
The Iris Murdoch Newsletter *of Japan*



No.16

March, 2015

An Archivist's View of Working with the Iris Murdoch Collections at Kingston University

Katie Giles

It has been ten years since the first Iris Murdoch collection arrived at Kingston University, and six since I took up the role of Archivist here. In the four years before I started the collections had grown from Iris Murdoch's Oxford Library (containing over 1000 books owned by Murdoch, many with her annotations) to also encompassing the library from Murdoch's flat in London, the research papers collated by Prof. Peter Conradi while writing his biography of Murdoch, as well as numerous collections of books, articles and original letters written by Murdoch to other individuals. There was also an established group of researchers who worked with the collections, led by the staff from the Iris Murdoch Archives Project at the University and our students undertaking a module on Murdoch and her work.

I was far from being an expert in Iris Murdoch—I knew who she was, of course, and I had read some of her novels. Once I knew I would be working at the University, I made a point of reading some of the biographies of Murdoch in order to get to know the individual behind the books. If I learnt one thing from these it was that pinning down who Murdoch was is not an easy task—opinions on her varied extremely widely. I therefore decided to drop any preconceptions I had of Murdoch and her work and to make up my own mind when I worked with her records.

As an archivist, what you bring to the institution you work for is the skills to correctly look after and give access to the records they hold, regardless of the subject matter. However, you do end up knowing a lot about the subjects which the Archives you work with relate to. In Archives the most important thing to know about any collection is the context—who made it, when, why and who was the intended audience. And as such, over the last six years I have learnt a lot about Iris Murdoch.

Archives are invaluable when it comes to understanding people in the past, they provide the authentic voices of those individuals. However it soon became apparent that Murdoch was an extremely complicated individual. This was especially apparent in her letter runs—the Archives at Kingston now hold over 3000 letters written by Murdoch and I have been privileged to read a great many of these in the course of my work. What makes the letters so fascinating is also what makes them so difficult, as it is extremely difficult to pin down the ‘real’ Iris Murdoch through them. Murdoch wished for her friends and correspondents to perceive her in certain ways, and as such the tone and language of the letters differ depending on who she was writing to. Sometimes letters to two individuals will explain the same events in very different ways—to French author Raymond Queneau, whom she admired and wanted to impress, the young Murdoch wished to appear sophisticated and as such she told him of her wish to sit overlooking the Seine drinking wine. In a letter to her old University friend Hal Lidderdale written at the same time she wrote of wishing to visit a pub to eat pickled eggs and get ‘plastered’ (an English euphemism for getting drunk)!

Having said that the letters do provide insight into Iris Murdoch—in them she describes her life and travels, the people she met and the books she read. She discusses art, music, literature, and philosophy, and exchanges views on politics and current events. As the letters at Kingston University span from 1942 to 1997 you can also see how Murdoch changed throughout her life—how her opinions evolved on certain philosophers, and how her political beliefs veered from being a member of the communist party to supporting Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative government. She is also very modest in many of the letters, putting down her own looks and philosophy, and seldom discussing her writing at any great length.

For me, the joy of working with the collections is seeing them get used by researchers. The established group of users has blossomed, and the collections continue to grow in popularity and researcher use. A project on the letters from Iris Murdoch to Philippa Foot, supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, introduced Murdoch and her archives to a wider audience including school children, local community groups, the elderly and adults with learning difficulties. And several pieces of work have been written on Murdoch using the collections we hold at Kingston University, resulting in the International Iris Murdoch Conference held in 2014 focusing on the Archives and the scholarship that has come out from them.

Of course, working with Murdoch’s collections is not always easy—the fact that she destroyed all the letters written to her has been a source of frustration to myself and many researchers. Her habit of not dating her letters can lead to difficulties when interpreting the contents, and her handwriting varies from being a bit difficult to virtually illegible—to the dismay of many a researcher who has come into the Archive only to stare at Murdoch’s letters or book annotations with a puzzled frown on their face. But for

those prepared look past the issues, a treasure trove of information on Murdoch awaits.

As for myself, I still would not call myself an expert in Iris Murdoch — she was far too complicated for that. However, there's no doubt that she was a fascinating person, and even now facts come to light about Murdoch that surprise me. I never suspected that she wanted to visit Disneyland. I also never knew that she had a perm, owned a mini — skirt, or attended an all night concert by the Rolling Stones. One thing that I can say about Murdoch is that she was endearingly human — with all flaws and complications that come with that. I look forward to discovering what other surprises are in store as the collections at the University continue to grow, and more researchers discover them and what they can tell us about Murdoch and her work.

For more information visit <http://blogs.kingston.ac.uk/asc> or email archives@kingston.ac.uk

(Archivist, Kingston University)