

# The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

---

Manuscript 1493

---

## Rupert Murdoch: Altruism Inverted

Elizabeth Summerfield

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl>



Part of the [History of Gender Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), and the [Public History Commons](#)

---

This Case Study is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Business at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Values-Based Leadership by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at [scholar@valpo.edu](mailto:scholar@valpo.edu).



**ELIZABETH SUMMERFIELD**  
**ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA**

## **Rupert Murdoch:** ***Altruism Inverted***

### **Abstract**

*American entrepreneur, television producer, media owner, and philanthropist, Ted Turner, once described Rupert Murdoch as “the most dangerous man in the world” (Beahm, 1). This is not an unusual judgement. But it is also one*

*which may contribute to sustaining the Murdoch “brand,” his notoriety, and appeal to supporters. This article examines the deep origins of Murdoch’s cynical worldview, and the source of an ambition that drove him from ownership of a small provincial Australian newspaper to global media mogul. What compelled the need to disseminate often dangerously divisive views on as large a stage as possible, while purporting to be acting in the interests of society’s disenfranchised? The purpose of the article is to critically, but disinterestedly, question the credibility of judgement, and so challenge the basis of his public influence. The article’s approach is gendered and historical. It examines the values modelled by his grandfather, Patrick, and transmitted to his father, Keith. It looks at the less direct, yet significant modelling of his boarding school headmaster, the institution that acted in loco parentis from age 10 to 18. It looks at the boyhood version of Rupert Murdoch and finds a direct, undeviating line of sight between the adolescent and the adult. Without access to the same eloquent and intimate relationship shared by Patrick and Keith, Rupert created for himself in adolescence a persona which not only distorted but inverted the altruism cherished by his male predecessors.*

***All representatives of the ideology of power, which is based on a false conception of the self, fear people who are inner-directed and have contempt for them because it is a fear that cannot be acknowledged. It makes no difference if one is on the right or left politically. What we are faced with on all sides is an obsession with power, rather than an openness to reality with all its rich and vital possibilities. – Arno Gruen***

### **Introduction**

Biographies of Rupert Murdoch often begin, unsurprisingly, with an outline of his father, Keith, also a journalist and newspaper owner. The professional line of sight is self-evident. Building on a father’s professional inheritance is a familiar narrative of intergenerational change, or lack of it. But this paper looks deeper than the professional.

The selection of evidence is framed by systems thinking theory in leadership studies (see, e.g., Senge, 1992). The approach also draws on recent findings in epigenetics and neuroscience to add scientific weight to a focus on male modelling in family history (Bruce, 2002; Wastell & White, 2017; Van Der Kolk, 2014).

Systems thinking theory looks at the “mental models” we all carry but which often remain invisible in our professional and personal lives — even to ourselves. Prominent systems thinking researcher, Peter Senge explains:

*[N]one of us can carry an organization in our minds – or a family, or a community. What we carry in our heads are images, assumptions, and stories ...Our “mental models” determine not only how we make sense of the world, but how we take action....Two people with different mental models can observe the same event and describe it differently, because they’ve looked at different details.*

Research on leadership, Senge argues, often begins and ends with the surface “what” and “how” of action. Overlooked is the deeper “who” of the leader, that is, an examination which seeks to reveal their deep “mental models” (Senge et al., 2008, 5).

Epigenetic research is contributing to the centuries’ old “nature versus nurture” debate, helping to scientifically explain the “why” of the “who.” Such research adds weight to the view that behavioural traits are biologically transmissible across generations, but without the reductive championing of biological determinism. It demonstrates the malleability of epigenes in response to environmental change once the traits become a matter of self-knowledge and amenable to conscious change. This scientific field complements the same complex dynamic of nature and nurture as the established social scientific work in the intergenerational transmission of personality traits (Wastell & White).

Neuroscientific research has shown that the adult brain is not mature fully until age 25 (Araim et al., 2013). Recent research also highlights the fallacy of the Cartesian focus on the purely rational and clinically objective, which has underpinned Western educational practice for centuries. Descartes’ Enlightenment assertion – “I think therefore I am” – is being replaced in the 21st century by research that shows the integration of “head, heart, and hand” in teaching, learning, and research (Damasio, 1995). Neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, and educator, Mary Immordino-Yang, for example, propose a contemporary version of Descartes’ aphorism: “we feel, therefore we learn” (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007).

Environmental factors, including socioeconomic status, cultural background, and influence of family are intrinsic to an individual’s character development. Extending research to examine other family members and individuals close to Rupert may help in explaining how he became the mogul of today. This scientific sketch highlights the formative stages of Keith and Rupert’s young lives to see what may have shaped their adult “mental models.” Rupert’s paternal grandfather, Patrick, and great uncle, Walter, are the starting points for this Murdoch family narrative history.

