

## Balwyn Historical Society News June 15, 2020

No doubt many of you will be happy that many social restrictions with regard to meeting friends and relatives have eased. However, social distancing requirements are still in place. This makes future meetings of BHS a little difficult. When the Balwyn Evergreen Centre opens fully we will let you know. The earliest date would be in August but more likely to be in September.

Boroondara Council announced in a Boroondara Update that the building plans for the new Canterbury precinct are underway. The three local historical societies that is Balwyn Historical Society, Surrey

### Sir Keith Arthur Murdoch (1885–1952) & Dame Elisabeth Joy Murdoch (1909-2012)

By

**Matthew ETTY-LEAL**

Keith was born on 12 Aug 1885 at West Melbourne, the third of seven children of Rev. Patrick John Murdoch and his wife Annie, née Brown, both children of Presbyterian ministers, who migrated from Scotland in 1884. Keith grew up in semi-rural Camberwell in stringent economy. He had a stammer which made school torture; his speech would collapse under stress, and sometimes he could not buy a railway ticket without scribbling a note. He first went to **Camberwell State School** and then in 1901-03, Keith attended **Camberwell Grammar** where he was dux.



Camberwell Grammar in 1934

He taught Bible class & Sunday school at his father's church (1887-1928), **Trinity Church** in Camberwell. Keith played golf, a family recreation, and was a keen horse rider.

When Keith was determined to take up journalism, his father introduced him to his friend **David Syme** who, impressed by the boy's shorthand skill, employed him at 1½d a line as district correspondent for Malvern. Keith's stammer was under control by 1909.

Keith lost out to **Charles Bean** as Australia's war correspondent during World War 1. He became well known for his "Gallipoli Letter" which was addressed to **Andrew Fisher**, our Prime Minister in 1915, and circulated as a state paper in Westminster. It helped expose the incompetence of high command at Gallipoli. **Herbert Asquith**, British Prime Minister, was looking for a way out of Gallipoli and the letter became ammunition for him. The politicians used Murdoch and he used them.

Murdoch's career was made on his unusual skills (his metier) as a manipulator of people. Known as **Billy Hughes'** man/emissary and literally became an arm of government. In 1917 Keith was Hughes' main agent in London. How he reconciled being a journalist, emissary, observer and player, was never explained, keeping govt secrets.

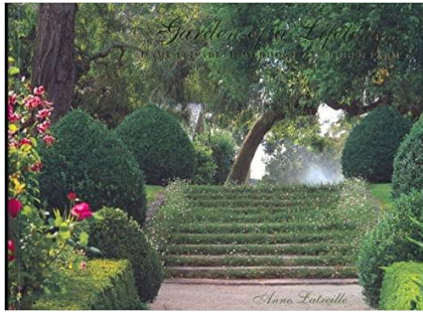
He even attempted to sell Australian flour in the US. He was as powerful as anyone in Cabinet, often asked by Hughes to comment on Australia's military leaders. Billy Hughes even travelled to France to sack Monash two days before the Hamel offensive, on the advice of Keith Murdoch and CE Bean. Billy soon realised in meeting his senior staff and troops that Monash was revered by soldiers and agreed to his battle plans. Not surprisingly, **Monash** made this comment on Murdoch: "*I profoundly distrust this man*". Geoffrey Searle **John Monash** – Australia's higher commanders were distracted during some of the most vital days of war, "*It is perhaps the outstanding case of sheer irresponsibility by pressmen in Australian history*".

Keith was engaged twice before he saw a pensive photo of Elisabeth in one of his magazines. He married at 43 on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June 1928 in **Scots Church** to 19-year-old **Elisabeth Joy Greene**, who became the family matriarch.



Elisabeth Murdoch on her wedding day.

They purchased **Cruden Farm** at Langwarrin, also living in Toorak.



Cruden Farm Garden

In Nov 1928 he became Managing Director of the Herald which remained his true love, his 'personal journal'; he was less interested in the Sun, even though he saw it as *'the best tabloid in Australia'* as it rose to highest circulation of any Australian daily. By 1935 Murdoch & the Herald had interests in 11 of the 65 commercial radio stations, campaigning to limit the devt of the ABC and to prevent it establishing an independent news service. Whatever the prime motive — profit, power or pulpitering — **Keith Murdoch** forged the first national media chain.



Murdoch forced a long overdue creation of separate authorities for the library, museums and gallery and from 1945 was Chairman of Gallery Trustees. He also founded the Herald chair of fine arts at the University of Melbourne and helped arrange reservation of the St Kilda Road site for a new gallery. He had become the leading figure in a new art establishment.

Tom Roberts – ***Before Rupert: Keith Murdoch and the Birth of a Dynasty*** – “Throughout WW1 he acts as a spin doctor and a fixer with his own agenda ... two things Keith wanted to promote: “*Australia’s contributions to the war effort and himself*”. Roberts states advances Keith added to his newspaper business – radio, newsreels and air travel. **He describes the template for corporate ambition Keith handed to Rupert.** Before his death in 1952, Keith confided his deep concern about Rupert’s “*alarming left- wing views*” and prospects.

Like most newspaper tycoons, Keith Murdoch backed conventional conservative stances of his day. He was an able journalist, a brilliant editor in his youth, a remarkable entrepreneur and organizer of his industry.

