteristics—including age, gender, social class/education and professional trajectory. They were born in the late 1940s and studied at Oxbridge in the late 1960s, before launching their own careers as poetry publishers (Peter Jay, Anthony Rudolf) and poets/teachers within or outside academia (Grevel Lindop, Roger Garfitt, Gareth Reeves). Michael Rowan-Robinson, who belongs to this generation and who studied at Cambridge, chose a different professional path by becoming a scientist. He is positioned on the margins of the network graph—outside the “Old Guard” cluster (Fig. 8.1).



**Fig. 8.1** Old Guard associated with Carcanet (Michael Schmidt, Peter Jay, Grevel Lindop, Gareth Reeves, Roger Garfitt, Anthony Rudolf). Michael Rowan Robinson is on the margins of this group, as is Alison Brackenbury who belongs to the New Guard

If we look closer, we can see that a previous generation influenced the Old Guard. Donald Davie, C. H. Sisson and C. B. (Brian) Cox gravitate around the cluster. They are among the names mentioned most frequently in the transcripts of Peter Jay, Anthony Rudolf, Grevel Lindop, Roger Garfitt and Gareth Reeves. Born in the 1910s and 1920s, the generation of Davie, Sisson and Cox had an aura of right-wing rebellion that the Old Guard often found alluring. Peter Jay thus told me: “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.”<sup>5</sup> Although Jay presents himself as “apolitical,” he belongs to a group marked by right-wing dissent. “It never bothered me that Michael was to the right,” Jay said. “I probably rather admired it, because nobody else was. You know, he was standing up for himself.”<sup>6</sup> Jay identifies a key paradox: while counter-cultural intellectuals valued dissent and anti-conformism, they overwhelmingly followed the doxa of the Left. The Carcanet/*PN* team were the true rebels, refusing to conform to the intellectual mainstream.

Peter Robinson, who was born in 1953 and who did not meet Schmidt until the late 1970s, also recognised the rebellious appeal of Davie and Sisson:

Carcanet was seen as a right-wing insurgency, as it were, ... because of the role of Davie and Sisson on the masthead [of *PN Review*]. Davie in particular was very curmudgeonly about the state of Britain ... Sisson was interested in [Charles Maurras’s political movement] *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.<sup>7</sup>

Here, the term “insurgency” reminds us that the Davie-Sisson-Cox group was waging a war against the leftist London elite. Their objective was to profoundly change Britain—hence the attraction of Davie for Thatcherism.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Jay, Interview with Lise Jaillant, Aug. 17, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Jay, Interview, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Robinson, Interview with Vanessa Millar, Feb. 26, 2020.

Although Old Guard members did not necessarily agree with extreme reactionary opinions, they often admired the boldness of Davie, Sisson and Cox. The masculinist discourse typical of *PN* in the 1970s was closely connected with this right-wing worldview. For *PN* editors, the war against social and literary decadence had to be waged by determined men. Women had, at best, a supporting role. Similarly, Charles Maurras insisted on a strict separation of sexes within his political movement. Women attracted to royalism and the fight against republicanism had to join a specific section, the Association of Royalist Ladies. In this traditionalist view, women belonged to a distinct sphere, separated from the world of men.

As Fig. 8.1 shows, the Old Guard interacted mostly with men. Elaine Feinstein was among the few women poets of the same generation, but she belonged to different literary networks. Elizabeth Jennings had closer links with the Old Guard (in part because she lived in Oxford and befriended aspiring poets who studied at the university, including Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop). But even Jennings remained on the margins of the male-dominated group formed by Schmidt and his allies.

This marginalisation of women was reinforced by the Old Guard's socialising in men-only environments. As Oxbridge alumni, they were used to privileged social settings, and they sought to recreate this privilege after graduation. As an emerging publisher still in his early twenties, Michael Schmidt joined the Savile Club—a traditional London gentlemen's club founded in 1868, with close connections to the artistic and literary scene. The Savile opened up numerous networking opportunities for the young Schmidt. In September 1971, he invited his mentor Brian Cox to share a meal with him at the club.<sup>8</sup> That same month, he told the poet Robert Shaw that he had met the novelist William Golding and the actor Ralph Richardson. He did not realise who either was until the end of the conversation. "I must say the former was enigmatically delightful, the latter pompously amusing – talk of lambchops and 'no good poetry since Arnold' came from the acting man," Schmidt said. "I should have said no good acting had happened since Scofield, but I didn't think of that."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Michael Schmidt to Brian Cox, Sept. 3, 1971, CQA 1/1/116, *Critical Quarterly* Archive, John Rylands Library, Manchester (hereafter referred to as CQA, JRL).

<sup>9</sup> Schmidt to Robert Shaw, Sept. 1, 1971, CPA 2/1/65, Carcanet Press Archive (hereafter referred to as CPA), JRL.

In addition to internationally-famous actors and writers, the young Michael Schmidt met distinguished publishers at the Savile Club—including Edmund Fisher, the Managing Director of Michael Joseph Ltd. In February 1972, after an informal discussion with Fisher, Schmidt followed up with a letter to suggest a direct investment in Carcanet. “By this means you would acquire for Michael Joseph Ltd a fine poetry, translation, critical, and growing educational list without any production, editorial or distribution problems,” Schmidt told Fisher.<sup>10</sup> From the perspective of the young man, such a partnership would leave him in control of editorial, production, promotion and distribution—while injecting much needed cash into his fledging publishing firm. In short, socialising at the Savile Club exposed Schmidt to valuable professional opportunities.

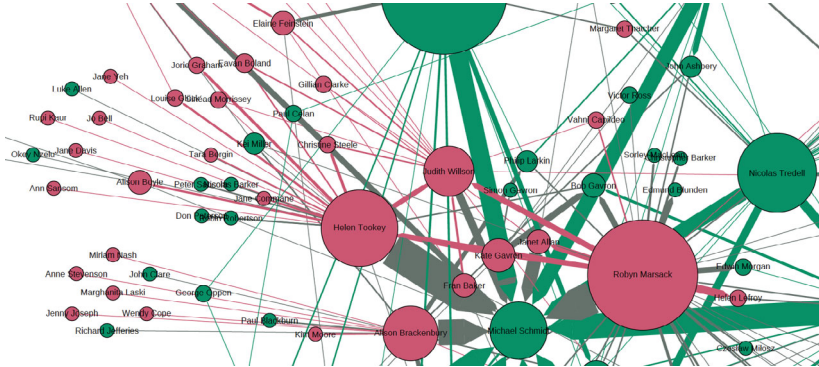
### THE NEW GUARD: CHANGING THE RULES OF THE GAME

What happened to those who did not fit in this right-wing, men-only, socially privileged environment? In the 1970s, they were largely excluded from the core Carcanet/*PN* group. But this changed in the 1980s, partly due to financial pressures from the Arts Council and to the growing market for women’s literature. In a 1985 letter to a male poet who complained about the low sales of his books, Michael Schmidt wrote: “If you were a woman your poetry would automatically sell better than it does. That is one of the accidents of the contemporary market.”<sup>11</sup> In the same letter, Schmidt mentioned Alison Brackenbury as an example of a successful young poet. Figure 8.2 shows a cluster of women associated with Carcanet either as authors (Brackenbury) or publishing professionals (Robyn Marsack, Judith Willson, Helen Tookey). This New Guard played a growing role at Carcanet, but power remained concentrated in the hands of Michael Schmidt.

Alison Brackenbury (born 1953) is a good example of this new generation of Carcanet authors. Her first collection, *Dreams of Power*, appeared in 1981. Carcanet then published *Breaking Ground* (1984), *Christmas Roses* (1988), *Selected Poems* (1991), *1829* (1995), *After Beethoven* (2000), *Bricks and Ballads* (2004), *Singing in the Dark* (2008),

<sup>10</sup> Schmidt to Edmund Fisher, Feb. 15, 1972, CPA 3/198, JRL.

<sup>11</sup> Schmidt to Paul Mills, Oct. 14, 1985, CPA 3/2, JRL.



**Fig. 8.2** New Guard associated with Carcanet (Alison Brackenbury, Robyn Marsack, Janet Allan, Judith Willson, Helen Tookey)

*Then* (2013), *Skies* (2016) and *Gallop* (2019). Like Schmidt and many Carcanet authors, Brackenbury studied at the University of Oxford. But unlike Schmidt, who grew up in a wealthy American family based in Mexico, she came from a modest social background: her father was a lorry driver, her mother a teacher, and she went to a state school in the countryside. At Oxford, she “had a very rocky time” in part because of she felt isolated:

People from state schools (and there were more people there than from state schools, at least the sort of state schools with mixed backgrounds) ... thought networking was something done by spiders – we didn’t do it. ... It was assumed later, I think by some people, that I’d been able to tap into some kind of magic Oxford network, a wonderful web. If there was one, I wasn’t even aware that it existed.<sup>12</sup>

While Schmidt was busy networking at the Oxford Poetry Association and editing *Carcanet* magazine, Brackenbury settled for more modest ambitions. After graduation, she worked as a librarian in a technical college. She then became a part-time accounts and clerical assistant. From 1990 until her retirement in 2012, she worked in her husband’s family metal finishing business.

<sup>12</sup> Alison Brackenbury, Interview with Victoria Stobo, May 10, 2019.

In 1982, Alison Brackenbury won the Eric Gregory award—a prize for a collection by poets under the age of thirty. That same year, the Award also went to seven men: Neil Astley (the founder of Bloodaxe), Steve Ellis, Jeremy Reed, Chris O’Neill, Joseph Bristow, John Gibbens and James Lasdun. During the interview, Brackenbury showed awareness of her isolation as a young woman poet:

I was the only woman with an award in my year, by the way ... I think, roughly, I was about the thirteenth woman to get an Eric Gregory award.<sup>13</sup> And I think, again, I’m speaking from memory, I think those awards run from the Sixties,<sup>14</sup> and it’s not unusual now to see a very large number of women on those lists, so it’s quite startling to look back. With a sort of naïve over-confidence, I didn’t really think about this, although a friend of mine made a rueful remark about us being token women! I don’t think I was a token woman for the Gregory Award. The judges were people of principle. But it hadn’t quite occurred to me, but it’s true, for my generation, as a woman poet, you were often the only woman on a shortlist.

