

Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie



Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie:  
The Correspondence between Iris Murdoch  
and Brian Medlin  
1976-1995

Edited by

Gillian Dooley and Graham Nerlich

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

---

**P U B L I S H I N G**

Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie:  
The Correspondence between Iris Murdoch and Brian Medlin 1976-1995,  
Edited by Gillian Dooley and Graham Nerlich

This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2014 by Gillian Dooley, Graham Nerlich and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-5544-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5544-0

# CONTENTS

List of Illustrations .....	vii
Introduction .....	ix
Personal Reminiscences of Brian Medlin.....	xv
Editors' Note .....	xxi
Acknowledgements .....	xxiii
The Letters.....	1
Iris Murdoch's Review of <i>Human Nature, Human Survival</i> by Brian Medlin .....	199
Endnotes .....	209
Bibliography.....	215
Index.....	219



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Iris Murdoch and John Bayley at Cedar Lodge, Steeple Aston

Brian Medlin in the arms of the South Australian Police, 1970s

Iris Murdoch in London 1988

Iris Murdoch and John Bayley in London 1988

Facsimile: Card from Iris Murdoch to Brian Medlin [Letter 13, 1989]

Facsimile: Iris Murdoch to Brian Medlin [Letter 22, 1991]

Book launch at Flinders University, 1992.

Brian Medlin with Syd Harrex, Flinders University, 1992

Christine Vick in the Wirra in her Prospect garden

Brian Medlin with 'Truth' statuette given to him in 1970 by a supporter

The house in Hamilton Road, North Oxford, where Iris Murdoch and John Bayley lived from 1986 to 1989

Iris Murdoch and John Bayley in Japan in 1995

Brian Medlin picnicking on McKenzie Creek, Victoria.

Brian Medlin just before his death in 2004



## INTRODUCTION

Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) visited Australia just once, in 1967, on a British Council trip with her husband, John Bayley. Her host in Adelaide was philosopher Brian Medlin (1927-2005), whom she had met six years earlier when he was a Research Fellow with Bayley at New College, Oxford. Recalling that trip more than forty years later, Bayley told me that their time in Adelaide with Brian was happier and more successful than their sojourns elsewhere in Australia.<sup>1</sup>

After that visit, they never met again. Plans for Medlin to visit England never came off, and despite all her travels, Murdoch never came so far south again. This correspondence bears witness to a friendship between them which nevertheless continued for more thirty years, until she was claimed by the “very, very bad, quiet place” that is Alzheimer’s Disease.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of Murdoch’s visit to Adelaide, Medlin had just been appointed Professor of Philosophy at the newly-founded Flinders University, ten kilometres south of the city of Adelaide, where he was to remain, more or less uneasily, until his retirement in 1988. He was impatient with bureaucracy and one of his worst terms of abuse was “vice-chancellor.” During the 1970s, he had been a leader of the campaign against the war in Vietnam and a high-profile player in the radical student protests which caused much division in the University, including a lengthy occupation of the Registry building in 1974.

Murdoch was a dedicated and prolific correspondent. Many collections of her letters survive, and some are now held in the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies at Kingston University. However, she “habitually destroyed all letters she received,”<sup>3</sup> so although she corresponded with dozens of people and “spent up to four hours a day writing letters,”<sup>4</sup> it is

---

<sup>1</sup> John Bayley, pers. comm., Oxford, 8 October 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Coles, “The Joanna Coles Interview: Duet in Perfect Harmony,” *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) p. 246.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Rowe, “Those Lives Observed: The Self and the ‘Other’ in Iris Murdoch’s Letters,” *Life Writing: The Spirit of the Age and the State of the Art* ed. Meg Jensen and Jane Jordan (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009) p. 212n(3).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Conradi, “On Iris Murdoch’s Pen-friendships,” *Iris Murdoch News Letter* 19 (Autumn 2006) p. 21.

both rare and fortunate that many of Brian Medlin's letters to Iris Murdoch survive, in electronic copies that he kept. He was an early adopter of word processing and was prescient enough to save his files and maintain them so that when his papers were donated to Flinders University Library in 2008, some three years after his death, Microsoft Word files of letters written as far back as 1986 were included on CD ROM.