## **Historical Narrative: Rupert’s Male Models**

### ***Patrick***

The Reverend Patrick Murdoch’s concept of freedom ran deeper than a free press. He was born in 1850, seven years after the “Disruption” in the state Church of Scotland, to a minister-father, James, who was one of the 33% of clerics who formed the breakaway Free Church. Central to the dispute was the principle of rectifying the practice of wealthy church patrons appointing parish ministers, regardless of the wishes of ordinary congregants. Here the will of the people had a spiritual rationale that informed the democratic. Christ taught the equality of all before God.

At 34, Patrick was called to a Free Church parish in Melbourne. Arriving with his parents, wife and two small children, he would eventually rise to the position of Moderator-General of the Presbyterian Church in Australia, publishing four books on theology along the way (Gunson, 1986). His was an erudite, articulate, and passionate clerical voice. At his funeral in 1940, Dr. James McKenzie, the State Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Victoria speaking

*of the influences that had gone to the shaping of the late Mr. Murdoch's character and message...[which] mentioned, in particular, the fact that his youth had been spent amid ecclesiastical controversy and theological discussion. Mr. Murdoch also had had the advantage of studying under great leaders and scholars, such as Professor Rainy and Professor A. B. Davidson. As a result, he had come to this country with a singularly complete equipment for the great work that he had done as a preacher, teacher and leader (Herald, 1940).*

Demonstrating the political and judicial reach of Patrick's ministry, attendance at the funeral included a prime minister, a chief justice, and crown solicitor, in addition to the nation's senior clergy. It was with Patrick that the family's connections to significant Australian political and business figures began... as well as the sense of vocation and responsibility to exercise public leadership.

But, if a contest between the principles of secular and sacred justice arose, Patrick's stance was unequivocal. Appearing in court as a witness in a case of slander, he was asked by the judge to produce a letter as evidence. He refused. The authority of the Church's governing body would be required before he could comply, he said. He was judged to be in contempt and gaoled overnight. Raised in the disruptive contest between competing spiritual and secular authority, he would remain a fierce advocate of the precedence of the first over the second (*Ballarat Star*, 1909).

Patrick graduated with an M.A. from the University of Aberdeen before completing his training for the Free Church ministry as Cunningham scholar at New College. He was an accomplished orator as well as writer. One of his publications outlined the core of his belief system. He began with the question: "What is the place of Christianity in relation to the demands and needs of man's nature?" and enumerated six human requirements, the most important being the intellectual and the moral. The first, he said, was "very profound" and "very obstinate" and led to the individual "persistently ask[ing] for the meaning of the world." The second was an equally persistent element of human nature: "conscience." Christianity, he argued, provides "sanction in the will of the Supreme" which is "presented as a Father, forgiving, loving, assisting. The compulsion of duty is fortified by the constraint and the persuasion of love." The other motivating elements of belief he named were seeking after the ideal, communion with the transcendent, and the spiritual foundation of "equity and goodwill" as the core of a just society (Murdoch, 1920).

Patrick's defiance of the judge coincided with his eldest son, Keith's, self-funded trip to London at the age of 24. His goals were to secure a six-month stint at a Fleet Street newspaper and to seek a cure for the dogged stammer that prevented both his own entry into the ministry and impeded his pursuit of journalism as a secular alternative.

The correspondence between middle-aged father and young adult son, from opposite sides of the world, reveals a striking emotional eloquence, candour, and intimacy. Its language defied the stoic silence of traditional manliness of the time (Addis, 2011). The letters reveal a sort of spiritual apprenticeship that was running in parallel to Keith's practical aims. The son is able

to bear with exceptional ease to a trusted father and life mentor his deepest fears and challenges in order to learn more of life's meaning and purpose.

In the end, some progress was made in remediating the stammer, but insufficient to gain entry to Fleet Street. In its stead was a period spent as a student at the London School of Economics (LSE), a course suggested by Patrick's brother, Walter. His studies supplied the aspiring journalist with a knowledge of political science, economics, and English expression that would contextualise and enhance his future work. But they also supplied the fodder for Keith's deep critique of the human condition – his own and others.

### ***Patrick and Keith***

Keith left formal education after completing secondary school, a surprising move given his academic talent. He topped his final year at a prestigious private Melbourne boys' school. Yet he determined not to take up his father's offer of to pay the university tuition fee. The expense, he believed, would not only compromise the family's material comfort, but risk the further education of his two younger brothers. (Older sister, Helen, was not mentioned). He knew his disability rendered him unfit for the ministry (Zwar, 1980, 11). But his uncle, Walter, modelled the alternative profession in journalism, writing rather than speaking about important civic matters. But even this was a struggle.

Defying the advice of the chief of staff of a leading Melbourne newspaper to his mother, Annie, to "put him in a bank" instead, Patrick sought the intervention of his friend, David Syme, the paper's owner. Offered the lowliest position of district correspondent, a resolute Keith defied expectation. Assigned to a suburb of Melbourne whose residents favoured a competitor's paper, he set about giving voice to their key concerns, and reversing the paper's fortunes in the area. After several years of saving his piecemeal earnings, there was enough to fund a trip to Fleet Street, and an invitation of employment upon his return to Melbourne.