Brackenbury identifies three main obstacles to integration in the poetry field for women of her age. First, the suspicion of being a “token woman,” chosen for her gender rather than for the quality of her poetry, plagued Brackenbury’s generation. As Pierre Bourdieu has shown, the “field of cultural production” is “a world of belief” in the value of the work of art (42). The function of literary prizes is to consecrate a book, i.e., to present it as valuable and worth reading. Accusations of tokenism erode this collective belief, threatening to devalue the literary work and to downplay the achievements of women writers.

Second, networking and socialising expectations centred around alcohol-fuelled literary parties—difficult to manage for mothers with young children. “Now, amongst poets of my era, especially drinkers, which I’m not, there is a nostalgia for the launches of that era,” Brackenbury said.<sup>15</sup> In the 1980s, she had a baby, which made socialising

<sup>13</sup> Jenny Joseph was the first woman to get the Gregory Award in 1962, followed by Jean Symons (1964), Jenny King (1969), Helen Frye (1970), Florence Bull (1971), Penelope Shuttle (1974), Val Warner (1975), Valerie Gillies (1976), Melissa Murray (1977), Medbh McGuckian (1980), Marion Lomax and Kathleen Jamie (1981).

<sup>14</sup> The Eric Gregory award was created in 1960.

<sup>15</sup> Alison Brackenbury, Interview with Victoria Stobo, May 10, 2019.

more difficult. She nevertheless managed to occasionally attend Carcanet launches, where she met people like Marghanita Laski, the Chair of the Arts Council literature advisory panel.

The third obstacle was the need to continue to publish while caring for a family. “There were gaps in my publishing time because I was busy with my daughter and so forth,” Brackenbury confessed. This inability to devote herself fully to poetry could have ended her writing career:

I was a tricky poet to deal with in the sense that I had a child, I worked in a small business, I couldn’t get time off, I was a marketing nightmare! I could get work in the *TLS*, or even on the BBC, but I couldn’t go out and do readings. I think a lot of publishers would’ve quietly ditched me in the 80s and 90s. I was writing but I wasn’t marketing, and Michael was completely loyal, very understanding, and so all this time, the editing, the proof-reading, the things that Carcanet are so good on, went on.<sup>16</sup>

During the busy years of child-rearing, Brackenbury continued to benefit from Carcanet’s support despite lacking time for readings, launch parties and other marketing opportunities. In the 2000s, as her daughter was now older, Brackenbury began to publish more and to participate in more activities. For example, she helped to judge the National Poetry Competition, which gave her a reading at the Ledbury Poetry Festival. Like many women, Brackenbury’s career has been shaped by her caring duties, which both limited her opportunities and pushed her creativity in productive directions.

The New Guard included female authors such as Brackenbury, but also publishing professionals who played an important role in the Carcanet/*PN* enterprise starting in the 1980s. The graph shows close ties between Robyn Marsack, who joined the firm in 1981 as an assistant to Helen Lefroy, followed by Janet Allan in the 1990s, Judith Willson in the 2000s and Helen Tookey in the 2010s. These four women have all expressed gratitude and admiration for Schmidt, who gave them valuable professional opportunities. But their relationship with the Old Guard did not always go smoothly. Several interviewees mentioned that they sometimes felt frustrated at their lack of autonomy. Power remained concentrated at the top, with Schmidt still firmly in control of the firm he had founded.

<sup>16</sup> Id.

The first woman to join the Carcanet/*PN* team was Helen Lefroy, who became Sales Director in June 1978 at the end of a long career in publishing. In August, Schmidt told Jonathan Barker of the Poetry Book Society that her arrival was

a blessing of major proportions. You will like her (if you don't already know her) – a lady with more than three decades in publishing at all levels, a saint of patience and industry, with an enthusiasm if anything greater than our own, so she has been a real shot in the arm for the Press and for morale generally.<sup>17</sup>

Despite her extensive professional experience, Lefroy received a meagre salary of £2,000 in 1978 (the relative income value would be around £20,000 in 2020).<sup>18</sup>

Why did Helen Lefroy—an unmarried woman who could rely only on her own income—accept this financial sacrifice? Schmidt wrote to Donald Davie that she was motivated by “vocation and belief”<sup>19</sup> Mike Freeman, who joined Carcanet in 1981, was impressed by her “stern professionalism.”<sup>20</sup> Robyn Marsack also noted her extreme frugality: “Helen was ... a recycler before that was fashionable. She understood that Carcanet had no money, it was operating on a shoestring. And she herself never wasted money.”<sup>21</sup> For example, discarded cardboards and lengths of strings found on the street were used to wrap packets of Carcanet books, which were then hand-delivered if the addressee lived close by.

These characteristics—a sense of vocation, sternness and frugality—were reminiscent of the protestant ethic described by Max Weber. For the merchants and entrepreneurs of early capitalism, the conception of work as *Beruf*—a religious vocation demanding fulfilment—gave them a psychological motivation for devoting themselves tirelessly and conscientiously to their task. As Weber put it, “the ability of mental concentration, as well as the absolutely essential feeling of obligation to one’s job, are

<sup>17</sup> Schmidt to Jonathan Barker, Aug. 25, 1978, CPA 3/196, JRL.

<sup>18</sup> Relative income measures an amount of income relative to per capita GDP. It shows the economic status or relative prestige value of the owner of this income, because of their rank in the income distribution. See Officer and Williamson.

<sup>19</sup> Schmidt to Davie, June 3, 1978, CPA 2/3/35, JRL.

<sup>20</sup> Mike Freeman, Interview with Victoria Stobo, April 24, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Robyn Marsack, Interview with Lise Jaillant, Aug. 11, 2018.

here most often combined with a strict economy which calculates the possibility of high earnings, and a cool self-control and frugality which enormously increase performance” (63). Helen Lefroy was primarily motivated by the success of Carcanet, rather than her own financial well-being. Self-sacrifice has traditionally been thought of as a female behaviour, and Lefroy was willing to sacrifice her own interests in favour of those of her employer.

Not only did Lefroy work for a low income, she also transformed her London flat into a Carcanet office. When Robyn Marsack joined the firm, she worked in Lefroy’s spare bedroom. The two women had a difficult relationship. As a young graduate from the University of Oxford, Marsack lacked any kind of training and experience in sales, marketing, editing and proofreading. Lefroy, who was immensely experienced, was not willing to patiently explain her trade. “Her method was to let you do a thing, and then tell you afterwards it was wrong. Instead of telling you before, how to do a thing. So, it was really quite difficult,” Marsack confessed.<sup>22</sup> There was no solidarity between the two women, perhaps because Lefroy resented Marsack’s privileged university education. When Lefroy decided to retire, a new London office had to be found. Bob Gavron, who acquired Carcanet in 1983, arranged for the press to have a room in the Folio Society building in Southwark. No longer dependent on Lefroy’s donation of free office space, Schmidt asked for the latest equipment that would position Carcanet as a serious competitor to the London presses. “The office should be equipped with telephone, typewriters, answering machine, and an IBM displaywriter with a two-slot drive, VDU and “text-pack three’ facility” he wrote in a 1983 memo, signalling a transition towards greater professionalisation.<sup>23</sup>

After Helen Lefroy’s retirement, Robyn Marsack went on to become an editorial manager, moving to freelance following her family’s relocation to Scotland in 1987. After four decades of collaborative work with Schmidt, she attributes the longevity of this working relationship partly to the fact that she was not working “next to him on a day-to-day basis.” “I think he’s very demanding - not in a nasty way, he wouldn’t shout at people or anything like that, but working with him day-to-day, I think it

<sup>22</sup> Id.

<sup>23</sup> Schmidt, Memo, April 25, 1983, CPA 4/2, Box 9, JRL.

could be quite frustrating and challenging,” Marsack said.<sup>24</sup> She went on to explain that Schmidt expected things to be done in a certain way. At the same time, he was not always available to answer questions, being busy with his other roles as university teacher and writer. Like other people who have worked under Schmidt, Marsack noted that he keeps a tight grip on the company. “There is no number 2” at Carcanet/*PN*, she declared.<sup>25</sup> Although Marsack benefited from valuable opportunities when she was working for the press, she had to look elsewhere to reach her leadership potential—becoming Director of the Scottish Poetry Library in 1999.

Janet Allan, who joined Carcanet in the early 1990s, confirmed that Schmidt remained firmly in control of the press, leading a team of mostly female staff members. “He probably employed women because they were cheaper than men!” she said. “There was never any money.”<sup>26</sup> Like Helen Lefroy, Janet Allan was at the end of her career when she started working for Carcanet, first in marketing and then in production. Her career had started in the 1950s as assistant production manager at a big London publisher, Associated Book Publishers. Her boss was convinced that production professionals should stay in touch with authors. “Even though the book may be a textbook, a school textbook or something like that, it’s still so much of the author’s efforts and enthusiasm and insight have gone into it, that it matters very much to them,” Allan said.<sup>27</sup> She continued to work closely with authors at Manchester University Press and Liverpool University Press, an experience that served her well at Carcanet. “We had to organise poetry readings, press releases, talk to our reps, and later on when I was working more on the production side, liaising with authors about the design and production of their books.”<sup>28</sup>

In addition to valuable skills and extensive experience in the publishing industry, Allan brought intellectual interests to Carcanet. This was a common point with the other professional women who worked for the press from the 1980s onwards. Robyn Marsack said: “We were all ... intelligent people who could also have a relationship with the authors, where

<sup>24</sup> Robyn Marsack, Interview with Lise Jaillant, Aug. 11, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> Janet Allan, Interview with Victoria Stobo, April 12, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

they would feel that somebody knowledgeable was looking after them.”<sup>29</sup> After working at Carcanet, both Judith Willson and Helen Tookey went on to teach and to publish poems. Marsack, who describes herself as a translator and critical writer, held an appointment as a Royal Literary Fund writing fellow at the University of Glasgow. “We all had an interest in writing ourselves,” Marsack noted.<sup>30</sup> Like Helen Lefroy before them, these four women (Marsack, Allan, Willson and Tookey) were motivated by a sense of vocation and belief in the importance of literary publishing. They signed up for a career that was not financially rewarding in the hope of fulfilling their true calling.