**Dame Elisabeth Joy Murdoch**, born Feb 8 1909 in Melb, died Dec 5 2012, 3rd daughter of Rupert Greene, hard-drinking wool valuer, sportsman and gambler, & Marie de Lancey Forth, a descendant of **Nathaniel Parker Forth**, diplomat & secret agent, and a British spy during French Revolution. She left **Clyde School** with a fine record as a games player and pianist but totally unfit for work, common for distinguished young ladies of social standing.



Keith and Elisabeth Murdoch and their children Rupert, Helen and Anne onboard the SS Mariposa in Melbourne after returning home from an extended tour

Elisabeth insisted Rupert go to Geelong Grammar, where the headmaster, **Sir James Darling**, shared her views on duties of Christian gentlemen towards their fellow man. She dissuaded Keith withdrawing Rupert from **Worcester College**, Oxford, where he was enjoying himself rather too enthusiastically, after warning him that he would lose her "*last shred of respect*" if he failed his exams.

Keith's will stated: "*I declare it is no wish of mine that my wife should not remarry.*" By her own account she never considered it. At 43, she launched herself into an independent life. She never interfered in her husband's business decisions. In settling Keith's estate, she preferred to see the debts cleared, leaving a small group of papers in Adelaide. It was a decision Rupert thought wrong and about which she remained uncertain, though she believed that smaller beginnings would be good for his character.

When Rupert felt driven to eviscerate the old Melbourne Herald, the paper Keith had made great, he dreaded telling her. She took the news coolly, declaring that they would just have to put it behind them and look to the new 24-hour tabloid that was to swallow it up. Her charm helped persuade **Sir William Carr**, chairman of the News of the World, to accept Rupert's offer to become a shareholder in order to keep out Robert Maxwell. But when Rupert told her that The Sunday Times planned to publish Hitler's newly discovered "diaries", she told him: "*Rupert, you've been sold a pup.*"

After 1952, she poured her energies into public service. As President of Management Committee of Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne (founded and administered by women for sick children of needy parents), she brought to a triumphant conclusion the design & funding of new premises for 400 beds. When Henry Bolte, Premier of Victoria, learned she wanted a new location, he said: "*Well, Lady Murdoch, there is a strong opinion we should rebuild on your present site in Carlton.*" "*Well, then, Mr Premier,*" she replied, "*You will have to ask someone else to do it.*" She won.

Dame Elisabeth became founding chairman of the Hospital's Research Foundation, which investigated children's ailments and care, and later won Rupert's agreement to a family gift of US \$5m to establish the **Murdoch Institute for Research** into birth defects. She worked also for children with impaired hearing and raised money for those needing special toys.



Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, opening a drug rehabilitation centre in Melbourne, May 2005

In 1968 she became, at Henry Bolte's request, the 1st woman trustee of NGV. She endowed the Keith and Elisabeth Murdoch travelling scholarship for art school students; the Elisabeth Murdoch Sculpture Foundation; and was a chair of Landscape Architecture at Melb University. The Royal Botanic Gardens created post of patron for her. In addition, she was a benefactor of opera; a trustee of the McClelland Gallery; and a founder of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. She also helped to fund Braemar College, a co-educational institution on the site of Clyde school.

As a leader of Melbourne society, she was considered for the role of Australia's Governor General. Malcolm Fraser, Liberal Prime Minister, believed she was exactly what the country needed to replace Sir John Kerr, who sacked Gough Whitlam in 1975. But she was ruled out because Rupert stood only a little behind Kerr and Fraser in Labour's demonology at the time.

The family anchor was Cruden Farm, a pillared mansion approached through a line of gum trees set in 90 acres at Langwarrin, 30 miles SE of Melbourne. When it was once threatened by a bushfire, her first instinct on arriving was to rush upstairs to rescue the papers and cash for which she was responsible as secretary-treasurer of the Clyde Old Girls' Association. She then organised the household and directed water on house's wooden walls.

On her 70th birthday she was up a ladder decorating a marquee, and on her 80th she received an electric golf buggy — she said it would be useful to take her older friends around. In her 80s she slept only 4 or 5 hours a night rising to swim at dawn.



Dame Elisabeth in her golf buggy at Cruden Farm

She kept up with her charities, looking at 6 reports in bed every night before switching to other reading, and was bemused to be presented with the keys to Melbourne in 2003. "*I just wonder what it means,*" she said to the city's Lord Mayor. "*Will I get a free parking space?*"

In 2008 she appeared in the English television gardener Monty Don's series *Around the World in 80 Gardens*. Driving him around her 20-acre garden in the buggy, she pointed out the copper beech planted 52 years earlier which had grown to a height of 40ft, and recalled

telling her gardener, Michael Morrison, that she would never see it fully grown. Michael's reply had been that she would live for ever.

She was appointed CBE in 1961, DBE in 1963 and Companion of the Order of Australia in 1989. On her 100th birthday a party at Cruden Farm was attended by over 70 descendants and 400 guests. There was a cake shaped in the form of a Steinway piano. No press were admitted.

Dame Elisabeth is survived by her son and two daughters; her eldest daughter died in 2004. On the eve of her century she was photographed sniffing a Dame Elisabeth Murdoch rose, named in her honour, which she said flowered for about six months: "*As tough as old boots,*" she declared. "*Wonderful!*"

Cecil King, the head of IPC, which owned Daily Mirror in London, was one of many who described Elisabeth Murdoch as 1st class "*Women don't come better than that,*" he said. "*A very nice woman and a very good woman — good manners and a good personality — a woman of integrity.*"