But the severe speech impediment dogged his progress in Fleet Street; it failed to respond quickly to specialist intervention. The young man's mental, emotional, and spiritual rollercoaster filled his letters home. In one, typically unguarded, letter written on the inbound voyage, he describes a combination of anxiety, fierce will, and vocation:

*I am dreading the first weeks in London. My stammering has not improved by the trials of the voyage and I hardly feel fit. But I am determined to make it before I leave the place, and I'm sure I won't leave even should it cost me every penny I possess until I am better qualified for good journalistic work....I'm sure I'm following the call of duty (Young, 2003, 31).*

His determination was soon tested as he pursued the contacts supplied by his father. Indicative of responses was one from a Scottish-born, erstwhile cleric, Robertson Nicoll, now a leading literary figure. Echoing the early advice to his mother, Nicoll regarded Keith's stammer as "crippling to his future prospects" (Young, 31). With a mixture of raw courage and despair, he wrote to his father of the "cold, stern slaughter of some hopes." But this was offset by the conviction that he would be "able to learn ever so much here" so that "with health I should become a power in Australia." He seemed steeled by the recognition of the inevitability of the cycle of suffering and redemption, central to Christianity's Easter story. He acknowledged that "tremendous strength of mind is needed to force one's way along" (Young, 32). There seemed almost to be a correlation between the severity of his disability and the energy which drove his determination.

A visit from Walter, then combining careers in academia and journalism, adjusted his goals, as the prospect of entry to Fleet Street faded. Aware of his nephew's intellectual ability, and the opportunity to use the trip to improve his knowledge of society, he suggested extension classes at the LSE. Moving to spartan accommodation nearby, Keith immersed himself in his studies with leading scholars, such as Professor of Sociology, L. T. Hobhouse (and experienced journalist) and political theorist, G.L. Dickinson (Young, 33). Prescribed reading included texts in ethics and morals, imperial relations, English expression and rhetoric, and Liberal principles on economic and sociological issues (Young, 37).

Captivated by his learning, Keith admitted to his father that he was "much amazed and grieved at my absolute ignorance" (Zwar, 11). Vacillation between determination and despair continued as his stammer refused correction: "I wonder what it feels like to be without the nervous strain and the half-ashamed anxiety," admitting openly to "a feeling of being halt and maimed, that possess me every hour of the day" (Zwar, 35). That depression would never fully eclipse his will to succeed though, professionally or personally. He continued to declare his desire for enrichment on both fronts. As well as "good work... I so earnestly desire those gifts of God, bright children, faithful friends and a comfortable home" (Zwar, 36). Armed with the promise at least of the first waiting in Melbourne, and with the successful completion of his studies, he prepared for the journey home. But just then the final prospect of professional work arose. Once again, he passed all of the written tests for the job, but his "speaking collapsed" and that was, finally, the end of that.

Keith's religious upbringing by a beloved and present father, meant a deeper questioning than most of the human condition – his own, and society's in general. The secular nature of his LSE studies had offered an expanded lens through which to interpret his external environment. This led in turn to a genuine test of his inner faith. The philosophical foundation of his worldview disrupted, he wrote, with the same deep trust that characterised his relationship to his father:

*Educated London declares for materialism and the people in the streets show all the traces of the brutish materialistic evolution. The churches here have little hold except through the superstition of the people. I do not hide from you the fact that I am being daily driven further from the belief in Christ's divinity and that I have hard work in holding to divine love and the divine element in man. I know you would have me, above all things, sincere and you'll have me find a way to the truth through doubt and honest thought .... You will trust me I hope to think sincerely and as truly as possible. I long to go back to Christianity and I feel I shall do so...I hope I shall.*

In another letter, reflecting on the economic, class, and cultural features of English society, he observed:

*The people could be A1 if given good wages. They can't live decently and their self-respect is injured. I am sure this is the great mistake in the English system. You know how the wealthy people pride themselves on their superiority. I have heard many of them say they nare better as men than others with less money: i.e., that wealth is the test of worth. The common people greatly believe this and they are as conservative as the wealthy. Give them good wages and the self reliant spirit found in the Australian working man will be developed here.*

One biographer recounts this period of Keith's young life in a chapter titled "Defeat" (Zwar, 2). And that was an accurate description of his thwarted professional goals. But there is a differ-

ent interpretation which could equally see the title “Success.” The Christian existentialist theologian, Paul Tillich, describes “being religious” as “asking passionately the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers, even if they hurt” (Church, 1999). Keith, aided by the absent presence of his father, did just that. His unwavering courage, including his frank confessions of despair, point to a spiritual victory in his personal maturation. His letters testify eloquently to the crucible-like nature of this formative experience. Armed with his developing, intelligent faith, and actively mentored by Patrick, he had chosen to send himself into the “wilderness” with limited funds, life experience, formal education, and with a significant disability. What seemed to be the infallible source of that courage were his male role models –his father and his uncle.

