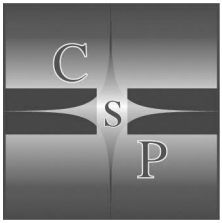
Sacred Space, Beloved City

Sacred Space, Beloved City: Iris Murdoch's London

by

Cheryl Bove and Anne Rowe

Illustrated by Paul Laseau



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for Tony Bove and Nigel Rowe

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Foreword

Iris Murdoch and London

Peter Conradi

Iris Murdoch studied at Somerville (1938-1942), taught at St Anne's (1948-1963) and lived in or near Oxford for fifty-five of her seventy-nine years. In 1956 she and John Bayley bought a house at Steeple Aston where they lived until 1985, after which they moved back to North Oxford for the last fourteen years of her life. She once wrote of Oxford as "this precious enclosed community […] with all its pedantry & its intellectual jokes".

Yet London was where her heart was. She associated London with a "holiday feeling", something John Bayley in no way shared; Iris alone was the "terrific London gadabout". Joy in the city gets into many of her novels. When Malcolm Bradbury once idly suggested she wrote "Hampstead novels" (that is concerned with adultery) she replied indignantly, "Certainly not! My people live by the river!" There is something of Dostoevsky's fantastical, and essentially religious, imagining of St Petersburg in her love of London, especially London near the Thames, with all its cleansing and redemptive powers.

Her excitement at finding her first London flat at 5 Seaforth Place in St James's in the autumn of 1942 is palpable from her letters. It was a (probably) seventeenth century converted brewers's granary and hayloft, open-plan, and recalled by Mary Midgley as resembling a stage-set in Dostoevsky, light visible in places between both the floor-boards and the rafters. One autumn morning after a night of fire-watching at the Treasury with a colleague, they went out to breakfast together. Iris proposed they walk up to Leicester Square, where she threw back her shoulders, breathed in "a deep gallon of air" and declared, "The *heart* of London! The *smell* of London!"

A similar sense of exultation comes out of her correspondence after 1963, from which time she rented a succession of apartments in or near South Kensington, in 1972 buying the top flat at 29 Cornwall Gardens, quiet, modest, shaded by plane trees at the front, looking towards the Albert Memorial at the back. There was no lift. By the time most visitors had managed the six or so flights of stairs, before what resembled to some the final chicken-run up to the flat, they were breathless.

While in Steeple Aston she worked in isolation, hardly emerging except to go to the village shop; in London she wrote of "feeling ordinary & buying cigarettes & feeling a whole city, as it were, backing up one's incognito". The idea of an urban "*incognito*" eloquently implies the twin, related pleasures of disguise and of moving unrecognised, "invisible".

She loved London pubs all her life, and in the war she really got to know them. A remarkable letter written around 1950 gives advice to her fellow-Somervillian, Marjorie Boulton, about how to track down the Canadian poet and frequenter of bohemian Fitzrovia pubs, Paul Potts. Iris calls herself a Pott-hunter of nearly ten years experience and says, "the only sure way is to comb the pubs from Charlotte Street to Leicester Square. The most likely ones are *The Wheatsheaf* or *Black Horse* (Rathbone Place), the *Queen's Head* […] the *Highlander* in Dean St., the *Dog and Duc*k in Frith St. He's unlikely to be further north than the *Fitzroy* (Charlotte St.) or further south than the old Compton St. pubs, at any time when they're open. Unless it were to be at *Legrain's* coffee-house in Gerrard St., after lunch".

London fired her imagination in a way no other city-scape (unless it be Paris) did. Fragments of one early abandoned novel, volume IV of which was started in January 1945, concern a classicist called only "The Professor". Staged in Oxford and London, it has a pleasing reference, considering Iris's later Platonism, to Eros in Piccadilly Circus, "high above the gyrating traffic", "poised and still, most gross & simple, a most refined & strange little god".

And then of course London went on to be the setting or part-setting for twenty-four novels–all but the Irish pair. Her joy in the city is remarkable among British novelists, who, Dickens, Virginia Woolf, Peter Ackroyd apart, bear their share, like Forster and Lawrence, of neurotic agrarianism. Even when her plots fade, the London setting is often what we remember of her novels, as if it were another character: *Under the Net*: Earls Court, the City pub-crawl, the Hammersmith theatre, the Mayfair hair-dressers, Sadie's Marylebone flat; *Flight from the Enchanter*: Mischa's South Kensington Palazzo, and Rosa's Camden Hill connections; the fog-bound Rectory in the East End in *The Time of the Angels*, shaken by underground trains; Fulham and Battersea in *Bruno's Dream*; South Kensington and Julius's Brook Street flat in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*; James's Pimlico flat in *The Sea, The Sea*; the Brook Green "aviary" in *The Green Knight.* It is good that Anne Rowe and Cheryl Bove have produced a book dedicated to celebrating Iris Murdoch's love of London.

Preface

John Bayley on Iris Murdoch and London

"I'm not a London man at all, you see, in the way she was", Iris Murdoch's husband, John Bayley, reflects when asked about his wife's affection for London. Murdoch's much greater passion was born out of the "trinity of love" she experienced with her parents during her childhood years in Chiswick, from the tense years she spent at 5 Seaforth Place, close to St James's tube station, while working at Whitehall during the War years, and from almost thirty years of periodic traveling between her house in Oxford and her apartment in London. Although both Murdoch and Bayley lived and taught in Oxford following their marriage in 1956, they always kept a base in London, getting closer to Hyde Park with each move. Murdoch would take the train from Oxford to Paddington station, and Bayley remembers that she frequented London "usually a day a week or so" while he preferred to stay in Oxford: "Iris had a lot of friends who I hardly knew or even particularly wanted to see" he recalls, and confesses that he never did like the London flat much himself. Murdoch's solitary journeys to and from London generated their own stories that she loved to recount to her husband: "She once came back from London looking quite amused, and she told me that she had been sitting opposite a young man on the train who was reading one of her novels and was quite absorbed in it, and she was very, very pleased of course, and when they got off in Oxford he said, 'You know, say what you like about that woman, and the critics don't think much of her, but she can tell a story.' And Iris was very delighted by this."