In *Culture as a Vocation*, the sociologist Vincent Dubois has shown that those who aspire to a career in the cultural sector are overwhelmingly women from socially privileged backgrounds. They have often grown up in families that value cultural activities outside school: visiting libraries and museums, going to the theatre, engaging with artistic practice such as drawing or writing. They are attracted to a sector where roles are ill-defined and require flexibility to adapt to a fast-changing, project-driven environment centred around the figure of the creator. Janet Allan thus declared:

If you work with Michael, nothing stays the same for very long. But we had a sense of what had to be done, and between us we did it. But we didn't have anything like strict job specifications or contracts or anything really. You would sort of morph around what other people were doing, and it was a collaborative, team effort.<sup>31</sup>

Here, Allan stressed that the flexibility to move from one role to another was a key requirement at a small publishing firm. Likewise, Marsack engaged with marketing and sales activities, in addition to her editorial work.

For Dubois, the cultural vocation combines both low wages and the need to develop managerial skills. Professionals in this sector have inherited the principles of the “reverse economy” specific to the cultural field. As Pierre Bourdieu has shown, the field of cultural production (at least in its purest form) relies on “a generalized game of ‘loser wins,’

<sup>29</sup> Robyn Marsack, Interview with Lise Jaillant, Aug. 11, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Id.

<sup>31</sup> Janet Allan, Interview with Victoria Stobo, April 12, 2019.

on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies.” In particular, “it excludes the pursuit of profit and does not guarantee any sort of correspondence between investment and monetary gains” (39). Cultural sector professionals accept that their vocation will probably not lead to personal wealth. But they also need to embrace market economy and managerial processes. At Carcanet, production and marketing managers thrived to deliver books on time and to promote them in various channels, bringing regular income streams to the press and the ability to satisfy the Arts Council’s requirements. The survival of the press largely depended on these female professionals, with Schmidt remaining in control of the firm and driving the editorial agenda.

Judith Willson, who became Carcanet’s managing editor in 2002, seemed extremely reluctant to acknowledge the role of gender in the publishing industry:

Publishing is probably of all industries one in which women have had significant roles for a long time, particularly editorial roles. Certainly at Carcanet, when I started work there the finance director, the marketing manager, the sales manager, the administrator were women, and that wasn’t unusual, either for Carcanet or other publishers I’ve worked with. The Chair of Carcanet’s Board is a woman. There’s never been any question of women not having powerful voices in the press.<sup>32</sup>

If by “power,” one means the ability to influence and make an impact, Willson is certainly correct to describe Carcanet’s female professionals as “powerful voices.” Similarly, Helen Tookey mentioned that Christine Steele, the finance person, was a strong woman who did not hesitate to tell Schmidt: “no, we’re not doing that, or no, that’s not going to work.”<sup>33</sup> But this power remained confined to mid-management level, and did not translate into more senior leadership opportunities. No one ever seriously questioned Schmidt’s directorship, not even Kate Gavron as Chair of Carcanet’s Board, who told me: “Michael is the life and soul of the company.”<sup>34</sup>

Judith Willson also exaggerates the role of women writers on the Carcanet list. “Carcanet very, very quickly was publishing women,” she

<sup>32</sup> Judith Willson, Interview with Victoria Stobo, March 28, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Helen Tookey, Interview with Victoria Stobo, March 27, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Kate Gavron, Interview with Lise Jaillant, Oct. 8, 2018.

said. “Elizabeth Jennings was an important poet for Carcanet from the beginning. Elaine Feinstein, Eavan Boland, Gillian Clarke, Lorna Goodison, Sujata Bhatt were absolutely central to the list from its early days, and remain so, along with many others.”<sup>35</sup> In fact, Jennings did not join the Carcanet list until 1975, six years after the creation of the company. And it was only in 1979 that Carcanet published Feinstein’s edited book *Three Russian Poets*. From 1969 to 1979, one in ten of its authors were women. The representation of women improved in the 1980s with the publication of the work of Clarke in 1982, Bolland in 1987, Bhatt in 1988 and Goodison in 2000. Carcanet waited until the late 1980s to start publishing women of colour. The growing number of women and ethnic minorities on the Carcanet list made the press less vulnerable to feminist critics, and more appealing to funders pushing for more diversity (see Chapter 5).

Why was Judith Willson so eager to present Carcanet as a woman-friendly press even in the early days? Willson “feel[s] very strongly” that women have not been marginalised on the Carcanet list. That impression “needs to be corrected by looking at the press’s output,” she said.<sup>36</sup> But today’s list bears little resemblance with the list of the 1970. Carcanet has morphed into a diverse press, open to alternative poetic voices. This transformation was piloted by Schmidt, who was tightly in charge of commissioning books. Robyn Marsack thus noted: “I was never a commissioning editor.” Many people recommended books to Schmidt but “the publishing decisions were very much his.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Willson declared that she “didn’t commission books,” because “that was Michael’s role.”<sup>38</sup> Schmidt operated largely single-handedly, but he sometimes passed on a manuscript to Willson to ask what she thought. Like Helen Lefroy, who lent her own London flat to Carcanet, Willson completely identified with the interests of the press. Her discourse supports the official narrative: the story of Carcanet as a press that has always been welcoming for women, including women of colour.

Helen Tookey, who succeeded Willson as managing editor, presented a similar view of Carcanet as a diverse company. To justify this, she cited

<sup>35</sup> Judith Willson, Interview with Victoria Stobo, March 28, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Id.

<sup>37</sup> Robyn Marsack, Interview with Lise Jaillant, Aug. 11, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Judith Willson, Interview with Victoria Stobo, March 28, 2019.

some of the same names mentioned by Willson (including Eavan Boland and Sinéad Morrissey, which can be seen on the graph as part of the network associated with the New Guard). And like Willson, Tookey did not work in a commissioning role, although Schmidt sometimes asked her for her advice. “If I’d been more the kind of person who would have come in and said, this person’s amazing, I think he would have completely listened,” Tookey said. “It just wasn’t something I did very much of.”<sup>39</sup> Tookey presented herself as an easy-going professional who was happy to stay in the shadow of her boss: she gave her opinion when asked to, but did not challenge her superior’s authority.

Michael Schmidt’s authority as founding director of Carcanet can be described as “charismatic,” a term used by Max Weber in his 1922 book *Economy and Society*. As Weber notes, charismatic authority is based on loyalty, on allegiance to a person who is deemed exceptional. It results in strong levels of obedience, as the charismatic leader tends to favour followers who do not challenge his or her vision. Since this authority relies so much on personal charisma, succession can be an issue. “In its pure form charismatic authority has a character specifically foreign to everyday routine,” Weber explains. “If this is not to remain a purely transitory phenomenon ... it is necessary for the character of charismatic authority to become radically changed” (246).

In the case of Carcanet, there is a consensus that things are best left unchanged until Schmidt retires. This retirement could well lead to the end of Carcanet. Kate Gavron told me that she had “two streams of thought” on the topic of succession:

One is that when the time comes when Michael either wants to give up or has to give up, he and I would look for someone to carry on in as close a tradition to Michael as possible, which of course would be extremely hard to find. My other thought is that there is no law that says that Carcanet has to continue forever. It might be that it should be one man’s life’s work, and it should just stop with Michael. However, I think the Arts Council would be unhappy about that.<sup>40</sup>

Why would it be so hard to find a successor to Michael Schmidt? Well-run companies have plans in place to anticipate all eventualities, including the

<sup>39</sup> Helen Tookey, Interview with Victoria Stobo, March 27, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Kate Gavron, Interview with author, Oct. 8, 2018.

departure, retirement or sudden death of their CEOs. When Steve Jobs died of cancer in 2011, Tim Cook, his second-in-command at Apple, became the new boss. No one suggested that Apple should just stop with Jobs, even though many criticised Cook for lacking the creative genius attributed to his predecessor. The charismatic authority of Jobs had to transition towards a new kind of authority that could be described as “rational-legal,” in Weber’s words (215–216). To run smoothly, large organisations need guidelines and processes, and managers who can interpret and apply these rules to different situations. Apple is still a leading tech company, in part because its management was able to stir this transition from charismatic towards rational-legal authority.

Unlike Apple, however, Carcanet has no stakeholders, and no lucrative markets in sight. The Arts Council may be unhappy if Carcanet stops with Schmidt, but they are unwilling to offer alternatives. Alison Boyle of the Arts Council, who regularly attends meetings of the Carcanet board, told me that they “have a hands-off role” and prefer not to intervene unless they see a problem.<sup>41</sup> True power remains concentrated in the hand of the founder, who is alone in charge of his succession. The New Guard has consolidated, rather than challenged existing governance.

## MARGINALS

Not everyone followed the path of the New Guard. Some have gravitated away from Michael Schmidt by choice (Michael Rowan-Robinson, who was associated with the Cambridge set of *Carcanet* magazine, and never met Schmidt). Others have severed ties after falling into disfavour (Peter Robinson, who is no longer a Carcanet author). Likewise, Mike Freeman had a fall out with Schmidt when he was working as fiction editor during the 1980s—a volatile period for the press. The rise and fall of Carcanet’s fiction list tells us a lot about internal power dynamics, as well as external market pressures at a time of huge changes in the publishing industry.

When telling the story of a publishing house or any cultural organisation, we often forget that things could have been different. Random House could have stayed an independent US firm known for the publication of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and other modernist texts. Instead, its founder Bennett Cerf sold the firm to the conglomerate RCA in the

<sup>41</sup> Alison Boyle, Interview with author, March 21, 2019.

1960s, and the company continued to grow in the following decades. Mergers and acquisitions were not ineluctable, and some companies (such as Faber) have remained independent. While Random House started small and became a multi-national corporation, Carcanet failed to scale up. Yet, there was no law that said that Carcanet had to stay a small press forever.

