

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## The Preciousness of Everything The 2014 Brian Medlin Memorial Lecture<sup>1</sup>

Brian Matthews

*The Willandra Billabong, which in moderately wet seasons relieves the Middle Lachlan of some superfluous water, and in epoch-marking flood-times reluctantly debouches into the Lower Darling, divides the country between those rivers into two unequal parts. Roughly speaking – the black-soil plains (which are chiefly light red) lie to the south of this almost imperceptible depression, whilst on the north – sometimes close by, sometimes out of sight, and sometimes thirty miles away – the irregular scrub frontier denotes an abrupt change of soil, though the uniform level is maintained.*

*'Here you enter upon a region presenting to the rarely clouded sky an unbroken foliage-surface, with isothermal zones rigidly marked by their indigenous growths. A tract of country until yesterday bare of surface water for lack of occupation, and lacking occupation for dearth of surface water. Which goes to show that regularity of rainfall is not ensured by copious growth of timber.*

*'However, a hundred miles back in that leafy solitude – just where the line of water conservation, creeping northward from the Lachlan, here and there touched the line creeping southward from the Darling – [you can stand on] ... the veranda of the barracks, [of] Goolumbulla station ...*

This could be from one of Brian Medlin's letters to Iris Murdoch, directing her gaze into the bush, detailing and observing it with forensic care, effortlessly slipping into a self-deprecating pedantry – 'black-soil plains (which are chiefly light red)' – narrating with a rhythm driven by the love of quirky logic – 'a tract of country until yesterday bare of surface water for lack of occupation, and lacking occupation for dearth of surface water.'

It isn't Medlin, though so many of his attentive descriptions of the bush for Iris Murdoch are as good and as vivid, including his painstaking exegesis of the billabong which he explains without irony is not 'a pond'. The piece I quoted is the work of someone important to Medlin and someone who is an evocative, murmurous presence in this correspondence: it is the voice of Joseph Furphy's Tom Collins in Furphy's great novel, *Such is Life*.

We are camped amongst ragged old black box surrounded by river reds. Black box is a rough-barked eucalypt that grows near water and on flood plains. It tends to take over from the red gums as you move to higher, dryer ground though, like them, it needs flood conditions to germinate. It gives the landscape an austere, muted, undisciplined, tough quality. The red gum is the smooth-barked large tree that gives watercourses all over Australia their Australian feel ... The red gum is without doubt, to any objective judge, the most beautiful tree in the world.

<sup>1</sup> This lecture was given at Flinders University in June 2014, preceding the launch of *Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie: The Correspondence between Iris Murdoch and Brian Medlin 1976-1995* edited by Gillian Dooley and Graham Nerlich and published by Cambridge Scholars Press.

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This *is* Medlin, with the same loving familiarity with the remote landscape as Collins, with his own lyricism, his own Collins-style insistence on accuracy and verisimilitude. It is a kind of writing which, to some extent at least, his profoundly affectionate correspondence with Iris Murdoch drew from him; the close yet paradoxically distant relationship gave him a sort of permission to be a poet again. Murdoch recognises him as a poet not only because he sends her some of his poems but because she sees unerringly the poetic sensibility and vision which find their space in the freedoms of personal, private correspondence with a dear friend.

Iris Murdoch is corresponding with a man who, on his own rueful admission, has left his life's work till his last few years. How to get things written, what to write about, how to write were topics Medlin and I frequently canvassed over a coffee or a few beers. Once when I told him, yet again, still having actually written very little, that I had a terrific idea for a story, he said, 'Ah, all those great books rotting in the mind.'

In an early letter, Iris Murdoch remarks that 'character is ... much concerned with showing how contradictory, muddled, incomplete and basically *mysterious* people are. Opaque.' What she liked about Medlin's stories and poems, she says, was their 'sort of lyrical sense of the funny, messy mysteriousness of life. Tom Collins,' she adds, 'is very good at this.'

I wasn't bad at it myself 47 years ago when I first met Brian Medlin, but not in the complimentary way Murdoch means. I was fearing that life was about to become deeply mysterious, not very funny and probably messy and some of these premonitions had obscurely to do with Brian Medlin.

