

Iris Murdoch and Australia: Her Life, Her Novels and Her Reputation

Gillian Dooley

Australia is marginal in Iris Murdoch's life and work. Although her name is well-known, especially since the film *Iris* came out in 2001, and her novels are quite widely read in Australia, her fiction has not been studied to any extent in Australian universities. Her novels haven't been set for any undergraduate courses in Australia, and my 2001 PhD thesis is one of only nine higher-degree dissertations on either her fiction or philosophy from the early 1970s to the present day. However, her philosophy is now being studied by many Australian scholars.

Murdoch visited Australia only once, for five weeks, on a British Council tour in 1967. She had a few Australian friends, including her colleague at St Anne's College, Margaret Hubbard; Carmen Callil, her editor at Chatto & Windus; and philosopher Brian Medlin from Flinders University. There are some Australian characters in her novels, such as Penn Graham in *An Unofficial Rose*, Kenneth Rathbone in *The Green Knight*, and Cantor Ravnevik in *Jackson's Dilemma*. Australia is often mentioned in passing as a distant and sometimes romantic destination in her other novels. Richard Todd, in a 1986 symposium, suggested that 'Australia was often a way, a place for characters to just leave at the end of the novel, to exit or . . . to start a new life. But it is also a way of getting them out of the world of the novel, isn't it?' Murdoch replied, 'Yes, certainly. Yes, I mean you don't want to kill them all, you know, you send them to Australia.'¹

In this talk I discuss Murdoch's relationship with Australia and Australians in her life and work. I look at the archival evidence for what she discovered about Australia from her UK-based Australian friends. I draw on her lively letters home to friends

like Brigid Brophy, David Hicks, and Elias Canetti during her 1967 visit, and her later correspondence with Brian Medlin: in 1991 she asked him for help with vocabulary for Kenneth Rathbone. With this information in mind, I then examine the depiction of Australia and Australians in her novels, especially the way her Australian characters speak and behave. I also touch on other aspects of Australia's relationship with Murdoch: her reputation in Australia, the current status of Murdoch studies in Australia, and my personal experience as a Murdoch scholar on the margins of her world.

(Flinders University)

1. Richard Todd, ed., 'Discussions from *Encounters with Iris Murdoch*,' in Gillian Dooley, ed., *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 178.