In the 1980s, Carcanet/*PN* was moving fast towards greater professionalisation. The firm had the financial backing of a wealthy businessman and a generous grant from the Arts Council. It was expanding its list towards fiction, with Mike Freeman as fiction editor. In the 1980s, it opened an office in New York City, directed by Bob Gavron's son Simon. The days of underpaying its staff and relying on the gift of free office space seemed over. The team was larger, and Schmidt was sharing more power. Yet, the failure of the fiction list and of the US office led to a rethinking of this strategy.

The origins of Carcanet's fiction list can be traced back to the early days of the firm. In September 1971, Schmidt told Brian Cox that the press was expanding in exciting new directions. "The great joy is the feeling that we are expanding into a great small publishing house, with a critical series, a translation series, the ghost of a fiction and children's series, and the murmur of a music series."<sup>42</sup> Further attempts to expand the fiction list happened in 1973. Schmidt worked with a literary scout, Miss David, to identify fiction "neglected by the larger houses."<sup>43</sup> But these efforts led nowhere, in part because Schmidt lacked enthusiasm for fiction. "My specialty and my main – perhaps my only – interest is poetry," he wrote to Mrs Dixon (Ursula Holden).<sup>44</sup> Although Carcanet had signed her first novel *Endless Race*, the book appeared with the London Magazine Editions in 1975.

Carcanet became a more hospitable place for fiction writers in 1980 onwards. Since fiction generally sells better than poetry, the objective was to develop a profitable list and free the press from its ties with the Arts Council. In a letter to Roy Burrows of Woodspring Press, Schmidt explained that "a careful incursion into the fiction market" would contribute to the diversification of Carcanet's list.<sup>45</sup> At the suggestion of

<sup>42</sup> Schmidt to Cox, Sept. 3, 1971, CQA 1/1/116, JRL.

<sup>43</sup> Schmidt to Ursula Dixon, May 21, 1973, CPA 3/198, JRL.

<sup>44</sup> Schmidt to Dixon, CPA 3/198, JRL.

<sup>45</sup> Schmidt to Roy Burrows, April 30, 1980, CPA 3/14, JRL.

one of Carcanet's directors, Stephen du Sautoy of Sidgwick and Jackson, he had prepared a confidential development plan to transform the press into an independent structure, no longer dependent on public funding. In addition to Carcanet, Schmidt also toyed with the idea of publishing more fiction in *PN Review*. "If we do anything in this area, I do not want to be merely a token service," he told the writer Penelope Fitzgerald. "As you know, in poetry we do a great deal. I would not wish to commit quite so much to fiction, but a cosmetic service would be less than useless."<sup>46</sup>

This editorial diversification was designed to loosen Carcanet's dependence towards the Arts Council, but also to make the firm more appealing to possible investors. Robert Gavron acquired the press in 1983, with Schmidt retaining full editorial control. Carcanet benefited from two free offices—in London and New York—shared with Gavron's company the Folio Society. In 1987, Schmidt explained to Graham Long of the Arts Council that the advantages of the New York operation were fourfold.<sup>47</sup> First, it led to more reviews of Carcanet books in the United States. Second, it offered growth opportunities for *PN Review*, a magazine that could find new American audiences. Third, the New York office could negotiate rights sales and purchases, which substantially benefited the UK operation. Fourth, translated fiction and titles from the "Lives and Letters" list often sold better in the US than in the UK. The effect was to extend print runs, reduce unit costs and increase margins. Fiction had become an important part of Carcanet's growth strategy.

In the mid-1980s, contemporary fiction and non-fiction reached 30% of the Carcanet list, the same proportion as for contemporary poetry. The rest of the list was composed of earlier twentieth-century fiction and non-fiction (10%), earlier twentieth-century poetry (10%), nineteenth-century century and earlier poetry (10%). The remaining part included books by authors of African, Caribbean or Asian in origin, as well as critical writing. With *PN Review*, the proportion of contemporary fiction and non-fiction was higher than contemporary poetry.<sup>48</sup> For the first time in their history, Carcanet and *PN* were no longer exclusively associated with poetry.

<sup>46</sup> Schmidt to Penelope Fitzgerald, Sept. 8, 1980, CPA 3/48, JRL.

<sup>47</sup> Schmidt to Long, May 7, 1987, CPA 4/2, Box 10, JRL.

<sup>48</sup> Schmidt to Kate Marsh (Arts Council of Great Britain), Nov. 7, 1986, CPA 4/2, Box 11, JRL.

The Fiction List followed the same logic that the press had applied to poetry, focusing on new and neglected English language fiction of the twentieth century, rediscoveries and translations. Among the rediscoveries was the modernist writer Ford Madox Ford. Unlike James Joyce or T. S. Eliot who had long reached canonical status, Ford was then marginalised in modernist studies. C. H. Sisson was among the few critical voices who endorsed Ford, putting him in the same category of neglected writers as Charles Maurras, Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound.

When explaining Ford's fluctuating reputation, scholars have given three main reasons. First, Ford was a difficult man, who had many powerful enemies eager to downplay his literary talent. As Max Saunders put it in his 1996 biography, "it is only now, half-a-century after his death, when most of the personal animosities have burned themselves out, that it becomes possible to gauge and judge" (vi). The second reason is the unequal quality of Ford's work. "He is only occasionally great," Saunders writes, thus echoing Arthur Mizener's earlier statement ("the very quantity of Ford's work has tended to obscure the best of it" (xxiii)). Ford's large and uneven production was undoubtedly a major obstacle to his entry into the literary canon at the time when New Critics privileged close attention to the literary text. Third, Ford's inability to have a collected edition of his work published during his lifetime, and his exclusion from prominent series of classics had a significant impact on his canonicity. Ford's constant change of publishers made it difficult to market him as a "classic" by issuing a collected edition or including his work in a series of classics. By the end of his career, his texts were scattered across more than twenty British publishing houses. In addition, Ford also had several American publishers, including J. B. Lippincott, William Edwin Rudge and Horace Liveright. In 1950, Alfred Knopf Inc published *Parade's End* in the US, and it was with this firm that Schmidt negotiated in 1979 to obtain the rights to publish the book in the UK.<sup>49</sup>

In 1982, Carcanet published its first Ford title, *The Rash Act*, with an introduction by C. H. Sisson. The book "had excellent reviews and is to date our best fiction title in terms of sales," Schmidt told Carmen Callil of Virago Press.<sup>50</sup> This caught the attention of Callil, who made an offer for the paperback rights. Ford's critical writings appeared on the

<sup>49</sup> Correspondence with Alfred Knopf Inc., 1979, CPA 2/3/8 (B Misc), JRL.

<sup>50</sup> Schmidt to Carmen Callil, Feb. 2, 1983, CPA 3/114, JRL.

Carcenet list in 1983, with the publication of *The English Novel: From the Earliest Days to the Death of Joseph Conrad*. In a letter to the French scholar Dominique Lemarchal, Schmidt wrote:

It has long seemed to us that writers such as Ford and Lewis have for diverse reasons been overlooked in England, despite the presence of Ford's novels. This seems to me to impoverish the contemporary fiction scene since Ford is such an excellent example and stimulant as Burgess, Greene and others have well appreciated. We re-issued *The English Novel* (without, as you will have seen, the dedication to Walpole!) because it represents a kind of non-academic criticism marked by enthusiasm, a commitment and a practitioner's insights, which we find exemplary, despite the factual inaccuracies of the volume. I hope that our Ford programme will continue to grow.<sup>51</sup>

Continuing this Ford programme, Carcenet published *A Call: The Tale of Two Passions* with an afterword by Sisson in 1984.

While Schmidt trusted the judgement of Sisson on Ford and other neglected modernist writers, he relied on Mike Freeman to expand the fiction list in contemporary directions. Freeman was particularly interested in the work of Christine Brooke-Rose who translated Alain Robbe-Grillet's work and was affiliated with the English *nouveau roman* in the 1960s. In 1968, she moved to France and taught linguistics and English literature at the newly founded University of Paris (Vincennes), an institution hospitable to counter-cultural thought. Her exile marked the start of a declining critical reputation in Britain. By the early 1980s, she was nearly invisible, and when she suddenly approached Carcenet, Freeman welcomed the opportunity to add her work to the fiction list. In 1984, *Amalgamemnon* became the first of a new wave of experimental novels published by Carcenet. "Christine and I became good friends, though her friendships were risky," Freeman recalled, "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."<sup>52</sup> After Freeman's departure from the press, Brooke-Rose was one of only two experimental writers to remain on the Carcenet list (the other was Gabriel Josipovici).

<sup>51</sup> Schmidt to Dominique Lemarchal, March 13, 1984, CPA 3/161/2, JRL.

<sup>52</sup> Mike Freeman, Interview with Victoria Stobo, April 24, 2019.

Nicolas Tredell—a frequent contributor to *PN Review*, with seventy-two contributions in the 1980s—gave two main reasons why Mike Freeman left his job as fiction editor, signalling the end of Carcanet/*PN*'s diversification efforts and the return to poetry. First, Freeman's political opinions differed from that of the Old Guard that had long shaped Carcanet/*PN*. "I think that Mike politically was rather more left-wing," Tredell said, "and he was inclined to open [*PN Review*] magazine more to writers with whom Michael [Schmidt] and perhaps also, say, C. H. Sisson were uneasy."<sup>53</sup> The second reason was Freeman's push for more experimental fiction to be published. Again, this did not go well with Sisson, who feared a loss of identity. Schmidt, who had relied on Freeman to assist him with the editing of *PN Review*, "didn't like the direction the magazine was taking." "There was a certain kind of parting of the ways of Mike Freeman and Michael Schmidt at that particular point," Tredell noted.<sup>54</sup>

When we interviewed Mike Freeman, he made clear that his association with Carcanet had always been unlikely. Before joining the press in 1981, he had worked as an English teacher at school and university level: "I was a Labour Party activist and involved with the university's Marxist group, though not a CPGB [Communist Party of Great Britain] member.

Moreover, I had an interest in post-structuralist theory as it affected literary criticism."<sup>55</sup> These political and literary opinions put him at the opposite spectrum of Schmidt and his close allies. But it was a period of experiment for the press, with fresh ideas brought by the New Guard. Freeman benefited from opportunities that would have been closed to him a few years before. However, with Schmidt still in the driving seat, his development was limited. "Michael was the managing editor: he managed, he edited, he called the final shots with the fiction list," Freeman said, comparing Schmidt to a chef with complete power over the editorial menu. "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."<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Nicolas Tredell, Interview with Victoria Stobo, June 17, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Id.

