

**The University of Manchester Medal of Honour
Presented to Professor Michael Schmidt on Tuesday 18 March 2025**

Citation:

Distinguished guests,

Prof Michael Schmidt joined the University of Manchester in 1972, which means he has been part of this University for almost a quarter of its existence – although when I look over the still growing list of Michael's achievements, it sometimes feels as if he must surely been here for twice as long as that: in his time here, Michael has founded the leading international poetry journal, *PN Review*, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2023; and during all that time, he has been Publisher and Editor of Carcanet, one of the great poetry presses which, from its Manchester base, has published the work of new and established poets. And this has been a truly significant contribution. In the past five years, Carcanet books have been recognized by every major poetry award, including the Nobel Prize (Louise Gluck), the TS Eliot Prize (for our colleague, Prof Jason Allen-Paisant), the Pulitzer Prize (Carl Phillips), the Costa Prize (Eavan Boland) and, on two occasions, the Queen's and now King's Gold Medal (Lorna Goodison, Mimi Khalvati) and, on a number of occasions, the Forward Prize (Parwana Fayyaz, Caroline Bird, Jason Allen-Paisant): that very selected set of poets also represents Michael's larger editorial commitment to diversifying Carcanet's list by publishing, side by side, brilliant work by British, Irish and north American poets, books by women poets and by Black poets, poets whose work is now in conversation with the great tradition of English-language poetry to which he is committed.

Michael's commitment to publishing has overcome major challenges – most notably the destruction of Carcanet's Corn Exchange offices by an IRA bomb in 1996 – and sometimes difficult funding climates, with both his enthusiasm for poetry and his entrepreneurial spirit undimmed. Alongside his editorial work, and numerous influential anthologies, Michael has published acclaimed, scholarly *and* popular literary histories. Michael is a remarkably learned man: memorious and agile, the furniture of his conversation is often a line by George Herbert, or Philip Larkin, or WH Auden, or Charlotte Mew, and lately the hymns and Latin poems he loves. That amazing range characterizes his critical work. Who else could chance a title as definitive as his *Lives of the Poets* or *The Story of Poetry*? Which were followed by *The First Poets*, his audacious survey *The Novel: A Biography* and most recently *Gilgamesh: The Life of a Poem*. And alongside that immense work, Michael's creative practice has offered its own steady rhythm, including the affecting novel of Mexican boyhood and faith, *The Colonist*, and of course nine individual poetry books, which range from the early poems' vividly detailed collections of amphibian creatures and often biblical character sketches to the celebrated sequences *A Change of Affairs* and *The Love of Strangers* and, most recently, *Talking to Stanley on the Telephone*, a book which I can describe as being, like Michael himself, excellent company.

Michael's working life as poet and publisher extended naturally during his time at Manchester. He was a major contributor to the development of the world-leading JRRIL Modern Literary Archive (which includes Carcanet's extensive archive). Michael has acted as adviser on the archives during decades when research studies, biographies and editions increasingly note their reliance on those holdings. At Manchester too, Michael established its first Creative Writing programme, in 1993, still going strong under the stewardship of Dr Kaye Mitchell, and in the process developed a model subsequently adopted by successful programmes at MMU, Glasgow, Bath Spa, St Andrews and Oxford. Among the thousands taught by Michael, Jesse Armstrong and Sam Bain (the writers of *Succession* and *Peep Show*) and poet-novelist, Sophie Hannah, acknowledge his influence, but his mentorship of so many others – from every corner of the world – continues through the constant stream of email, phone calls, lunches and coffees which punctuate his time at his desk.

That in-the-background work has clearly shaped our changed world of English-language poetry, but his adoptive home is just as indebted to Michael's influence. As the most globally significant UK literary publisher outside London, and alongside Manchester University Press (one of the largest publishers in the North), Michael's support for the bid for Manchester UNESCO City of Literature was crucial, while his long commitment to publishing poetry in translation has been foundational for City of Literature's enterprising commitment to the appointment of Manchester's Poet Laureates in Spanish, Urdu, Arabic, Hungarian and Ukrainian. Likewise Carcanet has been at the forefront of Manchester publishing more generally, an early pioneer of the city as a natural home for creative industries and, since the UNESCO denomination, a key player in the subsequent growth of publishing in the city.

I am proud to be able to present Michael this evening for the Medal of Honour. Born and brought up in Mexico and the US, Michael Schmidt is a true citizen of the world, a good and faithful servant to poetry, whose enthusiasms and whose drive and infectious belief in the power of books have been a glory, for more than 50 years of the University, the city of Manchester, and the global literary community.