Walter, only eleven years Keith’s senior, manifested his spiritual faith that same inheritance in a secular form that was accessible to his nephew.

### ***Walter and Keith***

Walter was the fourteenth and last of James and Helen Murdoch’s children. His active support of his nephew was evident in his London visit and advice to Keith. In the suggestion of extension studies at LSE, Walter enabled Keith’s confirmation of his intellectual abilities, and more profoundly, his growing sense of meaning and purpose in the world.

Walter was as erudite, principled, and successful as his clerical brother. Secondary education at private church schools in Melbourne, was followed by a liberal arts degree at the University of Melbourne, from which he graduated with a first-class M.A. in logic and philosophy. School teaching was his initial profession. But at twenty-nine, he was appointed to teach literature at the University. After being passed over for promotion, he left academia for journalism, spending a year as a parliamentary reporter before accepting the position as the foundation chair of English literature at the University of Western Australia (Young, 379). His academic teaching continued in tandem with journalism. A fortnightly column called “Life and Letters” was his secular pulpit. Later, his “Answers” column would become a popular weekend feature of Keith’s Melbourne newspaper. He also branched into broadcasting, a medium that attracted Keith’s interest too. Noted for the accessibility of his communication style, his “simple language, challenging titles, erudite literary allusions, subtle or open criticisms of popularly accepted practices or beliefs,” he also displayed a “sympathy for underdogs and a willingness to champion lost causes” (Alexander, 1986).

The lives of James, Patrick, Walter, and Keith Murdoch demonstrate in different professional forms a common drive to find a public voice for the public good. Depth of personal insight, a language to describe it, and a profound sense of public duty were transmitted across these three generations of Murdoch men. These were the patrilineal influences in Rupert’s life. But, as a boarder from age 10 to 18, at a prestigious Australian boys’ private school, it is also reasonable to take into account the leadership of that institution, embodied in its headmaster, James Darling.

### ***James Darling***

The educational ideas which Darling brought with him from England reinforced some of the modelling of Rupert’s paternal line. Darling was an unlikely appointment to the headship of Geelong Grammar School in 1930. He was not the experienced, married cleric most of the Council sought. But a reforming champion on that body persuaded the group to assume the risk of appointing this young, reputedly “pinkish,” single educator.

The son of a schoolmaster himself, Darling, had attended Repton, one of the oldest English private boys' schools. Perhaps indicative of its openness to non-conservative ways of thinking, was the school's appointment of Victor Gollancz to teach civics. Later a publisher, writer, and humanitarian, and founder of the Left Book Club in 1936, his teaching proved to be "a formative experience that shaped [Darling's] liberalism" (Gron, 2019).

Darling was both self-effacing and ambitious. A practical philosophical thinker, he taught his theology in the school chapel. He regarded himself as having no great intellect, but wanted to realise for the school a reputation grounded in an expansive cultivation of boys' heads, hearts, and hands –this, at a time in the school's history, when it was not known for academic or artistic accomplishment. By the time Rupert entered the school in the early 1940s, Darling's innovative, educational philosophy had become the settled framework of school life.

Historian, Weston Bate, said the core of Darling's approach lay not only in the model of "true scholarship" he gained at Repton, but in the elements of character he'd witnessed and absorbed there: "that blending of Christian and socialist ideology." Like Keith Murdoch, as a teenager and young man, he'd confronted the sting of failure. This had in turn encouraged "his passionate pursuit of meaning through communal effort and to those less fortunate." His aim was to shape "the rounded man of action, a kind of Renaissance figure with a social conscience" (Bate, 1990, 179).

A traditional focus on manly physical contest on the sports field would, under his watch, be rectified by strong encouragement of the arts, music, and civic education. Signature buildings were constructed, helped by boys themselves, to house these curricular and extracurricular activities. The latter included the discussion and exchange of topical ideas, enabling boys to apply the intellectual training they received in the classroom to contemporary issues. "Learning was to be relevant and exciting," said Bates, "set in a broader, more human context than the classroom" (Bate, 204). One such activity was debating.

When Rupert Murdoch announced his retirement recently in a letter to staff, he declared that he would not be relinquishing the "contest of ideas." He thanked his "colleagues," including the less visible but critical truck drivers, cleaners, skilled operators, and assistants. He described his own son and successor as a "principled and passionate" leader. He condemned "elites" contemptuous of "those who are not members of their rarefied class" and urged all staff to "make the most of this great opportunity to improve the world we live in." While his critics accused him of delusion and arrogance, there is a traceable line of sight from the teenage Rupert's extracurricular activity at school to this populist rhetoric over 70 years later (*Washington Post*, 2023).

### **The Teenage Rupert: *In His Own Words***

*I felt a loner at school, probably because of my father's position. Bullied a lot* (Murdoch & Beahm, 2).

This memory may reflect the true inner state of the teenage Rupert. But the school archives also reveal a very active and assertive participant in, and contributor to, some of the school's societies.

