

On Iris Murdoch in the Twenty First Century

Anne Rowe

Professor Bran Nicol commented in the 2019 edition of the *Iris Murdoch Review*¹ that Murdoch's focus on the individual raises the question of how her novels will fare in this new century. He suggested that British fiction today appears to be distinguished by its willingness to enter what he calls a 'response mode', that is 'a readiness to regard as its primary responsibility to depict, reflect and comment on aspects of our contemporary landscape, for example environmental, catastrophe, terrorism, transnationalism etc'. He fears Murdoch may be marginalised, because of her foregrounding of the spiritual and moral health of the individual which, indeed, has been perceived for too long as a *barrier* to an engagement with socio-political issues.

However, fresh ways of reading her novels are now being opened up by tracing Murdoch's characters' moral and spiritual health back to their root causes, inviting critics to speculate more freely on how they relate to external debate. Indeed, the passage of time since the novels were written seems to make them more not less relevant; her novels are 'shapeshifters', able to adapt to change because it is not Murdoch, but society itself that has been slow to recognise the psychological damage suffered by those once side-lined by society, designated as 'odd', or simply ignored. Only in recent years has such silent suffering been understood and discussed openly, yet Murdoch had always understood truths about humanity that humanity itself was slow to perceive. And if Murdoch scholarship is being enriched not only by such a new perceptiveness, but also by ongoing acquisitions and research at the Iris Murdoch archives at Kingston University, there is clearly much to look forward to.

Since my visit to Tokyo in October, Professor Peter Conradi, Murdoch's official biographer, has donated the last of his research papers to the Murdoch Archives, and has stated his intent to gift his own personal archives to the Conradi Archive. The annotations to Murdoch's Oxford Library are still not yet transcribed, and only around 700 of the 3,500 personal letters in the Murdoch archives have, as yet, been published. Annotated

editions of *The Sovereignty of Good* and the Heidegger manuscript, on which Murdoch was working in her last years, both edited by Justin Broackes, are being prepared for publication by Oxford University Press. With ten previously unknown poetry notebooks having been discovered in the loft of Murdoch's last home at Oxford, the year ahead promises to be as rich and productive for Murdoch scholarship as the centenary year we leave behind.

(Visiting Professor, Chichester University, Emeritus Research Fellow &
Director of The Iris Murdoch Archive Project, Kingston University)

1. Bran Nicol, review of Anne Rowe, *Iris Murdoch: Writers and their Work* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), in the *Iris Murdoch Review*, No.10 (2019), pp.89-92.