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<b>Title</b>	Walter Murdoch : a centenary tribute
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Ladies and gentlemen, this evening, on the centenary of his birth, we gather to pay tribute to Sir Walter Murdoch, after whom Murdoch University was named. Professor La Nauze has kindly come from Canberra to deliver what we intend should be the first of an annual series of Walter Murdoch lectures. It is fitting that the subject tonight should be Walter Murdoch himself.

It is also fitting that the first Walter Murdoch lecture should be given at the University of Western Australia, with which Sir Walter was associated for several years, and we are grateful to you and your colleagues, Vice Chancellor, for allowing us to use your own campus for this part of today's celebrations, and for joining with us in honouring a man who means so much to both universities.

Tonight's lecture is entitled "Walter Murdoch: A Centenary Tribute" and our lecturer is Professor John La Nauze, one of Australia's most distinguished historians, and Professor and Head of the Department of History at the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University. John La Nauze was born, bred and educated in Western Australia and was a Rhode Scholar from Western Australia in the early 30s. He held appointments at the universities of Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne before taking up his present appointment in 1966, and he was himself a pupil of Sir Walter Murdoch's, who

kept in touch with him throughout his life. At present he is engaged in writing a biographical memoir of Sir Walter. Our lecturer, then, could hardly be a more appropriately qualified or fitting person to deliver the first Walter Murdoch lecture and we are most honoured, Professor La Nauze, by your agreement to be with us tonight.  
Professor.

[applause]

**JL:** Mr. Vice Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen. As a West Australian, I deeply appreciate your invitation to speak tonight about Walter Murdoch on the day that Murdoch University has been formally inaugurated, and appropriately, by the governor-general of Australia. And sir, I would like to say to your fellow Vice-Chancellor that it's a pleasure to speak on such a subject in the Winthrop Hall.

Here, on the fifteenth of April 1932, I was presented as a candidate for admission to the degree of Bachelor of Arts although it was in a ghostly sense, since I took my degree in absentia. One of the men who addressed the gathering on that day was Walter Murdoch.

He began to write his autobiography at the age of eighty-five but he didn't get far because he said "I find I've had a terribly uneventful life". Here it is.

He was born on the seventeenth of September 1874 in the Free Church manse in the village of Rosehearty, a fishing village in the north of Aberdeenshire in Scotland. At the age of ten he, with his parents, arrived in Melbourne. After graduating from the University of Melbourne he was first a schoolteacher, then a lecturer at the university. He came to Perth early in 1913 to be the first professor of English in the new University of Western Australia. He retired in 1939. From 1943 to 1948, he was Chancellor of the university. He lived quietly in his home in South Perth where he died on the thirtieth of July nineteen hundred and seventy. He was well known as a writer of essays and articles and for, in his later years as a broadcaster. A few weeks before his death it was

announced that Western Australia would have a second university which would be named after him.

Yes, it was a very uneventful life, when we compare him with the names of the men given to other Australian universities. Macquarie, Monash - these were soldiers, administrators, accustomed to command. Cook and Flinders - these were naval officers, voyagers through strange seas. Griffith - Griffith was a premier, chief justice of Queensland, first chief justice of the High Court of Australia, a man set above other men. La Trobe - La Trobe, the least remembered in our history, was nevertheless a traveller, a mountaineer and a governor before whom sentries sprang to attention.

Walter Murdoch's first memorable adventure occurred in France when he was eight years old. He was knocked unconscious to the ground from the back of a bolting donkey. As a young man living on a sheep station, he once helped to hoist up buckets to put out the fire that might have threatened the roof of the wool shed. At the age of ninety, in his greatest adventure of all, he set out to visit Italy for the last time. For the rest, he lived in a suburb nearly all his life and I suppose the only people who ever came to something like attention in his presence were the little boys when he was a schoolmaster, and the audience on graduation days when he was Chancellor. In fact, he was the least granitic of men, as he said he had to be dismissed as no better than a university bloke.

He himself would have been quick to observe that it's by an accidental coincidence that we meet tonight. The span of a hundred years, a century, is one of the few units of measurement whose magic in the English tongue has not been lost forever in a miasma of metrification. It happens that the centenary of his birth falls conveniently close to the time when Murdoch University will open its doors to students. What more natural, then, that to honour his memory, his old university should, tonight, come together with a younger sister, to whom for centuries now Murdoch will at least mean a local habitation and a name.