The earliest letters from Murdoch apparently date from 1976 and 1977 (she rarely included the year of writing on her letters, and sometimes there is no date at all). In these early letters she refers to letters from Medlin, but these do not survive. Then there is a gap of about nine years before contact is re-established. In a letter of May 1986 from Murdoch, she thanks Medlin for his letter, and in his response he reproaches himself "for having lost contact." He certainly made up for his neglect over the next six or seven years, pouring about 60,000 words into the correspondence. Some of these words were copied and pasted into the letters from elsewhere: letters to other friends and colleagues, articles, talks or reviews he wanted to share with her. But much of it was written especially for her. In particular, there is an immensely long letter of almost 28,000 words, written over the course of a year, between May 1988 and May 1989, recounting trips into the Australian bush, with explanations of Australian flora and fauna and natural history in general, quotations from bush ballads and anecdotes about his travels with his partner, Christine Vick.

For Murdoch's part, she writes with affection, but not at such length. A recurring theme in her letters is their divergent political beliefs, which she seems keen on clarifying. In the first letter in the collection, from July 1976, she notes that "we might ... differ on general principles. I am increasingly hostile to the extreme left in Europe. ... I wonder if we agree—or do you want an eastern Europe style socialist state. ... Are you a 'Marxist'? What are you, exactly, politically, if that isn't a silly question? Anarchist? Not Stalinist obviously. Maoist? Or—?" In 1986, she asks again, and in the first of his letters included here he replies, "I am a passionate, but not a bigotted socialist. Jeeze, if you ruled out people who were politically shonky, you wouldn't have any friends at all." Once again, in 1991, she asks, "How much Marxism is still with you I wonder. ... I suspect we might disagree about art ... I expect I am by your standards bourgeois." His response:

I wouldn't be surprised if I were to find your views on art "Bourgeois." Some of the best views abroad are. And what Marxism can be made to tell us about art, in so far as it is correct, is at least woefully incomplete.

They bandy the word backwards and forwards for a while, until she says, in 1992: “My heart is with you—never mind about the bourgeoisie,” and he replies, “though I *do* mind about the bourgeoisie—mind very much too—and though you are doubtless culturally and ideologically deprived in not being a child of the working class, and though you are certainly culturally intimidating to a child of the working class, my heart is with you. So there!”

They compare notes about writing. Medlin wrote stories and poems as well as philosophy, but published little. He sent some of his work to Murdoch and she was warmly encouraging, offering to show his stories, written under the name Timothy Tregonning, to her publisher. Although he agreed, nothing seems to have come of it. She also talks about her own writing, though not in any great detail. When beginning the novel that became *The Message to the Planet* she wrote,

It’s an uncomfortable time starting to invent the new one—a lot of bad ideas rush in, & have to [be] thrown out (indeed destroyed).

He, in turn, was deeply appreciative of her novels, writing an enthusiastic critique of *The Book and the Brotherhood*, and concluding,

I have got so much from your novels, especially in recent years, that they have become, like Yeats’ close companions, a portion of my life and mind, as it were. I am deeply your debtor, mate. I love you lots, Iris.

Later, during the writing of *The Green Knight*, she asks him for some guidance in writing dialogue for an Australian character. This produces one of the most amusing passages in the letters. Medlin is in his element, expounding at length the variations on the word and concept “bastard,” and rounding the discussion off with, “As for ‘a really good guy’, the national experience is so poor in examples that we haven’t developed any language to accommodate them.” As I have argued elsewhere, his advice seems to have had little effect on Murdoch’s depiction of Australia and Australians.<sup>5</sup> Despite Medlin’s insistence to the contrary, she seemed content to idealise the country as an untouched wilderness, full of unique and remarkable wildlife and individuals, remote from the degenerate messiness of European politics and ideas.