Murdoch especially loved the London parks and was, Bayley adds, "a great walker, determined." She "became very, very fond" of the area around Gloucester Road where they had their flats–first of all flat 4 of No. 62 Cornwall Gardens between 1970 and 1972, and then one across the square, the top flat of No. 29 Cornwall Gardens, for twenty-seven years from 1972 until her death in 1999. Murdoch liked the London Square gardens which their flat overlooked, and her husband remembers how "fond" she was of the huge dominant plane trees, despite the fact that these trees, the largest in Kensington, nearly blocked her view of the garden. From the back of the flat she had a partial view of the Albert Memorial, and the couple had a favorite bench nearby where they would sit: "The memorial had been put in place when Iris was very young, and she liked it," Bayley recounts, and she was "rather unhappy when it was under wraps" and surrounded by scaffolding during its renovation.

John Bayley's memory returns to the days that they often walked from Cornwall Gardens to Kensington Gardens and stopped at local shops for food on their return. Murdoch "used to go into the Cyprus shop on Gloucester Road because she fancied that it was a Cypriot who ran it." It was "one of those little shops that sell everything and have eating there. We used to stop there, walking down from the park and get something to eat. We would like to go upstairs to the flat and have a picnic." After Murdoch died her husband never returned to the Cornwall Gardens flat: "It was a terrible climb up there," (without a lift), and "I never did feel any urge to go back there at all." Murdoch's London life was anyway never very real to him: "It's an odd thing," he muses, "but if you're actually living with and so close to somebody, what they're doing doesn't seem quite real in some way because your life together is the reality."

Christmas in London together was special to them both. Bayley's brother, Michael, would come to Oxford to bring them to London for the holidays, and on Christmas morning the couple would walk from Cornwall Gardens to the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens and back. Along the way they would walk up DeVere Gardens, passing the former residences of Henry James (No. 34) and Robert Browning (No. 29), and also remembering T.S. Eliot, who lived nearby (at 3 Kensington Court Gardens). They would cross to Hyde Park, walk up the Broad Walk, and stop by the Round Pond where Bayley used to sail toy boats as a youth: "Iris looked out for, and delighted in, "a big heron, a fine bird. It was quite tame and used to stand looking very majestic, statuesque." Then they would walk straight across to the Serpentine and back to the Peter Pan statue, of which "Iris became quite fond" and which makes guest appearances in her novels. Bayley used to read bits of *Peter Pan*, the novel, to Iris (she hadn't known the novel and it became a family joke). "We enjoyed this walk very, very much," says Bayley, recalling that they were "able to continue with it until 1997, two years before [Iris] died."

Professor Bayley has kindly agreed to have his diary entry recording their Christmas walk, dated 25 December 1997, reproduced here. It was first published in *Iris: A Memoir* (London: Duckworth, pp. 186-189).

> And it's Christmas morning. And we are doing all the usual things. Routine is a substitute for memory. Iris is not asking the usual anxious questions – 'Where are we? What are we doing? Who is coming?'
>
> Someone, or something, is coming. The silence it brings makes no demands. London is uncannily silent on Christmas morning. Nobody seems to be about. If there are church-goers and church bells we see none, hear none. The silence and the emptiness seem all the better.
>
> We walk to Kensington Gardens up the deserted street, between the tall stucco façades falling into Edwardian decay but still handsome. Henry James lived on the left here; Browning further up on the right. We pass their blue plaques, set in the white

wall. A few yards back we passed the great gloomy red-brick mansions where T.S. Eliot had a flat for many years. His widow must be in church now.

Our route on Christmas morning is always the same. We have been doing this for years. As we pass their spectral houses I now utter a little bit of patter like a guide, Henry James, Robert Browning, T.S. Eliot. On former mornings like these we used to gaze up at their windows, talk a little bit about them … Now I just mention the names. Does Iris remember them? She smiles a little. They are still familiar, those names, as familiar as this unique morning silence. Just for this morning those writers have laid their pens down, as Iris herself has done, and are taking a well-earned rest, looking forward to their dinners. Thackeray, the gourmet, whose house is just round the corner, would have looked forward to his with special keenness.

Now we can see the Park, and beyond it the handsome Williamite façade of Kensington Palace. When Princess Diana died the whole green here was a mass of cellophane, wrapping withered flowers. And the crowds were silent too. As quiet, the media said in an awed way, as it is in this morning's calm. The grievers were like good children at bed-time, folding their hands in ritual prayer. It was a tranquil ceremony, like our Christmas as we wander now vaguely over the deserted road, usually a mass of traffic, and up the expanse of the Broad Walk.

A few dogs here, unimpressed by Christmas, but seeming merrier than usual in contrast with the silence. There is one bell now, tolling somewhere on a sweet high note. Up in the sky the jet trails move serenely on, seeming more noiseless than usual, their murmur fainter when it comes. Christmas morning in London is always calm and mild and bright. I can only remember one time when it rained, even snowed a bit. I ask Iris if she can remember that Christmas. She smiles. No need to remember, as this ritual that has replaced memory goes on.

The Round Pond. Canada geese standing meditatively, for once making no demands. The same path as usual, downwards, to the Serpentine. Nobody round the Peter Pan statue. Not even a Japanese couple with a camera. One Christmas we met two middle-aged ladies from New Zealand here, who told us this statue was the one thing they really wanted to see in London.

Young Pan himself, bronze fingers delicately crooked, his double pipe to his lips, has the sublimely sinister indifference of childhood. Captain Hook, his great enemy, was always made nervous by that pose. He considered Peter to have Good Form without knowing it, which is of course the best Form of all. Poor Hook was in despair about this. It made Iris laugh when I told her, years ago, before we were married. I read a bit of the book to her (the book is much better, and funnier, than the pantomime play). Iris, I recall, was so amused that she later put the Good Form business into one of her own novels.

