

LIVING ON PAPER





LIVING ON PAPER  
LETTERS FROM IRIS MURDOCH  
1934–1995

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IRIS MURDOCH

Edited by Avril Horner and Anne Rowe

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*For our grandchildren: Rhiannon, Ffion, Owain,  
Iestyn, Eirian and Huw Rowe*

*and*

*Samuel, Felix, Lulu and Elise Horner*

Yet words are so damned important now that we're living on paper again. I shall want words from you – and words and words! Write all that you think, sweetheart, including the doubts and terrors. Write all that you think and feel.

Iris Murdoch to David Hicks, 5 January 1946

I can live in letters.

Iris Murdoch to Philippa Foot, June 1968

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Philippa Foot, 1943.

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Leo Pliatzky. *Kindly provided by Jean Harris. Photographer: Jean Weinberg.*

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Iris Murdoch and John Bayley in the garden of Cedar Lodge, Steeple Aston. *By Janet Stone with kind permission of the Reynolds and Janet Stone Estate.*

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Iris Murdoch taking tea in the garden at Litton Cheney. *By Janet Stone with kind permission of the Reynolds and Janet Stone Estate.*

Iris Murdoch accepting the Booker Prize for *The Sea, The Sea* in 1978, with A. J. Ayer and Booker director Michael Caine. *Permission to reproduce by Oxford Brookes University.*

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John Bayley, Iris Murdoch, Peter Conradi and Cloudy (Anax in *The Green Knight*). *By kind permission of Peter Conradi.*

Iris Murdoch at her desk at Charlbury Road, Oxford.

Objects in Iris Murdoch's study in Charlbury Road, Oxford. *By Chris Thomas, from the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University.*

Iris Murdoch's desk in Charlbury Road, Oxford. *By Chris Thomas, from the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Iris Murdoch had two studies in her final home, a house in Charlbury Road, Oxford; one was tucked quietly away upstairs at the back, the other was downstairs at the front and was lighter and more accessible. In the small, cluttered upstairs study, Murdoch worked from early in the morning on her philosophical writings and her novels, surrounded by more than a thousand books of philosophy, theology, fiction, poetry and travel. Later, in the afternoons, she retired to the lighter downstairs study where, sitting near the window at a roll-top desk that once belonged to J. R. R. Tolkien, she settled to write her letters. During the course of her life she wrote thousands of letters and was to be remembered fondly by her many friends, her students, would-be writers, interviewers, fans and the most casual of acquaintances, for being so generous with her time. She answered every letter she received, responding even to complete strangers with the utmost courtesy and grace.

All Murdoch's letters were written by hand, many with her Montblanc fountain pen. She would spend up to four hours a day on her correspondence, often responding immediately to friends or lovers who were currently in her thoughts. Her official biographer, Peter J. Conradi, has suggested that 'pen-friendship offered her cost-free intimacy, a point of entry into the imaginative worlds of others, and a stage on which to try out her own personae'<sup>i</sup> – and both the role-playing involved in writing letters, and the information elicited through them, fed into Murdoch's fiction. Unlike biographies, which usually offer coherent portraits of their subjects, letters provide a kaleidoscopic picture, their authors sometimes responding in remarkably different ways to different correspondents, even on the same day. Murdoch's life (1919–99) spanned most of the twentieth century, and her letters give us not only the story of a life lived to capacity by an extraordinary woman, but also a sense of the zeitgeist of both England and Europe during the mid to late twentieth century.

*Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch* opens with correspondence from 1934–41, formative years full of raw intellectual excitement and political intensity. These letters written in her youth already demonstrate serious thinking about morality and the human condition. However, pitted against

the privileged future almost guaranteed by her Oxford education, loomed the shadow of the Second World War and by 1941 her life was taking turns she had never envisaged. Letters between 1942 and 1944 catalogue both the tedium of her conscripted work at the Treasury and her frustration at being excluded from the war effort. By contrast, letters written when she had been transferred by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) to work in Europe convey both her satisfaction at being able to help displaced persons in Austria and her intoxicated delight with European philosophy and culture. She became enthralled by the intellectualism of café life in Paris and Brussels where, in October 1945, she met Jean-Paul Sartre. By this time she was committed to philosophy and determined to become a writer. The increasing complexity of the love relationships that characterise the letters of these years formed a pattern that would mark her life and her fiction for years to come.

Having resigned from UNRRA in 1946, in 1947 Murdoch became a post-graduate student for a year at Cambridge University, where she found the philosophical climate both stimulating and frustrating. In 1948 she took up a post as fellow and tutor in philosophy at St Anne's in Oxford and letters written between this date and 1954 suggest her pleasure in teaching and learning and her enjoyment of college social life. More poignantly, they catalogue both her unrequited longing for the French writer Raymond Queneau – whom she had met in Innsbruck in 1946 and regarded as her intellectual soulmate – and her final dignified settling for his friendship. The years between 1955 and 1962 saw her fame as a writer rise dramatically and she became an important figure in British culture. Her letters to friends are nevertheless full of humility and empathy, although her compassion occasionally shades into a voyeuristic interest in their private lives. Her marriage in 1956 to John Bayley, that was to prove strong and enduring, ensured a reputable public image. However, her personal life was complicated, each of her many correspondents unaware of either the many others to whom Murdoch also wrote, or how often her life came perilously close to scandal. Even more complex and unwise emotional imbroglios, most notably with two of her students, dominate the letters from the Royal College of Art years (1963–7). Letters written during the extraordinarily productive years between 1968 and 1978, when she wrote a book almost every year, predominantly record intense relationships with two female friends, Philippa Foot and Brigid Brophy. The decade between 1979 and 1989 brought emotional calm, marital security and new enduring friendships that allowed a freer engagement with the politics and the cultural concerns of her time, most evident perhaps in her letters to the American lawyer Albert Lebowitz and his wife, Naomi Lebowitz, a professor of English and comparative literature at Washington University in St Louis. *Living on Paper* ends in 1995, a year in

which her letters begin to evidence the onset of the memory loss that was to worsen before her death from Alzheimer's disease in 1999.

Iris Murdoch was a remarkably prolific author. She produced twenty-six novels, a body of philosophical writing which included a study of Sartre, two Platonic dialogues, over thirty essays and two seminal philosophical tracts, *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992). She also wrote six plays, three of which were adaptations of her novels, a radio play and some poetry, of which only a small proportion has been published. Murdoch's fame, though, came largely from her fiction. Although her novels have been accused of being patrician and socially narrow, they appeal to a wide range of readers. They manage to combine challenging highbrow intellectualism with gripping realism while the powerful passions and paralysing obsessions of her characters drive plots that are both fantastic and compelling. Her characters experience common moral and emotional dilemmas but many also undergo greater extremes of suffering, such as the anguish of male homosexual desire (at a time when it was illegal to act on it), or the transgressive pleasures and horrors of sadomasochism and incest. Above all, she was superb at portraying the madness of love and the way it can transform ordinary people into crazed and possessive beings. The reading public eagerly awaited the latest best-seller while scholars welcomed her fresh engagement with the works of philosophers such as Plato, Sartre and Simone Weil.

Despite her own reputation as a significant philosopher, Murdoch never wavered from her belief in the paramount importance of literature: 'For both the collective and the individual salvation of the human race, art is doubtlessly more important than philosophy, and literature most important of all'.<sup>ii</sup> If the point of philosophy is to 'clarify', then the point of literature is to 'mystify' – or make her readers *think*. She believed that literature could touch people's lives profoundly; philosophy less so because of its esoteric nature. Indeed, her artistic ambition was to construct a 'moral psychology' within her fiction that would enchant and challenge her readers intellectually and morally. While this intellectual rigour gave her novels originality and English fiction a distinctive new voice, Murdoch's spellbinding narratives – which combine psychological complexity with humour, tolerance and a deep understanding of human frailty – ensured her continuing popularity with the general reader.