---

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of this linguistic exchange, see Gillian Dooley, “‘You are my Australia’: Brian Medlin’s Contribution to Iris Murdoch’s Concept of Australia in *The Green Knight*,” *Antipodes* 25: 2 (December 2011) pp. 157-162.

They both loved singing. Murdoch recalls hearing Brian sing at New College, and laments that “People don’t sing much in Oxford now. Except for the Warden of New College who is a talented pianist, and sings a lot of Cole Porter etc. if encouraged—and even if not.” Medlin was not keen on Cole Porter: he loved Australian bush ballads, constantly quoting their laconic lyrics, but in the later letters complains of being unable to sing any more. In 1991 he was diagnosed with “a demyelinating peripheral neuropathy. There! That’s certainly better than ontological relativism!” The neuropathy made singing and even speaking progressively difficult, and threatened to curtail his bushwalking and the active physical life he enjoyed. Murdoch’s own health was clearly failing as the correspondence draws to a close. She often complains of exhaustion, though well into the 1990s she was still travelling overseas and dutifully, if reluctantly, making speeches when asked. The final letters are heartbreakingly simple: “Dearest Brian, I wish I had written to you long ago now—how was this? I cannot feel the time.” This brief note, undated, has a postscript: “Also; love, mortality and the meaning of life.” And with this, the correspondence is at an end.

There are more intimate and sensational letters from Iris Murdoch now available, including her wartime letters and diaries,<sup>6</sup> letters from the 1960s to a young friend, David Morgan,<sup>7</sup> both published in 2010, and other letter collections held in the Iris Murdoch Archive at Kingston University. The correspondence with Medlin is the record not of a passionate entanglement but a deeply affectionate relationship between two highly intelligent, articulate and philosophically sophisticated beings. Medlin confides in her many of the everyday woes of his work and family life, and shares with her his passion for the Australian natural world and his apprehension of the threat of its imminent destruction, for the unique culture he sees being weakened by encroaching Americanisation, for cricket, and for his friends and family. She is sympathetic and encouraging, and disarmingly modest, especially about her philosophy, but offers few personal confidences in return. The most striking proof of her regard for Medlin, perhaps, comes not in the letters so much as in the review she wrote, at his request, of his monograph *Human Nature, Human Survival* (1992). The letters written at the time show how difficult she was finding this task, and record Medlin’s astonishment when she sent not the 800 words she had been asked for, but a handwritten review of 4000 words. Medlin cut it down, scrupulously

---

<sup>6</sup> Iris Murdoch, *A Writer at War: Letters and Diaries 1939-1945* edited and introduced by Peter J. Conradi (London: Short Books, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> David Morgan, *With Love and Rage: A Friendship with Iris Murdoch* (Kingston: Kingston University Press, 2010).

retaining all her disagreements with his argument, to 1000 words before it was published in the *Age* newspaper in February 1993. Her complete text, thoughtful, sympathetic but by no means uncritical, is reproduced here for the first time.

*Gillian Dooley*



## PERSONAL REMINISCENCES OF BRIAN MEDLIN

Brian Medlin was a philosopher, activist, poet and cultural intellectual. These letters to Iris Murdoch are written during his later life in Adelaide. He was educated here and came back to the city as Professor of Philosophy at Flinders University in 1967. He was a prominent identity in the city. He was a remarkable person of prodigious and varied abilities.

I met Brian in 1950 or thereabouts when we were students together in philosophy and English literature at the University of Adelaide. Earlier, we had been at the same secondary school (Adelaide Technical High School). He taught there briefly when I was a schoolboy; I knew of him, although we never met there. I had the good luck to be close mates with him when we were young and I was foolish. We first met each other at parties and bars.

I was 19 and he was 21 or so. Two things drew us together: philosophy and literature—ponderous as that sounds for something that was huge fun for us both. I was an amateur actor, keen on reading poetry aloud; he wrote it and went to the theatre. A bit later, theatre put me in touch with Charles Jury<sup>1</sup> so I joined a small circle that met to drink at the South Australian Hotel on Saturday afternoons. Brian, Charles and John Bray<sup>2</sup> were among them. Outside the pub, Charles was hugely hospitable to us; we revelled in it. As students we also often met walking to classes and, with others, too, deviated to the Richmond bar instead. For me it was an explosive extracurricular education. We were both invited to join the Jury “Poetry”—a more sober group, but not at all solemn. We both belonged to the Poetry when he died. I still do.