Iris's amusement may even have been shared in a quiet way, by the sculptor himself, who covered the base of the group with elves and rabbits and snails in the Victorian fairytale tradition, but at the top put the elegant figure of a much more worldly young woman, scrambling determinedly over the plinth to proposition Peter, giving the bystander an agreeable view of her polished bronze derrière. It is clad in a modishly draped and close fitting Edwardian skirt, and she looks much too old for Peter anyway. Could it be that Sir George Frampton, as well as being an excellent

artist and sculptor, had a sense of humour about these matters? It certainly looks like it, on such a quiet sunny Christmas morning, with real squirrels hopping about all round the statue, vainly soliciting the nuts which the fat little beasts have no trouble in getting from tourists, on ordinary busier days.

As we walk round and admire I tell Iris that my mother assured me that if I looked hard enough over the railings into the private dells where the bluebells and daffodils come up in Spring, I might see fairies, perhaps even Peter Pan himself. I believed her. I could almost believe her now, with the tranquil sunshine in the Park making a midwinter spring, full of the illusion of flowers and fairies as well as real birdsong.

Iris is listening, which she rarely does, and smiling too. There have been no anxious pleas this morning, no tears, none of those broken sentences whose only meaning is the dread in her voice and the demand for reassurance. Something or someone this morning has reassured her, given for an hour or two what the prayerbook calls "that peace which the world cannot give".

Perhaps it is the Christmas ritual. It is going somewhere, but it is also a routine, even though a rare one. It is both. And now it will go on. We shall return to my brother, who has attended matins this morning at Chelsea Old Church, where Sir Thomas More used once to worship. We shall eat sardines and sausages and scrambled egg together, with a bottle or two of Bulgarian red wine which goes with anything. The sort of Christmas dinner we all three enjoy, and the only time of the year Michael permits a little cookery to be done in his immaculate and sterile little kitchen. The sardines are routine for him, but the eggs and sausages represent a real concession. I shall do them, with Iris standing beside me, and we shall bring the wine.

A snooze then. Iris will sleep deeply. Later we listen to carols and Christmas music. I have the illusion now, which fortunate Alzheimer partners must feel at such times, that life is just the same, has never changed. I cannot now imagine Iris any different. Her loss of memory becomes, in a sense, my own. In a muzzy way – the Bulgarian wine no doubt – I find myself thinking of the Christmas birth, and also of Wittgenstein's comment, once quoted to me by Iris, that death is not a human experience. We are born to live only from day to day. "Take short views of human life – never further than dinner or tea." The Reverend Sydney Smith's advice is most easily taken during these ritualised days. The ancient saving routine of Christmas, which for us has today been twice blessed.

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Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies
Kingston University

Any proceeds accrued by the authors will go towards acquisitions for the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies at Kingston University. The Centre already holds many important archives relating to Iris Murdoch, including the annotated libraries from her Oxford and London homes, the Conradi archives, a number of substantial letter runs and individual manuscripts, notebooks and personal items. (More detailed information can be found on http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/research/Iris_Murdoch/archive/index.shtml). The Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies is establishing itself as an internationally significant source of information for researchers on Iris Murdoch's life and work and is regularly offered documents, personal collections and letter runs that are carefully evaluated and considered for funding. The Centre would welcome any financial contributions that would enable the purchase of such items, and also the gift of reminiscences of Iris Murdoch, letters, or any other material that would enrich the archives. Contact Dr Anne Rowe, Director of the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies (a.rowe@kingston.ac.uk).

The *Iris Murdoch Review*
&
The Iris Murdoch Society

The *Iris Murdoch Review* is the publication of the Iris Murdoch Society, which was formed at the Modern Language Association Convention in New York City in 1986. The *Review* (formerly *The Iris Murdoch Newsletter,* 1987-2006) is published annually, offering a forum for short articles, reviews and notices, and keeps members of the Society informed of new publications, symposia and other information that has a bearing on the life and work of Iris Murdoch. To join the Society and receive the *Iris Murdoch Review* contact Penny Tribe, the Iris Murdoch Society, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Kingston University London, Penrhyn Road, Kingston, Surrey, KT1 2EE. Tel: +44 (0)20 8547 7884, Fax: +44 (0)20 8547 7292. Email: p.tribe@kingston.ac.uk

ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Iris Murdoch

AM	*An Accidental Man* (1971)
B	*The Bell* (1958)
BB	*The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987)
BD	*Bruno's Dream* (1969)
BP	*The Black Prince* (1973)
EM	*Existentialists and Mystics* (1997)
FE	*The Flight from the Enchanter* (1956)
FHD	*A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970)
GA	*The Good Apprentice* (1985)
GK	*The Green Knight* (1993)
HC	Iris Murdoch, *Henry and Cato* (1976)
IG	*The Italian Girl* (1964)
JD	*Jackson's Dilemma* (1995)
MGM	*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992)
MP	*The Message to the Planet* (1989)
NG	*The Nice and the Good* (1968)
NS	*Nuns and Soldiers* (1980)
PP	*The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983)
RG	*The Red and the Green* (1965)
S	*The Sandcastle* (1957)
SH	*A Severed Head* (1961)
SPLM	*The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974)
TA	*The Time of the Angels* (1966)
TSTS	*The Sea, The Sea* (1978)
U	*The Unicorn* (1963)
UN	*Under the Net* (1954)
UR	*An Unofficial Rose* (1962)
WC	*A Word Child* (1975)

Others

Caen	Université de Caen, *Recontres avec Iris Murdoch*.
D	G. Dooley, *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction.*
IMS	Conradi, Peter, "Iris Murdoch and the Sea".
PCIM	Peter Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*
PCW	Peter Conradi, "Writing *Iris Murdoch: A Life*".
PH	Peter Hollindale, ed., *Peter Pan and Other Plays* by J. M. Barrie.
RL	Roger Lewis. "A Dangerous Dame: Iris Murdoch at Seventy".
VC	Valentine Cunningham, "Shaping Modern British Fiction".

