

## Iris Murdoch : Archives and Afterlife

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I was delighted to speak at the Iris Murdoch Society of Japan Conference in this, the centenary year of Iris Murdoch's birth. My task was to outline developments at the Murdoch Archives at Kingston University, including acquisitions, projects and publications, and to review centenary events organised by the Iris Murdoch Research Centre at Chichester University. At the center of these events was the Centenary Conference at St Anne's College, Oxford, in July where, with over 100 delegates from 23 countries, 67 papers illustrated an extraordinary range of research by Murdoch scholars worldwide. Together, the growing body of archival material at Kingston University and the concurrent global interest in Murdoch are not only inviting fresh avenues of research into her novels, but also transforming perceptions of the kind of woman she was.

New generations of scholars are now interpreting her work more freely in the light of contemporary political and societal concerns, and I spoke in some detail of my own re-reading of *Under The Net* in relation to the METOO Movement. I went on to explain how recent students had reappraised *The Sandcastle* in relation to society's failure to identify serious mental health issues in the young, suggesting that Murdoch's novels are not only depicting the tortured inner lives of a group of troubled young characters, but also indicating causes for their ailments and practical methods of dealing with them. Murdoch's hitherto side-lined representations of gender relationships also imply that her understanding of gender fluidity is making a meaningful contribution to current debates on how society should acknowledge the complex nature of human sexuality and its impact on individual lives. These fresh perspectives make it clear that Murdoch's vision of humanity is a prescient one, especially when attention is turned away from those self-obsessed central characters towards other courageous battles that confront her minor characters,

from whom there is much to be learned about issues troubling society today.

A clutch of papers at the Centenary Conference illustrated how other scholars are highlighting topics hitherto marginalised in Murdoch scholarship; for example, politically nuanced readings included, 'Weil and Murdoch do Politics' and 'Iris Murdoch and political extremism', implying a more militant Iris Murdoch than we have come to expect. Other scholars examined Murdoch's novels through imagistic tropes of space, light and colour, or considered them in relation to Murdoch's knowledge of contemporary film. And while Murdoch's adoration of nature should have always made it unthinkable that a concern for the planet would not seep into her fiction, only now is an eco-reading of Murdoch's novels indicating a belief in the affective link between the human mind and nature that testifies to her appreciation of this world as sacred. We are being introduced, in this new century, to an Iris Murdoch many of us never expected to meet.

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