<sup>55</sup> Mike Freeman, Interview with Victoria Stobo, April 24, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Id.

By the early 1990s, Carcanet no longer put emphasis on developing its fiction list, preferring to concentrate on a few titles that brought prestige or profit to the press. In July 1991, Schmidt explained to the Chair of the Arts Council Lord Palumbo that a “selective fiction list” was part of Carcanet’s five editorial elements (the other four were new poetry; neglected twentieth-century poetry; selections from writers of the past with the Fyfield Books; and the “Lives and Letters” series including poets’ prose, criticism and related titles).<sup>57</sup>

The New York office closed at around the same time. “It closed because they lost so much money,” Kate Gavron said.<sup>58</sup> The additional sales in the US did not compensate for the fixed costs of running the shared Folio/Carcanet office, as well as the promotional efforts to advertise the lists in the US. “I now think with both companies, it’s better to make a virtue of being British and based in Britain, rather than trying to have a more global presence,” Gavron added.<sup>59</sup>

The decline of Carcanet’s fiction list sheds light on the tectonic changes of the publishing industry in the last decades of the twentieth century. With the rise of mergers and acquisitions, independent presses could not hope to compete with large publishing groups. To survive, they had to specialise in specific markets: literary fiction and poetry for Faber, for example. Carcanet had always been a smaller firm (in 1985, its objective was to sell “at least 10% as many books as Faber”).<sup>60</sup> In this ultra-competitive marketplace, Carcanet chose to return to its core poetry business. It positioned itself as a “list” publisher that valued its backlist rather than fast-selling titles. “At a time when most publishers project short shelf-lives for their books,” Schmidt wrote to Palumbo, “we serve authors and readers by keeping books in print for as long as possible.”<sup>61</sup>

It is certainly true that Carcanet has valued long-term relationships with its authors. Peter Robinson, who was living in Japan from the late 1980s to the late 2000s, benefited from this commitment to keep books in print for a long time. “When I came back to England in 2007, I

<sup>57</sup> Schmidt to Lord Palumbo, July 15, 1991, CPA 5/2, Box 1, JRL.

<sup>58</sup> Kate Gavron, Interview with author, Oct. 8, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*

<sup>60</sup> Minutes of the Poetry Centre Committee meeting, April 18, 1985, COX 5/1, Brian Cox Papers, JRL.

<sup>61</sup> Schmidt to Palumbo, 1991.

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."<sup>62</sup> He was able to get a professorial job at the University of Reading, largely due to his reputation as a leading Carcanet author (his *Selected Poems* appeared in 2003). But Robinson was angered by Carcanet's policy on permission fees to reproduce poems. In the case of anthologies that were unlikely to make a profit, these demands often led editors to drop his poems. The relationship with Carcanet came to an end, which left Robinson feeling upset:

I was taken up by Michael as a poet in my very early thirties, and when I edited the [Adrian] Stokes poems I was still in my twenties.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup>

Peter Robinson acknowledges that there is limited space on the Carcanet list, and that the press had to move on at some point: "Michael can only take on so many books, and he's got to keep abreast of the times."<sup>65</sup> It is precisely this flexibility and adaptability that has contributed to Carcanet's survival.

## CONCLUSION

For Carcanet, reconciling its past with its present was not an easy task. Closely associated with the "right-wing insurgency" of the 1970s, the press had to completely reinvent itself to survive in a very tough marketplace. When Carcanet started, there were many trade presses that were publishing poetry lists, including Jonathan Cape and Chatto & Windus.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Robinson, Interview with Vanessa Millar, Feb. 26, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Carcanet published *With all the Views: The Collected Poems of Adrian Stokes* in 1981.

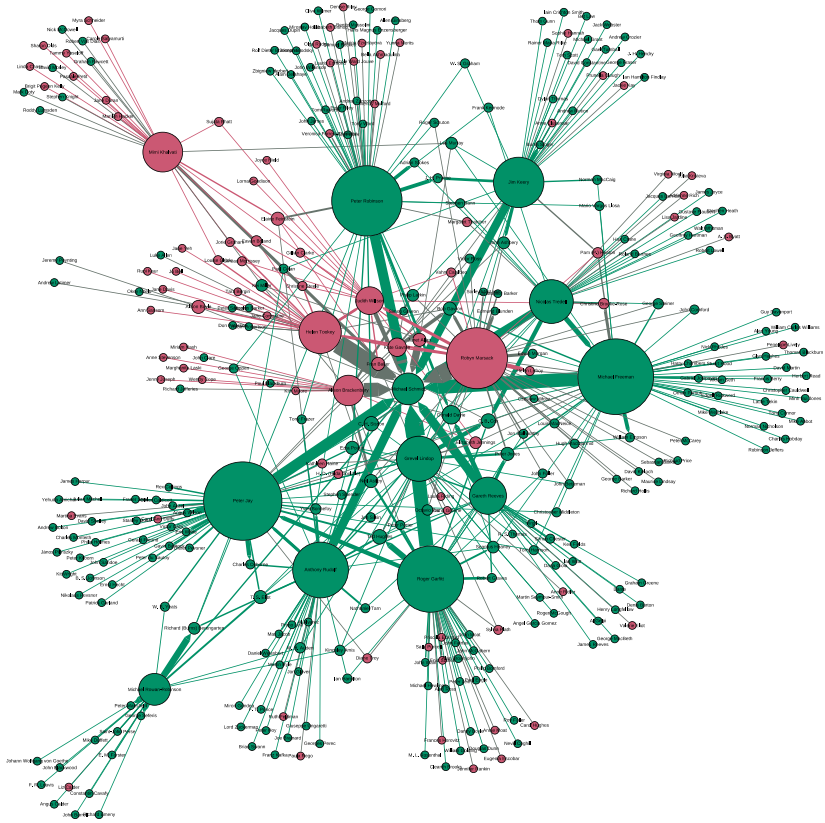
<sup>64</sup> Peter Robinson, Interview with Vanessa Millar, Feb. 26, 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Id.

The sector became increasingly concentrated, and many poetry lists disappeared. To continue to operate in the open marketplace and keep its Arts Council grant, the press reinvented itself into a women-friendly and ethnic-minority-friendly press. In practice, this meant working more closely with a New Guard of authors and publishing professionals, many of whom were women. They brought new ideas and new ways of doing things, but Schmidt remained in control of Carcanet. The charismatic authority of the Carcanet leader ensured long-lasting loyalty to the press. But it also meant that authority was rarely challenged. Schmidt continued to enjoy his freedom even after Bob Gavron bought the press, and the decision-making process remained largely concentrated in his hands—sometimes with input from his old mentors. C. H. Sisson's disapproval of literary theory and experimental fiction played a role in Mike Freeman's departure and the subsequent decline of the fiction list. The press stayed relatively small and specialised at a time when many independent publishers struggled to survive.

## APPENDIX

**Names mentioned by nineteen interviewees associated with Carcanet, transcripts available at [www.poetrysurvival.com](http://www.poetrysurvival.com).**



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## Conclusion: Social Media, Born-Digital Archives and the Survival of Poetry

Poetry has often been associated with difficulty, small audiences and a complete lack of commercial potential—a genre so doomed that its survival is in itself a source of wonder. This dark legend is not new. A famous painting by Henry Wallis shows the eighteenth-century poet Thomas Chatterton lying dead, having taken arsenic. The physical beauty of the young man contrasts with the squalor of his lodgings. In Wallis’s painting, poetry and poverty went hand in hand. Dead at 17 in his garret, the Bristol-born poet became an inspiration for a generation of Romantic poets. Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge saw him as a martyr, who had unjustly suffered for his art. Drawing on the Romantic image of tragic artistic talent, the *Guardian* described the series of projects marking the 250th anniversary of Chatterton’s death as a way “to remind people of his extraordinary but often forgotten life, and, perhaps, inspire a new generation of Romantic poets” (Morris).

When this article was published during the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, more and more people were seeking poetry as a comfort in difficult times. The number of Instagram posts tagged #poetry grew from 40 to 48 million between April and September 2020. Visits to the National Poetry Day website over the lockdown period increased by 160% compared to the same timeframe in 2019. Online readings flourished during the pandemic—from Patrick Stewart’s daily performances of Shakespeare’s sonnets, to readings of *The Poetry Pharmacy* by William Sieghart that “*Games of Thrones*” actress Emilia Clarke shared with

her 27 million Instagram followers (Cowdrey). In Britain and elsewhere, there was a growing demand for listening and watching poetry performances online, but also for writing poetry. The project #haiflu inviting people to write a haiku about lockdown resulted in 8,000 + contributions of poems and associated photographs posted on social media. Liv Torc, a spoken word artist who initiated the project on Facebook, received over 200 testimonies from participants citing how the project has positively affected their wellbeing during lockdown.<sup>1</sup>

The language of trauma and healing when discussing poetry is not new, but the pandemic has given it an additional appeal. For the 2022 World Poetry Day, *The Conversation* magazine gathered four articles on “How poetry can help people get through hard times.” Readers were reminded that poetry can comfort us in grief, through the example of the nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson who battled depression after a series of bereavements. In addition to the pandemic, the 2020 murder of George Floyd, and the Black Lives Matter protests to denounce racism, have highlighted the role of poetry during difficult times. The rise of activist poets is exemplified by Amanda Gorman who, at age 22, became the youngest inaugural poet in US history. As a young Black female poet, Gorman has pushed for poetry to speak of racial justice, and highlight past historical wrongs.<sup>2</sup>

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE RISE OF A NEW GENERATION OF POPULAR WOMEN POETS

The Romantic myth of the doomed (White male) poet has not entirely disappeared, but it is challenged by a narrative on poetry as a source of individual well-being and social diversity. This uplifting story is carried by various literary institutions. Funding agencies such as the Arts Council in the UK view poetry as a beneficial activity that can improve mental health and strengthen social links. Chris McCabe, the director of the National Poetry Library in London, has described poetry as “the perfect January tonic” and “a self-care powerhouse.” Indeed, there is scientific evidence that reading is beneficial, which has led the National Health Service to

<sup>1</sup> <https://nationalpoetryday.co.uk/haiflu/> [accessed Jan. 12, 2021].