But we must be very careful, if we're students of Murdoch, of Walter Murdoch, in talking about him. At a memorial service four years ago, Sir Paul Hasluck said rightly, we will not honour him by being over solemn. How well any student will remember the look of innocent bewilderment which caused the splendours of once most eloquent prose to dissolve suddenly into mere fine writing.

We would never have dared in Walter Murdoch's presence to call him a sage. We could too well imagine his muttered variation on a famous title; Sage and onions, he would have muttered. We would never in his presence referred to his venerable old age, had he not once brought a nest of elderly hornets about his ears by remarking that old age, in itself, was no more venerable in a human being than in a cheese. It's true, of course, that unless he is an Archdeacon or a potential saint, a man cannot be venerable without being old, but whether he deserves veneration depends on how he's lived his life.

Many of us knew Walter Murdoch more or less well, at different ages and in different relationships. Let us then recall him tonight but let us always remember one of his favourite quotations: Take rhetoric and wring its neck.

As a schoolboy in South Perth I knew Walter Murdoch in the early 1920s as a familiar figure. An unpretentious figure, ambling, or perhaps rambling is a better word, to or from the Mends Street jetty. All that I really knew about him then was that he was the writer of some lines which I'd taken the trouble to learn by heart. These were some lines from a book called *Anne's animals* and there were lines on the elephant; "This creature cannot climb the trees nor swing from branch to branch with ease. To put it brutally but shortly, his figure is extremely portly". Now in recollection, of those days anyhow, Murdoch always seems to have worn a crumpled grey suit and a grey felt hat with a turned-up that brim and somehow, he was always, carrying I suppose is the word, but somewhere on his figure, was a pipe.

I may have muttered a few embarrassed words when occasionally he'd stop to chat with my mother on the way to the ferry but I never really talked to him until I became a university student in 1929. After I'd left Perth, we did exchange letters informally, intermittently, for some forty years and we met from time to time as visitors to Perth or Melbourne. I last saw him in June 1968 waving from the door of Blythe Dale in South Perth when I turned to say goodbye and I last heard from him in May 1970.

Other people can recall many other things. Many of us, no doubt, in some sense knew Murdoch but which Murdoch did we know? Historians think in periods. No one alive today, I think, knew the Walter Murdoch of what I would call period one; the boy who spent his first eight years in a Scottish fishing village on the rocky dangerous coast of a perilous sea.

He was the ninth son, and the fourteenth and last child, of the Reverend James Murdoch and his wife Helen. As a young man of twenty-six, James had come out, as the phrase is - come out - into the Free Church at the disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843. In 1846, he'd accepted a call from the Rosehearty congregation in the parish of Pitsligo. An impressive preacher, much respected by the fisher folk of the village, he was a great reader of theology and literature. A very sound man on the doctrine of everlasting punishment but mercifully reserving what he's called express and lengthened exposition of it for rare occasions. A little old fashioned, it was thought, in his warnings about the Pope of Rome, in a parish where there was but one Papist, a shipwrecked and dissolute Irishman. But altogether James was a good earnest and learned minister.

His last child was baptised Walter Logie Forbes, or as he himself pronounced it in his own old age, For-bez, in the Scottish way, Walter Logie For-bez. The last two names were family names on his mother's side. Walter never went to school in Rosehearty. His father, like himself in his own old age, didn't believe in too early a beginning for formal education. He thought there was something in the view later expressed to me by his friend, younger friend, Ian Maxwell, "Children should perhaps grow like cabbages for a

while". Walter's older sister Lizzie taught him to read, his father taught him the rudiments of Latin, pulling his hair but one rather suspects rather gently when he got his declensions wrong.

Some older children of this family had left home or died before Walter was born but we can glimpse a happy family life. The Reverend James reading aloud from Robert Burns on winter evenings, snowballing in the winter, summer picnics to romantic caves along the coast, visits to a great aunt born in the year that the colony was founded in Botany Bay. The great aunt who remembered the illuminations for Trafalgar, for Waterloo.