Murdoch's versatility makes her fiction hard to categorise neatly, even in retrospect. She has been described variously as a surrealist, a magical realist and a fabulist. The theologian Don Cupitt remembers how, to those who read her novels as they appeared from the 1950s onwards, the most obvious comparison was not with the realists but 'with the great Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman'.<sup>iii</sup> Her extensive and complex dialogues with other art



forms, in particular painting, challenge the definition of Murdoch as a realist writer in the conventional sense. Despite her claim to be working in the nineteenth-century tradition and her admiration for novelists such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Henry James, she strongly asserted that she was driving the novel forward, not backward. 'One can't go back', she said. 'One's consciousness is different; I mean our whole narrative technique is something completely different'.<sup>iv</sup> Her early novel, *The Sandcastle* (1957), alludes to Henry James's short story 'The Figure in the Carpet' and thus implicitly chides critics who fail to see that aesthetics and form are as important to a story's meaning as its plot and characters. The point of this reference was to alert readers to the experimentalism in her own writing: 'there is a great deal of experimentation in the work, but I don't want it to be too evident', she once said.<sup>v</sup> The wording of a novel's title often hints at the complex use of a symbol – a net, a bell, the sea, a dream, a severed head, a rose, a unicorn – that the reader will find within it. Titles also sometimes refer to groups whose meaning outstrips their superficial significance: angels, enchanters, philosophers, nuns, soldiers. Even simple words can carry huge symbolic weight in Murdoch's work, marking her out as both a modern and a highly poetic novelist.

Many prizes for fiction came her way, including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *The Black Prince* (1973) and the Booker Prize for *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). Nonetheless, she fell out of fashion, both as a novelist and a philosopher, during the 1980s and 1990s. This partial eclipse occurred perhaps because her reputation became dogged by some reviewers' dismissive claims that her novels deal only with the bourgeois sorrows of highly educated characters obsessed by their overcomplicated love lives. In academia, fired by structuralism and postmodernism, university departments were adopting a rigorously theoretical approach to the analysis of literary works, looking for evidence of Derridean wordplay and a desire to deconstruct absolutes while dismissing the idea that a literary text can have intrinsic and stable meaning. Murdoch's novels – which uphold absolutes such as love and the Good and which promote the moral worth of art as a path to truth – were seen to fail such tests and were sidelined. It is true that she was suspicious of fashionable literary theories, in particular structuralism and deconstruction, which seem to privilege the linguistic system over the will and freedom of the individual, but in fact she engaged closely with contemporary philosophy, including Jacques Derrida's work.

Murdoch's eclipse lasted less than twenty years: since the late 1990s her writing has been internationally celebrated and her reputation revived. Her fiction is now hailed by many as a paradigm for morally responsible art and her philosophy is seen as important matter for debate in the field of virtue ethics. Since 2000 a raft of new publications on her work has emerged from

the UK, Europe, Japan and the USA. This global response is redefining Iris Murdoch as an eminent philosopher of the twentieth century and has triggered fresh interest in her fiction.

Recent research into Murdoch's life has, however, revealed a number of enigmas and contradictions and these have occasioned both perplexity and fierce debate among her critics. Revelations about her personal life since the publication of Peter J. Conradi's official biography in 2001 have sometimes been used to challenge the previously held image of her as a somewhat saintly puritanical figure. Bran Nicol, a subtle reader of her fiction, has described her as 'a complex, sexualised being, capable of cruelty and deception as much as kindness and wit'.<sup>vi</sup> Even Conradi, whose biography is both comprehensive and compassionate, has more recently observed that her letters to Frank Thompson, a contemporary at Oxford to whom she became close and who was killed in the Second World War, can seem 'arch and irritating'. He notes that Thompson was deeply hurt by Murdoch's promiscuity and by her casual frankness about it in letters to him (in particular her taking M. R. D. Foot, a fellow Oxford student, and Thomas Balogh, an Oxford tutor, as lovers during the summer of 1943). Conradi even speculates that Thompson's fateful decision to enter Bulgaria might have been in part prompted by the 'unwelcome news' received when he was in Serbia in 1944 about Murdoch's affair with Foot: 'was [Thompson's] reckless disregard for his survival a peevish reprisal for her troubled love life?'.<sup>vii</sup> Martha Nussbaum, a careful interpreter of Murdoch's philosophy, has claimed that Murdoch was unable to live up to her own definitions of moral goodness and that she was self-absorbed, controlling and predatory.<sup>viii</sup> In a measured epilogue to her most recent book on Iris Murdoch, Maria Antonaccio defends the author in the face of Nussbaum's claims and warns against reading the work alongside the life in any simple way.<sup>ix</sup>

Perhaps the same caveat needs to be made in relation to reading Murdoch's life through her letters. Effusive and emotionally weighted language in Murdoch's correspondence can be misleading. Indeed her language frequently blurs the boundaries between platonic and sexual liaisons so that deciphering accurately the extent of intimacy is challenging. Her vocabulary is often of the kind most usually reserved for sexually intimate relationships: 'I love you deeply' or 'I embrace you with much love' are refrains throughout. But such language in Murdoch's letters does not necessarily imply sexual intimacy and/or a desire for total commitment to one person. She was progressive, both in her advocacy of complete emotional and sexual freedom in relationships and in her sense of gender as something fluid rather than fixed.

For Murdoch, however, the highest form of love 'is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real'.<sup>x</sup> Such deep attention to the Other also occasions precisely

that emotional generosity and lack of possessiveness that her letters display, making room for the possibility of complete freedom. The person one loves should not be entrapped in one's own fantasy world, as so often happens with Murdoch's fictional characters. (The emotionally and sexually rapacious Charles Arrowby in *The Sea*, *The Sea* comes to mind here.)

Murdoch's 'love' in this sense is enabling and not restricting, and sexual encounters in her fiction are often part of a healing process that allows characters to move on from debilitating obsessions (as, for example, in *The Green Knight* when the young, wounded Harvey Blackett and Sefton Anderson make love briefly and therapeutically). However, her best novels also portray the tension between freedom and obsession that she experienced herself; this tension is what makes her novels compulsive reading. She was well aware that love could enslave as well as liberate, and many letters in *Living on Paper* demonstrate Murdoch's own obsessive desire for, or obsessive interest in, certain people at various points in her life. David Hicks, an Oxford contemporary, is replaced by Raymond Queneau, the French experimental writer, who is followed by the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott, the author Elias Canetti and the writer and activist Brigid Brophy as individuals with whom she cultivated intense and passionate liaisons. This pattern in her life has influenced the structure of *Living on Paper*; letters to specific people often appear in 'blocks', indicating periods of emotional obsession.

Such real-life experience undoubtedly flows into her portrayal of obsessive desire in her fiction, as do her own sexual relationships (which often took the form of 'diffused eroticisms'<sup>xi</sup> – erotically charged relationships that were deliberately not fully sexually consummated). And here we have another puzzle: in a letter to David Morgan written in mid-January 1972, Murdoch notes, 'I disapprove of promiscuity'. The apparent contradiction between this statement and the fact that Murdoch had many lovers herself – and that she encouraged others to engage in such free relationships – is perhaps illuminated by the remark that follows: 'To be oneself, free, whole, is partly a matter of escape from obsession, neurosis, fear, compulsions etc.' Sexual freedom was for Murdoch just one aspect of a wider freedom – social and political – that is paradoxically and inevitably tied up with other people and their difference from oneself. For Murdoch, freedom is always defined within a relationship or a social context and so 'love' for her is 'the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness'.<sup>xii</sup> This is not to say that she was blind to the potential damage to others that such sexual freedom could bring in its wake, and this ambivalence is expressed in the novels repeatedly.

The reader is, then, faced with a choice: whether to see Murdoch's many intimate relationships as an attempt to live out a liberal forward-thinking moral philosophy, or whether to see that philosophy as a convenient



legitimation of a personal freedom that, it could be argued, included a rather casual attitude to sexual relations and some emotional exploitation. In the end, it is for the reader to decide; *Living on Paper* adds another piece to the jigsaw of biographical information that helps us put together a picture of this complex and enigmatic personality.<sup>xiii</sup> In trying to understand Murdoch's chameleon nature, perhaps we would do well to remember her fondness for the myth of Proteus, who was able to change himself into any shape he wished, a myth that she used to assuage John Bayley's occasional anxiety about their marriage:

It was in reply to my despairing comment that I couldn't understand her, or the different person she became for the many others with whom she seemed, in my view, helplessly entangled. 'Remember Proteus', she used to say. 'Just keep tight hold of me and it will be all right.' [ . . . ] When Hercules held tightly on to him throughout all these transformations he was compelled in the end to surrender, and to resume his proper shape as the man he was.<sup>xiv</sup>

*Living on Paper* tells Murdoch's life story in her own words and provides a rather different portrait from those currently available. Her letters vividly convey her wonderful sense of humour and her sometimes wicked irreverence – thereby providing a sharp contrast to the almost austere and serious tone of many formal interviews and some previous accounts of her life. Moreover, her relationships with Michael Oakeshott and Brigid Brophy, to name but two of her correspondents, are fully documented for the first time in this volume. Her letters also give unique glimpses into the minutiae that made up her everyday life and they record her frequent travels, mostly omitted from biographical accounts; she was deeply interested in and stimulated by other cultures and traditions and eager to communicate her experiences on paper to lovers and friends. Her love of painting and languages and her desire to understand them better are displayed in many letters, as is her constant openness to new writers and new ideas. She was not intellectually or emotionally closed in any way and this openness contributed to the development of both her fiction and her philosophy. She was not closed, either, to the difficulties facing others and her letters are full of many small and sometimes extravagant acts of kindness and offers of help. Her lifelong insecurity about her own abilities is often painfully evident, as is her modesty about her achievements (she rarely used the title of 'Dame'). Although *Living on Paper* paints a picture of immense energy and commitment, we should remember that it represents only a fragment of the activity that produced a remarkable body of work.