Introduction: "A Terrific London Gadabout"[1]

> *It is London, not Oxford, that is the city Murdoch's fiction is in love with*; *no earlier novelists apart from Dickens and Virginia Woolf loved London so well, or celebrated it so memorably as she.* (PCIM, 585)

"London's still the best city in the world" says the nostalgic Freddie Arkwright in *The Sea, The Sea* (457), and Freddie's sentiments are Iris Murdoch's own. Her novels detail and celebrate London with an acuity which matches that of more celebrated "London writers", such as William Blake, Charles Dickens and Virginia Woolf. This book attempts to redress the balance and establish Murdoch amongst their ranks, because her plots thrive equally on the city: its buildings, icons, pubs, river and, most of all, its people. London was a source of great pleasure to Murdoch, the city to which she was drawn throughout her life, and whether in London for personal or professional reasons, she observed intently, absorbing and relishing the ambience of the city, noting her surroundings with photographic detail and pondering on how they affect those who live amongst them.[2] Although she clearly used these observations in her novels, few critics have dealt extensively with her representations of London, but those who do note her Dickensian eye for detail and identify links between setting and the psychology of her characters.[3] This book both celebrates Murdoch's love of London and seeks to extend this critical awareness by expanding the innovative and complex links she makes between the environment and the human mind. For her, the city has the power to speak to the soul–her own, her characters' and her readers' alike.

Post-war, much of London, Murdoch's "beloved city", had been destroyed and had thus lost much of its previous identity. Social mobility began to increase and then, as the technological revolution progressed, place became less significant in people's lives than ever before. Murdoch, noting such fragmentation, was well aware of the significance of place to identity, both on an individual and a national level. She understood the aesthetic, spiritual and moral impact of the environment on the human mind and the damage that could be done by never having been integrated into it, or by suddenly being removed from it. She was always conscious of her own displaced Irishness and her work at UNRAA had given her insight into the potentially demonic alienation that radical dislocation from the past can cause.[4] (Sophocles and Shakespeare had demonstrated how, for Oedipus and Lear, banishment destroys identity as efficiently as death.) Murdoch's presentation of London is thus both

preservation of the past and celebration of the present. The city becomes sacred, not in any conventional religious sense, but in its significance to the identity of a nation, and in its centrality to her attempt to encourage in her readers an awareness of what lies outside themselves, of the existence of the "Other" that pierces the fantasy world and leads to moral awareness. Her London settings influence her characters subconsciously and serve as spiritual resting places, and landmarks, if they are given proper attention, can alert characters to an understanding of what lies within themselves. Murdoch provocatively transforms London settings and landmarks into symbols that nudge characters and readers into confronting troubling aspects of the human personality which they may prefer to ignore. The city is also part of her formal experimentation, and descriptions of London's colours, sights, sounds, smells and movements provide an aesthetic moral apparatus which allows her readers to be absorbed into the environment along with her characters, and allows them to participate equally in the sacred nature of the city.

For Murdoch's many foreign readers, her novels may be their first, or most detailed, encounter with London and may form the basis of their understanding of the city. M. Christine Boyer, the architectural theorist, suggests that the way human beings come to understand their surroundings is not only through individual memory and experience and shared history, but also through what we have read or heard about a particular place. In this way, reading Murdoch's novels builds upon learned and imagined notions of London and English culture. The variety of meanings that can be conveyed through the built environment's shape and materials interests architectural theorists, who explore not only how people experience public and private spaces, but also analyze why people feel as they do about them. Clearly detailed descriptions with which authors present their readers contribute to the realism of their work, but these descriptions also reveal something about both authors and characters. The integration of literary setting and psychology suggests common ground between architectural and literary theorists, and this study of Murdoch's London attempts to enlarge this discussion by exploring the effects of six kinds of urban settings on characters in her novels.[5] Individual chapters take as their focus a district (the City–Chapter One), a group of buildings ("Sacred Spaces"–Chapter Two), a landmark (the Post Office Tower [now the British Telecom Tower]–Chapter Three), a statue (Peter Pan–Chapter Four), buildings which serve as a metaphorical mind-set (Whitehall–Chapter Five) and the River Thames (Chapter Six), respectively. Murdoch's moral philosophy, contemporary architectural and urban planning theory, and feminist and psychoanalytic literary theory are used to illustrate the complex ways Murdoch's characters respond to particular London settings. When Murdoch began writing in the 1950s she was ahead of her time in making such intricate connections between psychology and the environment, something which contemporary architectural

theorists such as Pierre von Meiss and Eleni Basteá now do habitually.[6] Each chapter is accompanied by a corresponding walk that links Murdoch's plots to landmarks and routes, and both are illustrated with sketches by Paul Laseau. These drawings not only illustrate locations for identification but also conjure their atmosphere so that readers apprehend how Murdoch's characters *experience* their surroundings. The final London Glossary is an annotated index of the London place names mentioned in all of Murdoch's 26 novels.

Peter Conradi's authoritative biography of Iris Murdoch (2001) provides an account of Murdoch's movements to and from London[7] and this source, with the help of Valerie Purton's *An Iris Murdoch Chronology* (2007), has enabled the following map of Murdoch's London life. London shaped Murdoch's identity as profoundly as she suggests it shapes her characters'. Her strong emotional well-being was fostered within her childhood homes, the first of which she moved to in 1921 when, aged two, she arrived with her mother, Rene, from Dublin, where she was born, to join her civil servant father, Hughes, who had been posted to London and had found the family a small flat in Caithness Road, Brook Green. In 1925, her intellectual abilities began to be nurtured when she attended the prestigious Froebel Demonstration School at Colet Gardens, a fifteen-minute walk across Brook Green from Caithness Road. A year later, this "trinity of love"[8] moved to 4 Eastbourne Road in Chiswick. The Froebel School was walkable from there in summer and five stops away on the District Line tube in winter; thus at six years old Murdoch began her familiarization with London as her father accompanied her on the tube on his way to work, and she would walk the last two minutes from Barons Court Station alone. It was her father, whom she adored, who bought Iris's school outfits with her at Bourne and Hollingsworth in Oxford Street when she left the Froebel Institute for Badminton School in Bristol in 1932.

