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**“Tis well an Old Age is out / And time to begin a New”:
The Current State of Iris Murdoch Studies in England**

Frances White

This quotation from Dryden’s ‘The Secular Masque’ is the epigraph to Iris Murdoch’s first novel, *Under the Net*. It resonates not only with Jake’s life within the story, but with Murdoch’s own life: in this début work she was leaving an ‘Old Age’ of failure for a ‘New Age’ of success. In terms of Iris Murdoch studies we are happy to announce that we are moving from an ‘Old Age’ of success at Kingston University London to a ‘New Age’ at the University of Chichester which will be equally successful.

This may come as a shock, but Iris Murdoch never *belonged* to Kingston. It was happenstance that her name has been associated for so long with that particular university. First, one of her earliest critics and biographer, Peter Conradi, was teaching English Literature there from the early 1980s to 1997. He taught the work of Iris Murdoch and, under his auspices as Professor, she was awarded an honorary degree at the University in 1993. Second, a student called Anne Rowe participated in the Iris Murdoch module inaugurated by Peter. Anne taught at Kingston from 1992 to 2016, and she picked up the baton left by Peter, teaching the Iris Murdoch module to further generations of students. Third, when in 2002 John Bayley put Murdoch’s Oxford library on the market, Avril Horner, who was then Professor of English at Kingston, had the vision that Kingston would be the most appropriate home for the library, and the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies was launched at Kingston in 2004. Since then we have had a further four international conferences there and the *Iris Murdoch News Letter* metamorphosed into the professionally produced *Iris Murdoch Review*, for the first six issues of which Anne was editor. In 2007 Murdoch’s London library was added to the Oxford library; Peter placed material gathered as he worked on her biography in the archive, and we began to acquire letter-runs from many sources (now over 3000 letters). The Iris Murdoch archive is heavily used by scholars from around the world with the guidance of our dedicated archivist Katie Giles whose unstinting support for Murdoch studies has greatly contributed

to its expansion.

Now we open another chapter in this history, also partially by happenstance. Anne retired last July, and we sadly thought that the future of Murdoch studies would be in jeopardy. But in October 2015 Dr Miles Leeson invited me to the University of Chichester to give a guest lecture to his students. Realising that Miles was inspiring the next generation of readers by teaching Iris Murdoch to his undergraduates, I wondered to Anne whether he would be the best Murdoch scholar and teacher to take on the baton from her. To our delight, Miles graciously agreed to do so and the first issue of the *Iris Murdoch Review* under his editorship has just been published. Furthermore, Anne and Miles successfully liaised with Kingston and Chichester universities to form a collaborative partnership between the Iris Murdoch Archive Project which Anne is continuing to lead at Kingston and the new Iris Murdoch Research Centre of which Miles is Director. This new centre was launched at the University of Chichester on 10th October 2016.

The increasing number of Murdoch centred events initiated from outside the Iris Murdoch Society base is encouraging. In December 2014 Silvia Panizza organised a symposium at the University of East Anglia, 'An Afternoon with Iris Murdoch'; Gary Browning convened a conference at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford in November 2015 called 'Why Iris Murdoch Matters: Truth and Love'; and a conference was convened by Paul Lodge at Mansfield College, Oxford in June 2016, called 'The Philosophy of Iris Murdoch'. Paul told us that he thinks 'Murdoch will become a fixture in the history of 20th Century philosophy as it starts to get more solidified' and that we are seeing the start of this. Iris Murdoch would be surprised as well as delighted that her work is now being studied and taught at Oxford University. Murdoch's cultural status as an iconic figure in the art world was affirmed by her being the subject of the National Portrait Gallery Lunchtime Lecture in July 2016, 'The Mystical and Mysterious Iris Murdoch'.

Looking to the future, Lucy Bolton plans a symposium on Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil at Queen Mary University of London in February 2017 and is convening a panel for another event at the National Portrait Gallery in October 2017. The first Iris Murdoch conference to be held at Chichester will be in September 2017. We hope to welcome our Japanese Murdoch colleagues and friends to this new Iris Murdoch Research Centre in the beautiful county of Sussex which is rich in literary history, and they will also continue to be welcome to study in the Iris Murdoch archive in Kingston.

(Editor of the *Iris Murdoch Review*

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