Dame Elisabeth Murdoch dislikes the term matriarch. She says the word “belongs to the past” and is suggestive of a sense of self-importance she doesn’t feel. At 94, she is incapable of seeing herself as a venerable old woman; in fact she “feels sorry for those poor old things, the ones in their 80s”, who get about in wheelchairs and walking frames.

Nor does she see herself as the dominant female figure in a family or tribal line. “I sometimes have to pinch myself and remind myself that perhaps I am at the head of a large family,” she says. “I don’t operate assuming that I am the matriarch or that I can influence.”

Perhaps not. Dame Elisabeth has always been an exponent of the gentle art of modesty, a quality for which she has won universal admiration. Name a recital hall after her, a university building, an art college building, an art gallery courtyard, a sculpture foundation, a cultural leadership award, a research institute, a star (in the constellation of Taurus!), even a rose, and you will get the same response. Am I worthy of it? Why me? Couldn’t they have thought of someone else?

Consider her for governor-general, which they did in the mid-’70s, and she still – to this day – pours scorn on the idea. “I must say I thought it was ridiculous,” she says now. “It rather undermined my respect and opinion of those who were in power at the time.”

Her husband, the late Sir Keith Murdoch, was the famous – and controversial – wartime reporter who chronicled the folly of the Gallipoli campaign and later went on to set up the first national media chain and newsprint industry in this country. Knighted in 1933 for services to journalism, Sir Keith was a confidant to Australian and British prime ministers, an interlocutor to American presidents, a friend to press barons like Lord Northcliffe and singers such as the great Dame Nellie Melba.

His contact book was a who’s who of pre-eminent people – the Queen, the Pope, presidents Roosevelt and Truman, General Eisenhower, General MacArthur, Lord Mountbatten, Winston Churchill ...

“He [Keith] was such a humane, caring person,” says Dame Elisabeth. “I grew up in my marriage to him. I always remember when we were crossing the Atlantic and Winston Churchill was on board, and I knew he was up half the night. Keith used to meet him in the sauna. I was shocked the way he [Churchill] was drinking and I was saying, ‘How could he behave like that?’ And Keith said, ‘Look dear, I’ve lived a long time and I’ve met a lot of very great men, and the greatest of them often have the greatest faults.’ And it’s true isn’t it?”

And from this now legendary union between Keith and Elisabeth has come 61 descendants – four children, 19 grandchildren and 38 great-grandchildren. Her son, Rupert, is to think about other people and how one can help them.”

Nothing like a Dame

At 94, Dame Elisabeth Murdoch is the modest matriarch of one of the world’s most powerful families. Strong and compassionate, spirited and independent, she talks candidly to DAVID LESER about her son, controversial media mogul, Rupert, her grandchildren and her own remarkable life.

Well, yes, they could have, except that there isn’t anyone else quite like Dame Elisabeth Murdoch in Australia. Not for generosity and not for the exalted position she holds at the crest of an illustrious and powerful family.

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MY LIFE HAS BEEN GREATLY ENRICHED
by what I have been fortunate enough to be able to do in the way
of helping other organisations and people.

The Australian Women’s Weekly – June 2003

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’enough to shake up your Anglo Irish
view of the world; then there’s the arrival
two years ago) of Dame Elisabeth’s half-
Asian grand-daughter, Grace, courtesy of her
father and long-time Murdoch associate
Peter Chernin. Brother James, 30, sits
atop Star TV, News Corp’s Asian pay
Television company, with its 20 broadcast
services in seven languages and 800 million
viewers across 53 countries.

And then there is older sister Elisabeth,
who has visited the farm – and they
spent their most treasured childhood
years together.

To this end, Dame Elisabeth served on
the board of the Royal Children’s Hospital,
Melbourne (for 33 years), during which
time she was also the driving force behind
the establishment of the Murdoch Institute
of Research, specialising in child health
and research into genetically inherited
diseases.

She has supported hospice services for
the dying, support care for homelessness,
drug addiction, computer training
centres for women. She was the first
woman appointed trustee of the National
Trust, and only truly global in the decades
of support to the Victorian Tapestry
Workshop, the McClelland Art Gallery,
the Victoria State Opera, piano awards,
chamber music ...

charge against the Turks in Gaza during
World War I; and, of course, her father,
Rupert Green, lovable rogue and gambler
that he was, a wheeler-dealer who started
every Melbourne Cup race from 1914-1944.
So given all this and more, why wouldn’t
one seek out the thoughts of such an
extraordinary woman, nay matron
especially if one thought that after 94
years of close observation of the human
condition, she might even decide to speak
her mind?