Finally, the great value of Murdoch's letters – which are often direct and very intimate – is that they give the reader a strong and lively sense of what

Iris Murdoch was like, not only as a novelist or philosopher, but also as a woman living out her daily life. If Murdoch's philosophy gives us a picture of a gifted intellectual and her novels convey her abiding interest in moral psychology and the contingency of life, Murdoch's letters show us a warm and complicated woman who loved life but who also frequently struggled with a sense of her own frailty and who endured dark episodes. Surprisingly, perhaps, few letters engage with philosophical ideas and theories in any depth; readers must turn back to her philosophy for that. Instead, they give us a portrait of a woman who lived unconventionally and according to her own moral code; of a complex individual whose reactions to others and world events were often intense and frequently irreverent; of a woman whose ideas and values changed profoundly over the years. However, the young Communist does not simply follow the predictable pattern of metamorphosing into the old conservative as the years pass: reactionary thoughts often jostle with radical ideas, even during the last phase of her life. Because they document so vividly the complexity of their author, Murdoch's letters constitute a distinct aspect of her writing persona: they are not merely an addition to her *oeuvre*, but an integral part of it, both illuminating and complicating our understanding of her philosophy and her fiction.

### Editorial Matters

The 3,200 or so letters written by Iris Murdoch and held in the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University, London, were the first inspiration for *Living on Paper*. Of the sixty runs held there, we selected letters from Murdoch to Marjorie Boulton, Brigid Brophy, Elias Canetti (copies), Roly Cochrane, Peter Conradi, Scott Dunbar, Rachel Fenner, Philippa Foot, Lucy Klatschko (Sister Marian), Georg Kreisel (copies), Michael Levey, Hal Lidderdale, Leo Pliatzky, Raymond Queneau, Suguna Ramanathan, Wallace Robson and Harry Weinberger. We have also accessed letters from many other archives in the UK and abroad, and read in excess of 5,000 when making our selection for this volume.

Some letters to Frank Thompson and David Hicks that are held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, have previously been published in Peter J. Conradi's *A Writer at War: Letters and Diaries 1938–46*.<sup>xv</sup> They are included here because they document how important both these relationships were to Murdoch's emotional development, and because they are historically and biographically relevant.

We have also chosen to include information about Murdoch's relationships with certain individuals who are not represented by any letters in this volume but who were important to her. They include her two Oxford colleagues, Peter Ady and Margaret Hubbard, and her lover Franz Steiner, letters to whom have either been destroyed or were not accessible when we compiled

*Living on Paper*. Also, two disproportionately short letter runs from the Conradi Archive<sup>xvi</sup> at Kingston University serve only fleetingly to represent Murdoch's love for two highly significant figures in her life, Elias Canetti<sup>xvii</sup> and Sister Marian of Stanbrook Abbey. These relationships were profoundly important to Murdoch and to omit them from the overview of her life would be to diminish it; they therefore feature in our narrative despite the paucity or absence of letters.

*Living on Paper* is not an exhaustive account of Murdoch's epistolary history. Letters to some significant figures in her life (such as Vladimir Bukovsky, A. S. Byatt, Honor Tracy and Richard Wollheim) are not included, either because they have been destroyed or because they were unavailable at the time of writing. Nor have we included letters from two other recently published collections of letters: Geoffrey Meyers's *Remembering Iris Murdoch* and Gillian Dooley and Graham Nerlich's edited correspondence between Iris Murdoch and the Australian philosopher Brian Medlin.<sup>xviii</sup> While both collections are noteworthy in relation to Murdoch's friendships, readers can easily access these volumes independently.

Limitations of space have meant that some fascinating letter runs that are held in the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University, or that have been loaned to us, have been omitted, for example letters to the architect Stephen Gardiner, to Murdoch's former student Julian Chrysostomides, to her philosopher friend Denis Paul and to the painter Barbara Dorf. Other important runs held at Kingston that are only minimally represented here include letters to Roly Cochrane, an American fan of her work, and her painter friend, Harry Weinberger. Reading these letter runs, however, helped us to understand more fully Murdoch's personality and the way her mind worked – and therefore aided us in the selection and editing of the letters that are included.

To cut down on distracting apparatus in the letters, readers will find biographical profiles of all correspondents, close friends and other significant figures in the Directory of Names and Terms at the end of *Living on Paper*. Other names, of less significance and perhaps mentioned only once or twice in the letters, are explained in footnotes. The Directory also includes brief explanations of important philosophical movements, and profiles of certain philosophers and writers whose work influenced Murdoch.

For the ease of the reader – and to save space – we have occasionally removed from letters: detailed information concerning arrangements for future meetings; repetition of information from one letter to another; some cryptic comments that are so esoteric as to be impenetrable or meaningless; references to people or events that are either insignificant or that we cannot account for or explain adequately. Such omissions are indicated in the usual way with ellipses. There are a handful of individuals whose identities we

have been unable to explain, despite our best efforts; as these are minor characters in the tapestry of Murdoch's life we hope readers will not be too distracted by them. In order to protect the privacy of certain individuals we have anonymised them by using names that are not their own.

Dating Murdoch's letters has been largely a process of sleuthing. While her early letters do usually include day and month (e.g. 4 October), she often omits the year. Later letters are sometimes not dated at all. Fortunately many of the letters were kept in their original envelopes by her correspondents and have been dated from postmarks where these are legible. Other letters have been dated from content or by liaising with still living correspondents. Any date, or part of date, that appears in square brackets signifies either date of posting (rather than date of writing) or is a date that has been deduced by us. Where we have had to guess a date, or part of it, we have included a question mark. All letters selected for inclusion were checked by more than one transcriber and sustained attempts were made to decipher any remaining illegible words; there are therefore very few gaps within letters due to illegibility.

Despite our best efforts, *Living on Paper* might still contain errors; these are our responsibility alone and we would be pleased to hear from readers with any relevant information and corrections. We would also be pleased to hear from anyone possessing, or knowing of, any letters written by Iris Murdoch that are not already in the public domain.

# PART ONE:

## *Schoolgirl and Student*

August 1934 to December 1941

Iris Murdoch was born on 15 July 1919 at 59 Blessington Street, North Dublin, her mother's home town. She and her mother soon moved to 12 Caithness Road, Hammersmith in London to join her father, Hughes Murdoch, who had taken the post of second-class clerk at the Ministry of Health in 1919 after having served as second lieutenant in the 1st King Edward's Horse regiment during the First World War. In 1926 the Murdochs moved to 4 Eastbourne Road, Chiswick where the family of three, remembered with great fondness by Murdoch as 'a perfect trinity of love',<sup>i</sup> was to live for many years. Although they lived in London, they returned to Ireland most years for holidays. At the age of five, Murdoch was sent to the Froebel Demonstration School at Colet Gardens, Hammersmith where she was very happy, later recalling those years as a time of 'light, of freedom' during which she enjoyed 'the great greedy pleasures of learning, the calm kindly authority of teachers, the instant amiability of the children'.<sup>ii</sup> Excelling at all aspects of her learning, she was made head girl in her final year. In 1932, Murdoch won one of the two open scholarships to Badminton School, Bristol, a small, 'internationally minded', 'forward-looking', tolerant and liberal institution with only 163 girls, of whom ninety-six were boarders.<sup>iii</sup> After an unhappy and homesick start, she soon settled in and began to thrive on its atmosphere of rigorous learning and left-wing politics. In 1938 she was awarded an Open Exhibition to read English at Somerville College, Oxford. She quickly changed direction, however, moving to Classics in order to study 'Mods' (Greek and Latin language and literature) and 'Greats' (philosophy and ancient history). Here she met Mary Scrutton (later to become Mary Midgley), Philippa Bosanquet (later to become Philippa Foot), David Hicks, Frank Thompson, M. R. D. Foot, Hal Lidderdale and Leo Pliatzky, who would all feature significantly in her life.

