



MR SCHMIDT MAKES GOOD

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By: Melinda Camber Porter

Commercial success and artistic integrity are notoriously difficult to combine. And surprise is the most natural reaction when one learns of the existence of a publishing firm that prints poetry, gets enthusiastic reviews in leading newspapers and is also making enough money to continue publishing material of the same kind. Mr. Michael Schmidt, who runs the Carcanet Press from a farmhouse in South Hinksey, seems at the moment to succeed in bridging the dichotomy of the literary world. His poetry books are sold in three hundred and eighty different shops over the world, and a recent volume of poems by the Russian dissident Natalya Gorbanevska has sold more than half its first edition in one month. Mr. Schmidt's authors are not trendy but he is not content to be read by a small elite. He aims at a varied and wide public twenty copies of Gorbanevska's poetry have been sold in Zambia.

Mr. Schmidt was born in Mexico and came from Harvard and Oxford where he read English at Wadham. He has been writing poetry since he was eight. In his undergraduate days (he is now only twenty five) he would write an average of three poems a day. During this time he started up a poetry magazine from which the Carcanet Press evolved. He took the money to produce seven pamphlets of poetry - mainly of writers in Oxford - from advance subscriptions. The reviews were kind; Elizabeth Jennings offered her encouragement and support. Since then he has published a variety of works - his own poems, two books of *Bedlam*, some translations of Fernando Pessoa (the most important Portuguese poet of this century), and many East European Poets. He is increasingly interested in translating foreign poets. He also has an eye for the writer with a fascinating life and personality - just out is an edition of Chatterton's poetry, and *A Tribute to Freud* by Hilda Doolittle, who was a patient of Freud's as well as co-founder of the Imagist Movement and close friend of Pound and Aldington. He hopes to devote a series to her culminating in a biography of her relationship with Pound.

Perhaps the most involving personality is Natalya Gorbanevska. She was born in Russia in 1936, a poet, philologist and civil rights activist. At present she is in a mental hospital as a result of her ardent support of Siniavsky and Daniel and her opposition to the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Her book contains a transcript of the trial and papers relating to her detention, a moving and informative introduction, and selected poems beautifully translated by Dannie Weissbort.

The Carcanet's other ventures in the field of translation have been equally successful. They have produced a quarterly magazine, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, devoted to bringing forward the work of as



yet untranslated Turkish, Greek, Russian, and Armenian poets. Penguin have caught on and are now bringing out their own translations. They are also publishing selections of work in paper as well as hard-back by authors otherwise accessible only in libraries, expensive editions, or not at all. Works of Chatterton, Crashaw, George Peele, and Christopher Smart are included. Soon he will bring out a series on literary criticism, starting with American and British poetry since 1960.

But why is the Carcanet Press especially deserving of attention? Isn't it just one of the many little presses in existence which give young, not yet established writers, opportunity to be published? Unfortunately this is not the case. In an enquiry recently called "The Society of The Poem" it was shown that the so-called "Underground Poets" (Children of Albion and the Beat Poets included) is "simply the result of a smooth P.R. campaign on the part of commercial publishing Houses." And "the sad hallmarks of the really small press and roneod mag are invariably meglomania and solipsism." Mr. Schmidt, although short-haired, enthusiastic and articulate, comes nearest to being one of the few truly Underground Publishers.

Mr. Schmidt remarked that although the Press was born in Oxford and started off by publishing young Oxford writers, there was little participation or interest shown by Oxford people. "If there are any good poets around we don't know about them and they don't know about us." He was also keen on seeing undergraduates starting their own magazines and presses. Whether a sign of modesty or not, he seemed confident that, with enthusiasm, they could make it work. "After all I started out as an undergraduate with a Poetry Magazine."

T.S. Elliot, who was both poet and publisher, seems to have set a new trend. Whether the Press will grow as establishment as Fabers, and whether Mr. Schmidt's poetry will match up to the comparison remains to be seen. Nevertheless, at the moment, it is encouraging to know that the Carcanet Press is in existence.

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