A couple of years after Medlin became the inaugural Professor of Philosophy at Flinders University, I arrived to join the School of Language and Literature, as it then was, as a junior lecturer. It was my first university appointment and, by the time I'd found my office and gratefully closed its door behind me, I was feeling rather in awe of everyone. This was January 1969 but I had taken up my post at the very end of the previous year, having arrived six months late after a bout of peritonitis. This late arrival meant that my entire experience of the School had been attendance at the final Board Meeting. At this meeting two members of the Philosophy discipline, Professor Medlin and Greg O'Hare, clinically and relentlessly laid bare the delinquency of a member of staff whose failure to carry out his responsibilities as a teacher and a head of discipline had resulted in serious disadvantage to an otherwise first class Musicology student. A significant part of the problem, though by no means all of it, was the staff member's failure to keep adequate records of the student's work over the year. The Medlin/O'Hare inquisition was a riveting performance – the delicate strokes of a scalpel alternating with broad, slugging whacks of a sledge hammer – and I left the meeting silently intoning over and over 'I must always record the marks', 'I must always record the marks' ...

In late January of the following year I made my official appearance. I knew two people in the whole school – Syd Harrex and Ken Arvidson – and they were both on leave. I felt hugely intimidated by many of those whom I didn't know, except by sight and reputation, and of all these the tall, dark, formidable, famously witty and saturnine Professor of Philosophy was the one I feared most. It didn't help that I was allotted the room next to his but anyway, in those summer days before the start of my first ever term as a lecturer, I would arrive early in the morning, go into my room and more or less skulk there while I worked out how to make up for what seemed to me suddenly a catastrophically inadequate intellectual preparation for my new life. I didn't even go to morning tea. After about two weeks of this reclusive behaviour, I was startled one morning when there was what sounded like not a knock but a kick on my door which then burst open before I could speak and in walked Professor Medlin.

‘Look, mate,’ he said, ‘if you’ve taken a vow of silence for some reason, then of course I’ll respect it. As a matter of fact, there are a few people round here that I wish would emulate you. But if that’s not the case, why don’t you come and have a cup of tea and meet some of your colleagues, for what that might turn out to be worth.’

So I did, of course, and my life at Flinders changed radically for the better under what became a stern, no bullshit but straightforwardly affectionate mentorship. As time passed and I learnt to leave more and more often the safety of my room, we spent a lot of time together talking poetry, politics, cricket and gradually, as we grew to know each other better, reminiscing about our very different pasts.

Though in general, like most of us, Brian loathed meetings and committees, the committee room – with its posturings, absurdities, cut and thrust and, sometimes, stimulating debate – was one of the many stages on which Brian gave some of his more memorable performances in those days. I would often sit with Brian at the meetings we attended and so had a privileged view of some of the theatre that frequently followed his entry into a debate.

One time, at a meeting under the chairmanship of a professor newly arrived at Flinders, while Brian was speaking I could see that on the opposite side of the table one of his listeners was becoming quietly enraged. This man was a known and self-proclaimed antagonist of Medlin and the moment he had an opportunity he launched into an extraordinary anti-Medlin tirade. When he had exhausted his onslaught the chairman, apparently unaccustomed to the rough and tumble of a Flinders debate, looked visibly shocked as he offered Medlin the right of reply. Thanking him politely, Medlin said: ‘Mr Chairman, I did not say what I said with the express intention of driving our colleague opposite into an apoplectic fit. That this has in fact happened I can only regard as a bonus.’

At another characteristically tumultuous meeting of the Board of the by then re-named School of Humanities, the head of the Discipline of Fine Arts handed round a printed page headed ‘Propositions’. There were eleven propositions but as it turned out not enough of the sheets to go round. When one of them reached me I put it between me and Brian and we both read it. Brian studied it intently, tracing from one printed proposition to the next with index finger, occasionally nodding or grunting. After a few minutes of this he passed the page on for those who still might not have seen it. When the item came up for discussion there was perhaps a quarter hour of the usual swapping of opinion, outrage, assent and objection and then Medlin entered the fray. Still without a copy in front of him, he said something like this: ‘If proposition 4 is true then propositions 8 and 10 can’t be; if propositions 8 and 10 are in doubt then proposition 6 becomes redundant, if we scrap Proposition 6 then Proposition 1 becomes ...’ and so on. It was an extraordinary performance and the question of whether or not there was any flaw in the stages of his analysis – though no one pointed any out at the time – became secondary to the sheer cavalier daring of his intervention.