Rupert's last years of secondary schooling, from 1947–1949, coincided with his father's declining health. Keith was diagnosed with two forms of cancer, on top of a heart condition, and was already enlisting the sixteen-year-old Rupert in discussion of his business and finan-



cial affairs. Rupert's mother, Elisabeth, worried about the emotional and practical pressures this placed so early on her son (Monks,1994,166). This prospect of the premature loss of a beloved father and of assuming early the male headship of the family formed the private context of his public voice in school societies.

Rupert was active in the Areopagus Society, a debating forum structured to resemble parliament. Propositions were contested by lead speakers couched in the same oppositional binaries typical of Australian parliamentary debate. Discussion was then opened to members of the "House." The adversarial, often personally hostile expression of competing positions directly imitated the theatre of male political debate. This was, sadly, the display of traditional manly power translated from the football field to the debating arena.

The prestigious reputation of the school meant senior politicians, representing both major political parties, were often honoured guests and contributors to these debates. At one, Rupert's contribution to the discussion was said to have "amazed us with his knowledge of business world statistics." The proposition was "This House approves the principles of Socialism." The motion was lost, 20 to 81, with Rupert one of the minority. Although he came from a highly respectable, professional family, he didn't number among the traditional landed elite, or the "rich and idle," the historical patrons of the school (Bate,176). He may even have regarded himself and his family as members of the underdog class, Walter was renowned for championing. Rupert reportedly "brought a quite unmerited reception on his head by vigorously urging more [state] controls." He objected provocatively to the lead speaker's "whitewashing of the Menzies' government, which, he claimed, was a failure" (Corian, Aug '48). Mr. Holt, a visiting member of that government, lent his vocal support to the cause of capitalism. Rupert was fully aware of his father's willingness to challenge established, yet familiar figures of authority in his newspapers. The ease and vehemence with which the teenage Rupert asserted his position could be seen as a gesture of filial loyalty to male role models. In his apparent overriding intention to provocatively adopt the minority view point, he seemed to give priority to form over substance, where his grandfather and father had dealt with similar issues at a deeper level of substantive meaning.

As a student at the LSE, Keith's discovery of various political systems had challenged his Christian conscience. The secular seemed to him to be a possible substitute for the spiritual. Patrick was also familiar with this possibility and addressed it as part of a public lecture. Patrick began by outlining the rationale for Christian belief. He then enumerated its possible substitutes, including Socialism. His response was that Socialism, as a political system may, or may not, be underpinned by the deeper spiritual beliefs of its adherents. Socialism and other political systems didn't, in other words, address the more foundational questions of the meaning and purpose of human existence (Murdoch, 1920).

Rupert argued cogently in opposition to another proposal: "That this House views with concern the present trends in Australian foreign policy." Aligning himself again with the minority point of view, and championing Australia's role in global politics, he argued the nation "stood for the little nations." It had taken its place in all branches of the, then young, United Nations Organisation and strengthened its position in the British Commonwealth. He declared that:

*Australia was progressive and responsible, and in view of the situation in the near North, its policy of Nationalism was justified.*

He credited the relevant Minister with paying careful attention to "all Near-Asiatic troubles," including policies enabling Asian youth educated at Australian universities "to help create a

higher standard of living in their lands.” Government policy, he asserted, had also improved Australian-American relations and “done much useful work in maintaining peace” (Corian, 1949).

Many of the debate topics reflected the urgency of reconstructing a global, postwar, civic society. In another, proposing the abolition of trade unionism, Rupert defensively and rather flippantly declared himself, “Not a Commo!” Arguing for the merits of unionism though, he asserted that it was the “right, and not the left, wing Labour element [that] controls the Union movement” and the existence of “employers’ combinations” was one reason for their need. He concluded by “painting a gloomy picture of the position if unionism were abolished.”

Arguing the very provocative proposition that “this House cannot foresee any future for the British Commonwealth of Nations,” Rupert expressed, again in flippant as well as serious tones, his vacillation between affection and reason. On the one hand, he saw the Commonwealth as constituting a threat to “One World.” He disapproved of the educational privilege he benefited from, as one reflection of the inequitable English class system. Instead, he advocated “more opportunities for the poor.” One’s trajectory in life should not be predetermined:

*He did not see why the chance of birth into a rich family should enable some boys [girls weren’t generally considered prospective leaders in the ‘40s and ‘50s] to enjoy an education most of them did not deserve.*

On the other, he declared himself “in love with the British system” even though he “saw no hope for the object of his affections.” But nor did Rupert see America as offering a viable, alternative system. In debating the proposition “That this House considers the American way of life to be a menace to civilization,” he spoke from the floor in support. He “accused the Americans of racial intolerance, deploring their political system.” The core problem he identified was “that America had fallen into the hands of the capitalists.”