Perhaps it was London *in absentia* that triggered Murdoch's early longing for it, for she boarded at Badminton and most holidays were spent with her parents in Ireland. From Badminton Murdoch progressed to Somerville College, Oxford (1938-1942), and her London working life began when she left Oxford for London only ten days after her finals to become a temporary Assistant Principal in the Treasury in July 1942. Her own experiences of the Civil Service environment, as well as those of her father and her colleagues, were to inform ambivalent representations of civil servants and Whitehall in her fiction in later years. Her office was in the "New Public Offices" on the corner of Great George Street and Whitehall, looking out onto the north front of Westminster Abbey (PCIM, 135). Murdoch's wartime London experience was alternately gruelling and euphoric. She worked a six day week and often queued for food, and noted that she was "the slave of circumstance at 23".[9] However, the drudgery and claustrophobia of the Treasury meant that the atmosphere

of London was, by comparison, exhilarating. It was then, as Peter Conradi notes in his foreword, that while walking to Leicester Square with a colleague, she "threw back her shoulders, breathed in 'a gallon of air' and declared, 'The *heart* of London! The *smell* of London!'"

London became home to Murdoch again when, in 1942, she leased a flat, 5 Seaforth Place, a tiny alley off Buckingham Gate and just a few hundred yards from Buckingham Palace. The flat was shared with a fellow Somervillian, Philippa Foot, who stayed there until spring 1945. Conradi notes that the

> tiny, ancient white cube, [is] curiously beached in an area strange to it, an ensemble so closed off and secret, that it seems, like the mysterious enclosures of Iris's Gothic fictions, a little lost world on its own. (PCIM, 142)

However, the flat was near enough to the Houses of Parliament to hear Big Ben, and to Westminster Cathedral to hear the Angelus. The women breakfasted in the Lyons tea shop in Victoria Street and dined at l'Etoile in Charlotte Street or the Gay Hussar. They walked to parties and gave two at Seaforth, and escaped from the chilly flat into the bohemian pub-life of Fitzrovia, where Murdoch once danced with Dylan Thomas. Despite the hardships London was thrilling: she described the city in a letter to Frank Thompson in January 1943 as "great and beautiful and exciting London" (PCIM, 155).

After the war Murdoch worked with displaced persons at UNRRA, first in Belgium then in Austria; she then studied at Cambridge between 1947 and 1948, and subsequently taught philosophy at St Anne's, Oxford from 1948 to 1963. Her marriage in 1956 to John Bayley, a fellow Oxford don, meant that she was now rooted, emotionally and intellectually, at Oxford. The couple settled first in some gloomy rooms there but later bought a large "country house", Cedar Lodge, at Steeple Aston (PCIM, 409). However, Murdoch continued, as she always had, to take refuge in the family home at Chiswick in times of emotional turmoil: she retreated there in 1945, unemployed and depressed; in 1946 after being jilted by David Hicks (to whom she had been briefly engaged), and in 1950 when another lover, Michael Oakshott, fell for someone else. She also began *The Flight from the Enchanter* and partially wrote *The Sandcastle* there, and it was at Eastbourne Road that her father died in 1958 from lung cancer. The house was sold in 1959 and Murdoch helped her mother move into a flat at 97 Comeragh Road, Barons Court.

London always appeared to be her emotional "home", and in 1960 she once again set up a permanent home there, renting a small flat at 59 Harcourt Terrace, SW10. Following her resignation from St Anne's in 1963 she returned to London to teach philosophy to students at the Royal College of Art in Kensington Gore, where she stayed until 1967. During term time she spent Tuesday and Wednesday nights

at Harcourt Terrace, from where she could visit her mother in Barons Court and also John's mother at Smith Terrace, Chelsea. The London of the 1960s was much changed from the London of the 1940s: class barriers were being broken, traditions and customs disregarded and the sex-obsessed bohemianism of the "swinging sixties" was particularly evident in the behaviour of rebellious RCA students. Murdoch was "shocked, fascinated, delighted and appalled" by the amorality and anarchism of students and the scandals and fights amongst staff (PCIM, 471) and was to build the effects of this undisciplined environment into her novels of the late 1960s and early '70s.

When Murdoch resigned from the RCA in 1967 she kept Harcourt Terrace until 1970, when she moved to flat 4, 62 Cornwall Gardens, South Kensington, and within two years had bought the top flat at number 29, on the opposite side of the square, shaded by plane trees at the front and looking out at the top of the Albert Memorial at the back. By the 1980s Murdoch was staying in her London flat at the start of the week and returning to Oxford towards the end. London was as much the centre of her intellectual life as Oxford. As well as her teaching, there were many academic commitments, lectures, interviews and a good deal of engaged political activism. Her time there decreased as she grew older, but she kept 29 Cornwall Gardens and went there as often as possible until her death. Thus a great deal of her life was divided between London and Oxford. Conradi records that

> in Steeple Aston she worked in isolation hardly emerging except to go to the village shop [while] in London she wrote of "feeling ordinary & buying cigarettes & feeling a whole city, as it were, backing up one's incognito". The idea of an urban "incognito" eloquently implied the twin related pleasures of disguise and moving unrecognized, "invisible". [10]

David Morgan, a pupil of Murdoch's at the RCA to whom she became close, also noted the difference between her London and Oxford identities:

> the London Iris was a brave figure, rushing about helping people, listening to them, paying for them, educating them, bucking them up – a fine figure very much in charge. When she got on the train at Paddington she turned into a different person.[11]