<sup>2</sup> See Gorman’s 2021 interview with Michelle Obama for *Time* magazine (Obama).

develop programmes to “actively engage patients in reading, often in groups, as a step towards better health” (McCabe).

The emphasis is not on suffering and death as in the Romantic myth, but on providing warmth and well-being. In this narrative, trauma leads to healing—not to death in a sordid garret. Like the Arts Council and other publicly funded institutions, charities such as the Forward Arts Foundation (which founded the National Poetry Day in 1994) and commercial publishers often present poetry as a comfort in a difficult world. To market *Milk and Honey* by the bestselling poet Rupi Kaur, Simon & Schuster UK used a blurb from London’s *Evening Standard*: “Caught the imagination of a large, atypical poetry audience... Kaur knows the good her poetry does: it saves lives.” As an Indian-born Canadian poet still in her twenties, Kaur is seen as a new voice in a poetry world that has long been dominated by White men.<sup>3</sup>

This focus on well-being and inclusion of women and ethnic minorities is broadcasted on social media platforms that reach mass audiences, including young, female and other traditionally underrepresented publics—in the English-speaking world and beyond. Rupi Kaur has 4.5 million followers on Instagram<sup>4</sup> and 41 200 followers on Tik Tok,<sup>5</sup> has sold millions of books worldwide and has been described as a “poet-entrepreneur” (Hill and Yuan). Commenting on the commercial success of *Milk and Honey*, Kaur’s publisher Kirsty Melville declared that “the medium of poetry reflects our age, where short-form communication is something people find easier to digest or connect with” (Gross). Kaur’s UK equivalents, Nikita Gill, Kae Tempest and Hollie McNish, have 657,000; 117,000 and 82,000 followers, respectively, on Instagram.<sup>6</sup> Tempest and McNish got a start on the slam/performance scene and developed a YouTube presence, before signing book contracts with Picador. An avid Twitter user, McNish often posts short poems on the challenges of motherhood. In “Our Own Way,” a poem written in 2020,

<sup>3</sup> See Parmar for an overview of race and UK poetry.

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/rupikaur\\_/](https://www.instagram.com/rupikaur_/) [accessed Jan. 10, 2023].

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@rupikaur> [accessed Feb. 11, 2023].

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/nikita\\_gill/](https://www.instagram.com/nikita_gill/); <https://www.instagram.com/kaetempest/> and <https://www.instagram.com/holliepoetry/> [accessed Feb. 4, 2023].

the speaker describes the pressures of caring for a child during the lockdown period.<sup>7</sup> Starting with a long list of tasks not done, the speaker concludes with: “no, i don’t feel guilty. yes, we’re both okay/just getting through this time in our own way.”

The clever use of social media by this new generation of poets fuelled a boom in poetry sales on both sides of the Atlantic. According to a 2018 survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts and the US Census Bureau, 28 million Americans were reading poetry—the highest percentage of poetry readership in almost two decades.<sup>8</sup> In the UK, statistics from Nielsen BookScan show that sales grew by 12% in 2018 against the previous year, to reach 1.3 million volumes of poetry. Two-thirds of buyers were younger than 34 and 41% were aged 13 to 22, with teenage girls and young women identified as the largest consumer group in 2018. The popularity of Rupi Kaur (who released her second volume of poems *The Sun and Her Flowers* in 2017, followed by two more books: *Home Body* [2021] and *Healing Through Words* [2022]) amplified a phenomenon that has been noticed for several years. Poetry sales were below £8 million in 2013, reaching £12.3 million in 2018. The category has held relatively steady with a slight decrease in 2019—down by 2% down in volume terms and 0.4% in value against 2018 (Ferguson).

Unsurprisingly, the rise of Instapoets has led to a backlash. Heidi Broadhead, managing editor at the tiny US West Coast publisher Wave Books, told *Publishers’ Weekly* in 2018: “This is a trend in media or publishing, not in poetry. It’s interesting to watch a poetry book create a phenomenon on the level of *Fifty Shades* or *Twilight*, but it feels pretty separate from what we do. Our interest is creating art and literature that has lasting value” (Maher). In the UK, an article in *The Spectator* declared: “‘Instapoetry’ may be popular, but most of it is terrible” (Hodgkinson). And the poetry magazine *PN Review* published an essay denouncing Kaur, Tempest and McNish as talentless amateurs thriving on “a cult of personality, which demands from its heroes only that they be ‘honest’ and ‘accessible’” (Watts, “The Cult of the Noble Amateur”).

The author of the *PN Review* essay, Rebecca Watts, has a background very similar to her target Hollie McNish. Both women were born in

<sup>7</sup> Tweet, Jan. 6, 2021, <https://twitter.com/holliepoetry/status/1346847300560302084?s=20>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2018/taking-note-poetry-reading-federal-survey-results> [accessed Jan. 10, 2023].

1983, studied at the University of Cambridge, and chose unambitious day jobs to focus on their poetry. Watts has worked part-time in a library in Cambridge, and McNish has done a wide range of jobs before becoming a full-time writer in 2014. Watts is successful in her own right: her debut collection *The Met Office Advises Caution* was published in 2016 with Carcanet Press. The main difference between the two poets is their positioning in the literary scene: Watts writes literary poetry, rooted in a long tradition of poetic forms and engagement with “intelligent critical culture.” In contrast, McNish is associated with accessible and unpretentious poetry. In Watts’s words, “unpretentious means abundant in expletives and unintimidating to anyone who considers ignorance a virtue.”

For Rebecca Watts, literary critics and reviewers have failed to denounce Hollie McNish and other social media sensations because their “artless poetry” appeals to groups traditionally under-represented in the arts. “The middle-aged, middle-class reviewing sector is terrified of being seen to disparage the output of young, self-styled ‘working-class’ artists.” Although McNish comes from a middle-class family and studied at Cambridge, her positioning is anti-elitist. She often uses expletives, a lack of capital letters and other forms that give the impression that she is writing quickly without revising. For example, her poem “Our Own Way” shared on Twitter was “scribbled in the last lockdown” and still showed signs of the automatic spelling check underlining “i’ve” and “roblox” as incorrect.

Rebecca Watts and the Instapoets belong to different poetry worlds, that seldom communicate with each other. In an article published on the website of the US-based Poetry Foundation, Timothy Yu describes the first realm, that “continues to hold the published book as the acme of achievement, and increasingly identifies ‘craft’ with formal training” in academic creative writing programmes. The work produced in this first poetry world is designed for a small audience, often composed of peers rather than amateurs. This is the realm of Rebecca Watts, and it stands in sharp contrast with that of the Instapoets, whose work and fame are largely born-digital and turned towards a mass audience.

Disparaging popular poets is nothing new. In 1972, Michael Schmidt and his friend Grevil Lindop edited a collection of essays on British poetry in the past decade. Schmidt and Lindop were then in their mid-twenties and recent graduates of the University of Oxford. They had witnessed first-hand the impact of the cultural and social changes of the

1960s on the poetry field. The Liverpool scene that gave rise to the Beatles also produced widely popular poets that performed in pubs and clubs. These Liverpool poets then attracted the attention of mass-market publishers. The anthology *The Mersey Sound*, published by Penguin in 1967, contained the poems of Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten, became a bestseller—with sales reaching in excess of 500,000 copies.<sup>9</sup> Lindop had seen McGough and Patten read their poems to an audience composed of people mostly under 25. Overall, he was not impressed: “The experiments of the Liverpool poets and their less famous associates have largely failed” (106). What particularly bothered him is that the language these poets used was that of “propaganda and mass-persuasion,” a language that seemed difficult to combine with “individual perception and self-analysis” (106). In other words, reaching a mass audience required twisting the medium of poetry into something closer to advertising, with catchy slogans accompanied by entertaining music.

Fast forward half a century, and the Instapoets have developed new ways to perform poetry inspired by the music industry. In 2021, Amazon Prime released a live special, in which Rudi Kaur performed her poetry on stage. “The one-hour special is a distinctive fusion of poetry, humour, spoken word, music, and compelling visuals inspired by Rupi’s poetry collections,” declared her website.<sup>10</sup> The programme is presented as a creative fusion of literary and performative genres, alongside visual arts. The following year, Kaur launched a World Tour, with dozens of appearances in North and South America, Europe, Asia and Oceania. On her tour, she showcased her poetry and discussed her personal journey through “love, loss, trauma, healing, femininity, and migration.”<sup>11</sup>

The tour coincided with the release of her fourth book, *Healing Through Words*, a volume of guided writing prompts to help readers to develop their creativity, process trauma, loss, heartache, and celebrate their individual identity and resilience. The attractive physical format of the book appealed to many readers (“It’s big, weighty, comfortable to write in and feels like I’m holding all my thoughts and feelings in my

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/stories/50-years-of-mersey-sound> (accessed Jan. 10, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> <https://rupikaur.com/pages/rupikaurlive> (accessed Jan. 10, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> [https://rupikaur.com/pages/about-me?\\_pos=2&\\_sid=0a91a2876&\\_ss=r](https://rupikaur.com/pages/about-me?_pos=2&_sid=0a91a2876&_ss=r) (accessed Jan. 10, 2023).

hands,” reads one review on Amazon UK).<sup>12</sup> The peaceful accompanying pictures on Kaur’s website—with flowers and a cup of tea on a tray—are reminiscent of the aesthetics of mindfulness publications, such as the magazine *Breathe*.<sup>13</sup> The book can be found in the list of Amazon Best Sellers in Family & Lifestyle Depression, alongside self-help books such as Suzanne Alderson’s *Never Let Go: How to Parent Your Child Through Mental Illness* and Matt Haig’s *Reasons to Stay Alive*. In an interview in *Publishers’ Weekly*, Kaur was asked for her views of writing as “a tool for self-expression, self-exploration, or even self-therapy.” She responded that “sometimes, healing comes from honest conversations with yourself, and writing allows you the space and freedom to do so” (Nawotka). Writing is presented as a way to heal the self, without necessarily needing the help of others (such as therapists and mental health professionals).