And there was something else in that family, like other Scottish families of that time, never to be forgotten when we try, as historians or readers of novels, to understand the Victorian family, and that was the memory of the expectation of death. Every family in Scotland, probably, was exposed to tuberculosis. The question wasn't whether you escaped it but whether you survived it and a number of the Murdoch's did not survive it.

In 1881, the Reverend James resigned his ministry, in order, he said, to emigrate for the sake of his family's health and his own. They then spent two years in the south of England and then the Reverend Patrick Murdoch, the oldest son, the oldest child of the family, accepted a call from a congregation in Melbourne, the metropolis of the southern hemisphere, the Paris of the South, and other such names, in the eighteen eighties. Patrick's parents, the Reverend James and his wife Helen, their three surviving daughters, and young Walter, sailed with Patrick and his own family to Melbourne. They arrived in October 1884; Walter was ten years old, having had his tenth birthday on the voyage. Within a month, his father died.

Well that's Walter's Scottish, and partly English but mainly Scottish, childhood and no doubt his Scottish childhood affected Walter Murdoch in many subtle ways which, I think, Mr Vice Chancellor, as an ex-psychologist and now an administrative slave, sir, you may still remember childhood may affect people in many ways, but quite certainly,

Walter Murdoch's Scottish childhood provided him with one invaluable asset. He left Scotland at the age of eight, he was well into his fifties before he first returned, briefly and as a visitor, to his birthplace, yet in eighty-five years as an Australian, he could, if he chose, legitimately call himself a Scot. His Scottish birth was his extra trump, the Joker in his hand, and some would say up his sleeve. Throughout a very long life, he played it with very great skill.

In period two, in Victoria, Walter Murdoch is a schoolboy, a university student, a schoolmaster, he marries. In Victoria he begins to be known as a writer on literature. These are the years from 1885 to the end of 1903. After the death of the Reverend James Murdoch it seems, though the details are slightly obscure, there was enough money to provide, for some years, a modest suburban comfort in Melbourne for the widowed Helen Murdoch, for her daughters and young Walter.

He was a fairly good student at school, not outstanding, and surprisingly he recalled in old age that, though no athlete, he considered himself a fair gymnast. Some would say that they could have doubts about that in a physical sense but certainly it described his mental qualities. He went on in 1892 from school to become an outstanding student at the University of Melbourne. His family wished him to do medicine and he began, nevertheless, with a preliminary in the Faculty of Arts. And then came the Victorian bank crash of 1893 and the loss of most of the family income. That was the end of any medical career for Walter. He didn't regret it, retrospectively. There are probably people alive, he once reflected, who would not be alive if I had been their physician.

Grants and scholarships enabled him to finish his Arts degree and he graduated in 1895 with first class honours in logic and philosophy, an asset with no market value at all, in that period of deep depression in the Victorian economy. He was lucky, he thought, to get a job on a sheep station as a tutor to the owner's son at forty pounds a year. He then became an assistant master at a country school at eighty pounds a year. Fifty years after that he found, to his high glee, that the shrewd headmaster, a fellow Scot, had

paid twenty pounds less to his successor, who turned out to have been Murdoch's old friend Sir John Latham. He thought this was a fair comparison of their relative mental abilities.

He returned to Melbourne in 1897, or at the end of 1897, to marry Violet Houston whom he'd known and whose family he'd known for some years in Camberwell where they lived. All I want to say tonight about his domestic life can be said in three sentences, and all that is proper to say in a public lecture. Sometime before Violet Murdoch's death, he wrote of their companionship of fifty-seven years, counting the years of their engagement. They had three much loved children; a boy and two girls. His second fortunate marriage, in old age, made possible the serenity of his last years.

In 1898 there was a problem of a job for a married man. He solved it, fairly originally, I think, by creating a job. He started a private school of his own in Camberwell where he and his family were well known. The advertised attractions of this school included train fares paid, but its three years' existence were not highly successful. Next, from 1901 to 1903, he took over a private school in the town of Warrnambool, on the western coast of Victoria. There survives a photograph, dated 1901, of a school football team; eighteen earnest youngsters in striped guernseys and knickerbockers, their arms folded to enlarge their biceps. Beside them stands a keen faced, dark haired young man, neatly dressed as becomes a Senior Master; Walter Murdoch, the football coach. One feels thankful that it was Australian Rules.

