The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE0366

Murdoch, Elisabeth Joy

(1909 - 2012)

Born	19090201, Armadale Victoria Australia
Died	20121205, Langwarrin Victoria Australia
Occupation	Philanthropist

Summary

Dame Elisabeth Murdoch was widely regarded as the ‘queen of Australia’s philanthropic community’ through much of the twentieth century. She was Patron of the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute in Melbourne, Victoria and supported 110 charitable organisations annually.

Details

The daughter of Rupert and Marie Green, Elisabeth Murdoch was educated at St Catherine's School, Toorak and Clyde School, Woodend. Rupert was the wool expert of the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Agency, and was well known in racing circles as a starter for the VRC and VATC. Marie – or Bairnie as she was known – was twice president of the Alexandra Club and once of the Victoria League. Years later, Dame Elisabeth would recall that 'that was very much my mother's milieu. She really was so very much attached to the English part of her heritage'. At the age of nineteen, Elisabeth was courted by the newspaper proprietor Keith Murdoch, then in his early forties, and the pair were married in 1928. They had four children: Helen (later Handbury), Anne (later Kantor), Rupert, and Janet (later Calvert-Jones).

While still a schoolgirl, Elisabeth had begun knitting woollen singlets for babies at Melbourne's Children's Hospital, and by virtue of knitting the greatest number, was given a tour of the institution. She was 'devastated by what she saw', and here the seed was sewn for later philanthropic activity. After school she volunteered one day a week at the Lady Northcote Kindergarten, another eye-opener. After her marriage, Elisabeth's voluntary work became a central part of her life. Through Keith she had become very friendly with Mr and Mrs Henry Gullett and, in 1933, was 'enlisted' by Lady Gullett onto the committee of the Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and by Lady Latham onto the management committee of the Royal Children's Hospital. She maintained that 'of course I had that opportunity because Lady Latham and her husband knew Keith' and wished to have the support of his *Herald* and *Sun* publications.

Elisabeth dedicated her life to philanthropic activity. Asked why, years later, she claimed that she felt so blessed in life that she was obliged to do the work 'as a sort of thanksgiving'. Her own philanthropic work, she insisted, was inspired by Keith's and she said: 'All the wonderful life I've had stemmed, I suppose, from my marriage, so I'm very conscious that I never would have made much of a mark… unless I'd married Keith and had the opportunities which he gave me and his position gave me.' Sir Keith, as he became, died in 1952. Lady Murdoch went on to serve as president of the Royal Children's Hospital management committee from 1954 to 1965, and was known for her personal touch in fundraising endeavours, hand-writing letters of thanks to each major donor. She was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, Civil Division (CBE)
in 1961, and in 1963 was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire Civil Division (DBE) for her role in building a new children's hospital in Melbourne.

1968 saw Dame Elisabeth become the first woman on the Council of Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria. She held the position for eight years. In 1976 she co-founded the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, and served as its Chairman from 1986-88. Dame Elisabeth's philanthropic activities continued throughout her varied career, and in 1984 she was a founding member of the Murdoch Institute (known today as the Murdoch Children's Research Institute). In 1968 she was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Laws by the University of Melbourne in acknowledgement of her contributions to research, the arts and philanthropy. Trinity College installed her as a Fellow in November 2000.

In July 2006, *BRW* magazine wrote that 'the 97-year-old mother of Rupert Murdoch is widely regarded as queen of Australia's philanthropic community'. By the time of her death Dame Elisabeth was supporting 110 charities annually. She concentrated her efforts most particularly on: the Tapestry Workshop; the McClelland Art Gallery; the Advisory Council for Children with Impaired Hearing; Noah's Ark Toy Library; the RSPCA; the Royal Botanic Gardens; the Maud Gibson Gardens Trust; the Chair of Landscape Architecture (Melbourne University); the Murdoch Research Institute; and Taralye, an oral language centre for deaf children.

Dame Elisabeth was a very keen, knowledgeable, gardener who designed and developed her garden at Cruden Farm into one of the best known in the country. She frequently opened the garden for fundraising purposes. An honorary fellow of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architecture, she funded and helped to establish the Elisabeth Murdoch Chair of Landscape Architecture and the Australian Garden History Society.

In 1989 Dame Elisabeth was appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) for services to the community also receiving the Centenary Medal in 2001 for her philanthropic services to the Australian arts community. In 2001 she was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women.

Dame Elisabeth Murdoch lived at Cruden Farm, Langwarrin until she died, in December 2012.

Events

2001 - 2001
Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

Published resources

Edited Book
Who's Who in Australia 2002, Herd, Margaret, 2002

Book
Elisabeth Murdoch: Two Lives, Monks, John 1929-, 1994

The Alexandra Club : A Narrative 1903-1983, Starke, Monica, 1986

Garden of a Lifetime: Dame Elisabeth Murdoch at Cruden Farm, Latreille, Anne, 2007

Resource Section
Trinity has three new Fellows,
http://www.trinity.unimelb.edu.au/publications/trinity_today/summer2001

A Great Form of Love: Women Philanthropists in Australian History, Lemon, Barbara, 2008,
http://www.abc.net.au/rn/hindsight/

Book Section
A Winning streak: The Murdochs, Browning, Julie, 2002

Thesis
In Her Gift: Activism and Altruism in Australian Women's Philanthropy, 1880-2005, Lemon, Barbara, 2008

Site Exhibition
Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

State Library of Victoria
Papers, 1972 Aug. 17-27. [manuscript].

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Dame Elisabeth Murdoch interviewed by John Farquharson [sound recording]

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Digital resources



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