Medlin expected such daring of others. In May 1988 Brian drove John Bray, Rick Hosking and me to McLaren Vale where we were going to have lunch at The Barn. Having heard from someone that I was going to Sydney the next day, Brian asked me why and I told him it was because I’d won the NSW Premier’s Literary Award for Non-Fiction. He was genuinely delighted to hear this.

‘Do you have to give a speech?’ he said.

‘I do,’ I told him ‘but I haven’t worked out what to say yet.’

‘The Elder Cato,’ Brian said, ‘ended every speech to the Roman Senate with the words, ‘And furthermore Carthage must be destroyed – Carthago delenda est. You should end like that,’ Brian said as if nothing could be more obvious.

Well, with some difficulty and severe contortions of sequence and logic, not to mention some embarrassment, but with the ameliorating help of a judicious amount of alcohol, I actually *did* contrive to end my short acceptance speech with ‘Carthago delenda est.’ During the drinks afterwards I met Ed Campion, an old friend, very good writer and a Jesuit priest. ‘What did you think of my Latin conclusion?’ I said incautiously. ‘Delenda est Carthago would have been more elegant,’ he said. I reported to Brian on my return and quoted Campion’s amendment. ‘Fucking Jesuits,’ he said.

The Brian Medlin of these anecdotes and many others like them is certainly present in *Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie* – the book we’re here to launch tonight – sometimes in astringent asides about vice-chancellors or Flinders University undergraduates, occasionally in *bons mots* about some of his colleagues. Camping at Monte Collina with fresh water running out, he writes: ‘There are worse fates than hanging round here, five seconds with a Flinders undergraduate being one of them; five milliseconds with a vice-chancellor being another.’ But something about the epistolary form is profoundly and excitingly liberating for him – it allowed him to be unashamedly personal, to digress, to pile detail upon detail, to pontificate and explain, to tell stories and pursue references, to muse, to express freely wonder, exasperation, amazement, love, to inhabit the narrative not guardedly but with the kind of panache and confidence and striking personality that had been typical of him in his prime as a university teacher. A string of letters has obvious similarities to a diary, especially the way Medlin writes, often day-to-day accounts with a thread of what might loosely be called ‘plot’ running through them and which he often returns to from a long, digressive excursion. The comparison with Tom Collins’s diary narrative in Joseph Furphy’s *Such is Life* is an obvious and powerful one. Tom Collins explains his plan in this way: ‘I purpose taking certain entries from my diary and amplifying these to the minutest detail of occurrence or conversation. This will afford the observant reader a fair picture of Life as that engaging problem has presented itself to me.’

Making the obvious allowances, Medlin’s contributions to *Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie* match Tom Collins’s expressed purpose: amplified often to the minutest detail, dealing in occurrences and conversations and being itself a prolonged conversation and certainly affording the observant reader a fair picture of life as seen by a poet, a philosopher, a naturalist, a keen observer and, perhaps above all, as seen for the benefit, enjoyment and edification of a dear friend, because, of course, a crucial aspect of the epistolary form for Medlin and, I suppose, for anyone embarking on a substantial correspondence, is who is being written *to*.

Iris Murdoch’s letters are mostly brief, but they are vital to the fabric of this remarkable narrative. In the first letter of the collection we hear from her *in medias res*. It is obvious that the correspondence reaches further back than July 2 in (possibly) 1976 and that she is to some extent continuing a conversation. She has yet to see some of Medlin’s prose and poetry but would love to, she has read Tom Collins ‘with the greatest pleasure’ – and thus *Such is Life* surfaces in the very first letter – and, since Medlin, it seems, may have described to her some of the upheavals at Flinders around that time, including the occupation of the Registry in 1974, she reveals, ‘I fear you might find me reactionary about student participation.’ But how does *she* find *him*? ‘Are you a Marxist? What are you exactly, politically, if that isn’t a silly question? Anarchist? Not Stalinist obviously. Maoist? Or –’