It has often been said that Cruden Farm,
50km south of Melbourne on the
Mornington Peninsula, is the seat of the
Murdoch family’s history. Named after a
sect at far north near Aberdeen in Scotland,
Cruden Farm is the cottage that the
42-year-old Sir Keith gave to his 19-year-old
Cruden Farm is the cottage that the
and the fire crackles from the little drawing
room off the hallway.

Our conversation begins on a rather
spiritual note when I ask her about the
most valuable things she has learnt in
life. “One’s chief obligation,” she replies
immediately, “is to think about other
people and how one can help them.”

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Opposite: Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, 94,
relaxing by the fire at Cruden Farm. Above: In
1938, on her marriage to Keith Murdoch, seen
right with their son Rupert, in 1938.
"Look, it wouldn’t help Rupert one bit for me to worry and if he dies tomorrow he would be doing something he loves."

And it becomes clear during the course of our nearly five hours together that there are things Dame Elisabeth does worry about, despite her best efforts at achieving a sense of acceptance. One of them seems to be the breakdown of Rupert and Anna’s 31-year marriage. It upsets her to know the tension as she lay in her bed sobbing while Mary would recount: “Elisabeth can still remember the tension as she lay in her bed sobbing while [her sister] Sylvia sat up reading a book and enjoying tea and Thin Captain biscuits. “Sylvia would say: ‘Stop snivelling you miserable little brute, stop snivelling and feeling sorry for yourself.’ And I’d feel so ashamed because I was feeling so dreadfully sorry for myself."

Elisabeth grew up in Torakwa during a time when the salubrious Melbourne suburb still toggled to the sound of cable trains and home-drawn carriages. There was no television, radio, refrigeration, taxis or telephones…nor was there any certainty that her estranged father would return home from his frequent excursions to the Melbourne or Bohemian clubs.

In John Monks’ official biography – Elisabeth Murdoch: Two Lives – Dame Elisabeth recounts one of the more searing episodes of her childhood: “I remember Dad, when he was raging, saying ‘I’m going to cut your mother up and put her in a little black box in the garden under the gardenia.’”

He would never have done it, but the threat hung balefully in the air. As Monks recounts: “Elisabeth can still remember the tension as she lay in her bed sobbing while [her sister] Sylvia sat up reading a book and enjoying tea and Thin Captain biscuits.”

“In healing”, she declares matter-of-factly, “you never forget what you’re going through or what you’ve been through.”

Supporting evidence: “She is a remarkable woman… an extraordinary person. Her upbringing could have made her extremely narrow, whereas she has actually widened. She has become much more open to different ideas. The children always felt they could speak to Gran more than they could to me when they were in their late teens because she kept a curious mind. And combined with that incredible physical energy did not so much as keep her interested in Jerusalem, eventually – and, despite the emotional pain he inflicted, he was the one most responsible for reinforcing Elisabeth’s natural zest for life. As a child, Elisabeth was an acrobat. She could do double somersaults in the air, walk on her hands, dive from great heights, dance… Who knows, she might have joined the circus had she not met the dazzling figure of Keith Murdoch, at that time probably Melbourne’s most eligible bachelor.”

Murdoch had seen a photo of Elisabeth in a copy of Table Talk magazine and asked a friend to arrange a meeting. Although Elisabeth was barely out of school, it wasn’t long before the two were engaged, and despite deep reservations from Elisabeth’s family. “It was a big, big, big thing for my family to accept,” she says now. “I think they were sensible. I think they thought if they didn’t allow it it would be unsuitable.”

Would you have married him anyway? “I don’t know. I was so frightened. Did she think women today should marry at such a young age?”

“I don’t think you can generalise. I think things have changed a great deal. Women have become far more ambitious about their careers. Whether that’s good or not I don’t know. But Dad didn’t allow it. I wouldn’t make any judgement on that… but I am rather old-fashioned, I think. Too many women are ambitious about their careers and they very often sacrifice their happiness.”

One of those women is perhaps her own grand-daughter, Elisabeth Murdoch, who married Elkin Pianim, the son of a Ghanaian political prisoner in 1993 (the wedding was a five-star event attended by, among others, former US President Ronald Reagan). Elisabeth and Elkin had two children together before their relationship ended four years later. She went on to marry and have a child with top English publicist Matthew Freud, great-grandson of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Although it is no secret that Rupert and Anna were dismayed by their daughter’s relationship with Freud, they seem to have accepted it. Matthew was invited to Rupert and Wendi’s wedding in June 1999 aboard his 35-metre yacht, Morning Glory, and then four months later to Anna’s wedding to William Mann.

Dame Elisabeth obviously still has some distance to travel before she comes to terms with the “extraordinary” breakup of her granddaughter’s most colourful career. Her heart would fibulate he was so anxious.