This focus on trauma and recovery should be analysed in a broader social and historical context, rooted in identity politics. Roger Luckhurst has traced our contemporary obsession with trauma, healing, and survival to the nineteenth-century notion of the “nervous shock” that could affect both body and mind (23). Twentieth-century wars then led to rising concerns over “shell shock” and later PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). As Luckhurst points out, “PTSD is a socio-political category that has routed a significant strand of identity politics into the language of survivorship” (62). Poetry can be seen as a tool to survive, to overcome historical and personal hurdles. In her 2021 poem “The Hill We Climb” read during the inauguration of Joe Biden, Amanda Gorman thus described how “a skinny Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of becoming president, only to find herself reciting for one.” Her reading was praised by dignitaries, including the outgoing president Barak Obama and his wife Michelle (who described in her book *The Light We Carry* how Gorman overcame a speech impediment, alongside other obstacles, to become a celebrated public speaker).

Placed in a position of prestige and symbolic power, Amanda Gorman used this platform to denounce the way poetry is taught in schools. When Michelle Obama asked her how to make poetry “accessible and cool, especially for a young audience,” Gorman responded:

<sup>12</sup> “Jen,” Review on Amazon.co.uk, Nov. 6, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> <https://rupikaur.com/pages/healing-through-words> (accessed Jan. 10, 2023).

Poetry is already cool. Where we run into trouble is often we are looking through such a tight pinhole of what poems can be. Specifically we're looking at dead white men. Those are the poems that are taught in school and referred to as classics. We really need to break out of the pathology that poetry is only owned by certain elites. Where we can start is highlighting and celebrating poets who reflect humanity in all of its diverse colors and breadth. (Obama)

Here, Gorman echoes the “canon wars” wages that divided literary scholars in the 1980s and 1990s. While Matthew Arnold famously viewed the canon as “the best that has been thought and said,” Jane Tompkins and others have described literary reputation as a historical construction dependent on the social, political and commercial interests of the time (Tompkins xii). For Gorman, the historical emphasis on dead white men still excludes women—and particularly women of colour—from the curriculum taught in schools. In other words, the literary canon is not a meritocracy but rather the product of injustice and exclusion.

Institutions such as literary journals, publishing houses and creative writing programmes have played a major role as gatekeepers of the canon. For ethnic minority female poets like Rudi Kaur (who defines herself as “a Punjabi-Sikh woman first” [Nawotka]), these institutions have failed to encourage non-traditional poets. She framed her own publication story as a narrative of defiance towards these gatekeepers. Determined to get published after several years of writing and performing poetry, she approached a creative writing professor who first told her not to bother since poetry books were nearly impossible to get published. The professor advised to send individual poems to literary journals, magazines and anthologies. This resulted in repeated rejections for Kaur. When she asked if self-publishing was an option, the professor told her no, “to surpass the gatekeeper would be looked down upon by my literary peers.”<sup>14</sup>

However, Kaur had grown increasingly frustrated not only by the rejections, but also by the realisation that her work was best read as a coherent whole—rather than individual pieces thrown to journals and magazines. “That’s when I set my eyes on self-publishing, regardless of what the creative writing professor had said. I couldn’t be held back by this gatekeeper who was never going to pay attention to me anyway.”<sup>15</sup> She

<sup>14</sup> <https://rupikaur.com/pages/about-me> (accessed Jan. 17, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

edited and designed her book *Milk and Honey*, and self-published it in 2014. With her rising popularity on Instagram, the book was reprinted by Andrews McMeel Publishing, and went on to be a huge commercial success in the English-speaking world and elsewhere in translations.

This story is a striking inversion of the traditional route to literary power. Self-publishing is generally considered an inferior form of publication, since no established publisher has “consecrated” the author (Bourdieu 42). Even when Rupi Kaur eventually managed to enlist a mainstream publisher, it was not one of the established US poetry publishers—such as W.W. Norton and Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Indeed, Andrews McMeel Publishing “is best known for its comics and humor, puzzles and games, and gift books” (Maher). Kirsty Melville, McMeel’s president and publisher, explained that publishing poetry with huge popular appeal makes sense for her company, which was once leading in the market for colouring books. “As a publisher, we go with where the culture goes,” said Melville (Maher). When the appeal for colouring books started fading, popular poetry became the next big thing.

Rupi Kaur’s success story—from self-publication to bestselling list—echoes that of other blockbuster authors such as Colleen Hoover. In 2011, Hoover self-published her first novel, *Slammed*. She was then working in social work and living with her truck driver husband and three sons in Texas (Walsh). The Young Adult novel was reviewed enthusiastically by a famous book blogger,<sup>16</sup> before attracting the attention of Atria Books (a division of Simon & Schuster). Atria has remained Hoover’s publisher, and has brought her books to millions of readers. *Publishers’ Weekly* has described Hoover as the “Queen of 2022’s Bestseller List.” That year, her novels *It Ends with Us*, *Verity*, and *It Starts with Us* topped the print bestseller lists in the US, and her novels sold 14.3 million copies (Milliot). This commercial success is helped by Hoover’s strong presence on Tiktok, where younger fans share videos describing their passion for her novels. Like Instagram in the case of Rupi Kaur, Tiktok has enabled Hoover to grow and renew her readership. In both cases, social media platforms have circulated and amplified the rags-to-riches stories of these authors—born outside literary centres and without the right networks, who have risen to the top of the bestseller list.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.maryse.net/books/contemporary-romance/book-review-slammed-by-colleen-hoover.html> (March 23, 2012; accessed Jan. 17, 2023).

The story of writers who, against all odds, found success via self-publishing is particularly appealing for early-career authors. Indeed, these authors often lack access to literary networks that could open the door to mainstream publication. While Kaur's creative writing professor tried to discourage her from self-publishing, other instructors are actively encouraging their students to explore alternatives to traditional publishing. R. Lyle Skains, who teaches creative writing at a British university, has described how she pushes her students to consider the "multitude of options open to them for publishing their own work – often in combination with royalty publishing." And she adds: "The stigma of self-publishing is fading away in light of the indie published successes of Hugh Howey, Marco Koska, and even E. L. James" (164).

While the story of unknown writers who found fame by taking things into their own hands is appealing, it is also deeply problematic. It gives the impression that traditional publishing is moribund, and that it can be bypassed through sheer individual will, talent, and ambition. In fact, finding success through self-publishing remains the exception rather than the norm. There are simply too many self-published authors for all of them to achieve a significant audience. This is especially true in poetry, a genre that has traditionally been associated with small readerships. Readers' time and attention is not indefinitely scalable: one cannot read everything that is published and traditional publishers continue to play an important role as gatekeepers. Even those who have won the self-publishing lottery then rely on royalty publishers to bring their work to larger markets. In short, mainstream publishing remains indispensable, a fact that has been obscured by the do-it-yourself narrative disseminated by Rupi Kaur and others.

As a former self-published author, Kaur is keen to present herself as a creative entrepreneur, as someone who took risks and actively sought opportunities instead of waiting for others to notice her work. In a 2006 study of German theatre artists, Doris Ruth Eikhof and Axel Haunschild showed that these cultural workers have a lifestyle that seems at first sight radically different from office jobs. Yet, artists are constantly on the lookout for new opportunities, and "integrate intensive self-management and self-marketing" into their artistic work life. Rather than leading lives without routine and structure, these "bohemian entrepreneurs" work meticulously to promote themselves, maximise career gains and minimise losses (Eikhof and Haunschild 234). Likewise, Anna Kiernan has pointed

out that Instapoets thrive to create a personal brand, which then becomes central to their commercial success.

The link between creativity, entrepreneurship and neoliberalism started to be theorised in the 1990s, with the work of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in particular. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, they showed that hierarchical authority (with bosses managing their subalterns in a top-down way) was being replaced by more flexible working environments. Staff members were increasingly expected to be “*self-organized, creative beings*” (96). “Creative intuition” was replacing the “cold, calculating administrative rationality” characteristic of the post-Second-World-War workplace (98). For Boltanski and Chiapello, this turn signalled the adaptation of capitalism to the “artistic critique” of the 1960s that had denounced the lack of autonomy, flexibility and creativity in office or factory jobs (191). The new spirit of capitalism aimed to unleash creative energies, a narrative that also justified the development of precarious employment presented as attractive alternatives to boring, 9 to 5 jobs.

If we expand the work of Boltanski and Chiapello, we can draw a parallel between traditional publishing and bureaucratic organisations on the one hand, and self-publishing and flexible working environments on the other hand. Rupi Kaur and others have denounced the rigidity of mainstream publishers, and have embraced the flexibility and autonomy of self-publishing. In doing so, they have promoted a model that is overtly self-reliant. They have undermined institutionalised ways of achieving literary recognition, while promoting precarious forms of publication which are very unlikely to lead to an established literary career.

In *Against Creativity* (2020), Oli Mould has argued that neoliberalism uses the disguise of creativity to encourage flexibility, agility, competitiveness and individualism (190). Creativity is no longer perceived as the territory of professional artists:

From line managers, corporate CEOs, urban designers, teachers, politicians, mayors, advertisers and even our friends and family, the message is “be creative” and all will work out for the better. They eulogize that we now live in “creative times” and we are encouraged by ‘thought leaders’ to free ourselves from the shackles of bureaucracy, centralized power and social straightjackets, and ‘unleash’ the inner creative entrepreneur. (10)

This broad definition of creativity is also at the core of Rupi Kaur’s *Healing Through Words*, presented as “a tool for everyone that inspires

creativity.”<sup>17</sup> By unleashing their inner creative aspirations, readers are encouraged to see themselves as writers. This “celebration of the self”<sup>18</sup> can seem inward-looking, but it is also an invitation to promote oneself by following the example of Kaur. Freed from the shackles of traditional publishing, would-be writers are encouraged to turn to social media and self-publishing—not so much for connecting with others, but rather for celebrating themselves and their own uniqueness.