---

<sup>1</sup> C.R. Jury (1893-1958) poet and Jury professor of English Language and Literature, University of Adelaide. Medlin and Nerlich were among his students in the same years. He quickly saw Medlin’s outstanding abilities and they became very close friends.

<sup>2</sup> The Hon. J.J. Bray AC, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of South Australia, 1967-78, Deputy Lieutenant Governor of the State and Chancellor of the University of Adelaide 1968-78. He was Medlin’s closest friend in the period of the letters and is mentioned in several of them.

I know Brian's early poetry best—some of it, I think, never revised or published. Sometimes I'd hear him read it with the ink barely dry on the page. I still have by heart his "Dedication"<sup>3</sup> and "For Margaret" about his dead sister. They were fine, contrasting poems each magical to me. I admire them as much as anything he wrote. In an early unrevised poem about himself—there may have been only handwritten copies—he wrote, partly in jest, "I, God's beloved larrikin ...". That note is often struck in the letters. It sat easily beside more distinguished themes.

He was born in Rorrorroo, a small country town in the mid North of the state. Some of that life appeared in his Tregonning stories. He told me that, as a child, he often used to strike out into the country alone, with a rifle and a swag to live off what he could find, for many days at a time. His experiences in the far north of the country soon after he left school—droving, horse breaking and the like—left strong, enduringly vivid impressions. That shows in the imagery of the Dedication poem. He loved the country, its toughness, challenge and beauty. The letters are full of that love.

We met often in the years to 1956 when I left Adelaide for postgraduate studies at Oxford. He followed that route in 1958, but we saw little of each other in Britain. I came back to Australia to teach at the University of Sydney in 1962 and Brian returned to Brisbane later in that decade. We swapped letters occasionally and met at conferences or passing through. I returned to Adelaide in 1974, where Brian then occupied the chair of philosophy at Flinders University. That department, as a body, had pursued a committed opposition to the war in Vietnam and remained a radical politicised group. I sympathised much with the former, far less with the latter, aim. We swapped letters and I saw him and Christine from time to time at their Prospect home and elsewhere. I last saw him at what might be called an advance wake. All of us knew he was dying but it was an evening of fun, reminiscence and celebration.

Brian saw philosophy as the deepest study aimed at moral and political thought and practice. He took a broad, generous view of its scope. He told me that the problems we got so excited about as students now seemed to him empty and trivial. I strongly disagreed while conceding that their role in practice was sometimes remote. The early days were exciting for me; the challenges to reason, both for and against it, rattled my cage, blew my mind. They still do. They were and are bedrock. They aren't for everyone,

---

<sup>3</sup> Published in *Meanjin* 11, no. 4 (Summer 1952), p. 352.

but for those with the philosophical gene (as David Stove<sup>4</sup> used to call it) they remain spellbinding and, for me, at the core. Brian thought me hide- (or perhaps ivory tower-) bound, a captive of bourgeois attitudes. I am both a sceptic and a pessimist about political theory and action. For all its grievous faults, western society is better than others that have endured. I have a deep mistrust of the upshot of revolutions and little hope about humanity's future. I feared that his students were more likely to focus on changing their world than on understanding it. I responded to his attitude to me by suggesting that he might have sold his philosopher's birthright for a pot of message. Such unkind thoughts troubled Brian not at all; his of me, somewhat. I have no doubt about the importance of what he worked on in the main period of the letters.

