

Memoir: John and Iris

Frank Egerton

DURING THE FINAL YEARS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, I was lucky enough to spend some time with John Bayley and Iris Murdoch. Although my first meeting with Iris was not perhaps the most auspicious, the warmth, generosity and kindness of the Bayleys had a profound effect on me and in many ways transformed my life. I first met them in 1984, when I was living in Steeple Aston and was working as a trainee land agent. I had been studying for A and S Levels in English Literature in my spare time and desperately wanted to give up my job and read the subject at Oxford but did not have much idea about how I was going to achieve this. I had written to several colleges but none seemed to offer any hope of accepting a mature student. Someone at the local pub, the Red Lion, suggested I might ask the advice of Professor Bayley, who lived in the village.

I wrote a letter and heard nothing for a couple of months, by which time I assumed he was too busy to help. But then a note arrived saying that he had been in America with his wife Iris, and would I drop round one afternoon. When I knocked at the door, Iris appeared after a long delay. She seemed distracted and I imagined I had interrupted her work. My embarrassed and characteristically long-winded explanation of why I was there did not help matters. 'You want to see John?' she said with some exasperation. 'You're one of his students.' 'No,' I said but she had gone inside. When John arrived, I could not immediately see his face because he was putting on a jumper in which there were more holes than one would have expected. After a struggle, his head popped through and he said, 'A bit déshabillé'.

We talked about my plans and I was struck by how interested in them he seemed and how gently encouraging he was. He said he would think about who might consider an application from a mature student. He would speak to his colleague at St Catherine's, Michael Gearin-Tosh. Could I send them some examples of my essays? Colleges were reluctant to offer places other than to school-leavers because of the impact of Mrs Thatcher's cuts. But there might be some who would. In the end he and Michael suggested I get in touch with Stephen Wall at Keble. Stephen said that the college would consider an application but only if I sat Oxbridge Entrance Examinations, rather than following the out-dated and less demanding

entry procedures for mature students. I gave up my job, enrolled with a private tutor and, after months of gruelling but exciting work, sat Oxbridge. I ran out of time on the essay paper and spent an agonised sleepless night believing I had blown my chances, but the two essays I did complete, together with the pieces I wrote for the close reading paper, were strong and I got a place.

I saw John again a few times when I was at Oxford and he always wanted to know how I was getting on. I loved Oxford and studying English. After I graduated, I wrote to him again, this time to ask him for advice about my ambition to become a novelist. Over the next five or so years I would meet with him regularly and he would read and comment on successive drafts of novels, although it was only towards the end of that period that he suggested I might like to meet Iris again. When he and I met we generally did so at St Catherine's for lunch. Sometimes he would help himself to cheese, which went into his pocket, wrapped in a napkin, 'For Iris'.

I wrote five first-draft novels and hoped each time I sent him a typescript that he would say I was producing work that was publishable. He did like the second one, but I could not think how to develop it, so I wrote another and another. John never really said very much that was specific in respect of the detail of my writing but he did make overarching comments about tone and structure, for example, as well as such matters as the way characters said things and their likeability ('Why would anyone want to spend time with him?'). He also told me that he had started writing fiction again, for the first time since the publication of his debut novel, *In Another Country*, in 1955. He was working on a novel called *Alice*: 'A late flowering, perhaps'.

His approach to discussing my work was characteristic of that of his generation, I would say. He did not want to prescribe what I should be doing. Instead, he wanted me to think through what I felt I should improve on and how I would go about doing so, under his broad direction. Always he gave me time, which was incredibly valuable. However, he never let me have any illusions about how difficult it was to actually make money out of writing fiction.

There was nevertheless a sense of him not fully understanding who I was as both a person and a writer and of him being intrigued to know more about me. I also did not fully understand who I was myself, although I felt strongly that writing fiction was helping me to find out. Once, the tutor I had worked with for Oxbridge had said that John and Michael wondered if I had been psychologically abused when younger. John never mentioned this to me and I concluded that he and Michael were picking up on my general lack of confidence, which I accepted as an essential want in my personality.

It was in 1993 that John told me that Iris had read the drafts that I had sent him over the years and he asked if I and my girlfriend, Jess, would like to come to supper with them. I was bowled over. By this time they had moved to Charlbury

Road in Oxford. It was a lovely evening, and my initial nervousness was soon dispelled. As well as Jess and myself, the guests were Michael and two other dons. There was a fair amount of Bulgarian red wine and a great deal of conviviality. There were pork pies and cold meats and salad (tomatoes mostly but also eggs and lettuce). Guests circulated from time to time and I was next to Iris on two occasions. We spoke about Ireland – my mother had lived near Kildare as a child – and Jess and I visited Belfast a couple of times each year to see her younger sister. But there came a point where Iris drew this conversation to a close, saying the Irish political situation was difficult. She seemed not to want to discuss literature much, although she was interested in my Welsh ancestry and the evocations of the natural world in my elusive second novel, together with its elements of myth and magic. She suggested – firmly – that I should read John Cowper Powys. I will always be grateful for this recommendation. We also talked about the process of writing. At one point she asked me how I kept track of the narrative. She mimed flicking back and forth through a manuscript. She emphasised the importance of continuity and developing the story in a thorough way. At the time, I took this simply as sound practical advice – and it has stood me in good stead, as a writer and when teaching creative writing at Oxford. With hindsight, I wonder if what she mimed was something that she was conscious of needing to do more as she grew older. There was something intense and urgent about this part of the conversation. Later, when the port was circulating, she came and sat next to me and held out her closed hand. When she opened it, there was a small apple which she urged me to take. It was from a friend's garden. The port came from a store somewhere outside. It was served in large glasses and as one drank a curious spikey sediment appeared, like tiny plum-coloured spillikins. No one took any notice. As we left, I glanced through a door to a room lit only by the streetlight outside, and noticed how the dust made the surfaces look like a landscape muffled by snow.

After that evening Jess and I saw John and Iris a number of times. At book launches for their friend Angela Huth and for John's novel *Alice*. We went to the theatre with John, Iris and Peter Shaffer. John and Iris came to supper with us in our tiny flat on Osney Island. We walked down the street to visit our allotment before we ate. During the meal, which involved a lot of home-grown produce, Iris was particularly interested in talking about food with Jess and about the dress design company AnnaBelinda which Jess managed. Again she was interested in ancestry – Welsh and Scottish on Jess's side – and what her forebears had done. When we were married at Binsey church, we had our party in the evening at the Waterman's Arms and John and Iris came for an hour or so. Iris spent much of the time talking to a friend's sister who had no interest in books and who did not know who Iris was. They looked to be having a wonderful conversation which involved a lot of laughter.

We never saw Iris after that time. When I next met John he was distracted and looked exhausted but did not say what was wrong. After Iris died, I went to Blackwell's bookshop to a reading John gave from *Elegy for Iris*. We shook hands at the signing table. It took me a long time to reach it. Readers, mostly older men, were queuing to shake his hand and to talk to him, grateful that he was giving them a voice and putting into words what they were going through. Sometime later John read at the Oxford Union, where I was working as a library cataloguer. Afterwards I joined him and the committee for supper at the Cherwell Boathouse restaurant. I gave him a copy of my first novel *The Lock*, which had a quote from him on the cover. It had been reviewed in *The Times* and the *Spectator* and in other publications. It was such a happy moment. I also met John's second wife, Audi. I noticed that he still wore second hand clothes – but from a more upmarket shop, I felt. He looked wonderfully well. That was the last time I saw him, although I received one or two cards before he died.