As the letters settle into a continuity through the 1980s, a pattern begins in which Murdoch quietly, gently, sometimes eccentrically prompts with news, questions and opinions and Medlin, while not at all ignoring her various lines of thought, enquiry and opinion, uses her letters as a kind of joyous opportunity to take her into another world. So when she supposes on 12 May 1986 that his politics are probably ‘much the same’ as before, he replies, ‘Yes, politically I

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ooligal' leading into an anecdote about how Christine 'was delivered from Booligal by a party of pig shooters' which he interrupts by returning to 'that wonderful old river, the Murray' which in turn brings him back to the camp on Lake Mournpoul, the brilliant bird life there and how it will be hard to leave in a week when he has to go back to 'rotten old Flinders' where there are some things that keep him going, but he wonders whether it is wise for him to stay as it is surely, along with the constant pain from his motorbike accident, 'an important cause of his depression'. The next sentence is: 'Yes, politically I remain much the same.'

This is wonderful stuff and typical, and as the years of correspondence wind out, he becomes so much better at it. The long descriptions and digressions become more ordered and organised without losing their spontaneity or the charm of their serendipity. And he is encouraged in what gradually becomes an extended tutorial on the Australian bush and its ways because Iris Murdoch is such a willing and marvelling listener. 'I like your account of your holiday,' she writes '... leading the good Australian life – very enviable – doing such lovely good things, being with trees and animals. I especially liked the account of the little horse. I see you as a horseman ...' Then she adds, as if recognising that this is the Brian Medlin she has come to know so well, '... your friends there sound a good lot too in spite of their political views.' This is Iris's gentle, placatory take on Medlin's 'I am staying with some friends ... [who] are very interesting, vital people, though in many ways very reactionary. They drive me bloody crazy at times.'

Murdoch's distant presence and her calm, attractive musing on her own and Medlin's life and work are fascinating from another point of view. Though he refers to things going on in his professional life at times he rarely goes into much detail. 'Rotten old Flinders is rotten' and various curt salvos at vice-chancellors are pretty much the extent of his reference to what was in fact a tremendously volatile time in his life as Professor of Philosophy at Flinders and a time of massive upheaval for most of us at the university. At the centre of much of the controversy was the Philosophy Department's adoption of the system of continuous assessment, which included self-assessment and peer assessment. School Board meetings became tense and hostile; friends and departments divided; a paper war conducted by the dissemination of roneoed A4 sheets hammering out point after point and riposte after riposte invaded the corridors. These antipathies and confrontations in the School at large fed into and to some extent exacerbated a conflict brewing in the English discipline. As Vincent Buckley observed during a similar earlier eruption at Melbourne University, 'God knows English departments are strange places' and the English discipline at Flinders at that time strenuously proceeded to exemplify this, dropping into tune with the conflagration sweeping the School as a whole.

Medlin as ever stood very tall in all this though he did not specifically lead it – or at least he tried hard not to lead it. He dealt sternly with the people he styled his 'enemies', thrilled some of his friends, sorely tested the wavering equanimity of others and utterly exasperated many more. For the record, he and I agreed entirely about the Vietnam protests which preceded and led into the Flinders' confrontations but we were often on opposite sides of what now look like the absurd barricades erected in the cause of the assessment wars. We didn't fall out but we had some serious moments. Some of my roneoed artillery was specifically aimed at Brian, Greg O'Hare, Rodney Allen and Ian Hunt, and I vividly remember – and may still have archived away somewhere – some enfillading mortar attacks dropped by Greg and Brian on me.

My sense that the correspondence with Iris Murdoch gradually gave him a kind of permission, a blessed liberty to write at length about the natural world and talk philosophy and politics – to a lesser extent – with his guard down, is borne out I think by the absence of these academic, professional and administrative horrors from the letters – not wholly absent, it's true,

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and there may be other letters where they feature, but easily overwhelmed by passions and experiences of much greater personal moment and in many cases of course, of profound beauty. There was, incidentally and parenthetically, a postscript to those conflicts and confrontations many years later, when Brian and Christine brought along some of their favourite teas and Jane and I had a cuppa with them in our kitchen. Somehow a spirited conversation about the police force – which included some of Brian’s good memories of the coppers during his imprisonment – became diverted to the old days of the Flinders troubles and Brian, with characteristic good-humoured relentlessness paraphrased for me one of the arguments I had proposed during the roneo wars and then clinically dismantled it. It was a stunning, entertaining performance and, like the eleven Propositions event, the question of whether or not it all hung together was entirely overwhelmed by the panache and intellectual dazzle of the performance. Jane, however, having listened intently, said his rebuttal was flawless.

