“Mercifully the architect had the impertinence to build us a house with a Virginian plantation home facade of tall pillars”

DAME ELISABETH DESCRIBING THE NEWLYNESS: SURPRISE AT FIRST SEEING THEIR NEW HOME

W hat do you give someone who has given all her life? On Dame Elisabeth’s 80th birthday the board of her beloved Royal Children’s Hospital painted over the problem—then got it right. They gave her a star.

They get the Mt Stromlo Observatory to deed a star known as HR 1369 Chi Tauri in the constellation of Taurus to be known forever more as the Star Dame Elisabeth.

Ever practical, she insisted on a map of the night sky so she could find her star. Ever modest, she said she might have to look through a very large telescope to see it. The map and the telescope won’t be needed now.

The star shines bright in the night sky.

The light that was Dame Elisabeth Murdoch’s has not been extinguished by her passing and her life and example will endure forever in our hearts.

By 1935, HWT had interests in 11 of the 15 commercial radio stations in Australia and Keith was now in charge of the first national media chain. In 1942 he became chairman of HWT, a position which was also occupied by their youngest daughter, Mrs Janet Calvert-Jones from January 1939 until her retirement as chairman in 2009. Today, continuing the family tradition, she remains a director of HWT.

Keith’s marriage to Elisabeth broadened his interest in the arts. They were both discerning collectors of antiques, paintings and glassware.

He became president of the board of trustees that ran the National Gallery, the State Library and the Museum until he put them into separate administrations before being elected chairman of the new trusts. While Dame Elisabeth embraced children’s issues—notably, of course, the development of the Royal Children’s Hospital—she also became deeply involved in the arts.

She was the first female trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria, chairwoman of the committee that established the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, trustee and prime mover behind the establishment of the regional McClelland Gallery and a benefactor of organisations ranging from the Australian Ballet and Opera Australia to the Bell Shakespeare company. No one knows exactly how much Dame Elisabeth gave or how many organisations have benefited from her support.

Not long ago she said she was helping about 300 organisations directly, and to stay up-to-date with their work she kept a pile of annual reports by her bedside.

“I make myself read at least half a dozen every night before I turn the light to read what I want to read—that means I’m reading until 2am or so.”

DAME Elisabeth threw herself into philanthropic work during the second phase of her life. The first ended quite suddenly and unexpectedly in 1952 when Sir Keith Murdoch, knighted for his services to journalism, returned to Cruden Farm after a particularly gruelling period at work.

He died quietly and without warning one evening. Dame Elisabeth was just 43, now left the farm, challenging debts and four children, as tributes to the greatness of her husband poured in from around the world.

She began her second life with grit and determination. With her son Rupert returning to Australia to take over business affairs, Lady Murdoch, as she was then, threw herself into the work of the Royal Children’s Hospital.

The hospital was to be re-built. As head of the planning committee, Lady Murdoch favoured the present site at Parkville.

Victoria’s tough and stubborn Premier, Sir Henry Bolte, favoured the old hospital site in Carlton.

There was a head-to-head confrontation.

“Well then, Mr Premier, you will have to ask someone else to do it,” said Lady Murdoch.

Henry Bolte had met his match. The hospital was built in Parkville. And she became a Dame on opening day.

1977 1984

1984 With encouragement from Dame Elisabeth, the Murdoch family help found what is now called the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute.

1972 A founding member of the Deafness Foundation, Dame Elisabeth is named Woman of the Year for her work in promoting services for the prevention of deafness and for the education of hearing-impaired children.

1979 Dame Elisabeth appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC).

1990 February 8, Dame Elisabeth turns 80.

1993 Dame Elisabeth presented with Great Australian Philanthropy Award by Research Australia, for her tireless contribution to health and research in Australia.

2003

2009

2012

Dame Elisabeth passes away.