In the city, perhaps, she became her alter-ego. She associated London with "a holiday feeling" that her husband did not share and was "a terrific London gadabout" (PCIM, 471). In London she participated in a celebrity world that at other times she might eschew: the designer Hardy Amies was a close neighbour in Cornwall Gardens and Murdoch's diary included lunch with Elizabeth Jane Howard (1963); dinner in the Dorchester to honour Dame Edith Evans (1968); a party at 10 Downing Street (1970); she rubbed shoulders with Noel Coward at the Connaught (in 1971–their

conversation was cut short with the arrival of Princess Margaret), and in December 1976 she attended Buckingham Palace with her mother to be presented with the C.B.E. London was where she met her lovers: David Hicks, Frank Thompson, Michael Oakshott and Elias Canetti (whom she visited at his home in Thurlow Road) amongst them, and these passions haunted her imagination and her fiction. Her novels deal with the whole gamut of human experience and describe evil as astutely as good. In London she intensified her experience of life, fostering morally dubious relationships so as to understand the darker side of humanity, her own as well as others', which informs her novels. Her characters' struggles with manipulative instincts and selfish sexual gratification that militate against the desire for goodness, holiness and spirituality are just as much hers, and her readers'. Sacred space and secular space have often been thought of as separate from each other, but Murdoch merges the two, both in her representations of London and in her depiction of the human mind. Her novels encourage a loving acceptance that the sacred and profane are forever conjoined, and suggest sanctity and profanity as alter-egos.

The first essay, "Architecture and the Built Environment in *Under the Net"*, in Chapter One, illustrates the contemporaneity of Murdoch's representations of the effect of architecture on the human mind; this 1954 novel uses spatial imagery which, more than half a century later, parallels contemporary architectural theorists' understanding of the emotional engagement between the individual and the environment. Jake Donaghue's picaresque night-time pub crawl through London's City district illustrates how the City environment engages him emotionally and suggests a complex subliminal dialogue between architectural space and his unconscious mind. This essay links Jake's responses to his environment with the work of theorists such as Pierre von Meiss, as Jake emerges from his nocturnal experiences more responsive to the world both as a writer and a human being. The pub crawl ends at dawn with a ritual bathing in the Thames, a cleansing rite of passage which mirrors the sacred encounters that some of Murdoch's characters experience in art galleries and which are described in the following chapter.

The next essay, "A Secular Iconography: Art Galleries and Museums", in Chapter Two begins by exploring how Murdoch incorporates into her novels the London churches, museums and galleries that she loved because they offer spiritual resting places for characters and readers alike. She encouraged entering churches and many of her non-believing characters use them, as she did, as sources of spiritual nourishment, despite having divorced them from the beliefs they represent and the God in whom she no longer believed.[12] Her love of galleries and museums stemmed from her early desire to be a painter and from her enthusiasm for the visual arts, which never waned: "Oh heavenly bliss!" she wrote to a friend on June 1st 1945, when fifty paintings which had been stored during the War in a slate mine in North Wales were returned to the National Gallery (PCIM, 210). Until her final illness she

visited galleries and exhibitions, including many at the National Gallery, the Wallace Collection and the British Museum.[13] Her experiences with paintings are transposed into her novels and are crucial to her linking of aesthetics and morality; occasionally they are a direct source of inspiration for her plots. It was to the National Gallery that her husband took her in an attempt to dislodge the "writer's block" which was, in fact, the onset of Alzheimer's. The discussion in this chapter illustrates how galleries and museums perform the function of lost Christian rites for characters, as their exteriors evoke shared history, dignity and solemnity and the paintings within offer secular alternatives to obsolete Christian iconography. Encounters with paintings may act positively on the consciousness of her characters or fail to do so, but they alert readers to the possibility of public spaces as sources of spiritual nourishment, and Murdoch transforms the novel itself into a sacred space, as it also offers readers a reflective space where they can glimpse their own delusions and the reality that lies beyond them.

The following two chapters focus on Murdoch's use of London landmarks with which her readers might be familiar directly or by repute. Chapter Three analyzes appearances of the Post Office Tower in *The Black Prince*, and Chapter Four looks at the appearances of Frampton's statue of Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens; both landmarks indicate unobservable inner experience that is inaccessible to the conscious mind of the character. "'Shadows that puzzle the mind': The Post Office Tower in *The Black Prince*" traces the appearances of an iconic national landmark as viewed by Murdoch's morally blind narrator, Bradley Pearson. Murdoch illustrates how urban monuments can act just as morally on the human mind as the open spaces of nature, but only if her characters (or readers) can become aware of the way the mind can respond to them. The Tower appears as a phallic symbol for her character and simultaneously as a moral beacon for her readers, as it punctuates the story on occasions when perception of reality is obscured by egocentric desire or at fleeting moments when behaviour could have been altered and tragedy averted. The novel ends with the Tower vanished from the landscape, obsolete and morally impotent, as characters remain strapped to the wheel of eternal desire. But Murdoch has absorbed a familiar London landmark into her own system of symbols and returned it to the world as a sacred moral emblem for her readers.

"Dark Glee: Apparitions of Peter Pan", in Chapter Four, merges Murdoch's fondness for the statue of Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens with her ambivalent fascination with both the play and the novel. Generally, Murdoch's allusions to Peter Pan are cautions about the dangers of avoiding adult responsibility and living in a self-centred fantasy world, but she expands them to include the treacherous effects of split personalities, and they become more sinister when they allude to the confusion between desire for the mother and sexual desire that is found in the play and the novel. The troubling transition between childhood innocence and adult sexuality, the

morally dubious sexual attraction adults can feel for children and androgyny, and the inability to establish mutually respectful relationships with women are some of the aspects of human behaviour which Murdoch explores by means of a network of allusions to Peter Pan.

"'Wooden Horses Racing at a Fair': Murdoch's Civil Servants and Whitehall", in Chapter Five, investigates how Murdoch draws from the experiences of her civil servant father and her own experience in the Treasury to construct one of the most profane of her London environments. While she celebrates Whitehall for its architectural beauty and its historical connections, she satirizes its bureaucracy and the effete civil servants who are corrupted by power and deadened morally and creatively by neurosis and convention. This chapter explores the patriarchy endemic in Civil Service recruitment in the early to mid twentieth century, and suggests that Whitehall participates in the ambiguous morality of her civil servant characters and exacerbates the harm that they cause. Murdoch's pride in Whitehall as a historically powerful and architecturally impressive environment is subverted by a critique of those men who unquestioningly absorb its values, or are too weak to resist the seductive but corruptive charm of power.