On the one hand, Rupert’s remarks need to be seen in the context of the accepted theatrics of a debating format, as well the opinionated stance typical of the inexperienced, yet omniscient, adolescent. But, on the other, the debating society was seen to be a teenage rehearsal for the adult, male-dominated fields of parliament in which one point of view was championed over an opponent’s, using the same range of techniques: humour, contempt, sophistry, and speciousness. Through his participation, he demonstrated an early tendency to reject what he regarded, as acceptable, self-satisfied, elitist opinion and a determination to exercise an opposing, deliberately provocative position, whether this was genuinely believed or not. The important point seemed to be to exercise the power of opinion over one’s perceived opponents.

Similar motives appear over seventy years later in his resignation letter of 2023 from Fox Corp and News Corp. In it, he decries:

*elites [who] have open contempt for those who are not members of their rarefied class. Most of the media is in cahoots with those elites, peddling political narratives rather than pursuing the truth.*

A stance of defiant contrarianism is evident in the utterances of both the teenage and nonagenarian Rupert. Did he see himself in the 1940s as exerting a power of speech against a majority of his peers from whom he felt alienated? Does he see himself now as exercising the same defiant sense of power? How much of it does he truly believe and how much of it is

a continuation of finding a current highly profitable niche for attracting attention in the way he learned to as a teenager?

Rupert was also a leading member of the Literary Society. Its activities included the presentation of papers. Rupert delivered a “very informative” paper on Australian literature at a time when the phrase was considered oxymoronic. A deferential Anglophilia informed curricula in secondary and tertiary classrooms so that “literature” was then synonymous with “English literature.” Here was another example of championing a prior minority view, and attracting controversial attention by so doing.

He was also instrumental in the Society’s revival of a student-driven newspaper, one which would sit alongside the school-produced *Corian*. “If” had been a feature of student life in the early 1930s, perhaps aided and inspired by the gift of Keith’s printing press to the school. Rupert was elected editor of its successor, “If Revived” (*If Revived*, 1947-1949, GGS archive). His modus operandi of presenting ideas provocatively was again on display.

Marsh’s biography, *Young Rupert*, speculates reasonably that the pieces appearing in the paper without a by-line were written by Rupert. In the first of the two editorials he’d write in 1949, he spoke rather patronisingly of the paper’s predecessor. In his view, this had been “sincere” if “thin” and shown “a singular lack of imagination.” But it had, he said, the political value of exercising the voice of students, “the merit of being wholly set up and printed by members of the School.” Its successor, he said, would be a forum in which “everybody can air their opinions” on “literary and artistic subjects” so long as they are “well expressed.” In a defensive disclaimer, he declared the paper would be free of editorial bias. Potential accusations that the paper would deliver “red,” “pink,” or “blue” opinions would prove “absolutely baseless,” he said.

Marsh highlights one article, an extension of the debate mentioned earlier: “The Case for Socialism.” Despite the editorial claim of political neutrality, Marsh suggests it further demonstrates the teenager’s political allegiances. The article offers an articulate argument of the double-barrelled defects of capitalism: the economic and the humane. He declared that:

*[A]lthough the critics of socialism often accuse it of being materialistic, the more important objections to capitalism which socialists have are moral. ...A minimum amount of economic security and leisure are essential before people can possibly develop ‘an interest in the best things of life, music, art, and knowledge. They want a society that will emphasise personal worth rather than wealth, co-operation rather than competition, a sense of social responsibility rather than pursuit of individual success. Capitalism puts a premium on the worst elements of human nature, stimulates selfishness, glorifies greed, and forces individuals into anti-social action.’...It is neither claimed that prejudice and dishonesty will disappear overnight nor that socialism will be without its own problems. What is claimed, however, is that socialism would bring mankind a great deal closer towards his ultimate objective — the Good Life.*

But Rupert chose to place another boy’s piece, “The Case Against Socialism,” immediately following his own. The adversarial, combative theatre of the debating forum that produced reductive utterances, was replaced here by expansive, methodical, but still diametrically opposed positioning. Did Rupert always need to be not only someone’s adversary, but in opposition to a majority point of view, which he could then label elitist?

In another piece arguing the necessity of rescinding “The White Australian Policy,” he asserts:

*Asia, which contains half the human race, is re-awakening. Civilisation began in Asia - in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates, and in China. ...a Renaissance is taking place in Asia, a Renaissance which will have greater effects and consequences than the European Renaissance of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries....Australia is geographically an Asiatic country, and it behooves us, not for sentimental reasons, but for reasons of self-preservation, to realise this and act accordingly.*

He concludes with a larger ethical question, beyond that of national self-interest:

*The question that should be asked, in Burke's words on the American Revolution, is 'not whether you have a right to render people miserable [through rejection], but whether it is not in your interest to make them happy? It is not what a lawyer tells me I may do, but what humanity, reason, and justice tell me I ought to do. Is a politic act the worse for being a generous one?'*

Marsh notes the "hint of mocking disdain for the antics of Comrade Murdoch" in reports of school debates (Marsh, 2023, p. 46). Rupert's alternating flippancy and earnestness of expression suggest his overriding purpose was to seek notoriety rather than a sincere conviction of purpose. Given his interest in the arts, he was likely aware of Wilde's aphorism, "the only thing worse than being talked about, is not being talked about."