Brian told Murdoch that he *meant* his "Dedication" poem and he surely pursued that commitment. More than anyone else I have known he not merely lived his life but *led* it—made it an object to be considered, constantly appraised and examined, aimed at realising to the best of his abilities, what he valued most. That was the betterment of human life—its progress toward more generous, egalitarian, cultivated, considerate and caring attitudes, practices and institutions as regards both people and their environments. He was the outstanding figure here in the Moratorium protests against this country's involvement in the Vietnam War. He never sought to be its leader. Indeed he worked assiduously to promote discussion, debate and an egalitarian sharing of the direction of the movement. Perhaps his greatest achievement was himself, and the way he lived. It was a work of high moral art, done without posturing, artifice or contrivance. Donald Brook<sup>5</sup> once said to me "Brian tries harder than the rest of us to do what he thinks is right." That's surely true. From so formidable a trier as Donald, it's distinguished praise. He strove for what I'd call called nobility—in a sense that he might not have rubbished: he carried it with a light, ironical touch. All this shows in his letters.

I've been lucky to have many bright people as friends, but no one's company has ever bettered Brian's. So vivid, so intelligent, such wonderful style, often affectionate, often abrasive, always flying high—a distinguished larrikin, too. His talk was superbly witty, amazingly trenchant and imaginative, full of novelty and wonderful jokes. People talk, often glibly I think, of passionate commitment and concern. You couldn't miss Brian's passion. His eagerness for truth, his concentrated

---

<sup>4</sup> David Stove (1927-94) was a philosopher of science at the University of Sydney. He was a witty and accomplished thinker and stylist. Medlin calls him "my wonderful indispensable enemy."

<sup>55</sup> Donald Brook was formerly the Professor of Visual Art at Flinders University.

setting of himself to judge by what really was there in the world, independently of his own hopes and fears—that’s *passionate* detachment, *passionate* objectivity. On the trail of truth he was keen as a Spartan hound, as Plato says of Socrates. None of it blinded him to its ironies. His affection could be the soul of tenderness. (See his funeral address for Bill Ivey.) The dynamics of his talk made you catch your breath. Such a range of information, analytic power and penetration at his fingertips all the time—just astonishing! I won’t meet anyone like him again. It’s been a privilege.

He was brave and bold. Some letters suggest more—daring and delight in dangerous challenges. He was strongly committed to non-violent civil disobedience. He was arrested in a Moratorium rally and later, briefly, jailed. A photo appeared in the *Advertiser* of Brian in the grasp of police, shouting “No violence” to his followers—daring enough. He had much to do with the police at this time, with some of whom there was mutual liking and respect.

Unsentimental love is the broad current of this correspondence, much of it impersonal. His affection and admiration for Murdoch pervades the letters. So does his love for Christine, his family and for his many mates. But the dominant, detailed and pervasive theme of the correspondence is his love of Australia, for the land, its fauna and flora, and for a main aspect of its culture, the culture of the bush and for the styles of personality and character he found there. The letters are often focussed, detailed, objective miniatures, a kind of album of Australia; that is their overarching aim and achievement. It is a celebration of all this by one who sees it as passing. He observes and records this in fine detail and with a persistent accuracy and fidelity that is surely loving. The passion lies in the objectivity, the care to set things down just as he sees them, in a truthful, generous unindulgent gaze. The correspondence is, thus, a remarkable, perhaps a unique, document of our country.

Murdoch applauded Medlin’s view that “philosophy is about the texture of human life. Philosophy is about getting life right and making life right.” Very few letters contain “slabs of philosophical argument” but they vividly display the texture of Medlin’s life and how he lived this part of it.

Some reproachful letters late in the correspondence are addressed to, or mention, me. Candour prompts me as a co-editor of this volume to say something about two matters in them.

On Medlin’s retirement I was appointed a member of The Committee of Review of the Philosophy Department and of Medlin’s tenure as its Chairperson. I saw this as a review of his custodianship of the Department

rather than about his capacities as a teacher and researcher. Since we disagreed about this more than I think Brian realised, I did not welcome the appointment. Had it been a review of his capacities we would have had little to disagree about. Murdoch's review of his *Human Nature, Human Survival* reflects her judgement of his abilities and of the quality of that work. It is a very perceptive account of these matters and in no way overestimates his achievement.