In these six years of school mastering, he began to write for publication. He needed the money. Surely, he must of thought, he could do as well as many of the writers whose stories, verses, articles, were accepted by contemporary journals and so he could. Editors did publish some of his stories, some of his verses. These were written competently enough but they were competent imitations. They were quite good but they were pastiche. The Murdoch who had something of his own to say was neither a novelist



nor a poet, although he always remained a good, an excellent writer of light verse.

Neither of these but a critic, a critic and expositor of new and old literature.

In 1899, the Melbourne Argus, a famous newspaper then, accepted a critical article on contemporary Australian verse. It was a little too smart, in places it trailed a coat, but it did have something to say, fresh, challenging, interesting. In Melbourne the literary establishment got quite angry and wrote letters to the paper about it. In Sydney the great A.G. Stephens of the Bulletin condescended to demolish it in a red page article. The Argus was now anxious to publish anything on men and on books that Murdoch found time to write.

Now it's worth noticing this kind of writing must be done in a certain way. This is newspaper writing. It must be concise, it must be clear, it must get straight to the point, it must sufficiently hold the attention of an educated reader who isn't himself a specialist. The writer must first think about what he wants to say, he must then set it down fluently, without prolonged revision of words and phrases. Murdoch the essayist of later years began to learn his trade in his early years as a literary journalist, looking for some money to supplement his inadequate income as a schoolmaster.

So, we come to period three which begins in 1904. An unexpected opportunity that I needn't go into here made Murdoch, or gave him the chance to be, a lecturer in English in the University of Melbourne and he was virtually in charge of that department until 1912. In these years, nineteen, beginning of 1904 to 1912 or 13, he came to occupy a distinct place in the literary and cultural life of Melbourne, and of Victoria. I think that perhaps among his professorial colleagues who came to the University of Western Australia in 1913, only his fellow Victorian Edward Shann could quite appreciate how distinct a place Murdoch had occupied.

In those days, teachers in the University of Melbourne were much more closely in touch with people of similar interests outside the university than they ever were in later times,

say, after 1920 or so. Murdoch, in this period, was the only university teacher of English literature. The people in Melbourne most familiar with new and old literature, most eager to discuss it, most concerned with attempting to write it, were the writers, the critics, the well-read men in various professional occupations outside the university. Murdoch came to know, as friends or acquaintances, the most interesting of these men and women and he was a respected figure among them as a writer, a critic and a companion.

This would take some time to expound properly but perhaps I can illustrate by asking you to consider the names of eight men who happened to dine together one evening in this period. I take them from an entry in the diary of one of them. Here they are: Walter Murdoch; Frederick Sinclair, who was a clergyman, a literary scholar, known to some of us; George Knibbs, the statistician of the Commonwealth, translator of Greek and Scandinavian poetry; Ernest Scott, historian; Robert Garran, federalist, lawyer, translator of Heine; Archibald Strong, literary scholar and critic; Maurice Miller, philosopher and bibliographer. The diarist himself was Alfred Deakin, the best read of Australian prime ministers.

Now, that entry has a peculiar interest for me personally. Murdoch and Sinclair were my teachers, I met and corresponded with Garran and Miller, I once occupied a university chair named after Ernest Scott, I wrote a biography of Deakin, and may add that I was born on that day that they dined together. I now believe in the stars.

Well Murdoch, the point that I want to make is that Murdoch sorely missed that kind of company when he came to Western Australia in 1913, at the beginning of the year, and furthermore, in Victoria he was well known, also, to hundreds of men and women, thousands perhaps, who had never met him, as Elzevir, the pseudonym he used, Elzevir of the Argus, whose weekly articles on men and books were eagerly read and discussed every Saturday. In the fluent, witty commentary but also with a critical ability which I think was at its height at this time, these articles kept readers in touch with new writing in English and French and Australian literature or sent them back to the writers of the

past. When he came to Perth, he was already a well-known man of letters and he came, and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise, he came to what was then a cultural desert. It's rather greener now and I think that is partly his doing.