The final essay, in Chapter Six, "'Sweet Thames, run softly 'till I end my song': The Eternal Drama of the Thames", celebrates the ubiquitous presence in her novels of the river that Murdoch loved, and suggests also that it features as a formal device to illustrate aspects of her moral psychology. Murdoch's descriptions of the Thames are part of her experimentation with the novel form, in particular her construction of synaesthetic devices that attempt to communicate the quality of consciousness of her characters. This essay explores some of Murdoch's compulsions: noting tidal influences, setting pivotal scenes on Thames embankments, and immersing characters in the Thames in secular baptisms. These secular baptisms suggest Murdoch herself symbolically makes religious offerings to the river while using it philosophically to explore the nature of self-sacrifice and redemption. Bridges over Thames also suggest symbolically how characters communicate both with each other and with their own subconscious minds. The multifarious and complex role of the Thames is also seen as integral to Murdoch's attempt at merging the great religions of the East and the West and, in its offering of forgiveness and its capacity for cleansing sins, the river is the most sacred of all of Murdoch's London images.

Murdoch's identity was partially shaped by London: by her affection for it, the freedoms it allowed, and by her own understanding of how its architectural forms affected her aesthetically and morally, and encouraged an awareness of the diversity of the world she inhabited. She understood herself to be blessed by London and her literary portrait of the city, drawn with reverence, endows the city in return with a stable identity that transcends its ever-changing face. Murdoch's London is offered as an enduring repository of a collective past that is as much a part of us as

it was of our ancestors. The city is also a source of secular spiritual nourishment; it demands moral accountability and suggests a complex ongoing dialogue between the environment and the individual that offers the possibility of purging egoism and knowing ourselves better. Most of all, London helps designate her novels themselves as sacred spaces which enshrine the possibility, as well as the difficulty, of becoming good.

Notes

[1] PCIM, 471.

[2] Vanessa Woolley from Perth in Western Australia remembers passing Iris Murdoch "in the quiet streets that run between Gloucester Road and Kensington High Street [Victoria Grove and St Albans Grove]" when she was seventeen years old: "I was walking with my mother who recognized Iris Murdoch; she [I'm told] gave me a long and attentive look as we passed. I do remember that her eyes were unusually penetrating. I have always remembered this". (Vanessa Woolley, email to Anne Rowe, 9 May 2007).

[3] The articles and books that discuss Murdoch's London life and her use of London in her novels include: Peter Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*; Louis L. Martz, "The London Novels" (first published as "Iris Murdoch: The London Novels"); John Fletcher, "Iris Murdoch's London"; John Fletcher, "Iris Murdoch, Novelist of London"; Christine Wick Sizemore, *A Female Vision of the City*: *London in the Novels of Five British Women*. Within these, only three articles and one book chapter focus closely on Murdoch's London settings and each author notes that they are integral to her characters' identity. Louis Martz's essay, "The London Novels" (1971), likens her to Dickens in her attention to detail and "instinctive affection for the London setting", and notes that many of her characters are "inseparable" from the London in which they live (42): "houses, streets and squares become part of the personalities living in each particular location" (42). Martz identifies love for the environment as a redemptive element in the novels of both. John Fletcher's "Iris Murdoch's London" (1987) also explores the relationship between character and setting and a subsequent essay, "Iris Murdoch, Novelist of London" (1990), concentrates on landmarks and sites "which it would be quite impossible to replace". Fletcher believes Murdoch's London novels will take on historical significance as the city changes because their detail will preserve the London of the past. The work which most extensively addresses the relationship between character and London settings in Murdoch's novels is Christine Wick Sizemore's *A Female Vision of the City*: *London in the Novels of Five British Women Writers* (1989), where Chapter Three, "The City as Labyrinth" (108-151), is devoted to Murdoch's novels. Sizemore's feminist vision of London identifies Murdoch's images of the labyrinth as a unifying spatial image, and she suggests that this imagery "reflects not only Murdoch's inheritance of the image from Dickens but also the morally limited character and perception of her male protagonists" (7). Sizemore argues that Murdoch's novels of the 1970s have "no moment of insight and only the barest hint of redemption" (113) because the male characters who "almost never break out of their prison of ego" dominate these novels, and the landmarks with which they

identify reflect their "rigidity and problems with interrelationship[s]" (113). It is not until *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980) that London landmarks become associated with more redemptive and feminine qualities associated with art and nature (138).

[4] Murdoch was unsympathetic towards Camus' romanticizing of unbelonging and was interested in the thinking of the French writer Simone Weil, who was a Jew in occupied France. See "Knowing the Void" in EM, 157-160.

[5] John Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) links aesthetics and architecture and considers the ways in which architecture produces meaning, and Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958) relates architecture to literary texts. More recently, Christine Sizemore explores the literary significance of the city through planning theory and feminist theory in *A Female Vision of the City*.

[6] See, for example, Eleni Basteá, ed.*, Memory and Architecture*; Pierre von Meiss, *Elements of Architecture: from Form to Place*; Edward Mazria, "Sacred by Design".

[7] The authors are greatly indebted to Peter Conradi's biography of Iris Murdoch, *Iris Murdoch: A Life,* from which the information in this introduction to Murdoch's London life is largely drawn. The sections of the Conradi's biography on which the descriptions of Murdoch's London life are based are: chapter 2: 33-56; chapter 4: 80-81; chapter 6: 135-63; chapter 7: 166; chapter 8: 211-212; chapter 10: 277; chapter 15: 409; chapter 17: 469-76; chapter 19: 537, 548; and chapter 10: 585. Valerie Purton's *An Iris Murdoch Chronology* has also been a source of valuable information.

[8] Murdoch describes her childhood with her adored parents as a "perfect trinity of love" in an interview with John Haffenden (Dooley, 129).

[9] Entry in Murdoch's journal quoted by Conradi (PCIM,140).

[10] Conradi, quoting a letter from Murdoch to David Morgan (PCIM, 537).

[11] David Morgan, *"With Love and Rage": A Memoir of Iris Murdoch*, in a forthcoming *Iris Murdoch Review*.

