

# COMMENTS ON BECOMING NEXT PRESIDENT OF THE IRIS MURDOCH SOCIETY OF JAPAN

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The paths down which our lives will lead us are so often unexpected. As I look forward nervously and humbly, yet with a certain quiet pride, to assuming presidency of the Iris Murdoch Society of Japan (taking over from the venerable Professor Shioda, who has kept a calm and steady hand on the rudder and to whom I am sure we all offer our warmest thanks), I ponder and wonder how this curious but welcome state of affairs came about.

It surely wasn't meant to be like this. Nor did I (so far as I recall) actively invite this pleasant scenario into my professional life: a life that seems to career around like a pinball in a pinball machine, even now, despite my best attempts to go in a straight and self-decreed line. Poetry (an oeuvre for which Murdoch, though she dabbled in it, is *least* well known), and not the novel, was always my chosen lamp and my lantern. In 1984, at Edinburgh University, in my final undergraduate year (before I embarked on a PhD in, yes, *The Poetry of Christina Rossetti*), I took a course in 'Twentieth Century Literature' (because I wanted to study Philip Larkin more closely) of which a single Murdoch novel (*Under The Net*) was an 'optional' component of a depressingly heavy reading list. I didn't read it. A fellow student (it might well have been Ian Rankin, who, years later, would himself become an award-winning crime writer, and who remains my close friend) told me Murdoch was 'middle class people sitting around dinner tables talking about Plato'. (To an extent, this may indeed be true, but so what?) This dismissive opinion was confirmed by friends, including a quiet man who sporadically turned up and slept on the sofa in the apartment I shared with five other students. His name was Irvine Welsh. A decade later, he wrote the best-seller *Trainspotting*, a novel arguably just as significant and influential as Murdoch's best (*The Sea*, *The Sea* would get my vote) and, arguably and ironically just as 'narrow' in its social vision (working-class heroin addicts instead of

middle-class philosophers). Irvine also remains my friend, and I have just about convinced him (and Ian) to revise their views of Murdoch.

Meanwhile, back at my narrative... Having completed my PhD, I arrived in Japan in 1992 to work as Foreign Professor in the Faculty of Letters at Okayama University, and found myself immediately under the caring, protective wing of my great mentor-friend and our society's mainstay, Professor Yozo Muroya, Japan's rightly most-respected Murdochian aficionado. He set to work on me immediately: less than 6 months after arrival I had fallen in love not only with Japan, but also with Iris Murdoch's beautifully written, moving, and sharply observed fictions and agile stand-alone philosophical musings. I stood in awe of this wonderful writer and her gargantuan store of knowledge and ideas, and I still do.

In the autumn of that same year, Murdoch and her husband John Bayley (a literary critic whose work I had loved and admired for its clarity and incisiveness since undergraduate days) came to Japan on a British Council visit, her last trip to Japan, a country she clearly adored. Professor Muroya and I chaperoned the couple in Okayama and Kyoto. They were absolutely charming, much more interested in quizzing me about my own creative writing than answering my inane questions about theirs. They asked me to send them some of my own poetry. I did so and, as a direct result of their recommendation, my first humble poetic efforts were published in the prestigious *Agenda* poetry journal, which led to a book contract and the first of what has become half a dozen volumes of verse I have published in the UK.

Professor Muroya and I went on to edit and publish, with her gracious approval, the only available international collection of Murdoch's own (rather good) *Poems*, and a companion selection of her *Occasional Essays*. I subsequently met Dame Iris and John on a couple of occasions in Oxford, and I would like to think that we built a rapport and even became friends. They were special persons: inimitable originals, unique. The last time I met them, Iris was already wrestling with the tightening grip of the onset of Alzheimer's. And she knew that too. We were chatting, and she suddenly stopped mid-sentence and grasped my hand so tightly. 'I'm sailing away, aren't I?' she said, with a look of sadness and fear in her beautiful Irish eyes. I told her she was not, and I wished that she wasn't, but she was.

I am still a poetry person, but that doesn't prevent me enjoying Murdoch, and, somehow, I do not feel myself to be an impostor here. There is a breathtaking undertow of poeticism in all Murdoch's prose: in the maxims, aphorisms, wit, rhythms, and images that uplift her narratives and make her sentences bristle and ripple and flow with a compelling energy and a beautiful ease. And Murdoch knew it. At a garden party at the home of a mutual friend and Bronte scholar Professor Christopher Heywood, I told that most enigmatic and engaging lady that I found her novel *The Sea, The Sea* heavily

symbolic. She replied with a dissembling charm as cutting as it was graceful that, 'Well, of course it is. All my writing is symbolic!' So I feel at home here. I have loved being a member of this worthy and convivial society since its inception, and I will be honoured and delighted to become its president, to do my best to keep the ship steady and well organised. I have no confidence at all in my ability to do so, but, with your help and patience, we'll sail to somewhere good, and not sail away.