

Iris Murdoch, Novelist of London

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My subject is Iris Murdoch and London: the relation between fact and fiction, setting and story in the work of a great novelist. I shall mention a number of novels in which London is a setting only, and others in which the city is a subject, where the location is fully integrated into the fabric of the narrative. It is not easy to establish hard-and-fast limits here, but my criterion will be those works in which it would be quite impossible to replace London as the milieu (on the one hand) and those in which London is largely incidental (on the other). For our present purposes, this distinction will do well enough.

The only previous study I am aware of is useful article by Louis L. Martz, which deals with all the novels up to and including *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*.¹ Martz argues that Iris Murdoch's London characters are inseparable from their London setting: houses, streets, and parks become part of the personalities living in each particular location. The novels with their precision of detail as to location and setting grow, he suggests, from Iris Murdoch's deep, instinctive affection for the London scene: not only the elegant, genteel neighborhoods, but the squalid, shabby ones too. I shall be illustrating this point by referring not only to the Boltons but also to a run-down section of Notting Hill.

Since Murdoch's work covers a period of nearly forty years—her first novel, *Under the Net*, was published in 1954—it is only to be expected that London itself has changed considerably during that time. In *Under the Net*, for example, Jake and his friends go on an epic pub crawl through the City of London. Most of the pubs mentioned in the description of that odyssey still exist—the Viaduct Tavern, for instance, mentioned in Chapter 7—but the City itself, still a bombed site when Jake roamed through it, has been extensively rebuilt or redeveloped since then, so that Jake's itinerary is to a considerable extent lost to us for ever. Those districts which suffered less from the baleful attentions of the Luftwaffe (or postwar property developers) have nevertheless changed as well. Notting Hill, for instance, is if anything more run-down than it was in 1970, when *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* was published; and even the wealthy Julius King, a leading character in that novel, could probably not afford today to buy a house in the Boltons. These must now change hands at several million pounds each, and so it is not surprising that some of them appear to have been taken over by Middle-Eastern diplomats who have installed intimidating security systems and put bars on the windows in a manner which inevitably alters the character of these magnificent town mansions for the worse.

So the London of Iris Murdoch, preserved in aspic in the novels, is changing all the time; one is looking therefore at a historical, not a present situation.

¹ Louis L. Martz, "Iris Murdoch: The London Novels," in *Twentieth-Century Literature in Retrospect* ed. Reuben A. Brower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) 65-86. Iris Murdoch's love for London is attested in numerous public statements (cf. the blurb to the 1955 Reprint Society ed. of *Under the Net*).

Nevertheless, it is still perfectly feasible to visit much of the London which is such a potent force--almost a character in its own right--in some of Iris Murdoch's novels. It is not by any means the whole conurbation which Iris Murdoch is interested in, however. For one thing--perhaps taking her cue from a reference to Saint Petersburg in Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*²--she, or more accurately her spokesman Jake Donaghue, differentiate sharply between that part of London which is "necessary" and that part which is merely "contingent": "everywhere west of Earls Court is contingent," Jake roundly asserts, adding the gracious qualification, "except for a few places along the river."³ In line with this belief, Iris Murdoch restricts her settings to the central boroughs of Hammersmith, Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster, and the City, a tiny part of the huge conurbation, the outer boroughs of which--the likes of Hillingdon, Sutton, Bexley or Havering--she totally ignores; and it is only the southern parts of Hammersmith, Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster--that is, those areas nearest to the river--that she mentions at all. The River Thames, in fact, dominates her novels as it cuts the agglomeration majestically in two.

This attachment to London's great river on Iris Murdoch's part probably goes back to her childhood. In the present state of knowledge--and I have used only sources in the public domain, not private information--we have only two or three addresses for her, but the earliest is, revealingly, in Chiswick, within a few minutes walk of the waterfront. When she left Badminton School in 1938, the school magazine gave as her home address 4 Eastbourne Road, W4. This turns out to be a quite unremarkable thoroughfare lined with semidetached 1930s houses of the sort one associates with the suburbia dear to the poet laureate Sir John Betjeman. Number 4 is typical of the millions of "semis" which spread like a fungus over the landscape between the two world wars. There are some beautiful houses in the area, particularly in Strand on the Green facing the river, or just over Kew Bridge on Kew Green: small but exquisite Georgian houses and cottages which blend harmoniously with the riverscape which dominates the scene. It comes as a disappointment, even a shock, to discover that Iris Murdoch did not grow up in one of these, but in the architecturally undistinguished "semi" in Eastbourne Road. I certainly expected better of someone born into a middle-class family (her father was a civil servant) who could afford to send her to a girls' public school. It is not that the street is in any way mean: quite the reverse. It is that it betrays, on the part of those who purchase properties in the road, a lack of taste which takes anyone who knows Iris Murdoch's superlative judgment in painting and sculpture somewhat aback.

