

Iris Murdoch's Letters in the English Epistolary Tradition

Wendy Jones Nakanishi

Iris Murdoch died on 8 February 1999 at the age of seventy-nine. An edition of her correspondence was published sixteen years later, in 2015. *Living on Paper*, edited by Avril Horner and Anne Rowe, consists of more than 760 letters and postcards Murdoch wrote from 1934, when she was a schoolgirl of fifteen, to 1995, when she was seventy-six, a world famous writer, the author of twenty-six published novels as well as philosophical essays and treatises but already in the grip of the Alzheimer's that would soon stop her writing altogether.

Living on Paper is the first comprehensive collection of the philosopher-novelist's correspondence to be made public and, as such, offers her readers their first opportunity to assess her accomplishment as a letter writer. The edition also, as Malcolm Forbes has observed, represents a kind of surrogate autobiography, and the nearest we will ever get given the fact Murdoch wrote no memoirs.

With this publication, Murdoch joins the ranks of English individuals – some illustrious, many obscure – whose supposedly private letters have been deemed of sufficient literary or social or historic interest to be made public. In other words, Murdoch has become part of the English epistolary tradition of published letters stretching back hundreds of years.

Only thirty-six of the letters in *Living on Paper* had been previously published, and the edition represents only a small selection of Murdoch's letters. The number she actually wrote and sent has been estimated to be huge. The 3,200 letters held in the Iris Murdoch Research Archive at Kingston University in London is probably matched by at least that number elsewhere.

The quantity of Murdoch's letters illustrates the central role letter writing played in her life. It was an important part of her daily routine. She devoted her mornings to her novels and philosophical writings and her afternoons to her correspondence. With some friends, such as Brigid Brophy, she maintained near daily contact by letters.

Living on Paper garnered mixed reviews. Some dismissed Murdoch's letters as dull; others condemned what they considered the salacious behaviour on show; while still others regretted the fact that Murdoch rarely discussed her work in them. But some applauded the correspondence as revealing how talking, writing and reading all constituted 'erotic acts' for this important novelist.

Comparing Murdoch as a letter writer to such seminal figures as Alexander Pope, Horace Walpole, or Virginia Woolf, it seems obvious Murdoch never intended her letters for publication. In dashing off endless letters – ranging from long discourses on philosophic topics to short utilitarian messages arranging meetings – Murdoch was writing for specific friends rather than for posterity. We can be grateful so many of those

missives have survived, giving us a vivid sense of Murdoch's personality and interests.