The Review Committee report was a painful issue for us both. Confidentiality forbids my discussing its processes. I was by no means an eager member. Experiences of politicised teaching in Sydney when I was there in 1973 convinced me that the damage done locally to universities was by no means matched by gains on the national political level, although the sorry days that have followed are not explained by it. I sometimes supported Brian's role at Flinders against internal attacks on him there. My political scepticism—pessimism had made me less than enthusiastic. I was unhappy at some achievements he was proud of. I think they eventually fostered the growth of postmodernism and what passes for its philosophy. We equally deplored its relativism and subjectivism. I was surprised and dismayed by how important the review was for him, given his rather dim view of Flinders and of academic committee processes and their values. I was grieved—still am grieved—at having played a part in his strong disappointment. Perhaps his view of my role was just. But I was never strongly sympathetic with what he saw as his achievements there.

Then there is the “slab of philosophical argument” directed at me. The theory of personal omnipotence that he ascribes to me left me bewildered at the time. He did not quote anything that I wrote. It is obviously an untenable theory and he certainly showed that it is. I am now confident that he refers to my outline of a different theory prominent in Hegel's philosophy. Since it is rather close to views held by Marx and, indeed, by Brian himself, it may be useful to sketch them.

For a time I was briefly but keenly interested in Hegel's philosophy although never a disciple of it. Crudely, Hegel was a pantheist who saw a divinity in human conscious life, in its transformation of the world through thought and action, and its progressing unity with that world. This was Spirit or God—God as immanent in human life. Spirit fully realises itself and comes to an identity with the world when it fully understands it and thereby fully controls it. Spirit as God cannot fail to complete this project and realise itself. This constitutes its omnipotence and omniscience. The process is dialectical, Spirit resolving contradictions in a series of higher syntheses although with partial success since each breeds a further contradiction. Finally History, i.e. Spirit's journey, does come to an end,

arriving at the final perfect synthesis. The modern mind boggles at this but many of the details of the argument are thoroughly arresting and insightful. It is by far the most imaginative and interesting philosophy of religion. But I am no less opposed to religions than Brian was.

A famous theme in Marx springs from this. He writes: "Therefore, mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve ..." The thought that humankind *can* always solve the problems it sets itself is startling. It does not follow from Marx's version that it *will* solve them. But it does state a kind of omnipotence. Of course neither of these theories states nor suggests that individuals might be omnipotent.

Brian himself states a not dissimilar view of life in one of his poems which I had not read at the time in question:

... for I have held,  
For half my life, hard to the faith  
That a clear mind can do something with  
Any known phenomenon,  
And everything that can be done  
Will be done, if only we're able  
To render the world intelligible.  
In this faith I have written well  
And for it lost the clumsy skill  
Of setting down upon a page  
Those inarticulate cries of rage.

The poem reminds me of a perceptive remark made by our mutual friend Charlie Martin. It was about Brian's attitude towards his enemies. "Hate was never an option for Brian. Anger would have to do."

*Graham Nerlich*

## EDITORS' NOTE

Iris Murdoch's letters are all hand-written on unlined letter paper, aerogrammes, or occasionally greeting cards. The originals are held in the Medlin Collection, Flinders University Library. They have been transcribed by the editors. The numbers assigned to her letters were based on their physical order in the collection. This is not chronological, as few of the letters were immediately able to be dated with certainty; and by the time an approximate chronological sequence was established, this numbering system had already been used in at least one publication. It has therefore been retained for convenience.

Brian Medlin's letters were provided by his literary executor on a CD ROM as a series of Microsoft Word documents each numbered with a code beginning "MDC." These code numbers have been retained, although once again they do not reflect a chronological sequence.

Before his death, Brian Medlin made it clear to his literary executors that they should not make public any material that would disclose private affairs of close family members. This instruction has precluded publication of several passages concerning his son Bruno and his wife Christine, among others.

Murdoch's letters—and Medlin's, as edited by his executors—indicate that at times Bruno's behaviour caused Medlin considerable anguish. In spite of his and Christine's extensive efforts to counsel and assist Bruno, Medlin's anguish persisted on and off for the duration of this correspondence.