The young Keith's letters home to his father were often impassioned, displaying a genuine struggle with his deepest beliefs and in the ongoing formation of his identity and purpose. Rupert's utterances and writing contain nothing as deep or inner-directed – none of the same wrestling with complexity and ambiguity of Keith's.

Patrick and Keith's correspondence reveal a rich, inner world – the search by the son for a deeply meaningful identity as a solid foundation for questioning and forming judgements about the external world. There is no documentary evidence of a similar correspondence between Keith and Rupert, of the nurturing towards a masculinity that was grounded in the first principles of compassion and self-compassion, and of learning from a trusted male role model that power within was a greater asset in life to power over others (National Democratic Institute). But Keith was 24 when he left his father's home to try his hand in London. Rupert was 10 when he left the family home for boarding school.

There is documentary evidence of an articulate and intelligent teenager, removed from the emotional mentorship of a trusted father while in the throes of shaping his identity and self-worth – and of him doing so in deliberately provocative, if apparently rational, opposition to the peers from whom he later declared himself to have felt emotionally estranged. There is a striking similarity of tone and content between the teenager displayed in these schoolboy writings and the letter of resignation to staff penned over seven decades later. It is a plausible interpretation of the evidence that, the deeply compassionate, highly progressive masculinity evident in his grandfather and father's relationship became permanently inverted during Rupert's formative years, substituted by an impassioned contempt for the views of those from whom he felt alienated, and masked by a rationalized, disinterested counter-championing of society's powerless and voiceless. That training in traditional masculine power over one's perceived opponents became a substitute for the instruction of power within in contravention to what Darling may have wanted otherwise. It is plausible that the passion and intensity of Keith's mentored quest for a deeply-grounded identity was channeled instead by Rupert into an insatiable drive for wealth and even greater notoriety as a poor substitute.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to examine some of the deep origins of the intense drive that took Murdoch from Australian provincial to global media figure, one declared to be the “most dangerous man in the world” because of his vast platform for populist influence.

It sought an historical explanation vis-à-vis his paternal male role models, only to find its opposite: the exemplification of altruism informed by deep spiritual beliefs and true inner strength. His grandfather, Patrick’s theological erudition demonstrated the heart and mind of a philosopher who made sense of, and sought to, mitigate the suffering of humanity through eloquent exposition and practice of Christian love and forgiveness demonstrated through the compassionate and perceptive fathering of his sensitive son, Keith, Rupert’s father. Keith’s correspondence with his father from London demonstrates a degree of emotional insight, honesty, transparency, and eloquence that is still sought after by male and female feminists over a hundred years later. Keith’s sense of vocation in the service of the public good was ultimately reflected in the language of his Will. He declared that he wanted his son to “have the great opportunity of spending a useful altruistic and full life in newspaper and broadcasting activities” (Sun King, 144).

The evidence suggests that that prospect of altruism was lost in the failure to replicate the modelling and mentoring that Keith had received directly from Patrick. As a substitute for the presence and guidance of a beloved father, Rupert cultivated the negative attention of his peers because he didn’t know how to cultivate its opposite. In the absence of loving, male support and true empowerment, he developed a “blokey” veneer of toughness – a “manly” display of crude power over others’ ideas.

At 21, and approaching graduation from Oxford, there was the prospect of Rupert redeeming a close connection with his father. But Keith died. At an age similar to that when Patrick was actively engaged in mentoring Keith’s spiritual development and the altruism to which he aspired, Rupert was equipped with only the distorted emotional life he had developed in institutional cultures dominated by his peers. He seemed to contain the same emotional intensity and intellect of his father and grandfather, but without the same spiritual or ethical framework.

It is plausible to infer that the grief of his father’s sudden death, the ongoing grief of his father’s absence in his life, and the failure to connect positively with his substitute “family” of peers, resulted in an intense drive to remediate these losses. Material acquisition, proliferation of media outlets to dispense divisive, simplistic views, rationalised as giving voice to the common man, became the adult version of Rupert’s sadly defiant contrarianism at school.

It is perhaps a popular psychological cliché to conclude that the search for notoriety is the poor substitute of the damaged in search of genuine love. But there is historical family evidence that suggest that this is indeed true for Rupert Murdoch. Turner’s declaration that “Rupert Murdoch is the most dangerous man in the world” is an adult version of the negative attention he succeeded, perversely, in attracting at school. Amassing a personal fortune of \$18 billion can be seen as a gratifying, yet inverted, substitute for the thwarted intimacy between father and son and the altruism Keith hoped for Rupert. Leadership for the public good, born from a generous and forgiving love of humanity, was Patrick Murdoch’s philosophy and practice. The promise of emotional maturation that offered his own son was, unintentionally no doubt, denied Rupert. The prospect of altruistic leadership became inverted as a consequence.