The short run of eleven early letters that comprise this section spans the years from 1934, when Murdoch was a fifteen-year-old at Badminton School, to the end of 1941, when she was in her final year at Oxford. A number are to her school friend, Ann Leech, the youngest daughter of a Manchester doctor, whom she met on her first day at Badminton and who was to become a lifelong friend. Murdoch's future talents and interests are already evident: the teenager's excited recording of a dramatic incident on a family holiday in Ireland presages more mature impulses to transform life into narrative. An early love of the visual arts, as well as a determination to paint, foreshadows her courting the company of painters and the inclusion of favourite paintings in her novels. Her enthusiastic reading of Gorki and Mallarmé anticipates her subsequent intoxication with European philosophy and literature.

The zeitgeist of the late 1930s generated a fierce left-wing political idealism, and Murdoch became heavily involved in Labour Club activities and joined the Communist Party soon after arriving at Oxford. On the one hand she loathed politics, much preferring the study of Classics; on the other she believed that in such times no one had any choice but to be politically engaged. Her radical leanings are expressed in her letters to Ann Leech and include an animated account of 'The Festival of Music for the People' at the Royal Albert Hall in 1939. Her Communist sympathies had stripped her of the Protestantism of her youth and she defined her religion at this point in her life as a passionate belief in the beautiful and a faith in the ultimate triumph of the people. In 1939 she shared the common anxiety that Britain might be overrun by Nazis in the near future; indeed, in March of that year some of her Oxford contemporaries, including Frank Thompson and Leo Pliatzky, acted in and produced their own play, *It Can Happen Here*, which imagined Britain as a fascist state.<sup>iv</sup> Later that year Murdoch performed with an acting troupe, the Magpie Players, a travelling theatre comprising young men and women from Oxford who toured the West Country from 28 August to 16 September 1939, performing in small theatres, village halls, schools and in the open air. All proceeds were donated to various humanitarian organisations. Murdoch became fully aware of the privileged life she led during the war years that followed, when so many were suffering and dying, and in 1940 confessed to Eduard Fraenkel, her tutor, that she felt guilty about her inability to participate in the war effort. One of the central tenets of her philosophy, that morally improving the self is a fundamental prerequisite for a healthy society, is seen to emerge during these years, as does persistent insecurity about her intellectual abilities. In a more intimate vein, Murdoch confides to Ann Leech that she already has the capacity to be in love with six men at once. Such 'complications and distresses' will continue well into her adult life and will also feature in the fictional lives of her characters.



*To Ann Leech, written from Ireland where Murdoch was on holiday with her parents.*



15 Mellifont Av  
Kingstown  
Co. Dublin  
29 August 1934

Dear Ann,

Hello! A grey and relentless sky has been pouring rain on us for the last week, and the sun has forgotten how to shine.

I will come to Manchester on September 4th, Tuesday, by the train arriving at London Road station at 2.10 p.m., 10.30 from Euston. Will that be all right? Please write to 4 Eastbourne Rd and say if it is.

Great excitement here! Last Sunday week night (that sounds queer) a terrible storm got up, and on Monday morning about 8 a.m. the first maroon<sup>1</sup> went for the lifeboat. I was in the bathroom at the time. I never got washed so quick as I did then. I was dressed and doing my hair when the second maroon went. Then I flew out of the house. Doors were banging all the way down the street, and the entire population of Dun Laoghaire<sup>2</sup> seemed to be running to the harbour. Doodle (Daddy) and my cousin had already left with the first maroon.

The lifeboat was in the harbour mouth when I arrived. I asked a man what was up. A yacht had evidently broke its moorings and drifted out of the harbour or something, anyway we could just see it on the horizon. A high sea was running and I was glad to have my mackintosh with me. I dashed down the pier – which by the way is a mile long – and was drenched by the spray and the waves breaking over the pier. The sand whipped up by the wind, drove in clouds and I got some in my eye, which hurt like anything.

The lifeboat had an awful job, it was pitching and tossing, and once we thought it was going down, but it got to the yacht, which turned out to be empty, and towed it back amid the enthusiastic cheers of the populace. Three

<sup>1</sup> A firework intended to imitate the noise of a cannon, used especially as a warning.

<sup>2</sup> Town on the east coast of Ireland, about seven miles (11 km) south of Dublin.

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other yachts broke their moorings in the harbour, of these, two went down, and the other was saved and towed to calmer waters just as it was dashing itself to pieces against the pier. That was a great thrill. The next excitement was a huge German liner – three times as big as the mail boat – that anchored in the bay. It was too big to get into the harbour. Launches took the passengers ashore and the officers conversed in German, much to everyone's delight. The ship was touring Ireland and the tourists were taken in buses round the Wicklow Mountains. Today they are raising one of the yachts that sunk.

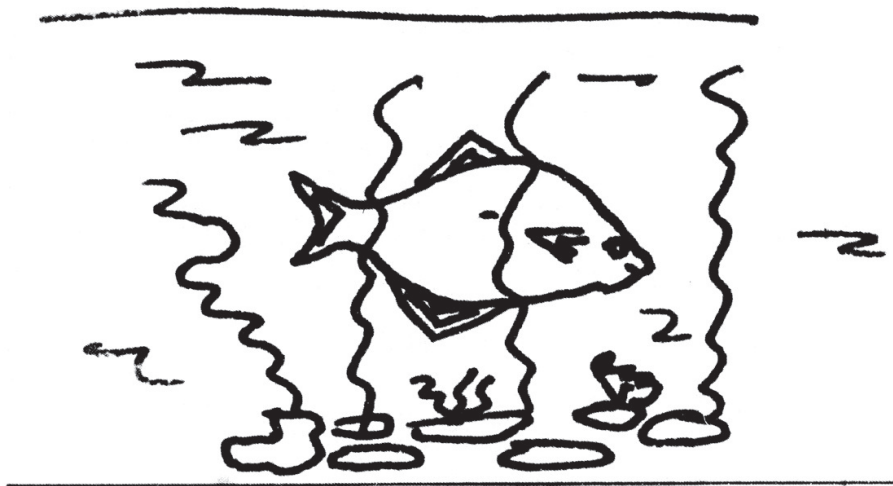
We go back to England tomorrow, and I hope we have a better crossing this time. Goodbye Ann.

See you on Tuesday.

Lots of love

From

Iris



To Ann Leech.

Badminton School  
Bristol  
17 July 1938

Dear Ann,

You angel! Thanks ever so much. Your present was *Lust for Life* by Irving Stone – a novel about Van Gogh. I read it most of Friday, finished it about 6.30 – 500 large pages, not bad going – and shall probably change it tomorrow! I may add 2s 6d and get Herbert Read's *Art Now*.<sup>1</sup> I haven't quite decided. *Lust*

<sup>1</sup> Published in 1933. Read was a champion of modern British artists such as Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Between 1933 and 1938 he was editor of the trendsetting *Burlington Magazine*.



*for Life* was terrific. It just knocked me off my feet – I had no idea Van Gogh was such a wonderful, passionate, dramatic sort of person. He began as a clerk in an art dealer's, where he was not successful, as he refused to humour customers who had bad taste. Then he tried teaching, tried to go to a university, went as an Evangelist to the worst Belgian mining districts. Here he lost his job because the heads of his missionary society, coming round unexpectedly, found him conducting a service in a filthy hut, all covered with coal dust and dressed in sacking, as he had given all his clothes away. This, they thought, was a most shameful degradation of the dignity of the church!

He was heartbroken – and one day, sitting outside the mine, he began to sketch the miners as they came out – and that was the beginning. During his whole life he only sold *one* picture – and had to be supported by his brother Theo, a Paris art dealer and one of the salt of the earth. He went to Arles eventually and lived with Gauguin [*sic*], painting passionately, wildly all day in the terrific heat, quarrelling about art with Gauguin all night, and living on absinthe. This couldn't last long – he began to have epileptic fits, and finally shot himself lest he should become permanently mad and be a burden on Theo. Theo was heartbroken and died a few months later.

I am now, consequently, consumed with the desire to paint all day and all night – and am making a start this morning with an oil painting of Maria. If only I were about six times as good as I am, I'd chuck up Oxford and go to an art school. I'd sell every faculty I have to paint one good picture.