The chair of English in Melbourne, long vacant, was advertised in 1911. Most people interested in such matters, including his colleagues and his students, expected that Murdoch would be appointed to it. He was not. That was quite certainly a blunder by the Melbourne University Council, not the first or the last blunder that that council has made, but a Western Australian can hardly deplore it. Within a few days of that announcement, Murdoch was accept, had accepted a full time job on the Argus, Now, doubtless he could now have continued for many years, perhaps the rest of his life, to earn his living as an excellent literary journalist but his rejection by the university been a blow to his pride. Many years later he wrote to a friend. "I suspected myself of being a nobody and I wanted a chair as evidence that I was a somebody". Evidence, that is, not only for himself but for some others close to him whose opinion he cared for.

At the end of 1912, Hackett's new University in Western Australia provided that opportunity for him. John Forrest, speaking at a reception for the first Professors in 1913, gave it as his opinion that the university was fifty years before its time. Professor Alexander's Jubilee history provides what I think I might call pretty solid evidence that this judgement was wrong. That fascinating record of a half a century necessarily has a great deal to say about Murdoch. Murdoch the administrator, the teacher, the friend and the helper of younger colleagues in times of trouble, he was also held in deep and affectionate respect by undergraduates. And if his colleagues could tell some pretty rueful tales of causes lost under the fire of his ironical criticism, they could also tell some tales of desperate causes won with his court.

I could say a lot about this, partly from the position of a humble observer, partly from talking to my old friends, my seniors of those days, but I shall not. I think I'm exercising considerable self-restraint, and perhaps disappointing some of you, if I don't recall in

detail Murdoch's academic career within the University of Western Australia. Many of us, I've got no doubt, could spend hours in reminiscent chat about the old days and about Murdoch as we knew him in our different situations, but in the first place, this would do less than justice to his colleagues, to such men as Wilsmore, whose encyclopaedic range Murdoch very greatly respected, to Whitfeld, his closest friend, to Edward Shann, of whom he wrote to me in 1935, "I seem rather old to be learning lessons but Shann's death has taught me one. You don't realise how much affection you have for the man until he is gone. We have no chance of telling him". In the second place, it would be discourteous. There are two universities meeting here tonight and private talk about only one of them would be simply bad manners.

If Murdoch's name appropriately links the old and the new universities, it's not because he was the first professor of English in the University of Western Australia, but because of what, as a West Australian, he wrote and said over many years. So I shall talk a little about him as a writer whose name was known throughout the continent.

Hackett had urged the first Professors to keep in touch with the public. It was desperately important to Hackett that the public accepted the new university. He thought they wouldn't and that professors ought to go out among them and convert them. Murdoch thought the best way he could do this was by writing. He did continue to review, for many years, books for the Melbourne Argus but his articles for the local press in his early years in Perth tended to be concerned with public issues, particularly the problems of the university and of education generally. One example, is his celebrated thoughts on the kerosene tin published in 1922 but are not, I think, reprinted. There it lay, you will remember, some of the older among you if I may say so, there it lay, the kerosene tin, overflowing the garbage near the Weld Club, mislaid perhaps by some absentminded member, as Murdoch said, and there it lay for a week.

The observation of this kerosene tin near the Weld Club as he passed it coming from the ferry to the old university in Irwin Street led him to write, through various byways, a

powerful plea for the proper housing, the proper equipment at the university, still in those tin sheds, so that in time, through the leaders it would train, there might be some alleviation of the cost to the community of dear old complacent West Australian amateurishness. That was an early example, and still rather particular and local, of a kind of Murdoch essay.

Now, as far as I can see there are three likely reasons why Murdoch began, about the mid-nineteenth century, to write more frequently on general subjects chosen by himself rather than those set for him by a book to be reviewed or a particular and immediate public question. He was fifty, fifty years of age in 1924. He was not unhappy in Western Australia, indeed in many ways happy, but he still greatly missed the friendships, the literary atmosphere of Melbourne, as it had been his years in the university. He was still prepared to move back east if the suitable opportunity occurred. One promising opportunity fell through. He never sought another one.

