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Review of Peter J. Conradi, ed. and introd. Iris Murdoch: A Writer at War (Letters and Diaries 1939-45). London: Short Books, 2010. ISBN 978-1-906021-22-1. £16.99 (HB).

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Peter Conradi is well-known amongst Murdoch scholars now as her official biographer, but he was also a good friend of the author during her life time; and has written some of the most astute and interesting criticism on Murdoch's creative work, his literary study, *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist* (originally published in 1986), is still widely drawn upon by new Murdoch scholars today. His latest insight into the personal and early professional life of one of Britain's most prolific and well-read authors, *Iris Murdoch: A Writer at War Letters and Diaries 1939-45*, is also a welcome addition to the increasing wealth of Murdoch related publications available, and is as vital to serious students of Murdoch's work as it is integral to the re-examination of her legacy.

Conradi introduces Murdoch's personal diaries and correspondence with a review of the popular image of her after her death in 1999, and how this has been affected most notably by her struggle with Alzheimers; and the posthumously released film, *Iris*, based on her husband, John Bayley's memoirs of her life.

Although Conradi is not critical of the film as a whole, he expresses concern "[t]hat the film contained not one word Murdoch ever wrote nor much accurate rendition of any she said" (10). He states that Murdoch "was in death unwittingly reduced to two opposed stereotypes: in vulgar language bonking (younger Iris) or bonkers (elderly Iris)." (10) It is easy to see why Conradi wishes to readdress the balance, as this rather narrow popular reputation is both strange and unfair for an author for whom a relatively elementary consideration of her philosophy, fiction, plays and poetry belies an academic prowess and thirst for knowledge that is hard

to rival, and which secured her the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, a Whitbread, and three Booker Prize nominations, as well as eventually the Booker itself for *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). Conradi's complaint appears to rail against the general public rather than the serious scholar, but this rare public insight into Murdoch's private journals and her war-time letters to two men she had strong emotional attachments to, Frank Thompson and David Hicks, is undoubtedly intended to appeal to both the casual lay reader and the dedicated critic.

Conradi introduces the overall work as well as each of its three sections, by explaining the period and the people each part focuses on, both in terms of the wider significance of events both pre and during the Second World War, in addition to the impact of these on Murdoch's personal world. He also gives some comment to the potential implications of biographical details to her creative enterprises. For a reader who may have little knowledge of Murdoch and her work, the biographical material is thereby made more manageable and could consequently serve as an inspiration to further explore her writing. For the scholar, Conradi's insights are no less valuable, and much like Murdoch's work itself his commentary works on two equally useful levels, depending on the contextual information and literary background of the reader it can be both an introduction to Iris Murdoch and a source of numerous penetrating considerations. Murdoch was both a best seller and an intellectual so making the reality of her personal life more accessible and thereby making her work more palatable to the first-time Murdoch initiate seems eminently appropriate. The availability of even this limited amount of personal information in the general retail domain will be of great assistance to students of all levels who have previously been obliged to travel to visit various archives and libraries to view the majority of similar material in her own hand.

Murdoch's sections of the book begin with substantial excerpts from the 'Magpie Journals', which chart her tour with a group of Oxford players in two heady weeks in the height of summer 1939, just prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, indeed according to Conradi, Murdoch made it home, "early in the

small hours of the first day of war” (25). The international backdrop makes the peculiarly Englishness of her situation and her youthful innocence even more poignant, and when juxtaposed with the second section charting the romantic friendship of Iris and a fellow Oxford student, Frank Thompson, through their war time correspondence; the impact of war on the individual becomes an additional and equally important purpose of the work. Thompson died a war hero in 1944, not yet twenty-four years old. In her earlier diaries Murdoch wrote on the possibility of war, “We have so many urgent little problems of our own, that we have not time to look up & see the gathering clouds” (55). Murdoch’s words on Frank’s death in the final section of this book seem to reverberate against her previous naiveté, “I suppose I’m only now beginning to realise the war isn’t just a short interval after which one resumes – something. There’s nothing to resume.” (216). Murdoch’s personal wartime experience consequently becomes not only valuable from a literary perspective but from a more general historical vantage point. The frustration of communicating by letter alone, of not being able to see or speak with loved ones sometimes until it was too late was a shared experience for more than one nation of people. Part three of the book contains the letters between Iris and David Hicks to whom she was engaged, Conradi describes how Hicks’ posting with the British Council meant that they did not see each other for seven years, relying only on their letters for communication, which detail the end of the relationship as they do the confounding twists and turns of living and loving in such an unsettled period.

Murdoch’s ability to write with style and flair, her talent for characterisation and her ability to turn life into artistry are all apparent through her own words, but it is her humanity and her feeling for everyone she refers to in these journals and letters, as well as her ambition for life and for work that are of true import in this book. Such aspects not only provide illumination of the woman rather than the popular reputation, but they cannot help but influence interpretations of her creative output and her philosophy. This is however, only an excerpt of a full life and cannot therefore either conclusively evaluate the person or the professional

direction of the author who was Iris Murdoch, but it does provide an invaluable addition to the field for Murdoch fans and sceptics alike.