Events and characters outside the walls and reach of Flinders University are dealt with: his motorcycle accident, for example, which, catastrophic as it genuinely was, he recounts for Murdoch with irony and a sort of half confected, half genuinely outraged spleen. The woman involved, he calls Dr W.K. ‘The only way I could have avoided her,’ he tells Iris Murdoch, ‘was to have stayed at home in bed – and even then I’d give her an even chance of crashing through the front window ... “I’m terribly sorry, Professor,” she said as I was lying on the road with my pelvis knocked to bits, “but I do have a PhD in chemistry” ... she visited me a couple of times in hospital to tell me how sorry she was and how bad I was feeling.’

In a later letter he remarks, ‘She used to visit me in hospital till I told her to hop it.’ Well, it might have been the very day he’d told her to hop it that I passed a young woman near Brian’s hospital door as I arrived to visit him. ‘That was her,’ he said when I walked in. ‘She’s got a PhD in Chemistry, mate. Articulated straight from Matric to Masters, no doubt. Skipped basic fucking driving, though.’

*Never Mind the Bourgeoisie* has any number of asides that are part of its charm; some are like that one, some are more sober, like the marvellous farewell to Flexmore Hudson: ‘My intellectual life really began with my friendship with Hudson,’ Medlin tells Iris and his affection and sadness for Hudson in his last ruined years are intensely moving. ‘Bray spoke at the service well and movingly,’ he writes. ‘[But] hardly any of Adelaide’s self-acclaimed literati were there. A poet, a small publisher, a few drinking mates. I don’t know.’

And there is Murdoch’s running joust with the Australian language, occasionally reducing Medlin to near speechlessness, which he indicates by a succession of exclamation marks: ‘Oh my Dear Iris, what are we going to do with you [16 exclamation marks]. Not, repeat *not* flat as a lizard, but *flat out like a lizard drinking*. The words are fixed and fossilised into an imperishable beauty destined to remain in midst of other woe than ours and no more to be tampered with by pommy novelists than are the legs of Phar Lap to be redesigned by a merry-go-round proprietor.’

Repeatedly, Iris Murdoch ends letters with a wish that he would come to England, so that they could get together, sing some songs, have a few jars, talk philosophy and literature. Occasionally, Medlin counters with his own invitation and an apparent rejection of her fantasy which is too good humoured to be dispiriting. ‘I must reproach you,’ he writes. ‘I say “Come to Australia” and you reply “Come to England”. What sort of bloody answer is that? England!’ As time passes though, it becomes more and more clear that they are not going to meet and aspects of the correspondence assume a quiet intensity, a fervour and a presence in their lives because increasingly they see that it is all they’ve got. The great friendship, the meeting of minds, the closeness will have to survive in their letters. This means that recurring themes and preoccupations assume progressively and subtly a greater importance.

One of these themes, of course, is Medlin's portrayals for Iris's delight and pleasure, of the nature of the Australian landscape. These are all memorable, detailed, passionate and poetic – even when he is telling a sad tale of species loss or destruction – and together they constitute one of the more remarkable and informed evocations of the Australian bush, one that stands comparison with Marcus Clarke's 'weird melancholy' and Tom Collins's 'Overhead, the sun blazing wastefully and thanklessly through a rarefied atmosphere; underfoot, the hot, black clay thirsting for spring rain ... mile after mile, till the dark boundary of the scrub country disappears northward in the glassy haze ...' And here is Brian Medlin, just one glimpse from his panoply of wilderness scenes: 'two dingoes came padding towards us through the hummocks ... [but by the time he looks up from his book] they'd tumbled to us and turned back. One of them turned again almost immediately and stared at us. Seconds only or maybe even only parts of a second, but it seemed forever. It seemed to use up all the time in the universe. A golden, lucent animal! The life glowed from inside it. Its gaze was intense, brilliantly young but ancient. Not old. Ancient. The inhabitant of every desert ever. Then it turned away and became a mere dog again.'

