

1947
In the Herald

Gas strike continues

"Settlement of the gas strike in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide has not been reached ... It is unlikely that Sydney's gas supplies could be restored fully before Friday. A long conference in Melbourne of the federal council of the Gas Employees Union was adjourned until today. They are believed to be divided on whether to accept the terms proposed by the National Gas Association."

Harry Hollinsworth

Farewell to Duke, Duchess

"The Duke and Duchess of Gloucester praised Australia's achievements and appealed for national unity to realise the promise of still greater development. The duke said he was conscious that the kindness was more than a personal gesture. It was a way of showing loyalty to the king. The duchess said 'I like Australia very much and think it is a fine country which could be finer still.'"

Thieves rescued

"Two men who stole a safe last night from the Egg Board's offices in Newcastle trundled the safe in a wheelbarrow for 2½ hours, tried to push the safe over a 20-foot cliff in the hope of bursting it open, jumped over the cliff to a ledge below when police arrived, were ignominiously hauled back by police using cliff rescue equipment, and submitted at gunpoint as an anticlimax to their adventure."

James Fairfax 1933-2017

Born to be a newspaper headliner

Two murals on the walls of James Fairfax's Bowral home encapsulated his two lives: one of duty, the other of adventure and artistic expression.

The murals, painted by Donald Friend, are more than a little cheeky, just as James would have expected when he commissioned them a few months after he bought the Bowral property, Retford Park, in 1964.

The smaller mural depicts the Fairfax family's history in Australia from the 19th century. While James is not pictured, his father, Sir Warwick Fairfax, is shown as a pensive Byronic figure being crowned with a laurel wreath. Warwick's wife, Lady Mary Fairfax, appears to be in a hurry, holding a butterfly net. The family members are intermingled with images of the Fairfax homes.

The second mural indicates James' place as a pivotal and convivial figure within the artistic and social networks of Sydney.

One important element of the mural is a dinner party scene. The guests include his friends, the artist Sidney Nolan; interior designer Leslie Walford; socialite Nola Dekyvere; the last private owner of the Darling Point mansion, Lindsay, Walter Pye; gallery owner Thelma Clune; Lady Lloyd Jones; her husband, Sir Charles Lloyd Jones, a patron of the arts and chairman of David Jones; and Donald Friend himself.

James had a talent for friendship. A good listener, an agreeable travel companion and a generous host, he made many friends and knew how to keep them.

As chairman of the media group then known as John Fairfax Ltd, he was, by necessity, more reserved. In a foreword to James' memoir, *My Regards to Broadway*, Max Suich, the former chief editorial executive of the company, described him as "a cultivated, thoughtful and tolerant man who listened to ideas and argument".

The fifth generation of Fairfaxes to lead the company, James grew up in a wealthy and privileged family. He was the second child of Marcie Elizabeth (Betty) Fairfax, nee Wilson, and Warwick Oswald Fairfax (later Sir Warwick), the company's managing director from 1930, then executive chairman from 1967 until 1977 when James took over the chairmanship.

With his parents and sister, Caroline, the young James lived in the Bellevue Hill home Barford, which was managed by 10 servants.

Betty was an extrovert, an elegant and charming hostess, while Warwick was the introvert, solemn and cerebral. He wrote three plays and books on mysticism, science, religion and philosophy, and spent his



James Fairfax, AC, was proud of his contributions to editorial independence. Photo: Robert Pearce

spare time on motoring and sport.

The first chapter of James' life came to an end when his father left the family home to move to a nearby residence, and his mother fell in love with Pierre Gilly, captain of the French Navy destroyer *Le Triomphant*, whom she met in 1942 when the warship was in Sydney.

Not long before his parents divorced, James was enrolled in Cranbrook School in Bellevue Hill where one of the teachers was the artist Eric Wilson, who inspired him to appreciate art. A Paris street scene painted by Wilson was the first artwork James bought.

Early in 1946, he left the family home to board at Geelong Grammar School. Within a few months his mother married Gilly in Sydney and immediately the couple left Australia to settle in Chungking (now Congqing), the headquarters of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, where Gilly was naval attaché to the French military mission.

James' teenage years were, perhaps, the most difficult in his life. With the absence of his mother and the challenges at Geelong Grammar, James' only respite was school holiday time when he was supported by Hanne Anderson, who became his father's second wife.

At the end of 1947, when James was still in his early teens, he travelled to Japan where he stayed with his mother and Gilly.