Sorry – I hope all this hasn't bored you.

Yesterday Architecture Club and me went to Montacute House, near Yeovil – my God it was glorious. It's a *huge* Elizabethan house, in perfect preservation inside and out, full of the most exquisite carving, and surrounded by the most perfect Elizabethan gardens. It's just the place Bacon<sup>1</sup> would have loved – square velvety lawns, lily ponds, yew trees centuries old, and two 'gazebos'. (Bet you don't know what they are!) There were white fantail doves flying about it all the while, and there *were* peacocks to walk on the terraces, but apparently the ungrateful birds spend all their time roosting in the depths of the wood! I wonder what they think they're kept for?

Good luck for Sweden – I expect you are feeling thrilled. [. . .] Some people have all the luck! We shall probably go to Ireland and join in the family quarrel – ugh.

I hope you have a marvellous time – and thanks awfully for the present.

Lots of love

Iris

Finished the painting – it's frightful!

<sup>1</sup> Francis Bacon (1561–1626), English philosopher, statesman, scientist, essayist and author.

To Ann Leech.

4 Eastbourne Rd  
Chiswick  
London  
W4  
27 September 1938

Dear Ann,

Thank the gods for one piece of good news – I am most terribly glad – only sad that I shan't be with you. I was going to write you today anyhow, as I heard your news from Orpen<sup>1</sup> – or was it Ysobel? Dulci<sup>2</sup> has just been staying with me, and I haven't been to bed before 1 for about a week. She is very gloomy, that is she believes the worst will happen, but is taking it calmly. I too believe that the worst will happen – but I don't feel at all afraid yet – only sad and strangely amused. I don't want to leave London – I love the city, and if it's going to be smashed up, I want to be there.

I can see nothing beyond Saturday<sup>3</sup> – so I am treasuring these last few days of peace, and perhaps of life – reading poetry, and enjoying pictures and music. Of course this is just melodramatic rot – the chances are that you and I will be alive and healthy this time next year, and the world certainly won't end on Saturday – but I feel the sword of Damocles over me all the same.

We are storing food, my father is helping the man next door to build an air raid shelter in his garden, and tonight we get our gas-masks – 'Oh brave new world . . .'<sup>4</sup>

Singularly enough I feel happier now, in spite of my sadness, than I have ever felt for years. This isn't *real* you know – the real things will go on, whether we are blown to pieces or not – I am very close to reality now – something infinitely calm and still and beautiful.

Sorry to have become mystical – Dulci and I went into Westminster Abbey yesterday, and prayed with many other people beside the grave of the Unknown Warrior – the atmosphere was indescribable.

I was to go to lunch with an MP tomorrow, but Parliament is meeting, so I wrote to ask him to get me a ticket instead. It will be exciting if he managed to get me one.

1 Margaret Orpen, who was later to become Lady Margaret Lintott. The headmistress of Badminton School, Beatrice May Baker ('BMB'), had asked Margaret Orpen to keep an eye on the young Iris who felt homesick on joining the school. 'Ysobel' was presumably another school friend.

2 Dulcibel Broderick, another Badminton friend who later became Dulcibel MacKenzie, author of *Steps to the Bar*.

3 Neville Chamberlain's eagerly awaited return from Munich on Saturday 1 October 1938. Chamberlain returned triumphantly to Britain claiming to have negotiated 'peace in our time' but this act of appeasement failed: almost a year later, Hitler invaded Poland.

4 Miranda's exclamation in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

I am happy that you are going to Cambridge as you wished – the best of all luck to you. Do you remember in *Julius Caesar*, where Brutus and Cassius take leave of each other before Philippi? ‘And if we meet again, why then we’ll smile – If not, this parting is well taken . . .’<sup>1</sup>

Forgive me – it’s not often I get such a grand opportunity for melodrama.

*Auf Wiedersehen*

Love

Iris

*To David Hicks, an Oxford contemporary three years older than Murdoch, who graduated in PPE (philosophy, politics and economics) at Worcester College in the summer of 1938 and who had recently embarked on a Diploma of Education course. Murdoch, now in her first year at Somerville College, met Hicks through the university branch of the Communist Party.<sup>v</sup> Zuzanna Przeworska, mentioned in the letter, was a Polish undergraduate at Somerville in the year above Murdoch and an enthusiastic member of the Communist Party.<sup>vi</sup>*

Somerville

20 November 1938

Dear David,

Zuzannah is in a raging fury – Gaetolian lions<sup>2</sup> are as sucking doves beside her – so I think on the whole it would be a good thing to return her typewriter *quam celerrime*.<sup>3</sup>

I have just returned from having a rather embarrassed tea with the principal<sup>4</sup> – it consisted of a series of nerve-wracking pauses strung together by desperate attempts at conversation, the chief topic being Siamese cats! – What a waste, to go to tea with a really intelligent woman and talk about Siamese cats. I have now come back to the more imperial company of Aeschylus, whom you no doubt consider to be on an equal level of futility – and I admit his plays have no great bearing on surplus value<sup>5</sup> and bills of exchange.

I hope you have sustained no fresh damage since last we met in fights

1 Murdoch misquotes Brutus’s words: ‘If we do meet again, why, we shall smile; / If not, why then this parting was well made’.

2 The Gaetolian lion was an African lion of fierce reputation, described in both Horace’s *Odes* and Pliny’s *Natural History*. Gaetulia, in the ancient world, was the land of the Gaetuli, a warlike Berber Libyan tribe.

3 as quickly as possible.

4 Helen Darbishire, principal of Somerville between 1931 and 1945.

5 ‘Surplus value’, a concept developed by Karl Marx, refers to the value produced by workers in excess of their own labour-cost. This profit is appropriated by the capitalist owner and forms the basis of capital accumulation.

with fascists or pseudo-fascists<sup>1</sup> – I feel like having a fight with somebody right now – Siamese cats! What a charming world we live in.

Well, goodbye, give my love to the deadheads,<sup>2</sup> and don't forget Zuzzanah's typewriter.

Iris

*To David Hicks.*

4 Eastbourne Rd  
29 December 1938

Dear David,

Thank you very much indeed for your charming letter. The weather didn't hurt me in the least and as for feeling 'fooled' – well, I didn't come all that way to see any refugees, Czech or otherwise, or any number of other Davids – I came to see you and your family. May I say how very much I liked your family – and how much pleasure it gave me to see *you* in your natural habitat.

I didn't realise you wouldn't be coming back to Oxford and I certainly didn't know you were going to start teaching so soon – you should have told me. I won't pretend I'm not sorry about it. A very short while now I have 'delighted in your company',<sup>3</sup> but long enough to know that you have something I want and that I've not hitherto found and I think I have something you want. I am, to use your words, 'a seeker after my own species'.

I shall write when there is time from Oxford and tell you of Zuzzanah's latest *affaire* and what sort of ties Peter Shinnie<sup>4</sup> is wearing and why I think my philosophy of life is better than yours – and in return I should appreciate an occasional dissertation on the universe in general and young Hampstead in particular. Next vac – well, the animals at the zoo will still invite us with their interesting curves, and I should like extremely to improve my acquaintance with your family.

And now I wish you all the luck and happiness in the world. Believe in yourself. You're *not* so 'bloody mediocre'.

Love from

Iris

1 Minor altercations between Communist Party student members and other political groups occasionally took place in Oxford.

2 Boring or unenterprising people.

3 From the late sixteenth-century song 'Greensleeves'.

4 Peter Shinnie (1915–2007) was active in the Communist Party club at Oxford. He later became one of the founders of African archaeology and held professorial posts in Ghana and Canada.

PS And pray cease considering me as a child. I am in many ways considerably more mature than you are.

To Ann Leech.

4 Eastbourne Rd  
[early April 1939]<sup>vii</sup>

Dear Ann,

Hello, Hello, Hello! I'm terribly sorry too that I didn't write all last term, but for reasons similar to yours I have been cutting down everything, and correspondence was one of the first to go.

I'm terribly glad you are enjoying Cambridge now – I was sure you would soon. Gosh! I was glad to hear from you – going to write to you very soon. But you haven't joined CUSC<sup>1</sup> yet! Shades of Marx and Engels!! Of course it's sensible from an academic point of view. You will get a first and I shall get a third or a *satisfecit* (*quod avertant dei!*).<sup>2</sup> Still, there are days in which I think every intelligent man and woman has a definite duty to study politics. Next year it may all be too late.