That's one reason, I think. Secondly in 1923 he published his book on Alfred Deakin, his first real book. As he said later, he put a great deal of hard work into it and yet he must have realised, when he had finished it, that in this kind of work he was writing against the grain of his own talents, that the constraints of close, documentary, frustrating, scholarly work necessarily suppressed his own gifts of wit, of fancy, and indeed suppressed his compulsive desire to preach, to draw a moral, which he always admitted.

That's a second reason and thirdly, he found himself in middle age, out of sympathy with a good deal of the new writing of the 1920's. It was becoming more difficult for him to write with enthusiasm, if not about new books indeed, at least about the new novels and poetry of that time, and he knew that good criticism springs from fundamental sympathy. And yet, he still had many things to say and when he said them, he found that readers liked to hear them.

He was now settled and he accepted this willingly enough, I think, and happily enough. He was settled in Western Australia for life. He would write as he choose, as he would choose and perhaps he could disturb a little that complacency of thought, that complacency of action which he called the suburban spirit and so, I think, you get in its full maturity, so emerges the Murdoch essay.

Now the essay is a literary form which has a long and honourable lineage and Murdoch is, so far, the best of Australian essayists. The formul, formula looks easy. If you want people to think about what you have to say, you must first hit on some perfectly concrete word or thing or personal experience to arouse their interest or their curiosity and so lead them onto the lesson that you may wish to impart. You'll remember, perhaps, Murdoch's rising politician, who suddenly found that he had a real halo, for which his wife made a cardboard shade to be used as a reading lamp or the lift boy, who expressed the essence of democracy in his peremptory cry to the obviously important person who got out at the wrong floor, "Hi! Bloke". It looks easy. I could write that sort of thing myself if I cared to, some of you may say. Well, could you?

These Saturday morning essays were read as eagerly in Perth as the Elziver articles had been read in Melbourne. When the first collection, speaking personally, was published at the end of the twenties, published as a book, we saw the extraordinary phenomenon of a set of more or less literary essays becoming a bestseller and so it was with the similar collections which followed it from time to time and so it was with the larger book, the collected essays, the collection of the collections. That phenomenon I commend as a subject for study by Murdoch University's School of Human Communication.

The Murdoch of the 1930s wrote more than entertaining essays which made readers think. He ventured, many people thought or said, further than was decent in the Professor of English, into writing about public affairs in that decade of depression and the threat of war. He was often criticised. We needn't agree with all he had to say; he didn't think we would. It was a hazardous business to attack Murdoch. With what surprise,

again some of you who knew, what surprise would he learn that his public opinions could possibly be thought to be dangerous, that anyone took any notice of an aging sheep like himself? Gently, humbly, not always fairly, he would slice little pieces off a clumsier but often well-meaning critic. He once suggested, for example, that none of the existing political parties seem to have any solution to the economic problems of the time. A new party appeared to be needed. He was told, in the newspaper, in a letter to the newspaper, sternly and at length, that in political matters he didn't know what he was talking about. He replied that his critic, "having disposed of me to his satisfaction, assures you that the active members of existing parties can sleep easily. He appears to believe that the main objective of political life is undisturbed sleep, the balmy slumber of innocent and healthy children. It seems a strange occupation for active members. It is plain that he and I entertain quite different notions of the main aim of politics" and so on. But he had been provoked.

Most of us think of Murdoch as characteristically kind and tolerant, and so he generally was, but in one way he was a dangerous animal. When attacked, he defended himself and when a school or university education was in question, he became the attacker.

There was an eminent Western Australian who proposed that, as an economy measure, the university grant that should be discontinued and the state secondary schools should be closed. If I were that man's biographer, I wouldn't relish the task of explaining away the article entitled *Simply a Bright Idea*, in which Murdoch as he said "proposed to give him a piece of my mind such as it is". "At this moment of economic shipwreck", Murdoch wrote, "when every sound practical man is tasking his wits to find some way of making somebody else bear the brunt of the disaster, a number of distracted passengers have hit on the happy idea of making the younger generation suffer for the bad pilotage that brought us on the rocks. There is no crime more cowardly than the crime of robbing children. We can sink into no lower slough of dishonour, and this into which he invites us to descend, this of making our young people pay now and all their lives long for the price of our own follies".