Naturally, Brian and Christine had some matters of which they spoke only, and in confidence, to intimate friends. Murdoch became privy to some such, but in accordance with Medlin's wishes passages in several letters have not been made available to the editors of this publication. These passages are indicated by ellipses in square brackets. Apart from these omissions, all the extant correspondence between Murdoch and Medlin has been included.

The letters have been lightly edited, with obvious errors silently corrected. Illegible or uncertain transcriptions have been indicated. Murdoch often made marginal notes which are difficult to reproduce in printed layout. They have been included as footnotes attached to their approximate location in the text. Occasionally Medlin jotted names, phone

numbers and other brief notes on Murdoch's letters. These have not been included.

Medlin's formatting has been retained in most cases, although it has occasionally been altered either to standardise the letter headings, or for greater clarity.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Editors are grateful to John and Audi Bayley for permission to reproduce Iris Murdoch's letters and her review of Brian Medlin's book, and to Christine Vick for permission to reproduce Medlin's letters. Thanks are also due to Peter Conradi and Ed Victor for their assistance in liaising with Murdoch's executors, and Wallace McKittrick for assistance in liaising Medlin's.

The extract from the *Adelaide Review* on page [38] is used with permission of the publisher.



# THE LETTERS

## Iris Murdoch to Brian Medlin [Letter 12]

**Cedar Lodge, Steeple Aston, Oxford**  
**July 2 [1976?]**

Dear Brian, thanks for your super letter & the broadsheets—I am very interested indeed in all you say. I wd have replied sooner only I've been obsessively trying to finish some stuff (on Plato: you wouldn't like it!)<sup>1</sup> and also dealing with a host of problems, my mother ill & staying here,<sup>2</sup> and so on. How I wish we could meet and talk. I don't often have proper philosophical or political discussions these days. About politics: your scene is, I think, very different from ours here, though we might also differ on general principles. I am increasingly hostile to the extreme left in Europe. I think there is an irresponsible drive to the left (judging from the left Labour Party here) which may land us all (one day) in the kind of regime which the Poles and Czechs now enjoy.<sup>1</sup> (I've visited Poland and Czechoslovakia lately—& people there watch our "lefties" with horrified amazement!) One is jolly lucky to have a parliamentary democracy: the thing is to make it work. Pushing inside it will get one a long way, actually. I wonder if we agree—or do you want an eastern Europe style socialist state? I am extremely interested by your account of your life & its changes. I'd love to see what you write, prose & poetry.<sup>3</sup> Tom Collins I read with the greatest pleasure before I visited Australia—he was an excellent introduction to your marvellous country.<sup>4</sup> Yes, I think things may be different with you in some ways. There's less stuff around from the past. I do wish I cd just take a 'plane & turn up! I hope I may be in Australia in 1978—but that's so far ahead & anything may prevent it.

I fear you might also find me reactionary about student participation!<sup>5</sup> (I don't teach now, so I am out of the latest dramas, here, which are not extreme, thank God.) I think students should be taught genuine objective things like history, languages, art (of course no teacher can be entirely objective, but he can try) and not led too much into "self expression"! This of course begs the question about "Marxism." Are you a "Marxist"? What are you, exactly, politically, if that isn't a silly question? Anarchist? Not Stalinist obviously. Maoist? or—? I used to be a Marxist (years in the CP)

---

<sup>1</sup> Marginal note: "Intellectual freedom: very very important, things rot without it."

but no more. I think Marxism is either something generally obvious or else (if it covers the whole horizon) very misleading. (Sorry, this would need to be stated at more length.) Marxist young persons tend not to learn. I learnt in spite of Marxism because I wanted to, as it happened; and was prepared to respect & obey my teachers, & to respect the institutions & authorities which confronted me. Many students now don't, & are encouraged not to. I taught art students after I left Oxford & was depressed by the numbing effect of "Marxism" upon the more aggressively opinionated ones—who were led on by similar "teachers." However I may be seeing only the dark side of a picture which has (as I see too) some good aspects!

