

James Fairfax, AC

March 27, 1933–January 11, 2017

Max Suich, one in a succession of gifted Fairfax editors and executives, has written about James Fairfax:

if a word summed him up it was “tolerance”, born of a childhood of parental conflict and a painful adolescence but what emerged were two lives—an adulthood that lived up to his inheritance, taking responsibility for the company; but also a full creative life—a man of taste and leisure and a thousand friendships ... these differences perhaps imposed tolerance. However acquired, it was his tolerance that was his gift to the company.

Another editor, Michael Davie, saw it as “an unwavering sense of noblesse oblige”.

Adam James Oswald Fairfax was born in Sydney on March 27, 1933. Perhaps the first name reflected his father’s obsession with *The Fall*? In any case, it was never used and James eventually rid himself of Adam by law. *Truth* greeted his birth with “Australia’s Richest Baby is Born”. James dismissed this as inaccurate but he was certainly born to great and, in Australian terms, old wealth—the fifth generation in the male line since thirty-three-year-old John Fairfax arrived in Sydney from Warwickshire on September 26, 1838, with five pounds in his pocket. By February 1841, John and a partner had purchased the *Sydney Herald*, which on August 1, 1842, became the *Sydney Morning Herald*. “Ginahgulla” in Bellevue Hill, a Gothic Revival of brick and stone, was the first of many fine Fairfax houses. As the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* records, by the time of John Fairfax’s death in 1877, “he was well known for his tolerance at a time when sectarian feeling ran high ... [he] built the *Herald* from a small journal to one of the most influential and respected newspapers in the empire”.

James (later Sir James) Reading Fairfax (1834–1919) followed his father as proprietor. He added some antiquity in marrying Lucy Armstrong, the

great-granddaughter of First Fleeters John and Mary Small. James Reading’s son, James Oswald (1863–1928), also knighted, followed *his* father. Sir James Oswald married Mabel Hixson, fourth daughter of Francis Hixson, superintendent of pilots, lighthouses and harbours in New South Wales who wanted the coast “illuminated like a street with lamps”. Family legend has it that on her fourth birthday Mabel announced, “This is the hottest summer I have ever known.” Known to Sydney as “Lady Jim”—but to the family as “Granny Fairwater”, after their house on Seven Shillings Beach—she was a strong influence on her eldest grandson. But the centre of Granny Fairwater’s life was, perhaps naturally, her only child, Warwick Oswald Fairfax, James’s father.

Warwick Fairfax was the most fascinating, complex figure this formidable family has produced. Fairfax editor John Douglas Pringle saw Warwick as “rather like a sensitive, intelligent, slightly neurotic don”. The Fairfax historian Gavin Souter described “a slightly gauche, dreamy patrician”. He was not only the prevailing dynastic presence at John Fairfax for half a century but an alternately distant, commanding, admired, menacing, baffling, brooding presence in his eldest son’s life. A philosopher, with a fascination for the doctrine of *The Fall*; an author, playwright, balletomane and cattle breeder, he also broke the Fairfax mould by taking three wives. James and his older sister, Caroline, were the children of Warwick’s first marriage, to Marcie Elizabeth Wilson (always Betty), daughter of David Wilson KC and Marcia Rudge. When asked to describe her, an old friend simply said, “Cocktails and laughter.” Betty Fair, as she was known, was also a fond but distant figure to her son in his childhood (perhaps like many in their circle) but once James left school, she was a constant, charismatic presence in his life, loved by his friends and a perfect companion during his decades of travel.

By 1933, the Fairfaxes were prominent members of Sydney’s plutocracy. Fairfax mansions dominated

the Eastern Suburbs, running from the mountain to the sea. In Bellevue Hill, Warwick and Betty lived at Barford, beside Great-Aunt Mary at Ginahgulla; while on the water at Double Bay, Great-Uncle Hubert had Elaine beside Granny at Fairwater. Barford had a staff of ten. James and Caroline were driven along Victoria Road to school in the family Rolls by Hook, the chauffeur, until they pleaded to be allowed to walk.

After a few years at nearby Edgecliff Preparatory School and Cranbrook, James followed his father to Geelong Grammar in 1946. This was a miserable time for him—a bespectacled, retiring, unsparty child of privilege. James, typically, saw fault in himself, citing his “priggishness and reserve”. And yet, he retained an admiration and respect for the school’s great headmaster, Sir James Darling, and learnt much from some of his masters.

His unhappiness and dislocation were exacerbated by his parents’ separation in 1944 and divorce. His mother married Capitaine de Frégate Pierre Gilly, son of an admiral of Breton stock, who had sailed into Sydney on *Le Triomphant*. A month after James’s departure for Geelong, Betty and the Commander left for China where he joined the French military mission at the headquarters of Chiang Kai-Shek. Two years later, his father married Hanne Anderson (nee Bendixsen), a divorced Danish-born mother of a son, Alan. James was close to his step-brother and fond of both of his step-parents (even Pierre’s mother became “Grandmere”).

After what he described as a wasted year at Sydney University (although all was not lost, as he reacquainted himself with his family’s city—Prince’s, Romano’s, The Australian Club, old friends from town and country), he entered Balliol College, Oxford, just as his father and grandfather had done. He read Modern History. While James regretted not making the most of the intellectual opportunities, he revelled in his time there—beautifully evoked by his Balliol contemporary and friend Michael Collins Persse in *Scholar Gipsy* (2012) his memoir of a friend-in-common. As James put it, Oxford provided “a civilised guide to a well-rounded future life”.