Murdoch retired from the Chair of English at the end of 1939, the year in which he reached sixty-five, although he could have stayed on for several years longer if he'd wished to do so. He explained that his zest for teaching had been lost and in the sense of classroom teaching, that was no doubt true. In another sense he was remain a teacher for nearly thirty years more. One wonders who drafted the Senate's resolution when he gave notice of his retirement. I think it was probably Hubert Whitfeld, his own friend who was to die about six weeks later. "The Senate feels that as teacher, writer and speaker of English, his influence has been felt far beyond the walls of the University and has helped to mould the development of thought in this state and indeed in the whole of Australia". That, I think, was well and justly said. For some years he was still a figure in the university as a senator and then as Chancellor, and there were times in the 1940s when the university was fortunate that its ceremonial head was a man of Australian standing who would be listened to when he spoke his mind.

It seems an astonishing thing to say but it's probably the case that Murdoch's writing was read even more widely after he was seventy than it was before. In 1945 he began to write his weekly Answers, as the column was called, Answers to Reader's Questions for various newspapers, a particular one at the beginning and then others, as the column was syndicated among the Australian newspapers. A doubtful experiment, he thought, at first, which in the event was carried on for nearly twenty years. He said, after some months of this experiment, that "such a lot of people have said or hinted to me that to write such things is beneath my dignity. I explain that I haven't any dignity. Anyhow, these disjointed notes are bringing me into contact with a lot of minds the reverse of academic and it's doing me good whether it does them good or not".

Recently I've been looking again at some of these answers and I think they do really constitute a quite remarkable performance, extending until nearly his ninetieth year. Whether other people thought it was dignified or not it was none of their business, he was retired and there seemed to be tens of thousands of people who thought that what he was doing was worthwhile. I've been profoundly impressed by looking again at some



of these answers. They seem to me in many ways a good deal more worth reading than I find the commentaries of so many of my academic colleagues when they talk about foreign affairs on their five-minute commentaries on the radio.

I suspect that Walter Murdoch, now an old man with a fairly long life, even if it was uneventful, was saying something very hard to fit into formal history. How do you judge the influence of a man unless you have surveys, using sampling technique or something of the kind? No one did these things but somehow, I suspect these are fairly important for any sort of social or cultural history of Australia for a generation, or more, in the nine, in the twentieth century. I suspect that he even made some of his, the questions up, so that he could, for instance, speak out on that constitutional referendum of 1951 which presented a cruel dilemma to men of liberal and democratic mind. He took serious question seriously, he didn't shirk difficult questions, some of the answers provoked virulent or even libellous, actionable abuse I should say, since Murdoch honestly asserted his own humane and liberal values and these are very difficult things to bear for enthusiasts at various stages of a larger spectrum but as he knew too well, the suburban spirit takes many forms.

In the 1960s, he was slipping, quietly, into extreme old age. He once wrote that he'd known old people who had seemed to him to be truly venerable, people who gave reality to Wordsworth's vision of an old age serene and bright. He was of that company. This is the Murdoch, remembered by many people who are still young, the sage of South Perth who refused to be labelled a sage. He was still writing, the oldest working journalist in Australia in his nineties. He could still teach a thing or two to young journalists. His mind remained open, enquiring. He writes in 1962 of the tremendous power of Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*. He comments shrewdly on England and the Common Market and the problems of that time in 1967. He is not happy about the high rectangular tenements springing up in pleasant South Perth. The whole district, he says, is bristling like an unshaven chin, while on his own little plot of ground. nothing is going up but the rates.

His private letters are as shrewd and entertaining as ever they have been. "Do you cultured people", he asks in 1967, "pronounce Sibelius to rhyme with contra milius, or would you say poor old Sibelius, this is one of his failures?". The old teacher pounces on that morning's newspaper headline "Heatwave broken by cool change". "What else a heatwave could be broken by they didn't say" he wrote.

One of Murdoch's Melbourne friends had been the poet Bernard O'Dowd. In his poem, *The Bush*, published in 1912, there are some fanciful stanzas about a future Australia in the far distant time, in which some of the real people of that time of Bernard O'Dowd's own time have become myths, folk heroes, folk heroines. Among these he named in the poem, Murdoch. In reviewing that poem, Murdoch imagined the unfortunate schoolboy of the future poring over the footnote to his name: Murdoch, obscure literary hack, eighteenth century, doubtful character, facts of life unknown.