James attributed his lifelong love of travel to this, his first overseas journey. The adventure also led to a lifelong connection with Japan. One of his Sydney properties was a house with Japanese elements, among them a Zen

garden, tall stands of bamboo, and a large Japanese screen.

After graduating from Geelong Grammar, life at home was frustrating and unfruitful. James spent one year at the University of Sydney, where, he said, he "failed at everything" and was urged by his father to study at Balliol College at Oxford University, where Warwick had read philosophy, politics and economics. James agreed, flying to England in 1952 for three years at Oxford. His studies were pleasantly interrupted by travels throughout England, to Paris (where his mother and Gilly lived from 1948), Italy, Germany, Greece, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon.

Graduating from Oxford with a master of arts, James knew it was his destiny to join the family business in Australia. In 1955 he began his 32-year career at John Fairfax Ltd (now Fairfax Media), starting as a trainee journalist under the supervision of John Pringle, editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

He furthered his training in Scotland, where he spent eight months as a reporter and sub-editor at the *Glasgow Herald*.

Returning to Sydney meant a new family drama. His father was soon to divorce Hanne for a new bride, Mary Symonds, nee Wein. Negotiating the divorce settlement with Hanne in London was Rupert Henderson, a key figure in the Fairfax company who helped elevate James within the hierarchy of the Fairfax business.

In 1957, Henderson urged him to join the company's board and the following year he discussed with James the problems that the com-

pany was facing. Henderson suggested he take part in the editorial decision-making process including daily discussion with Angus Maude, editor of the *Herald* from 1958.

By then, James was gradually building up his parcel of shares in Fairfax. Until 1959 James owned only 3 per cent of the issued capital, most of which had been transferred to him by his father.

But in 1960, through a complex rearrangement within the family holdings, James' holding had more than trebled, reaching the same number of shares as those of Sir Vincent Fairfax, his father's cousin; combined, the two men's holdings outnumbered that of Warwick.

In his early 30s, James had established a stable and happy personal life with frequent travel overseas and enough money to buy the artworks he admired and eventually two properties, one in Bowral and the other in Darling Point, Sydney.

The 1970s was a pivotal decade. At first it seemed unlikely that he would take a major role in the company. But there was a move within the company to elevate the next generation of Fairfaxes. Sir Vincent Fairfax believed the time was right for James to succeed his father as chairman and Rupert Henderson thought it was more than time for Warwick to relinquish his executive authority.

Warwick resisted, but eventually retired on March 1, 1977. James chaired his first board meeting on March 17.

Summing up his years at the company, in 1991 he told me he was happiest about the "establishment of relations between the manage-

ment and board and its individual editors": "I was attempting to change the concept of personal control which Sir Warwick had, to a constitutional one, the right to be informed, advised and warned. Editorial independence is banded about in so many ways now, you hardly know where it is, but it was in that area I felt I did achieve something which might have some permanent and lasting effect in this country. Maybe that's putting it way above what it deserves."

James planned to retire as chairman in February 1991 when he would have spent 35 years at the company but his half-brother, Warwick, put an end to that with his foolhardy takeover bid in 1987. The timing could not have been worse, as the takeover attempt came just before the sharemarket crash in October that year.

The Fairfax family sold their shares, with James selling his for \$164 million. This was \$265 million less than he would have received if he had sold all his shares at the cash offer.

James left the company in December 1987 and began a new direction, allowing him much more freedom for writing, travel and expanding his art collection.

Known for his philanthropy, he made numerous gifts to art galleries and was a regular benefactor for many organisations and charities. He was a life governor of both the Art Gallery of NSW and the National Gallery of Australia. The NGA houses the James O. Fairfax Theatre while the National Institute of Dramatic Art Playhouse has a James Fairfax foyer.

James donated old masters worth more than \$30 million to the Art Gallery of NSW, among them works by Tiepolo, Rubens, Ingres, Canaletto, Lorrain and Watteau, and both the AGNSW and Art Gallery of South Australia have acknowledged his gifts with galleries in his name.

His generosity was acknowledged in the Australia Day Honours in 2010 when he was awarded the Companion of the Order (AC) for "eminent service to the community through support and philanthropy for the visual arts, conservation organisations and building programs for medical research and educational facilities".

If tolerance was the gift he gave to his colleagues and employees, then generosity and loyalty were the gifts he gave to his friends. The gift he gave himself was a productive, adventurous and harmonious life. He is survived by his half brothers, Warwick and Charles Fairfax, his half-sisters, Annalise Thomas and Anna Cleary, and his stepmother, Lady Mary Fairfax.

Valerie Lawson