This is one of the many times when, in the presence of the natural world, he is reminded and convinced of, as he puts it, 'the preciousness of things'.

His wilderness is a tough place. I remember one time when Brian and I were standing at the windows of the common room in the School of Humanities looking out at the sweep of hills surrounding the Flinders university buildings. It was mid-winter and the hills were green and lush.

'I hate winter,' he said. 'Everything turns bloody green and it looks like England.' He makes the same point more forcefully to Iris Murdoch. 'I can't approve your dislike of harsh landscape ... Only in hard country can you find real subtlety. Where everything is pretty, nothing is. Where every prospect pleases, as Alexander Selkirk said, it gives you the shits.' What Selkirk actually said was, 'Where every prospect pleases and only man is vile' which Brian unquestionably would have rewritten as only Vice Chancellors are vile.

Another theme is a long-running, every now and then surfacing discussion about the bourgeoisie. What does it mean? Who are the bourgeoisie? Is Iris bourgeoisie? 'I wasn't the first to say that your views on art are bourgeois', Medlin objects mildly on one occasion. 'You said I'd probably find them bourgeois and, being an accommodating chap, I merely agreed.'

The bourgeoisie question is much on Murdoch's mind as she prepares to review Medlin's *Human Nature, Human Survival* – 'there is much to say on the meaning of "bourgeois"' she writes and, indeed, goes on to say it in her famous review in the *Melbourne Age*. But this letter concludes: 'My heart is with you – never mind about the bourgeoisie.'

This moving conclusion does not mean that she regards the bourgeoisie question as in any way irrelevant or that she's impatient with it. She is saying that the two of them have a much more personal, emotional, rewarding and profound matter to mind about – their close and loving friendship. The editors' inspired decision to make this the title of the book recognises this.

Murdoch also supplies the crucial and moving keynote to the book's central theme – Medlin's continuing descriptions of and reflections on the Australian landscape and its flora and fauna. 'You are my Australia ...' she writes to him, 'Much love to you, friend in a hundred guises, splendid magician.'

Behind this wonderful tribute is the sad recognition that they will never meet again, that she will never go again to the Australia that he has so brought to life for her and that Medlin won't come to England.

Reading *Never Mind the Bourgeoisie* I hear again Brian's voice, his passion, his irony, his relentless logic, his despairing impatience, his vast range of reference, his wit, hear it all so

clearly that it seems he must actually be still here, waiting round somewhere to question, joke. He was a great friend to me and to many and a colossus of this university, and it is entirely proper that he be honoured and remembered in a lecture that bears his name. And I am honoured in my turn to be invited to give this year's lecture and to have the opportunity to launch *Never Mind the Bourgeoisie* which, as I'm sure you are in no doubt, I think is a wonderful book – like the two people it celebrates: *sui generis* and utterly beguiling.

So I wish *Never Mind the Bourgeoisie* a great and successful journey and to conclude with a further affectionate nod in the direction of the man Iris Murdoch learned to address as 'Dear Mate': *Ceterum censeo Carthago delenda est*.

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*Brian Matthews is honorary Professor of English at Flinders University, Adelaide where he taught for 25 years and was awarded Flinders' first Personal Chair in English. He was Fulbright Scholar in Residence at the University of Oregon, 1986, and subsequently held visiting professorships at the universities of Trento, Venice and Bologna. He was head of the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies and professor of Australian studies at the University of London, 1993–96. In 1997 he became foundation director of the Europe Australia Institute at Victoria University, Melbourne. As a writer of biography, fiction and memoir and as a columnist for the Weekend Australian Magazine and Eureka Street, he has won numerous awards, including the Gold Medal of the Australian Literature Society, the Queensland, New South Wales and Victorian Premiers Awards for literature, the 2004 ARPA award for best humorous article and the CACS Honourable Mention for his The Temple Down The Road: The Life and Times of The MCG – 'An Outstanding Contribution to Australian Culture'. His most recent book, Manning Clark – A Life, won the 2010 National Biography Prize.*