That this was no more aberration on her parents' part is revealed by two other London addresses we know about, this time flats in Kensington. In the early 1960s Iris Murdoch, no doubt feeling that she needed a pied-à-terre in

² Peter Conradi makes this point in "Iris Murdoch and Dostoevsky," in *Encounters with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Richard Todd (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1988) 37-54. Another way of looking at it is offered by Hilary Burde himself: "London is unreal north of the park and south of the river. Unreality reaches its peak on the horrible hills of Hampstead" (*A Word Child* 5). Some people express surprise that Hampstead is not part of Iris Murdoch's London; but it is quite obvious that--for whatever personal reasons--she cannot stand the borough. South London is treated with similar disdain in ch. 12 of *Under the Net*.

³ *Under the Net*, ch. 2 (where page numbers are given, these refer to the Chatto & Windus or Viking first editions).

town now that she was increasingly having to deal with publishers and journalists (she normally lives in Oxford), took out a 25-year lease on a flat near Earls Court, at no. 59, Harcourt Terrace, SW10. The building itself is part of a long terrace in the plainest of Georgian styles (stucco on the ground floor and yellow brick above that), a no-nonsense property bought no doubt for a no-nonsense purpose by a no-nonsense person. Her current London address is 29 Cornwall Gardens, a more elegant and expensive street a few minutes' walk to the north; the initially more impressive effect this house creates is however attenuated somewhat by the fact that the windows of the top flat are extremely dirty and the paint on the stucco is peeling badly.

These real places, associated with the real Dame Iris, have significant connections with the fiction too. Harcourt Terrace is close to Redcliffe Square and a church, called Saint Luke's, to which I shall return in a moment, and it backs on to the Little Boltons, themselves as their name implies near the Boltons which figure so prominently in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*; and in *A Word Child* Hilary Burde walks through Cornwall Gardens and stops at St Stephen's Church nearby to meditate on Clifford Larr's suicide which he has just heard about. As we learn more about Iris Murdoch's youth and the addresses she lived at, we shall almost certainly discover that they too have close connections with places featured in the novels.

About eight of these--*The Sandcastle*; *The Bell*; *An Unofficial Rose*; *The Unicorn*; *The Red and the Green*; *The Italian Girl*; *The Sea, The Sea*; and *The Philosopher's Pupil*--do not feature London much but are set in other parts of the British Isles. About ten use London only as a decor: that is, they could to a greater or lesser extent be set in any other large city without real loss, or else their use of the London setting is too unspecific for the metropolis to feature as a leading character in its own right (I am thinking here particularly of *The Time of the Angels*, which is so fog-bound as to be topographically imprecise). That leaves the four I wish to concentrate upon.

Under the Net is not only the first in date, it is the first to use London in the special way I have in mind. (Paris is featured too in *Under the Net* but it does not "feel" like the real Paris in the way London, the "beloved city" invoked in ch. 19, does.) As I said earlier, not too much of 1950s London survives, but the description of Hammersmith Upper Mall in ch. 3 corresponds very closely to what can be seen on that particularly impressive piece of river frontage. As for the Miming Theatre of the novel, it seems to be an amalgam of at least two houses in real life (see Martz 67-68).

In *Bruno's Dream* (1969) we move from Hammersmith to the altogether seedier environment of Stadium Street, Chelsea, where Danby lives. In the days before the installation of the Thames flood barrier this area was subject to flooding, and indeed there is a serious inundation in the story. Danby's row of houses is dominated by the chimneys of Lots Road power station (for some reason, three in the novel, in reality two). Hard by is Battersea Bridge--painted red and green, it is one of the most attractive of Thames bridges--over which Danby would walk every day to the printing works he runs, and from which his beloved wife Gwen threw herself "to save a child who could swim anyway" (ch. 2). This represents a sort of frontier to his world, beyond which he never feels comfortable or at home: "Fulham, Battersea, where he knew every public

house, this was the London on whose mystery he meditated" (ch. 2), as we may be sure Iris Murdoch does too.

