Kingston University acquires revealing Iris Murdoch letters

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A collection of letters written by Dame Iris Murdoch, which reveals the depth of her relationship with one of her closest female friends, has been acquired by Kingston University's Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies. The 250 letters from the 1940s to 1990s were written by Murdoch, the philosopher and distinguished post-war British novelist, to fellow philosopher Professor Philippa Foot. The pair first met in the early 1940s and subsequently had a brief affair in the late 1960s.

The purchase – made possible by a £107,000 Heritage Lottery Fund grant – represents an important addition to the London university's Iris Murdoch Archive, now thought to be the most extensive in the world. The letters provide a rare insight into Murdoch's private life and thoughts, Dr Anne Rowe, the Director of the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies explained. "They hold particular human interest because of the intense personal relationship between the two women who first met as undergraduates at Somerville College, Oxford," she explained. "They went through all the ups and downs of friendship together but they remained very close for six decades and, in the final stages of Murdoch's illness, Philippa was one of the few apart from Murdoch's husband with whom she could be left alone without becoming agitated."

Murdoch and Foot's 60-year friendship survived personal upheavals and painful emotional dilemmas. Referring to an earlier estrangement, Murdoch wrote in the late 1950s, 'Losing you, and losing you in that way, was one of the worst things that ever happened to me. I hope very much that we can now recapture something. I have thought of you so much in these years and dreamed painfully of you too. I would entirely wish only to speak to you from the heart'. In 1968, the year in which their relationship became more intimate, Murdoch wrote, 'Sometimes I feel I have to invent a language to talk to you in, though my heart is very full of definite things to say. You stir some very deep part of my soul. Be patient with me and don't be angry with my peculiarities. I love you very much.'

Iris Murdoch (1919-1999), who published 26 novels between 1954 and 1995, is recognised internationally as one of the most significant British writers of the 20th century. The latest purchase will ensure that the unique letters, which also give a first-hand insight in to the social, political, philosophical and literary zeitgeist in Britain in the mid-to-late 20th century, will stay in the United Kingdom and be made available to a global community of scholars and researchers, as well as to the wider public. "The powerful combination of historical, intellectual, political and personal insight in the letters provides a unique opportunity to encourage members of the public to explore the significance of scholarly archives to British heritage," Dr Rowe said.

The Heritage Lottery Fund grant will finance a year-long project, which will include a range of activities created for scholars, researchers and students as well as the wider community. In addition to the academic world, reading and community groups (including MIND in Kingston, Age Concern Kingston, Kingston Carers' Network and Adults with Learning Difficulties) will be welcomed into the University and encouraged to work with academics.

Iris Murdoch had always understood that the world of philosophy should have relevance for ordinary people, Dr Rowe said. "This grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund will enable us to break down perceived barriers between the work of academics and members of the community and so broaden people's horizons," she added.

Sue Bowers, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: “The Iris Murdoch archive at Kingston is one of the most important centres for the study of this celebrated British writer in the world. We are delighted to be able to assist in acquiring such a significant collection of letters and wish Kingston University every success in the project to make them an accessible resource for everyone.”

A major exhibition, celebrating the lives and work of Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot and the richness of Murdoch’s letters, will be held at Kingston Museum in May 2013.

Further information

Kingston University Press Office on 020 8417 3036 or email press@kingston.ac.uk.