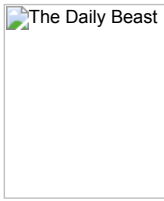


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# WORLD NEWS

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## The Anguish of Murdoch's Mom

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Family matriarch Dame Elisabeth Murdoch said his News of the World purchase nearly 'killed me,' and told her son of her concerns about invasion of privacy. By David Leser.

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As [Rupert Murdoch appeared before his British parliamentary interrogators](#) yesterday, both a diminished and defiant figure, perhaps his longest-standing critic—and admirer—would have been thinking, *I told you so*. His mother, Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, had, in fact, told him so 42 years ago when he bought the newspaper that would find itself at the center of an unprecedented political and media scandal on both sides of the Atlantic.

In a book published in Australia nine years ago on the Murdoch dynasty, entitled *A Winning Streak: The Murdochs*, Dame Elisabeth told author Julie Browning that her son's purchase of [News of the World](#), the newspaper once dubbed *News of the Screws* and *Screws of the News* nearly "killed me." She told the author she'd raised her concerns at the time, but that her son justified the content of the newspaper with the assertion that "there are tens of thousands of people living in London and around England who have nothing in their lives practically, and they want this sort of thing."

Dame Elisabeth, now 102 years old and living at Cruden Farm, the seat of the [Murdoch family's](#) history near Melbourne, remained unconvinced. In a rare interview with this writer eight years ago, she admitted to her continuing concerns about her son's proclivities for invasive journalism. "I'm sorry about that," she said, "but that doesn't in any way change my great affection for him, and my support for him."

Did she wish he wasn't a purveyor of such journalistic practices? "Well, I think the invasion of people's privacy is the worst thing, because from that comes so much more. I think privacy is anybody's right. I really do." Asked whether she'd informed her son of these views recently, she'd replied: "No. We don't often get into that. We've had it all out before."

### Gallery: Who's Who in the Murdoch Clan



Rupert Murdoch and his mother, Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, in 2005, James Knowler / Getty Images

Pressed then to explain how the two images of Rupert Murdoch could possibly be squared—the loving family man on the one hand, the implacable, media tycoon on the other, Dame Elisabeth replied: "I don't know. I find it hard to analyze. I really do. I think going back to the privacy [issue], I think we value our privacy and we expect it to be respected, so we ought to respect other people's privacy. It's a question that comes up often."

[Never more than now.](#)

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Dame Elisabeth declined to comment this week—her personal assistant said: “Dame Elisabeth is not giving interviews any more,” but anyone who has ever met her, and been disarmed by her bashful smile and flurry of self-effacing words, is in no doubt what she must be thinking.

As the matriarch of Australia’s most powerful family (72 descendants at last count), Dame Elisabeth would have been well justified in describing her life as a full and fortunate one.

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During her 24-year marriage to the legendary Sir Keith Murdoch, she walked with monarchs and dined with the leaders of her age, after her husband set about translating his reputation as a legendary young reporter during World War I into the most influential newspaperman in Australia, founder of a national media chain that son, Rupert, would one day inherit and eclipse.

She was the daughter of a lovable rogue and gambler father named Rupert Greene, and an elegant mother named Marie de Lancey Forth, who was to be swept off her feet by Melbourne’s most eligible bachelor in 1928, after he saw a photo of her in a copy of a magazine and asked a friend to arrange a meeting.

The Murdoch marriage was a love story that never diminished with time, even with Sir Keith’s death in 1952. It became part of the modern-day fable that would forever wrap itself around their family history; so, too, the fact that despite two world wars, the Great Depression, and a fire that nearly destroyed the family’s farm in 1944, Dame Elisabeth Murdoch would go on to lead a life of wealth and privilege beyond most mortals’ wildest dreams.

What distinguished her in Australia—a country often noted for its withering disdain for those with wealth and status (the “tall poppy syndrome,” as it’s known Down Under) was her grace and boundless generosity. Yes, she was the mother of the world’s most imposing—and feared (until two weeks ago)—media baron, but she was always, and still is, universally admired for her qualities of compassion and modesty.

As Australia’s leading philanthropist, she has for decades given her support to more than 100 charities, as well as served on boards such as the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne, helping establish a research institute for children with genetically-inherited diseases, supporting hospice services for the dying, setting up care centers for the homeless, the drug-afflicted and the intellectually impaired.

“One’s chief obligation,” she told me, “is to think about other people and how one can help them. I honestly feel that it has been my great, good fortune to help, rather than *theirs* to be helped.”

In return, she has had a recital hall, university building, high school, girls’ boarding house, art gallery courtyard, sculpture foundation, research institute, even a star (in the constellation of Taurus) named in her honor, as well as numerous accolades bestowed on her, among them the Companion of the Order of Australia and the Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

And now the public disgrace of a family name, coming just three years after she was forced to appeal a decision by the Australian Tax Office to pay tax on 85 million Australian dollars paid to her by the Murdoch family company, Cruden Investments.

Dame Elisabeth owns nearly 10 percent in this family company which controls [News Corp.](#), but because of a reorganization of family trusts in 1994, she was shortchanged as much as A\$273, or about \$290 million U.S. dollars on today’s exchange rates, and left “up tax creek” by her son, according to the *Sydney*

*Morning Herald* at the time. Dame Elisabeth's appeal against this tax ruling was ultimately successful.

What has been palpably unsuccessful, however, are all her attempts, direct and indirect over the years, to try and curb her son's enthusiasm for tawdry journalistic practices.

Little wonder, then, that when Rupert Murdoch apologized last week to the family of murdered British schoolgirl [Milly Dowler](#)—her phone had been hacked after she was abducted in 2002—he invoked the ethical standards of his parents.

As the Dowlers' lawyer, Mark Lewis, told reporters following that meeting: "He [Murdoch] said the word 'sorry,' this should not have happened, this was not the standard set by his father, a respected journalist, nor the standard set by his mother.

"He apologized many times and held his head in his hands. He was very humble. He was very shaken and sincere."


A world away at Cruden Farm in Australia, a grand dame would no doubt have seen all this with the heaviest of hearts.

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David Leser is a multi-award winning journalist based in northern New South Wales, Australia. He has worked as a feature writer in Australia, North America, the Middle East, Europe and Asia for the past 32 years and currently writes for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Melbourne Age*, the *Australian Women's Weekly* and Italian *Vanity Fair*.

He is the author of four books with a fifth currently in train, and is also executive producer of a documentary on Paul Kelly, Australia's leading singer-songwriter, due for release early next year.

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