I don't know your Leeds sociology Prof (can't read his name actually Barnam?)

I'm sorry about Pru—but these things may be inevitable. Are the children with her? Do write to me again & tell me MORE & send your book, books etc. I wish I cd see your factory & its [surrounding?] events. God bless Australia. Excuse this unclarified letter. Write. Much love Iris

## Iris Murdoch to Brian Medlin [Letter 8]

**Cedar Lodge, Steeple Aston, Oxford  
Nov 18 [1976?]**

Dear Brian, forgive this very late rejoinder to your two stories—it was very kind of you to send them and I read them with a special pleasure and interest. The Australianness of Australia has a marvellous tang about it, and I think the art of your tales have got this very well—and of course they are about human nature in general, & very much so. I imagine they would be part of a series of interlocking pieces which would build up a picture of a family, a place, a society.

I liked and felt interested in both of your characters. I thought you were a bit too severe with Uncle Horrie at the end & a bit destroyed his mystery. Bruno has plenty of mystery & it persists. Creation of character is (in my view of it) much concerned with showing how contradictory, muddled, incomplete and basically mysterious people are. Opaque. There are all sorts of ways of doing this, actually, and it is consistent with all sorts of styles. What I liked about your stuff is a sort of lyrical sense of the funny messy mysteriousness of life. Tom Collins is very good at this. Have you written more of these pieces? They should make a book. I know you are deliberately avoiding “plot,” but I feel a bit of old-fashioned plot needn’t spoil the atmosphere!

How are politics now down your end of the planet? It’s pretty terrible here. I hate the Labour Party almost as much as I hate the Tories. There are so few human voices in politics here. What a change it is when you hear one! (Shirley Williams, for instance.) Soundly sincere & rational after all the shifty rhetoric.

I do terribly fear violence—it is creeping in—meetings disrupted by shouts, fighting etc—I hate it. I know you feel it’s part of your tradition, and maybe that it’s unavoidable. I fear the extreme left here. They are so irrational and stupidly impatient. The violence in Ireland is so deeply damaging and awful, the result of abstract politics & impatience as well as sheer callous lack of humanity. As things stand now there isn’t even any point in a united Ireland!

Do write again & let us keep in touch. Let me know if I can do anything helpful for you up here (or down here) such as sending a book.

I've finished my stuff on Plato, thank God. (Just an extended essay.)<sup>6</sup>  
Look after yourself! Thanks for sending those pieces. With love, Iris.

## Iris Murdoch to Brian Medlin [Letter 10]

**Steeple Aston Oxford**

**June 3 [1977]**

Brian, so sorry not to have replied sooner to your interesting letter. Life, generally too much to do, has rather overwhelmed me lately. (Too many letters, no secretary, and the house & garden which somehow have to be “done” in spare moments!) Here, it’s the Jubilee. I fear you wd be, if present, a “stuff the jubilee” man! I am rather monarchist. After all, we have to have a head of state, and this lot are fairly picturesque—though I deplore their barbarism, lack of interest in art, failure to marry black men etc. The political scene continues gloomy. Indeed, as you say, there are “too many Trots about” here. There’s a sort of lunatic purely destructive left whose idea of “changing capitalism” is just to smash the nearest thing they see. Such people are on the way to terrorism. Endless mean-minded unofficial strikes are a symptom. Genuine Marxists are more rational—or seem so—and yet what can they be aiming for? A miserable unjust autocratic state like Russia or Czechoslovakia? I begin to think that sort of “socialism” is an illusion. (It’s “national socialism” in the end.) The only real socialism is the stupid old muddled Old Labour party. A depressing conclusion in some ways. I wish I cd write some political plays expressing just what I think, perhaps finding out in the process!<sup>7</sup> I don’t think I cd do it in a novel. I hope you are continuing with your post-Tom-Collins work? I liked that. And what happened about the swimming pool? And what news of your now numerous family? We may conceivably be in [remainder missing]