

DAME ELISABETH JOY MURDOCH AC DBE

1909–2012



PHOTO: AAH ARCHIVE

Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, legendary philanthropist and friend to the humanities, died at her home outside Melbourne on 5 December 2012 at the age of 103. She had been elected to an Honorary Fellowship of the Academy in 2009, establishing a new record, unlikely soon to be broken, as the most senior new Fellow ever to be recruited to the ranks of the Academy.

Newly-admitted Fellows, as Dame Elisabeth was aware, are customarily obliged to sign the Academy's Charter Book at the first General Meeting after their election or at their next visit to the Academy offices in Canberra. In Dame Elisabeth's case it was however proposed that, in recognition of her status, the Charter Book might instead be brought to her directly for signing. 'Oh, yes please!' she exclaimed with delight. 'Do come to lunch!' Three days after Dame Elisabeth's 101st birthday in February 2010, a small group of Council members accordingly travelled to Cruden Farm, Langwarrin, with its famous gardens, the home which her late husband, the newspaper journalist and proprietor Sir Keith Murdoch, had purchased for her as a wedding gift in 1928. She welcomed the party warmly and took the Charter Book with a sense of due reverence immediately to the sofa, where she proceeded to read

carefully, from the first page to the last, the signatures of all Fellows elected to the Academy since its foundation in 1969. She chuckled with pleasure as she deciphered the names, and paused to report some fact or anecdote about each Fellow – there were a great many of them – whom she remembered personally, before signing her own name on the final page with a firm and clear hand. She'd taken her daily swim that morning and was in good spirits. There was wine from the family vineyard on the lunch table which she urged us to enjoy, as she did herself. When the time for her siesta arrived she sent us off for a tour of the gardens with a cheerful wave.

Dame Elisabeth was a great benefactress not only (of course) to the humanities but to any cause that she considered worthy of her attention. Asked a few years ago if the number of charities she supported was around a hundred, she replied with modest vagueness that 'That would be rather conservative' as an estimate. She was deeply committed throughout much of her life to the work of the Children's Hospital, of which she was President for twelve years, and of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, and the Murdoch Institute for Research into Birth Defects. She was a Life Governor of the Royal Women's Hospital, a member of the Deafness Foundation of Victoria, a patron of the Epilepsy Foundation, a member of the E. W. Tipping Foundation, dedicated to assisting those with physical disabilities. She was devoted to botany, and aspects of science: a newly evolved rose and a newly discovered star were both most appropriately named after her.

But it was Dame Elisabeth's commitment to the humanities that was most astonishing in its scope, scale, and duration. At the conclusion of a conference on Philanthropy and the Humanities held in Melbourne in 2009 (organised by the Academy of the Humanities in collaboration with the University of Melbourne and Trinity College) a small book of essays celebrating her extraordinary contribution and that of her family to the cultural and artistic life of Australia was presented to her. *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice* are the famous words on the tomb of Christopher Wren: if you seek a monument, look around. At the University of Melbourne, two buildings had been named after her, together with a superbly equipped art library; the Herald Chair of Fine Arts had been established there thanks in large measure

to the efforts of her late husband, Sir Keith Murdoch; the Elisabeth Murdoch Chair of Landscape Architecture had been substantially funded through the generosity in particular of her son Rupert, who asked that the Chair be named in his mother's honour. At Trinity College, which elected Dame Elisabeth to a Fellowship in 2000, she made provision for a quartet of young musicians to reside in the College and travel internationally, and for the College choir to tour in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Southeast Asia. At the National Gallery of Victoria, which has received many superlative bequests in its day, 'no individual' (in the words of its former Director, Gerard Vaughan) 'has consistently contributed more through active personal involvement than Dame Elisabeth Murdoch'. The Victorian College of the Arts, now part of the University of Melbourne, owed its foundation in 1972 chiefly to her generosity, and its survival during harsh financial times to her intervention, when she called the then-Director offering simply to provide 'whatever is most needed'. The Victorian Tapestry Workshop, which she enthusiastically supported, on her hundredth birthday commissioned a new work in her honour for display in the Melbourne Recital Centre, whose main auditorium was appropriately christened, with a celebratory concert, Elisabeth Murdoch Hall. She gave shrewdly and generously to Opera Australia, to the Australian Ballet and the Australian Ballet School, to the Royal Botanic Gardens both in Melbourne and at Cranbourne, to the State Library of Victoria, to the National Herbarium, to the McClelland

Gallery and Sculpture Park near her home in Langwarrin, and to many other institutions, both large and small.

Dame Elisabeth never gave without careful research into the precise needs of the organisations she supported, and without continuing personal engagement with their activities. It was a constant pleasure for members of the Bell Shakespeare Company, which she regularly assisted, to know that she would travel to Melbourne for each of their opening nights; for members of Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company, founded to help women recently released from prison or otherwise marginalised in society, to feel the warmth of her interest in their work, and her endorsement of its value. To possess significant wealth was not in itself, as she well knew, a great achievement. To possess the power to disburse that wealth, however, was another matter. To do so judiciously, with heart and mind, was always for her a supreme privilege, worth living, if you were lucky enough to do so, a very long life to enjoy.

A State Memorial Service for Dame Elisabeth Murdoch was held on 18 December 2012 at St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne. Carved in stone at a high spot on the spire of the Cathedral, her benign face continues to overlook the city she graced and cultivated. 'Look, don't go and make too much of it', she remarked when the sculpture was set in place a few years ago. 'It's not that important.'

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