

特別寄稿

A REPORT AND REMINISCENCE OF THE IRIS MURDOCH CENTENARY CONFERENCE

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On a pleasant Oxford summer evening, Gillian Dooley, our 2018 IMSJ conference guest speaker, curated a one-off tribute event: music and words for the author whose craft unites us all. Some lines I recited there seemed especially fitting:

‘After all the interrupted landings comes the one that brings you home. There is a way, a road, a thoroughfare. There is a way home. After the sadness and the madness comes the learning, comes the landing, comes the image unimagined, comes the love. And love will be the landing.’

Let me explain.

13-15 July 2019. St Anne’s College, where Murdoch taught, was the perfect venue for the Iris Murdoch Centenary Conference: a glorious long weekend overseen by Miles Leeson (for the University of Chichester IM Research Centre), with particular assistance from Anne Rowe and Frances White. Over 100 delegates gathered, from 22 different nations. An accompanying exhibition of photographs and literature, ‘Iris Murdoch and Oxford’, was held at nearby Somerville College, where Murdoch studied, which also hosted a Murdoch-themed book launch.

To nominate conference ‘highlights’ would be unjust; there were few discernible ‘non-highlights’. My criterion for mentioning a presentation here is (since sessions

were 3-panel paralleled) that I was able to attend it. And everything I attended was excellent. After warm salutations from Leeson and Rowe, Miklós Vető, Hungarian-born French philosopher and Murdoch's last PhD student in Oxford, captivated us with his persuasive opening plenary on Murdoch and Simone Weil. Oxford 'legend' (and friend to the Bayleys) Valentine Cunningham gave a similarly enigmatic Sunday evaluation ('How Good?') of Murdoch's work in shifting contexts. His plenary was provocative, frank: confessing deflation at witnessing himself 'substituted' by another character in the 'Iris' movie, but reverence for Murdoch's 'prescient' writings and occasionally contrary presence. And Gillian Dooley delivered a fascinating Monday plenary on the cypheric nature of singers and singing and song in Murdoch's novels.

The presence of venerable British actress Annette Badland was a treat. Badland is known for her television work in *Eastenders* and *Doctor Who*, and a prolific stage career including a role in Murdoch's 'The Servants in the Snow'. She has appeared in *The Archers*, which delighted me, and is a big-hearted wise soul, which delighted everyone. In plenary 'Interview' with Anne Rowe, Badland insightfully equated acting with Murdoch's 'unselfing'. This made perfect sense. Life's a form of acting, of course: bits of it necessarily are, otherwise we'd get in more trouble than we do.

Either side of convivial marquee buffet luncheons garnished with delicious chat, I enjoyed so many thematically-diverse presentations. Cheryl Bove chaired 'Intertextuality' afforded a feminist slant (balanced with a subsequent 'male' intertextuality session), at which Sabina Lovibond, Donna Carpenter, and Janfarie Skinner carved respective inroads to Patricia Highsmith's (Existentialism!), A. S. Byatt's (Fairy Tales!), and Rachel Trickett's (Oxford Life!) debts to the Murdochian oeuvre, and vice versa. 'Whatever you are looking for, you can find it in Murdoch,' someone commented afterwards. Anne Rowe sagely chaperoned an engaging 'Life and Letters' session wherein Ian d'Alton (Trinity College, Dublin) focused on Murdoch's Irishness, Wendy Nakanishi identified singular meaningfulness in the 'collected letters' form, and David Szoke reconsidered Murdoch's interchanges with Franz Steiner. Maria Peacock also spoke of Steiner, finding connections with Canetti via Murdoch the catalyst conduit. An eclectic student panel, 'Emerging Scholarship', advanced much to celebrate: Murdoch studies are clearly in capable hands. Paula Scorer (Chichester) analysed rhetorical aspects of Murdoch's fiction, Philly Malika (East Anglia) explored the serio-comic in *Under the Net*, and Shuang Gao (York) delved fruitfully into complex notions of 'artistic truth' elucidated in Murdoch's philosophical prose.

I must indulgently add that I was greatly uplifted by the scholars with whom I shared the 'Poetics' panel. Pamela Osborn, Daniel Read, and Mitchell Mainstone produced illuminating interpretations of Murdoch's unpublished poetry (a dozen notebooks, currently being transcribed!), examining processes of textual revision alongside attitudes to poetry itself. Encountering others working, like myself, on Murdoch's *poetry* is a huge encouragement, an affirmation. The entire conference became, likewise, a statement of solidarity and tacit renewal of scholarly vows. At the closing dinner, Peter J. Conradi gave an incisive, balanced but emotive address, while Audi Bayley gently paid affectionate personal tribute to Iris herself.

A seminal event, then: timely tonic to anyone mistakenly mistrustful of academia, or fearful that Iris is 'out of vogue'. She's not. There was nothing not to love, lots to admire and inspire. Anne Rowe rightly remarked that 'a Murdoch conference has a unique atmosphere'. It's an intellectually-driven oasis of oneness, noble and welcoming, a world removed from the reductive dryness and risible academic one-upmanship of many Eng. Lit. conferences. We fortunate delegates left Oxford enlightened, with information and confidence to initiate studies of which Iris herself might even have approved. We will look forward to the 2021 UK conference. And love will be the landing.