[12] London churches were special to her, among them Westminster Cathedral, where she spent time with a fellow Oxford student whom she loved, Frank Thompson, before he was posted to the Middle East (PCIM, 147). She returned to the Cathedral after his death to remember how he had lit a candle to the Virgin Mary there, and she emerged to be cheered by sunshine on a pure white cloud. The Cathedral had more joyous associations when she visited on VE day to give thanks for victory and she kneeled to pray there in April 1948. She gave two talks on Existentialism at St Anne's Church, Soho, and at St James's, Piccadilly, she gave a eulogy at her great friend, Reynolds Stone's, memorial service.

[13] Including the Max Beckmann exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1965 and the Bonnard exhibition at the Royal Academy in the same year. She also visited the exhibition of Reynolds Stone's engravings at the New Grafton Gallery in May 1972 and wrote the introduction to the catalogue for the exhibitions of Henry Weinberger's paintings at the Herbert Art Gallery in 1983 and at the Duncan Gallery of Contemporary Art in 1995. Most memorably, perhaps, she attended the "Genius of Venice 1500-1600" exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1983, saw Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas* there and was "completely stunned" (Murdoch, interview with Eric Robson on"Revelations").

Chapter One

Architecture and the Built Environment in *Under the Net*

I know the City well. (UN, 105)

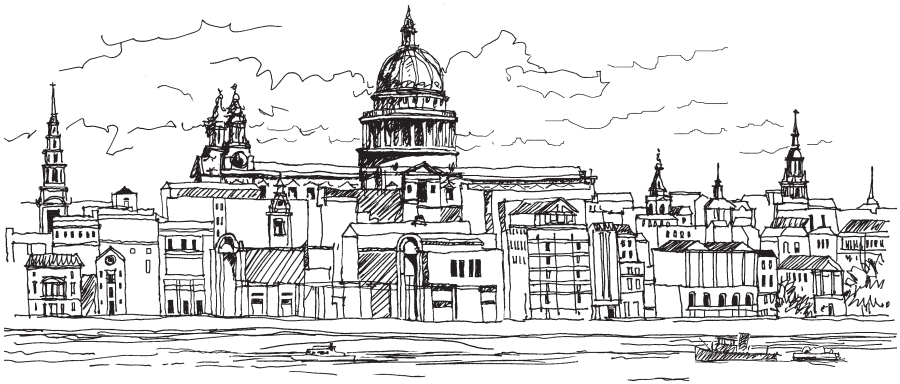

Fig. 1.1 City Skyline from the Thames

Iris Murdoch once referred to London as a "sort of main character" in her novels, one that "appears differently in different contexts";[1] indeed, her London is a fully-rounded character, one her readers come to know and understand, but one always capable of surprise and diversity. The City district of her first novel, *Under the Net*, affects her readers in as complex a way as any of her characters: it engages them emotionally, embodies imagery that stimulates their collective memories, and forms a complex dialogue with their subliminal understanding of the functions of architectural space. Murdoch develops this picture of the City with just as much precision and love as she constructs her characters: both embody multiple identities, have hidden pasts and secrets, and in the same way that her characters are intended to engage morally with her readers, so, too, are her images of the City. In fact, the complexity of Murdoch's representation of the City in this novel resonates with the ways that contemporary architectural theorists understand the emotional engagement between the individual and the environment. As the various histories embodied in the City landscape are absorbed subliminally by Murdoch's first-person narrator,

Jake Donaghue (who claims to "know the City well"[UN, 105]) and by her readers, perception of self and the world is transformed.

Murdoch thought that literature should have the power to stimulate *all* the senses, and that communication of unobserved inner experience is more effective when vision and other physical sensations are stimulated simultaneously. Her theory on aesthetics claims that

> experience is riddled with the sensible. Language itself [...] as it occurs "in" our thoughts is hardly to be distinguished from imagery of a variety of kinds, and hardly to be distinguished at times from sensations in the sense of obscure bodily feelings.[2]

An elaborate network of subliminal information is communicated by language and imagery, and in this case architecture, in Jake's picaresque pub-crawl through London's City district in chapters seven and eight of *Under the Net*. Here, Murdoch suggests a complex, shared, subliminal meaning for the various architectural spaces that Jake and his friends encounter in their increasingly drunken pub-crawl that begins at dusk on Holborn Viaduct and ends with a naked ritual bathing in the Thames at dawn. Jake's pub-crawl is a crucial element in his journey away from a solipsistic existence that negotiates only the enclosed space of his fantasies, to one that negotiates the real world as it exists outside them. His increasing awareness will enable him to become more responsive to the needs of others and, consequently, to become the good writer he aspires to be. Thus, over the course of this moonlit evening the striking contrasts that Murdoch constructs in Jake's City environment come to be understood not only in terms of his own personal history, but also as complex spatial configurations associated with the City and its historic past.

Jake is in the midst of a "personal drama" (UN, 106), believing that he has betrayed his friend and mentor, Hugo Belfounder, by plagiarizing Hugo's ideas and using them in his own book, *The Silencer*. The three men are now searching for Hugo because Jake is convinced that Hugo must hate him and wants to apologize. On reaching Hugo's flat, which is "perched on top of some office buildings" near Holborn Viaduct, they find only a note on the door: "*Gone to the pub*" (UN, 102, 104). They leave the flat and stand beside the iron lions on Holborn Viaduct, with "the intense light of evening [falling] upon the spires and towers of St Bride" (UN, 104). Jake, believing he knows Hugo well, decides not to travel west to the King Lud and the pubs of Fleet Street, but to "the less frequented, alley-twisted and church-dominated pubs" to the east (UN, 105). Their attempts to locate Hugo in one of these establishments result in their visiting no fewer than eight: the Viaduct Tavern, just past St Sepulchre; the Magpie and Stump, just across the road from the Old Bailey; the George with its ecclesiastic barman; an unidentified Younger's house on the hill; Short's in St Paul's Churchyard; a Henekey's house in Freeman's Court;