**A non-professional Delegates-eye view
of the 2nd International Iris Murdoch Conference,
held at Kingston University, 17-18th September 2004**

**Frances White**

I think Iris Murdoch would be both surprised and delighted could she have seen the gathering of ninety-three delegates who met to share their enjoyment of her work, and their conviction that it is of lasting importance in the fields of both English Literature and Moral Philosophy. Surprised because of her innate humility; delighted because it seems that her early-avowed desire to provide “something for everybody” (Iris,p.25) has been realised. These delegates ranged from students barely out of their teens (reminding me irresistibly of Toby Gashe or Tom McCaffrey), to octogenarians with hearing-aids, and included professors of literature and doctors of philosophy, teachers, artists, poets, psychiatrists, book-sellers, priests and housewives. We came from all over the world to celebrate Iris Murdoch and her work together ? England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, Holland, France, Romania and Spain, Africa, India and Japan, and many different States of America, Some were scholars of distinction and experts on her work, others (like the present writer) just devotees of her books, ‘fans’, I suppose, if that word didn’t conjure up an image of unthinking hysteria. For thinking was very much what we were there to do, and the experience validated the sense Iris Murdoch’s novels unusually offer of the pleasure and excitement of serious thought.

Iris Murdoch’s friend, critic and biographer, Professor Peter Conradi both caught and set the tone of the conference in his opening speech of welcome when he recalled Willy Kost in The Nice and the Good, telling Theo that he has to go on with his apparently unimportant and self-imposed task simply because, “It expresses my love for Propertius and my love for Latin.” (NG, p.126). All the subsequent lectures, seminar papers and discussions arising from these, sprang from a love of Iris Murdoch. And a great intellectual feast was provided, the Plenary Sessions including a fire-work display of ‘tactful reading’ of Iris Murdoch’s Imaginaire from Professor Valentine Cunningham (which must have sent many other hearers besides this one hurrying to find his Reading after Theory), and a closely textual consideration of The Bell from Dr Bran Nicol on the Literature side; balanced by a meticulously argued re-examination of Iris Murdoch’s view of the ontological argument for the existence of Good from Dr Stephen Mulhall, and a new look at the dynamic of the saint/artist dichotomy (or is it?) from Professor Maria Antonnacio on the Philosophy side. The four Seminars and nine panels (which took in twenty-six papers, on subjects ranging through metaphysics and modernism, architecture and theology, influences and canonicity, to pick out but a few) were a smorgasbord of tempting offerings and indeed the only ‘criticism’ of the Conference that I heard voiced was that it was too short ? people wished to hear everything that was available and regretted the necessity and difficulty of choosing amongst the options! (We look forward to the forthcoming publication of the Conference Proceedings which will enable us to ‘fill in the gaps’.)

Having thus been able only to attend a few of the sessions offered, it is not possible to comment fully, but an example from one of the Panels I joined and enormously enjoyed will suffice to illustrate the other aspect of Iris Murdoch’s breadth of appeal which the conference evidenced. Three fascinating, well-argued, beautifully-expressed (and delivered) disquisitions on Iris Murdoch and Theology were given, each of them wholly convincing in itself though presenting apparently mutually contradictory views of her thought! An impassioned case was made for an eclectic Hindu/Buddhist/Judaic reading of the later novels and a quietly passionate claim was made for an orthodoxly Roman Catholic mystical interpretation of others. It seems that Iris Murdoch has at least in part succeeded in taking on the mantle of her beloved Shakespeare in giving expression to the feelings and experiences of a wide variety of world views and personalities, so that many from different traditions and stances feel able to claim her and find themselves portrayed and understood by her. I became evident how very much more there is to share about her work, how much more to say and to write, and in conversations over coffee-breaks and the (excellent) lunches, one could almost hear the sparks as minds ignited from each other’s ideas, leaving many of us to go away inspired with new thoughts and projects.

The special moment at the heart of the conference was the Launch of the new Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies at Kingston University, and the heart of the heart, so to speak, was the few and moving words from Professor John Bayley. His presence gave much joy, as did the opportunity not only to see the books belonging to Iris Murdoch recently purchased by the Iris Murdoch Appeal, but actually to hold and read in them, small groups going to do so throughout the two days.

Thanks are due from all the delegates to the librarians who facilitated this, to Professor Avril Horner and the staff of Kingston University for their hospitality, and above all to Dr Anne Rowe whose hard work so successfully created a memorable and inspirational second conference for all those of us who love Iris Murdoch ? please make the next one longer!