Well, since a university now bears Murdoch's name, it seems tolerably certain that it will go down to a far distant future. He would have found considerable amusement in composing a footnote about himself for a history of Murdoch University supposed to be written for its thousandth anniversary, but he would have been distressed and embarrassed if we, in this generation, deliberately gave currency to myths about him. So, let me suppose that I'm questioned by a young member of Murdoch University who knows nothing about the man after whom his university has been named. He asks, let us say, was Walter Murdoch one of the founders? I would reply, I presume, No, he was well over ninety at that time, that if he had been asked to join them, he would surely have replied in the words of a Sydney Professor invited to attend the funeral of, I'm sorry to say, a certain Chancellor, he couldn't attend but he was in favour of it. Was Murdoch then, my student, my Murdoch University student goes on, a distinguished scholar? The answer is No. He would've smiled at that question. He respected what an academic means by scholarship but he knew that it was something that couldn't be practiced in Western Australia fifty years ago, even if he'd wished to practise it. He was a learned

man, a man of letters, concerned to promote a humane literacy in others. A writer, a teacher and, with apologies, a preacher.

What was he good at? First, at being himself. Second, he said, he wrote newspaper articles which others were pleased to call essays, but they were the best essays yet written in Australia. Third, he expounded certain ideas, consistently, clearly, sometimes with a nice irony, always so skilfully that people listened to him. What were these ideas? Read his books. And if you translate, into his lucid prose, Murdoch universities original statement of its objective, educational objectives, I think you will find they're much the same as his. But here are two of his ideas in his own words. The first may now seem trivial but it was written before you were born. Do not tamely acquiesce in what your elders say and meekly imitate what your elders do and unquestioningly adopt the life mapped out for you by the wisdom of your elders. But the complement of that idea may be harder to accept. There are two sides to every question. "I've always believed", he wrote, "that to insist on this truth, in season and out of season, is to play one's humble part in civilising one's country, for a civilised country is a country which weighs, without heat, without passion, without violence, both sides of a question".

Is his name worthy to be a name for a university? The answer to that, I think, is that we who knew him think so, but he would have said that names don't matter very much. There's something else for a new university to worry about and twice he expressed it very emphatically. Let me tell you it was. On Wednesday the twelfth of February 1913, Professor Walter Murdoch was interviewed by a representative of The West Australian. "Upon the preliminary work of the first Professors", he said, "would tradition be based. It amounts to this", he continued, "Western Australia has to decide whether she is to have a real university. It is essential that the university idea be insisted upon from the very start. On our work our status will depend." On Friday the tenth of July 1970, the same newspaper reported that the Premier had announced yesterday that Western Australia's second university would be named after Sir Walter Murdoch. He had not been well enough to be interviewed but Lady Murdoch had said that he was deeply touched and

felt that it was a great honour. Well, he had indeed said that, when he was given the Premier's message, but I have the highest authority, the first hand authority for stating that he said something more. He said "Well, it had better be a good one."

**UWA Faculty Member:** Mr Chancellor, and Mr Co-Chancellors, and Mr Vice Chancellor, distinguished guests and ladies and gentlemen. I am pleased and honoured to have been invited to move the vote of thanks to Professor La Nauze for this scholarly feast that he has laid before us tonight. Murdoch University has this evening bestowed upon the University of Western Australia a number of gracious compliments. It is a compliment that this, the first of its public lectures, should, at Murdoch University's request, have been held in this fine hall, of this university, in which Sir Walter himself so often presided. It is a further compliment to us that Professor La Nauze was chosen to give this commemoration lecture. He is one of our most distinguished graduates, having been awarded the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1932, and as we have heard, he became the first History Rhodes Scholar from this state. We have heard that he was a student of Murdoch's, while he was an undergraduate here, and it is clear that he had, and continues to have, a great admiration for him. This combination of pupil and admirer, and then distinguished scholar and biographer, has resulted in, what has been for me, a fascinating, illuminating and a rewarding lecture. I would like to express my thanks to Murdoch University for providing the invitation and to Professor La Nauze for gracing it so splendidly, and I ask you to join with me.

**End of Transcription**