A Fairly Honourable Defeat covers a much wider spectrum of districts, from elegant SW10, where Rupert and Hilda live (in Priory Walk--Priory Grove in the novel), and where the errant Morgan comes briefly to rest (in Seymour Walk), to Brook Street, W1, where Julius rents a luxurious flat while waiting for a house in the Boltons to come on the market. The street in Notting Hill where Tallis lives (in a house with the door off its hinges) is not named, but it is probably Powis Gardens, W11: the name, vaguely Welsh in sound, is close to "Tallis," and there is a church opposite, a Victorian Gothic pile called All Saints. In the novel it is referred to as "St Luke's" (ch. 5); however this is probably because Iris Murdoch did not bother to check its real name but used a name she knew well, that of St Luke's in Redcliffe Square near her flat in Harcourt Terrace.

I do not believe she was deliberately concealing the real name, since elsewhere in the novel she is so accurate and specific in her topographical references. For instance, the pub into which Morgan invites Julius in ch. 8 is a real place: the Drayton Arms, on the corner of Drayton Gardens and the Old Brompton Road, a few hundred yards further along which is the corner of Cranley Gardens where Morgan tells Julius that she had an abortion when she discovered she was carrying his child.

In *A Word Child* (1975), finally, London comes fully into its own as a continually felt presence in the novel. The narrator, Hilary Burde, is in his own words "an Undergrounder" (38), someone for whom the Circle Line on the London underground is home. Hilary rides the underground to get to work (Westminster Station, handy for his office in Whitehall) or to find sustenance (such as at Paddington Station, at the buffet--since closed down--next to the war memorial by C. Sargeant Jagger depicting a soldier of the first war, his trench coat flung over his shoulders and his tin hat pushed back on his head, reading a letter from home). The tube enables Hilary to meditate upon tragic monuments, such as the Guards memorial in Whitehall, and upon the little fountain in Kensington Gardens surmounted by two embracing bears, which is its comic counterpart; and upon T.S. Eliot, as well as upon Clifford Larr the friend, in St Stephen's, Gloucester Road, where the poet served as churchwarden but which can also be entered from Cornwall Gardens, Iris Murdoch's own street. All the sites in the novel may be visited and photographed; of particular interest is the group of ornamental ponds at the north end of Kensington Gardens which Hilary calls his "Leningrad Garden" because it seems to him out of place in London, being characteristic rather of Russia's great northern city.

More to the point, London sights and scenes closely reflect the action. At the very end of the story, for instance, Thomasina proposes to Hilary under the bleak spire of St. Mary Abbots in Kensington early on Christmas morning as the snow falls thickly about them. Whether this site augurs well for their future happiness as a married couple every reader will have an opinion about. What is clear is that, as for Jagger's letter-reading World War I soldier, billets doux are vital to Hilary's happiness also, and a lot of them are quoted in the text. Likewise, the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens is, appropriately, the place where Hilary falls in love with Kitty. But perhaps the most poignant paral-

leling of real London scenes and Hilary's emotional odyssey is the moment when he connects the battle honors listed on the Guards memorial in Whitehall with his own spiritual struggles (294).

All that being said, however, I am mindful that Iris Murdoch herself warns the critic of the danger of being too mesmerized by such congruences between real London and the London of her imagination: "better, in some cases, impressions," she cautions.⁴ The city that she visits so fruitfully in her novels is, after all, a place which exists truly only in her own magnificent imagination. To illustrate this point conclusively, one would need only to visit the sites most frequently mentioned in her novels and see how she mythicizes and transforms them. On the other hand, her use of famous London landmarks has considerable documentary value, and this will inevitably increase as London changes in the future more rapidly and profoundly than it has in the last forty years. It is striking how the same places--pubs, museums, parks and churches--keep on cropping up in novel after novel. As London alters with the passing years, the novels of Iris Murdoch will come to be seen by the cultural, social and architectural historian as preserving for ever the essence of the great city.

⁴ In a letter to me (29 August 1987).