Yes, I've been thinking things over lately, and certain facts are becoming painfully clear. If I chucked politics (which I loathe) and devoted myself to Classics (which I love) I *might* just get a first, and I *might*, not impossibly, get some sort of research or archaeological job, and spend the rest of my life in a museum (which I am beginning to believe is my natural habitat) delving into the origins of Greek religion and pursuing the labyrinthine paths of comparative mythology. That would be – paradise. And I'd write a few poems, and publish a modest little novel now and then (maybe). But you see I can't. I can't go and be happy while the world goes to hell. I saw that dimly when I joined the party, and I see it clearer now. And anyway it all concerns me personally – if England goes fascist (a not improbable contingency if we don't do something damn quick) I shan't be able to write what I please or study what I please. In fact I shall be in a concentration camp or some other even less desirable spot. So I've got to be a political worker. If I can be a great Hellenic scholar as well, so much the better, but I'm not a genius – and I'm even doubting whether I have much talent. My faith in my intellectual ability has been shaken in the last few months. I can feel, I can appreciate art and understand symbolism perhaps better than average, but I haven't a clear mind. You see, Ann, to return to the point, my job is not

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge University Society of Communists.

<sup>2</sup> Satisfactory degree (God forbid!).

to go and dig at Knossos, it is to see that the next generation even hears of Knossos – it is not to write fine poems, it is to work for a world in which man will read and write fine poems. O Christ! If only I'd been born into the world we're trying to build, instead of this damnable place!

Sorry. Excuse all these heroics, but I am in earnest. I thank God that I have the party to direct and discipline my previously vague and ineffective idealism. I feel now that I am doing *some* good, and that life has a purpose and that the history of civilisation is not just an interesting series of unconnected muddles, but a comprehensible development towards the highest stage of society, the Soviet world state. Ann, you *must* see, that this is the only way – it's no use dabbling about on the surface, as a Labour government would do, with always the risk that the Conservatives will come in at the next election and undo all their work. We've got to reorganise society from top to bottom – it's *rotten*, it's inefficient, it's fundamentally unjust, and it must be radically changed, even at the expense of some bloodshed. Remember, a Bolshevik revolution is not a wild emotional business of random bomb-throwing – it's a carefully planned, scientific affair, which occurs at a moment when there will be a minimum of people to be dealt with violently. And the ring of financiers who control every state in the world except one will never, *never* let go their hold unless they are forced to. And better a little violence than the physical, mental and spiritual starvation and depredation of millions of men and women.

On Saturday I went with some nice Oxford reds to the Festival of Music for the People at the Albert Hall. You would have loved it – it was a pageant tracing the relation of music to the class struggle right from feudal times to the present day. In fact a Marxist line on music, which was quite new to me. Parry Jones and Robeson sang – Robeson was, O magnificent, and the house went wild with enthusiasm.<sup>1</sup> Near the end they played the Spanish national anthem, and everyone stood, which pleased us.<sup>2</sup> And at the very end Tom Mann<sup>3</sup> and Fred Coperman<sup>4</sup> and the dean of Canterbury<sup>5</sup> spoke. The dean was a glorious surprise to me – I knew he was that way inclined, but never dreamt he dared to come out so openly. To see him standing there in his red robes, calling us all 'comrades' and talking in a voice like thunder

1 Gwynn Parry Jones (1891–1963), famous Welsh tenor. Paul Robeson (1898–1976), American singer and actor who was a political activist for the civil rights movement.

2 The Spanish Civil War had stirred great passion in Oxford and elsewhere. Many idealistic British students and intellectuals of the time supported the Republican left.

3 A noted British trade unionist.

4 An English volunteer in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War who had commanded the British Battalion.

5 Hewlett Johnson (1874–1966) was an avowed Christian – Marxist and in 1931 became dean of Canterbury, where he acquired his nickname 'The Red Dean of Canterbury' for his support for the Soviet Union and its allies.



about the 'fullness of life in the Soviet Union' was simply wonderful. And God! the house was enthusiastic! A great sense of comradeship with all sorts of people one gets from being a communist.

About Christianity – I'm glad you are finding it good and a help to you. And I hope that it will lead you to what I consider its only logical conclusion – communism. I have finally decided that I cannot accept it as a religion, though of course I accept fully most of the teaching. My religion, if I have one, at the moment is a passionate belief in the beautiful, and a faith in the ultimate triumph of the people, the workers of the world. And in a longing for the civilisation in which every worker shall possess and love beauty lies the mainspring of all my political ideals.

I enjoyed this last term – though perhaps it wasn't such unalloyed heaven as my first term. I saw more of the seamy side of Oxford – and it's certainly a pretty vicious place in some ways. Also I had *much* too much to do and nearly had a nervous breakdown a few weeks before the end of term. However I stayed up a week and worked in the Ashmolean library – a well of silence – and recovered. My emotional life gives me trouble too – I find myself quite astonishingly interested in the opposite sex, and capable of being in love with about six men all at once – which gives rise to complications and distresses. And too many people are in love with me just at present – which though pleasing to my vanity, is also liable to be annoying and difficult.

But on the whole I find life, if not a sweet flower garden with endless vistas of roses, at any rate a very rich, lively, interesting place, and not without hope and promise, though not for me as an individual.

And now Ann dear, please pardon me for talking so loftily about myself for all these pages. I do wish you were here and we could discuss things – will you by any chance be in London this vac? Anyhow, write to me soon and say how all this strikes you.

I am going to Ireland tomorrow for four days – Oh joyous thought! After so long a time in the land of the Sassenachs without one ray of Celtic twilight to relieve the gloom! I am travelling on the Ulster Express, so if you hear the IRA have blown it up, weep a tear for me, won't you.

Now I really must put a period to my talk. The very best of luck for next term, if I don't see you before – and anyway I'll see you at the Old Badmintonian Association.

Ever so much love.

Iris

PS I must just add a note to the effect that Chamberlain must go, and that forthwith because:

- 1.) He is gradually introducing fascism into this country – he takes action without consulting the Cabinet, conveniently ‘forgets’ vitally important proposals, and deliberately misleads the country by withholding information e.g. the Cabinet knew five days before it happened that Czechoslovakia was to be invaded.
- 2.) He has consistently betrayed the working class movement and played into the hands of H and M<sup>1</sup> e.g. in Spain by ‘non-intervention’ and the recognition of F<sup>2</sup> and in Czechoslovakia by the Munich concessions.
- 3.) He is now betraying Poland by refusing to make a definite alliance with USSR and by making vague promises and talking about ‘negotiations’ – i.e. leaving Hitler a free hand.

This is my last piece of paper and I must stop. Good thing too. Love I.

*To Ann Leech, written after Germany had invaded Poland on 1 September and Britain and France had declared war on 3 September.*

4 Eastbourne Road  
9 September 1939

Dear Ann – how is it with you? I hope you are not feeling too sad about the way the world’s going. It’s a beastly miserable business, yes, but maybe we can make something good out of it. After all it *is* a war against fascism, though undertaken for imperialist reasons, and if we play our cards properly we can make it into a war for socialism. But first, we’ve got to get rid of Chamberlain. Our government would infinitely prefer a Hitler-ruled Germany to a free and possibly socialist Germany. But Hitler threatens the British Empire, ergo, Hitler must go. But they will do their level best to prevent the German people from working out their own destiny afterwards. So we *must* get a decent government in this country that will really fight to *free* Germany and not merely to defend British interests.

I shall go back to Oxford. There will be plenty of party work and war work for me to do there. Funny, I thought once I was going to a university to study the classics. It must have been a dream. I’m sorry about my academic career – but really at the moment it seems to me that the only thing to do is to fight for a world in which it will be worthwhile having an academic career at all. O God, how I loathe politics . . . But, believing as I do, I have no choice.

<sup>1</sup> Hitler and Mussolini.

<sup>2</sup> General Franco, leader of the Nationalist military rebellion in the Spanish Civil War.



What will you do? I hope you will go back to Cambridge and carry on. We are so lucky not to have the whole tenor of our lives upset. Also, we've had a fine year of university life. When I think of Maria and Lalage I could weep.

Also, I had a grand finale in the Magpie Tour, when we acted plays all over the Cotswolds for the Oxford Refugee Fund.<sup>viii</sup> Hitler curtailed it by two days, which proved rather disastrous financially, but we had such tremendous fun for our money, and had not a moment to brood over the international situation. Questions of lighting, and props, and interpretation and how many two shilling seats were sold, were of much greater importance.