“Who knows, she might have joined the circus had she not met the dazzling figure of Keith Murdoch, at that time probably Melbourne’s most eligible bachelor.”

Elisabeth recognises the inconsistency of a man who has been one of the major differences between her and her mother-in-law. “We have really kept a curious mind. And combined with that incredible physical energy did not so much as keep her interested in Jerusalem, eventually – and, despite the emotional pain he inflicted, he was the one most responsible for reinforcing Elisabeth’s natural zest for life. As a child, Elisabeth was an acrobat. She could do double somersaults in the air, walk on her hands, dive from great heights, dance… Who knows, she might have joined the circus had she not met the dazzling figure of Keith Murdoch, at that time probably Melbourne’s most eligible bachelor.”

From left: Elisabeth with Keith Murdoch outside their home near Melbourne, in the ‘40s; with Helen, seven, baby Anne, and Rupert, five, in the ‘30s; with Prime Minister Ben Chifley and a teenage Rupert, in the ‘40s.

From New York, Anna Murdoch Mann went on to marry and have a child with top employee from The Herald & Weekly Times. He would take all for 24 hours.

Dame Elisabeth agrees. “Sometimes his heart would fibrillate he was so anxious. [Instead of going to bed] he would play a game of patience and he’d still be playing at 1am or 2am. I knew exactly what was going on. It happened on several occasions. He felt deeply concerned about having to disrupt people’s lives. He was always so interested in their families.”

“And even Rupert, who you may
think is ruthless, cares also for the families. It worries him but he's got more — well, I think perhaps maybe where Keith might have not been ruthless Rupert would be.

Keith was a real softie? “He was a real softie. “Is Rupert a softie?” “No I don’t think so, not when it comes to business.”

On that score I ask her whether she understands what keeps driving her son to keep pushing, acquiring and conquering: newspapers, books, sporting teams, film studios, TV networks, satellite digital TV … “People say ambition,” she replies, “but it is an ambition to put things together and make them work. Keith was often doing that. It’s ambition to succeed in putting those things together.”

How should we square them the two images of her son — the loving, kindly family man who feels no shame in telling his children publicly that he loves them, as opposed to the implacable, marauding media tycoon who inspires envy and fear around the world.

“I don’t know,” she says, laughing. “I find it hard to analyse … 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. For instance, I was rather squeamish about accepting your invitation to be included in this [interview]. And I thought, ‘Well look, we ask other people to support something or a person which often feels constrained by being the mother of Rupert. So, not when it comes to business.”

One senses almost a relief in Dame Elisabeth that she feels able to free herself, even momentarily, from these shackles. When I ask her, for example, whether she ever feels constrained by being the mother of Rupert Murdoch, she says, “Yes, I think occasionally I do. I would sometimes like to write to the paper. But I’m very vulnerable because I’m Rupert’s mother.”

What sort of things would you write about? “Ah well … I might be wanting to support something or a person which didn’t agree with Rupert’s point of view — and therefore I’d be very vulnerable.”

Dame Elisabeth sleeps rarely more than three hours a night and maintains a tempo that would exhaust a person half her age. Having had a hip replacement a few years ago and a nasty leg injury more recently, it could be argued that she’s in need of some assistance.

“Why aren’t you walking on a stick?” her surgeon asked her on her last visit. “I’d need of some assistance. Recently, it could be argued that she’s in her age. Having had a hip replacement a than three hours a night and maintains a and therefore I’d be very vulnerable.”

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When she dies, she says she has no idea what will happen to her 10 per cent stake in Cruden Investments, the family company that controls News Corporation, the biggest media group in the world. “I ought to know,” she says, “but I keep forgetting.”

“The shareholders would be vitally interested,” I begin to say. “Would they?” she shoots back. “Sorry (laughing), I can’t help them.”

She also says she cares not one bit for the interactive digital television revolution being spearheaded across the globe by people like, well, her son. “I can’t stand it. I think it takes the humanity out of everything.”

And, as the rain continues to fall over Cruden Farm, the two of us stand together in her office, with its pile of books and papers spread everywhere, looking at the famous words of Desiderata stuck on her wall. I read the words aloud and as I do so, Dame Elisabeth offers a small commentary on each phrase.

“Take kindly the counsel of the years, (“that’s right, that’s very important”) gracefully surrendering the things of youth … (“that’s right”) Keep peace with your soul … (“that’s very important”) Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit. (“It’s all lovely, isn’t it?”) And remember what peace there may be in silence … be on good terms with all persons (“that’s awfully important”).

That almost sums you up, I suggest finally. “I hope so,” she replies.