The history of the comparative genesis of the principles of leadership of Patrick, Keith, and Rupert Murdoch reminds aspiring leaders of the critical importance of self-knowledge and emotional intelligence in working genuinely for the public good, whether in the private or public sector. Recognising and knowing how to cultivate an inner source of power as the basis for exercising public power altruistically is not only in the humane interests of those one seeks to lead, but in the deepest self-interest of leaders themselves.

---

## References

[The primary sources for the article are held at the Geelong Grammar School Archive, Corio, Victoria, Australia. This included copies of the School magazine, *The Corian*, 1947-49, and the student paper, *If Revived*, 1948-49.]

Addis, Michael (2011), *Invisible Men: Men's Inner Lives and the Consequences of Silence*, Times Books.

Alexander, Fred (1986). "Murdoch, Sir Walter Logie (1874-1970)." *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/murdoch-sir-walter-logie-7698/text13477>.

Arain, Mariam, Haque, Maliha, Johal, Lina, Mathur, Puja, Nel, Wynand, Rais, Afsha, Sandhu, Ranbir, & Sharma, Sushil (2013). Maturation of the adolescent brain. *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, 9: 449-461.

Baer, A.J. (22 September 2023). Rupert Murdoch's Arrogant Farewell Says It All. *Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/09/22/rupert-murdoch-s-arrogant-farewell-says-it-all/386e013c-595a-11ee-bf64-cd88fe7adc71\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/09/22/rupert-murdoch-s-arrogant-farewell-says-it-all/386e013c-595a-11ee-bf64-cd88fe7adc71_story.html).

*Ballarat Star* (16 March 1909). "A Clergyman's Contempt of Court," p. 1.

Bate, Weston (1990). *Light Blue Down Under: History of Geelong Grammar School*, Queensland University Press.

Church, Forrester (1999). *The Essential Tillich*. University of Chicago Press, p. 105.

Damasio, Antonio (1995). *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, Penguin.

Di Stefano, Mark (22 September 2023). Rupert Murdoch steps down from News Corp and Fox, Lachlan ascends. *Financial Review*, <https://www.afr.com/companies/media-and-marketing/rupert-murdoch-retires-from-fox-and-news-corp-lachlan-ascends-20230921-p5e6p1>.

Gronn, Peter (2019), "Darling, Sir James Ralph (1899-1995). *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/darling-sir-james-ralph-21871/text31931>.

Gunson, Niel (1986). Murdoch, Patrick John (1850-1940). *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/murdoch-patrick-john-7695/text13471>.

*Herald* (2 July 1940). "Many attend the funeral of the Reverend Patrick Murdoch," p.7.

- Immordino-Yang, Mary, & Damasio, Antonio (2007). We Feel, Therefore We Learn: The Relevance of Affective and Social Neuroscience to Education. *Mind, Brain and Education*, 1:1, 3-10.
- Marsh, Walter (2023). *Young Rupert: The Making of the Murdoch Empire*. Scribe.
- Monks, John (1994). *Elisabeth Murdoch: Two Lives*. MacMillan.
- Montgomery, Hugh (23 September 2023). An inside look at the real Rupert Murdoch. *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230922-an-inside-look-at-the-real-rupert-murdoch>.
- Murdoch, R., Beahm, George (ed) (2012). *The Sun King: Rupert Murdoch in his own Words*, Hardie Grant Books.
- Murdoch, Rev. Patrick (1920). *Christianity: What can be put in its place*. Presbyterian Church of Australia.
- National Democratic Institute. "The Meanings of Power." <https://www.ndi.org/sites>.
- Perry, Bruce. (2002). Childhood experience and the expression of genetic potential: What childhood neglect tells us about nature and nurture. *Brain & Mind*, 3(1), 79–100.
- Roberts, Tom (18 November 2015). The Murdochs: How Keith's Legacy became Rupert's Obsession. *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/18/the-murdochs-how-keiths-legacy-became-ruperts-obsession>.
- Senge, Peter (1992). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization*, Random House.
- Senge, Peter, Scharmer, Otto, Jaworski, Joseph, & Flowers, Betty Sue (2008). *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, Crown Publishing Group, p. 5.
- Van Der Kolk, Bessel (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score*. Viking Press.
- Wastell, David & White, Susan (2017). *Blinded by Science: The Social Implications of Epigenetics and Neuroscience*, Policy Press.
- Younger, Ronald (2003). *Keith Murdoch: Founder of a Media Empire*, Harper Collins.
- Zwar, Desmond (1980), *In Search of Keith Murdoch*, Macmillan.
- 

## About the Author

### Elizabeth Summerfield

Elizabeth Summerfield is a Visiting Fellow at the Stretton Institute of the University of Adelaide, Australia. Her research interests are in the history of leadership and its application to contemporary problems of sustainability, education, and gender. She has published in science, leadership, and education journals. Her books are *Transmitting Gender across Generations* and *Educating Leaders in Sustainability using History*.

She can be reached at [esummerfield5@gmail.com](mailto:esummerfield5@gmail.com).