On the whole, I feel optimistic now – perhaps unduly so. At any rate, full of fire and fighting spirit, thank God. Really, I think any sort of hell, with a fighting chance of heaven beyond, is preferable to the limbo we've been drifting through for the last five years. (Easy words, of course, from a non-combatant.) And if a socialist Germany comes out of this, any sort of sacrifice will have been worth it. But the bitterest fight will be at home . . .

Do write and tell me how you are feeling and what you are doing. And will you ever be in London? I shall be here until I go up (I refer to my return to Oxford, not to a possible air raid) and I'm just longing to see you and talk and talk and talk.

Goodbye my dear, I wish you all possible peace of mind. Love Iris.

*To Margaret Orpen, Murdoch's school friend at Badminton, who was unhappy in love and also missing her brother, a British Army cadet being trained at Dartford.*

4 Eastbourne Road.  
20 September 1939

My dear – I'm terribly sorry – I do hope you are feeling happier now than you were when you wrote that letter. After all we are young – and we aren't really going to be cheated. We shall have our chances surely, if not to be happy, at any rate to live, to experience, to do – and life even at its most hellish can still be interesting. Yet I do cherish a possibly irrational belief that there *is* a good time coming.

But forgive me for this vague optimism – I know you have such great reason to be unhappy, and my God I wish I could do something for you – I must see you when you come to London – I shall be here probably till mid October.

I don't know whether you have these two books or whether they interest

you or whether they will cheer you up at all – I hope they may. My apologies that they aren't new.<sup>1</sup>

I'll see you soon.

Meanwhile, look up, dear lass.

Love

Iris

*To David Hicks, who had abandoned his Diploma of Education course in order to work for the British Council in Egypt.*

Somerville College

29 April 1940

Dear David,

My greetings. How is it with you? I think of you decorating the skyline on a camel and taking your well-earned siesta in the shade of a pyramid. Or is Egypt not romantic? Yes, I know. I had an aunt once who used to teach the young Egyptians to love God. What do you teach them? I hope it's something with an equally good moral. And altogether, how wags the world in your region of it?

You and your pyramids seem almost as fabulous and mythical to me as Oxford and I must seem to you now. I expect an act of faith is necessary to persuade yourself you ever were here. (But you were, I remember you quite distinctly.)

Everything here seems curiously the same – and yet I don't know why it should, for every month batches of men fade away into khaki, and Balliol is full of glossy civil servants from Whitehall. Worcester is still largely academic – I go there twice a week to hear Pickard-Cambridge<sup>2</sup> talking about moral philosophy. Lectures and all the clubs proceed as before, and the only difference it all makes to me is that I have ten times as much organisational work to do as I would normally, owing to the increasing man-shortage.

I have just done Mods, and got the distinguished second which you once so kindly predicted for me. (Damn you. I held that against you for a long time. I suppose it would be unreasonable to bear the grudge any longer) and now I am doing Greats. The philosophy is not as philosophical as one would wish, but the ancient history is very ancient (especially in the matter of the dons appertaining thereto) and I find them both pretty good mental exercise.

<sup>1</sup> A note about these books at the end of this letter, possibly written later by Margaret Lintott (née Orpen) reads, 'Donne's love poems; *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* translated by Fitzgerald'.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Wallace Pickard-Cambridge (1873–1952), an authority on the theatre of ancient Greece.

The *personelle* of the university has changed tremendously. Freeling and Lucy<sup>1</sup> are vanished as though they had never been. Carol<sup>2</sup> I hear of spasmodically achieving great things in the Ministry of Economic Warfare. A few old-timers like Jack Dawes and Denis Healey<sup>3</sup> are still here and active. Peter Shinnie is in the air force and getting incredibly tough – others of them are in the artillery and fleet air arm. None of the women whom you knew, I'm glad to say, has joined the ATS.<sup>4</sup>

Myself, I am incredibly busy this term with committees [. . .] and with acting. You see I have achieved one of my ambitions, to play the chorus leader in *Murder in the Cathedral*.<sup>5</sup> Christ Church dramatic society is doing it and our stage is the cloister quad at Christ Church with the cathedral as a backcloth. Also I am bringing out a revised version – an *editio maior*<sup>6</sup> rather – of your song sheet. (Remember?)

The world – yes. It's a pretty interesting and fast-moving little world these days. There's a lot to be depressed about certainly, but I can't say I feel very fundamentally downhearted. In fact I've never felt so full of hope and new life as I do now. We're not doing so badly.

Meanwhile this place is raving wild with spring. I met a calf this morning that looked like Michelangelo's Moses<sup>7</sup> – and the calf's mother was like Epstein's Madonna.<sup>8</sup> I won't tell you about the cherry trees or how green the Cherwell banks are, or you'll be homesick. How homesick are you? Don't be too. Though indeed there's nothing much wrong with the flora and fauna. As I think Browning observed.<sup>9</sup>

I hope very much life isn't boring or unhappy or lonely or any of the things it shouldn't be but so often is. How many English people are there with you? Are they interesting? How hard do you work? What is the work like? Do you still paint? Have you written anything? I tell you one thing you

1 Lucy Klatschko, a half-Latvian and Jewish senior scholar, had read modern languages at Somerville between 1936 and 1939. She was later to become Sister Marian.

2 Carol Stewart, an Oxford contemporary two years older than Murdoch, who later translated Canetti's *Masse und Macht* into English with the title *Crowds and Power*. On marrying, she became Carol Graham-Harrison.

3 Denis Healey (1917–), who was reading Greats at Balliol, met Murdoch through the Communist Party but left it in the summer of 1940 when France fell to the Germans. Murdoch read his copy of Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*, a book that influenced her considerably.

4 The Auxiliary Territorial Service, formed in September 1938, was the women's branch of the British Army.

5 This production of T. S. Eliot's play at Oxford in 1940 allowed male and female students to act together for the first time; previously dons' wives had acted the female roles.

6 A jocular reference – 'major edition'.

7 A sculpture that depicts Moses with horns on his head.

8 Jacob Epstein's *Madonna and Child* (1927).

9 Oblique reference to Robert Browning's poem 'Home Thoughts, from Abroad' which opens 'Oh, to be in England / Now that April's there'.

might write, and that's a letter to me, if you feel like it, and if you have anything of note to say about a) Egypt, b) David.

The best of luck to you.

Love

Iris

PS John Willett,<sup>1</sup> from whom I got your address, sends his love and says he misses you a lot – but as he said all this some time ago I expect he has conveyed it himself by now.

I

*To Eduard Fraenkel, professor of Latin at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, whose famous seminars on Aeschylus's Agamemnon Murdoch had been attending and from whom she was – unusually for an undergraduate – also receiving private tuition. The Ministry of Health (Murdoch's father's employer at this time) relocated to Blackpool in 1939, necessitating her parents' move. They lived in Cavendish Road, Blackpool in 1940 and then in Waller Avenue, Blackpool from 1941, returning to London after the war.<sup>ix</sup>*

196 Cavendish Road  
Bispham  
Blackpool  
[October 1940]

Dear Professor Fraenkel,

Greetings. How is it with you? I hope you're having a very peaceful and unanxious vacation. As for me, my exile will produce no *tristitia*<sup>2</sup> after all – I left London for here about a month ago, and haven't regretted it yet for a moment. Never before have I been able to come out of my front door and see *mountains* – I can't see them every day, but when it's clear there are the sharp Lake District peaks in the North. And I love the wideness and freedom of the land here so different from the closeness of London – I'm so used to having my horizon 300 yards off.

There *are* crowds of people, yes, and they all talk like Gracie Fields<sup>3</sup> and rush madly from one variety show to another – but they have a ballet-like quality of gaiety and colour and one can't help liking them. Anyway they

1 John Willett (1917–2002) read PPE at Christ Church 1936–9, and went on to translate and publish on the work of Bertold Brecht. He managed the stage lighting for *It Can Happen Here*.

2 Sadness, melancholy.

3 The actress, singer and comedienne Gracie Fields (1898–1979) was born over a fish and chip shop in Rochdale, Lancashire.

stay in the centre of the town, and we live a little way out. No one bathes – they all seem quite oblivious of the sea, though they often sit on the sands just to keep up appearances – so from here I can bathe or walk for miles along the shore and hardly meet anyone. And on a windy sunny blue and white day full of seagulls and wave crests that is well worth doing. I've also made several cycling expeditions to the Pennines, some fifteen or twenty miles off, and had days full of heather and butterflies and no people.