The popularity of Rupi Kaur and other Instapoets may or may not be sustainable. There are already signs that the phenomenon of popular poetry amplified by social media is attracting less interest, and that sales are decreasing. At the time of writing (January 2023), *Healing Through Words* ranks #555 on the Amazon.com general Bestsellers list, #9 for “Creativity (Books),” #12 in “Self-Esteem (Books),” and #12 in “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.” These categories, which highlight the link with trauma and recovery, show that poetry is no longer tied to a high-brow image: it can be marketed as suitable for anyone struggling with personal issues. But the market for mental health books is ever evolving. The trend for colouring books has risen and waned, and the same is perhaps already happening with social-media-driven poetry.

### BORN-DIGITAL ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS AND THE SURVIVAL OF POETRY

The rise of a new generation of popular women poets is in sharp contrast with earlier male-dominated periods. This book started with the literary landscape of post-Second World War Britain, a landscape where few women poets were published and read. With changing incentives from the market and funding agencies, poetry publishers increasingly turned to new voices. The push for “diversity” was of course not limited to the UK, and the rise of the internet and social media have opened new opportunities for unusual poets—including women from minority backgrounds.

Women who started their writing careers during the post-war period witnessed important changes in the following decades. In her 2013 memoirs, Elaine Feinstein wrote:

<sup>17</sup> <https://rupikaur.com/pages/healing-through-words> (accessed Jan. 31, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

If I had to say what has changed most in the poetry village over the fifty years since I first began writing I should point to the number of people who now write poems. How could there not be more of them, when creative writing forms a part of so many university courses? And among these new aspirant poets, many are women. Serious poetry was once thought to be male territory, even when women became successful as novelists. I wonder what exactly has happened. Certainly we now have a whole raft of excellent women writers in all genres, perhaps more surprisingly poets. What worries me a little is that society tends to downgrade the importance of areas where women predominate. (*It Goes with the Territory* 228)

Feinstein is certainly right to point out that women poets are now much more numerous and visible. But is it really the case that these women are now big fish in a smaller pond, with less status and recognition attached to poetry? With the changes in the newspaper and magazine sector, it is indeed becoming less frequent for periodicals to review poetry. But the digital revolution has also brought new opportunities for poets. If we look at the “field of large-scale production” (Bourdieu 39), the wave of commercially successful women poets shows that the literary field continues to evolve rapidly. In other words, it would be simplistic to say that women poets are still marginalised because poetry is less valued than it once was.

While this book is based on extensive archival work in paper collections, scholars of the future may well struggle to find rich sources of information. Like all of us, poets no longer write letters—they write emails and short messages on MS Teams, Slack and the like. They use their laptops to do their work from draft to final finished version. And in the case of Instapoets, they post their short pieces on social media. These materials are fragile—anyone who has tried to access webpages created ten or twenty years ago knows that content can easily disappear from the internet. Creators can delete content that they no longer see as relevant, websites can close, and URLs can decay and lead to error messages. Email providers can close (as in the case of Altavista, who closed 200,000 email accounts in 2002). Social media platforms can become obsolete or change their terms and conditions (in 2018, the image-hosting service Flickr thus threatened to delete pictures of non-paying users). Archival institutions have a key role to play to preserve and make accessible born-digital records. Yet, access to these archival records remains extremely complicated—largely due to data protection and copyright regulations.

I have described elsewhere the struggles I encountered to get access to email collections of publishers and writers.<sup>19</sup> When I did get access (as in the case of the Carcanet Press email archive preserved at the John Rylands Library in Manchester), I could read only a small selection of emails that had previously been screened by archivists. Access to a selection of one or two hundreds of emails on a laptop screen is of course better than nothing. It is certainly better than reading a few printed-out copies of emails, which can often be found in collections of contemporary writers and publishers. But it is also frustrating for researchers who want to harness the digital nature of emails, and use quantitative research methods. Close reading a selection of emails can lead to valuable insights, but this approach is also ill-fitted to the analysis of masses of data.

For literary scholars, lacking access to large collections of emails is similar to lacking access to large collections of letters. Heather Clark's biography of Sylvia Plath would be less rich if the biographer had not consulted Plath's vast correspondence (the HarperCollins hardcover edition of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath* includes 2,512 pages over two volumes). Moreover, emails are not simply composed of textual content—they can also contain pictures as attachments, which can be analysed using manually or automatically with methods such as Computer Vision. Although email collections are central to literary and history scholarship, too few archival institutions are actively collecting and preserving emails, let alone making them accessible.

The threat of a digital dark age that would lead to the erasure of our collective heritage agitated the archival community in the 1990s and early 2000s, and has not entirely disappeared. But these fears have been largely displaced by the urgency to make born-digital materials more discoverable and usable. Indeed, the preservation of social media and other digital records remains challenging, but the issues of access and usability are perhaps even more pressing. What is the point of preserving materials that will not be available to researchers in the near future? There have always been restrictions to access for very sensitive materials (such as military archives). So why is it so difficult to access the email archives of writers and publishers? Why should researchers travel to reading rooms to consult tweets that were once publicly available?

<sup>19</sup> See Jaillant, "After the Digital Revolution" and "Design Thinking, UX and Born-Digital Archives."

Paper collections in libraries and archives are also fraught with data protection and copyright issues. Yet, there are generally much more accessible, in part because librarians and archivists have had to strike a balance between risk and access. For born-digital materials, the overall trend has been to focus on risk, and to leave access as something to be decided in the future. In a 2017 white paper on its Twitter collection, the Library of Congress thus announced that “there is no projected timetable for providing public access at this time.” There is surprising little pressure from researchers to access born-digital collections, and the decisions to restrict access often remain unchallenged. This is why I recently proposed the creation of a global user community who would participate in decisions on access to digital collections (Jaillant, “How can we make born-digital and digitised archives more accessible?”).

Researchers, but also record creators, have a large role to play to make born-digital records accessible and useable. One of the reasons we have so many materials on Sylvia Plath is that she was well aware of the financial value of both literary texts and paratexts (including letters). Indeed, the market for literary archives boomed in North America in the years after the Second World War, as university libraries competed to acquire the most desirable papers of modern and contemporary writers. In a letter to Ted Hughes dated 6 October 1956, Plath asked her husband to be scrupulous and date his letters. “When we are old and spent, they will come asking for our letters; and we will have them dove-tail-able” (*Letters of Sylvia Plath, Volume I*, 1281). Five years later, she sold some of her poetry manuscripts to Indiana University’s Lilly Library. In short, Plath played an active role in preserving her papers, and ensuring access to them.

The difficulty for today’s writers is that the market for born-digital records is almost inexistent. Archival institutions now routinely acquire hybrid collections (composed of paper and digital records). Yet, the purchase price generally does not differentiate what portion of the total is for the traditional paper-based archive and what portion, if any, for the born-digital files. Steve Ennis, the director of the Harry Ransom Center in Austin (Texas), points out that this absence of financial value could have a significant impact on what record creators deem worth preserving:

Whatever else we may have to say about the trade in writer’s archives, it is that trade that has ensured the survival of countless collections of letters and manuscripts. It is that awareness of an archive’s monetary value that

has led to a high survival rate for scores of paper-based archives, and it therefore follows that uncertainty about the value of born-digital content may threaten the survival of our twenty-first century archives. (108)

For poets and other writers, there is little financial incentive to preserve their email collections, or to archive their social media accounts. Yet, if platforms such as Twitter disappear, researchers of the future may well rely on the datasets that content creators have downloaded and made usable. “While lacking the preservation power of the Library of Congress, perhaps these digital scrapbooks will one day remind us of the Twitter that was,” argues Ian Milligan. As scholarship relies on available sources, writers who actively preserve and make accessible their own digital archive will be well placed to attract the attention of future researchers.

Since archives often reach institutions when a writer is nearing the end of their lives or is already dead, literary estates should also be seen as major agents in the decisions to make born-digital records more accessible. A liberal attitude towards access to archives (both paper and digital) can be enormously beneficial for researchers. Plath scholars have thus praised the decision of Frieda Hughes to publish *Ariel: The Restored Edition* and to allow the publication of previously unpublished letters, including letters that Plath wrote to her psychiatrist in the months leading to her suicide. As Anita Helle puts it, this “makes Plath available to broader audiences and enables those who read and write about Plath not only to return to archives as a product, but to consider archivization itself – what is collected, who preserves, and uses it, for what purposes – as an ongoing process” (“Introduction”, 2–3). Likewise, literary estates can decide to provide broader access to email correspondence, thus benefiting researchers and other users.

Archives are of central importance in part because they shape our understanding of what is worth studying. When women voices were rarely heard in the poetry world of the post-Second-World-War period, archives were also largely silent. It took enormous energy from feminist scholars and archivists to address these gaps in archival collections. It also took a great deal of intuition for women’s presses to see that there was a growing market for writings by women. But as this book has argued, the rise of “women’s poetry” should not be attributed only to individuals and institutions aligned with feminism. In the 1970s, conservative publishers and funding agencies played a leading role in advocating for women poets, at a time when feminist presses focused mostly on fiction

and non-fiction. The rise of “women’s studies” in universities in the 1980s confirmed that poetry by women could be marketed to a broad audience. Amidst gloomy discourses on the death of poetry, the genre has survived, and has found routes to appeal to new publics—often through the focus on mental health and the promise of recovery. With the emergence of popular women poets from diverse backgrounds, the genre continues to reinvent itself—opening the door for new forms of scholarship based on social media and born-digital records rather than traditional paper archives.

Another key point of this book that even conservative publishers will publish more diverse authors if they think it will be profitable. Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, publishers in the United States, but also in other Anglophone countries, issued huge numbers of books on anti-racism. As Laura McGrath put it, “books about race” were “produced by a predominantly white industry and with a white reader in mind” and “marketed in a way that ultimately props up existing power structures, even while their acquisition and promotion enables that industry to fashion itself as forward-thinking, increasingly inclusive, and committed to consciousness-raising” (790). The same happened in the 1970s and 1980s, when conservative British publishers started publishing more poetry books by women. In addition to the market, public funding agencies played an important role in this evolution. Far from being marginal in the literary landscape, organisations such the Arts Council of Great Britain contributed to stirring publishers towards more diverse voices. Today’s funding agencies and policymakers should therefore not underestimate the power they have in shaping a diverse literary canon.

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