

SPEECH DELIVERED
BY LACHLAN MURDOCH TO THE MELBOURNE PRESS CLUB MEDIA HALL OF FAME
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My father was honoured to be invited to speak to you about his father, and I am equally honoured to take his place to speak to you about my grandfather. A man who I feel I know intimately but whom I never met.

I wish I had met Keith Murdoch. But he died, long before I was born. He died on October 4, 1952. He was just sixty-six.

My grandfather was a journalist. That was all he wanted to be from when he was a very young boy.

That was despite the fact that my grandfather was painfully shy and had a serious and often debilitating stammer. So serious that when he went to the railway station to buy a ticket he had to give the man who sold the tickets a hand written note!!

Keith Murdoch's father, the very Scottish and the very Reverend Patrick Murdoch wanted Keith to go to university but the 19 year old had three qualities that would stick with him through his life... Determination; Persistence; and great Perseverance.

So despite his father pushing him to follow a different path and after putting in a lot of hard work he got a job at The Age.

Another Scotsman, David Syme, who is also honoured here tonight and who saved The Age from bankruptcy was so impressed by the young Keith Murdoch's shorthand that he offered him a casual job as the Malvern district correspondent – at the grand freelancer's rate of a penny-halfpenny a line.

For four years Keith worked day and night reporting everything that moved in Malvern, lifting the local circulation and saving every penny he earned until he had saved enough money to sail steerage class to England.

Now...At penny-halfpenny a line that's a lot of column centimetres.

He went to England for two reasons. One was to advance his career as a journalist. The second was to find a way to cure his stammer.

Now, if you saw the movie 'The King's Speech' you will know about Australia's Lionel Logue the speech therapist who cured the future King George VI of his stammer.

Perhaps due to his stammer, Sir Keith spent 3 years unsuccessfully trying to find work as a journalist on Fleet Street, where he felt he could truly learn his trade. He failed to find a steady shift, but after 3 years of Speech therapy with Lionel Logue his stammer improved dramatically.

Determination; Persistence; Perseverance

My father credits Lionel Logue for saving my grandfather's dream of a life in journalism but I credit Sir Keith and the strength of the young man's character.

Elocution improved, he came back to Melbourne and became the parliamentary reporter for the Age.

A few years later he helped found the Australian Journalists' Association.

After the First World War broke out my grandfather was on his way to London when the government commissioned him to go to Gallipoli, on the pretext of investigating complaints from the troops about the Australian Imperial Force's mail service.

The truth was the Australian government wanted to find out from a reporter they knew and trusted what was really happening on the Gallipoli peninsula.

Appalled by what he and other war correspondents saw, Keith Murdoch broke the censorship contract he and other journalists had had to sign.

And on the boat back to London he typed his famous Gallipoli letter to Prime Minister Andrew Fisher praising the Australian soldiers and condemning the British Command.

As a result when the ship docked in France my grandfather had to hand himself in to a British officer, and the Gallipoli campaign was destined to soon be over.

Back home in 1921 he took over editorial control of The Herald.

The Herald was a tired small town newspaper, with a circulation going nowhere. Within a year he had breathed fresh life into it.

The Herald was easier to read, News was crisply presented and the photographs and graphics were bigger and better. He began hiring the best journalists and contributors to join what was soon called "The House".

Keith Murdoch liked talking to and listening to his journalists and they in turn became part of a 'family'. He would be remembered as an exacting employer and a good friend.

He wrote daily notes to the staff. Here's one that I specially like:

"The paper today is good throughout but never let anyone call our city Smelbourne in our columns. It is deliberately provocative, which is good. But it provokes no thought or argument, but sneers at our paper."

Journalism and newspapers were subjects of pride to him.

"Above all considerations in the newspaper structure," he wrote "devotion to readers' interest must be paramount, and so long as this is in the hands of well-trained public-spirited newspapermen, failure need not be feared."

He was uncompromising, and correct in his belief that the media should be free of regulation.

It is in the public interest that News media not be fettered, not be controlled by any elite, be they social, political or economic. As Sir Keith wrote, it must always be our reader's interests, our listener's interests, our viewer's interests, that are paramount.

After the purchase of the Sun News-Pictorial in 1925 my grandfather was leading a team of one thousand from the company's newly built headquarters in Flinders Street.

By the late twenties he had expanded interstate and of course, around the same time he began his everlasting romance with Elisabeth Greene.

He saw her photograph in a Herald magazine and arranged to meet her. They married two years later.

Keith Arthur Murdoch attended his last annual meeting of the Herald and Weekly Times in December 1951.

Looking back over his 30 years as publisher he could see his two Melbourne newspapers alone now had a combined daily circulation of over 800,000 copies.

That was in a city with barely a quarter of today's population.

He was a patriot who believed in Australia and for 30 of his 66 years my grandfather was a builder, a maker of newspapers, and of newspapermen.

He would turn a modest company producing one daily newspaper and a weekly agricultural journal into an Australia wide publishing company, transforming its cornerstone, The Herald itself, into one of the world's largest evening newspapers.

As well as being a successful publisher, he was also a pioneer of commercial radio networks and a person who at the same time was president of Melbourne's library museum and gallery and would sponsor international exhibitions to the city.

But Keith Murdoch, newspaperman still had an unfulfilled yearning. He wrote:
"The old journalist dies still stretching out for better English, better cover of actualities, better comment, better taste, more happiness in his paper's pattern."

These are aspirations which we can all still strive for today, no matter by which ever means we chose to deliver the message.

Stretch out.

That was my grandfather's motto for success.

And he did. Thank you.