One of the best things about being here is that I am quite cut off from the endless acquaintances who used to be always passing through London and calling on me. I have time to read, thank God. I've almost finished *The Republic*. I find Plato at times a vile casuist, and almost always a reactionary. But he does write exquisite Greek. (Don't take this for my verdict on *The Republic*! But he does make me very angry now and then.) I've read Farrington's *Science and Politics* which you were so harsh on last term. I see the reasons for your hard opinions and I agree he does in many cases rush at his conclusions without a satisfying array of evidence. But in general I think (in all humility) that his view of the situation deserves to be considered. His remarks on Lucretius particularly seem to me to be pretty sane. And frankly, after being brought up in an atmosphere of mystical and irrational adoration of Plato, I found him refreshing. I do want to think honestly and clearly about this period and come to some coherent conclusions and I'm not at all sure I'm prepared to accept a lot of the things that are taken for granted by the historians. But I realise that with the small quantity of knowledge I possess at present I ought to be keeping my mouth shut, and that I have an obligation to reserve judgement till after the fullest consideration of the evidence – which will take a long time. So, enough!

My form of National Service at present (though I doubt if Churchill would appreciate it) is running a Left Book Club<sup>1</sup> group (on strictly Marxist lines) and selling the *Daily Worker*<sup>2</sup> in the street. But don't worry, as I don't 'waste' a great deal of time on these activities. I've met a lot of fine people, for which I am chiefly thankful. Altogether my days are full to the brim and I have little time to reflect on what a miserable world it is. I have various friends in internment camps for whom I feel a dull misery whenever I think of them – and others, far worse . . . Happiness can only be reckoned in individuals now. Living this easy pleasant life I have a perpetual sense of guilt and desire to hurt myself or something. I feel myself a rather opinionated

1 Presumably in imitation of the Left Book Club, a venture founded in the UK in May 1936, set up by Stafford Cripps, Victor Gollancz and John Strachey in order to revitalise and educate the British left. The club's aim was to encourage the struggle for peace and the fight against fascism; it closed in 1948.

2 The *Daily Worker* newspaper, the voice of the Communist Party of Great Britain, was founded in 1930. It was renamed the *Morning Star* in 1966.

fool with very little knowledge of suffering and life – (I stick to the opinions nevertheless!) and I wish for a time of trial and a chance to strip my spirit to its essentials. One wish at any rate which is sure to come true in an age like this.

Forgive this soliloquising letter so full of me. I hope you and all your family are well and happy – as happy as may be.

Best wishes to you for the rest of the vacation. I hope there will be a next term.

Yours affectionately

Iris

*To Frank Thompson, a fellow student at Oxford. He first saw Murdoch in November 1938 at a political meeting and was attracted to her, but did not manage to speak to her until the following term. A gifted poet and an intense idealist, he left New College in 1939, where he had been reading Mods and Greats, to volunteer for the army. On becoming a member of both 'Phantom', a small communications intelligence unit, later the Special Operations Executive (SOE), he served in North Africa, Syria, Iraq, Sicily, Serbia and Bulgaria. He was posted to the Middle East in March 1941 and there contracted septicaemia, spending two months in hospital in Damascus; by November 1941 he was back in Cairo. Murdoch's pacifism had strengthened after she joined the Communist Party in 1938; however, by the time she wrote this letter she could see the necessity for military action in Europe.<sup>x</sup>*

9 Waller Avenue  
Bispham  
Blackpool  
24 December 1941

Frank Me darlin'

It is Christmas eve and I in Blackpool. There is the hell of a wind blowing over the house and I feel a bit withered away already. I have just received a box of expensive Turkish cigarettes from Michael.<sup>1</sup> Dear old Michael. A lost soul too. (The trouble is, I have been reading Virginia Woolf, the darling dangerous woman, and am in a state of extremely nervous self-consciousness. The most selfish of all states to be in.)

The most important thing of course is that the Russians are winning at last thank God.<sup>2</sup> May they go on winning. I feel ashamed of my defeatist

<sup>1</sup> M. R. D. Foot (1919–2012), a school friend of Frank's from Winchester College who was reading PPE at New College, Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> Nazi Germany had invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941.



mood of a month ago – then it seemed that nothing could halt the Germans this side of Moscow – now I feel that nothing can halt the Russians this side of Berlin. An equally false optimism of course. The war begins to affect me emotionally far more than it did – possibly because my watertight rationalism has broken down. It's all damn complex and confusing. I don't have a clear line on it any more. I feel myself approaching the state of ἀπορία<sup>1</sup> which I imagined only Liberals and the *New Statesman* suffered from – it couldn't happen to me, this pathetic confusion and suspension of judgement. But it has. Actually in a way I'm quite pleased, because such a condition contrasts favourably with the suspension of thought which preceded it. And of course the foundations are as sound as ever. It's only a lot of the fancy superstructure that's been blown away.

Last term was good. I got face to face with my work for the first time since Mods – and the results weren't too depressing. I was beginning to be afraid that my brain had decomposed in the interim. It's too late I'm afraid as far as Schools<sup>2</sup> is concerned – but I've got a lot of satisfaction out of doing philosophy and getting my mind clear on one or two questions. This man MacKinnon<sup>3</sup> is a jewel, it's bucked me up a lot meeting him. He's a moral being as well as a good philosopher. I had almost given up thinking of people and actions in terms of value – meeting him has made it a significant way of thinking again. (Obscure. Sorry.)

Soon my charming American lassie and her kid (now two years old) are coming to stay. That will be good. I'm feeling a bit vampirish and want to have my friends around. Her husband is in the ME<sup>4</sup> (in artillery – one William Holland, in case you ever meet him). She's upset about her country too. I'm afraid I can't muster much emotion about the Philippines<sup>5</sup> – except that it's bloody that all these people are killing each other – but that's probably because I'm no strategist.

What is important is whether you are in on this Libyan business.<sup>6</sup> It's very hard, sitting here and looking out at the cabbages and the semi-detached villas, to imagine you in a war – killing people maybe – you and Leo and

1 Aporia: doubt, perplexity.

2 Final examinations.

3 Donald MacKinnon (1913–1994), Murdoch's philosophy tutor at Oxford; like Eduard Fraenkel, he was a charismatic, intellectually demanding individual and greatly influenced Murdoch. Many years later, criticising Sartre's introduction to a work by Jean Genet, Murdoch described it as 'the sort of thing I would throw back at a clever and favourite pupil with a few sharp words. "Attractive slapdash stuff" as MacKinnon said to me, tossing my essay on the table and searing my soul, sometime back in 1941'. (Letter to Brigid Brophy postmarked 21 March 1965.)

4 Military Engineers.

5 The Philippines were invaded by Japan between December 1941 and May 1942.

6 The Allies' Western Desert Campaign in what is now south-east Libya.

Hal<sup>1</sup> – I can't imagine it at all. Whereas I *can* imagine you at the Coptic monastery, swimming in the cistern. God. I do feel bloody, sitting here writing self-conscious letters.

I wish June were over and I were (even) in the ATS. I don't care how tough the job is so long as I can use what mind I have. The primrose path is getting me down a bit. It's unsettling looking forward into a blank, though. A sort of queer interregnum has set in. I feel I've outgrown my old personality and not yet acquired a new one. I guess I shan't get a new one till after June. Then I shall learn some things.

I've read Gorki's *Mother* – yes a darling book. My Czech lassie is more like Sonya than anything I've ever met. As for being simple and warm-hearted – fine, grand – but unfortunately we aren't peasants with a straightforward line on life, we're just bemused intellectual misfits – or at least I am. I think. I'll know for certain after June and I'll tell you.

I'm reading Mallarmé who suits my mood again – exotic, restless, obscure. He passes me, *laissant toujours de ses mains mal fermées / Neiger de blancs bouquets d'étoiles parfumées*.<sup>2</sup> But Gorki is better. Of course – if only one could and were. I must go to America after the war.

I'm writing a little poetry again. It has its moments. I hope you are safe, dear Frank. Good luck.

Love I

1 Leo Pliatzky was awarded a first in Classical Mods at Corpus Christi, Oxford in 1939. He then served with the Royal Army Ordnance Corps and the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers for the next five years. His friend, Hal Lidderdale, read Greats at Magdalen College, Oxford before joining the Royal Scots Fusiliers.

2 From an early poem entitled 'Apparitions' (1862), in which the poet's feelings for his beloved evoke memories of his mother who 'would hover above me sprinkling from her gentle hands / Snow-white clusters of perfumed stars'.