His first trip abroad was to the Gillys in Japan in 1947, and so began a passion for travel; but it was at Oxford that he developed the art—always in comfort; preferably in good company; and invariably

staying with the most illustrious hosts.

After three years, he returned to Sydney, assigned Nanny’s old room at Barford, quietly accepting his destiny at the family firm. Headquarters had moved from Hunter Street to Broadway, where he worked on the executive floor in an office beside his father, as a special reporter under John Douglas Pringle. On James’s twenty-third birthday, the firm established a public holding company—a decision conveyed to him, not by his father but by Rupert Henderson, the earthy, assertive, elfin managing director and the real power and driving force of the firm’s success.

In the mid-1950s James was back in Britain, doing a five-month stint as reporter and sub-editor at the *Glasgow Herald*, repeating the cycle at the *Evening News*. By then, his mother was living in London, having divorced Pierre (who had returned to an old lover).

On James’s return to Sydney, a new woman had entered his father’s life. Warwick’s marriage to Hanne had soured as Mary Symonds (nee Marie Wein), the Polish-born daughter of Sydney merchants, emerged and transfixed him. Mary Fairfax, as she became in July 1959, would have a profound effect on the family and the firm.

*His houses, be it
Lindesay Avenue,
Bilgola, Edward
Street, Stanbridge
Mill or Retford Park,
were monuments to
an exquisite taste; it
was as if every single
wall, every surface
had been curated.*

James attended his first board meeting in May 1957 and for the next two decades played his part; observing his father, knowing that one day he would succeed him. Eventually, in March 1977, forty-four-year-old James became chairman when the majority of the directors considered that after forty-

six years Sir Warwick should make way for the next generation. This caused a breach with his father that lasted four years but the resentment on Mary’s part lingered and would pass in greater measure to her son.

Of James’s legacy as chairman, Clement Semmler wrote in these pages (*Quadrant*, March 1992), the charge from Rupert Murdoch, Kerry Packer, and the Hawke and Wran/Unsworth governments that Fairfax pages during James’s time were “out of control” was far from true:

Not only in the period of his chairmanship was it one of unprecedented expansion, of proven profitability (both in television and newspapers) but probably for the first time in Australian newspaper history there was a surge of truly investigative journalism.

The *National Times* waged an unremitting campaign against corruption while the *Sydney Morning Herald's* crime reporter, Evan Whitton, and its foreign editor David Jenkins's investigative work uncovered some ugly truths. In Australia, the company had, in 1987, fifty-three newspapers, seventy-nine magazines, two television stations and the nationwide Macquarie radio network.

Unlike his interventionist father, James was determined "to develop gradually a philosophy of influence that could combine with a considerable measure of genuine editorial independence". Dr Semmler also noted:

Moreover, as between the various Fairfax newspapers, there was "a jealous independence of one another and a competition outsiders found hard to comprehend". All this, be it noted, stemmed from the influence and control of an Oxford-educated, cultured and cultivated devotee of the arts and literature. One wonders if there will ever be his like again in the Australian newspaper world.

One wonders if there will ever be his like again in Australian public life.

In 1985, Fairfax bought the *Spectator*. It was rather neat that the owners of the oldest newspaper continuously in family hands had bought Britain's oldest continuously published periodical. That presence in London led Lord Hartwell, proprietor of the troubled *Daily Telegraph*, to look to John Fairfax to save them. As he put it, "The Fairfaxes are newspaper people—our sort of people." But the Telegraph Group was already in the grip of Conrad Black and the proposal ended there.

Even after the *Spectator* was lost and his mother returned to Australia, James would maintain close links with England, spending time at his house, the sumptuous Stanbridge Mill in Dorset, and giving to a wide variety of causes, including the British Museum, and funding scholarships to Oxford University.

At the end of June 1987, six months after Sir Warwick's death, his and Mary's twenty-six-year-old son, "young Warwick", joined Fairfax. Mary had been preparing him since birth for not "a" but "the" leading role in the family company. She once claimed that at the age of five he had told his father that a front-page story should really have been a page-three one. Although not yet a director, he was invited to sit in on meetings of the board as an observer, preparing him for the role of chairman, following firstly James, who hoped to retire in February 1991 (the sesquicentenary of Fairfax

ownership) and then their second cousin, the vice-chairman, John Brehmer Fairfax.

Two days after impassively attending the board meeting on August 27, and hours before the public announcement from the Exchange, young Warwick advised an astonished James of his intention to take control of the firm. The plot had been months (perhaps years?) in the planning. He was, as V.J. Carroll titled his wry and gripping account of the takeover, *The Man Who Couldn't Wait* (1990).

In addition to Carroll, the saga describing the end of family control has been well told not just by James himself but also in Gavin Souter's *Heralds and Angels* (1991), a sequel to his masterly official company history. Typically James had allowed the author final editorial control.

James and his cousins were criticised for "taking the money and running" but this was not true. As he wrote:

two facts became increasingly clear [to the three family directors]: the first was that Warwick did not want us to stay on and the second that our positions, if we did, would be intolerable. We would bear full responsibility for the increasingly precarious financial situation of the new company but would be powerless to do anything about it.

And so, on December 7, 1987, the family directors met for the last time. (Eerily, two years later, on the day the company completed its fatal refinancing, a mysterious fire consumed the Woollahra Congregational Church, where the early Fairfaxes had worshipped and John Fairfax had laid the foundation stone in 1875.)

Some months after stepping down as chairman, an exhausted James took himself off to the Japanese mountain village of Koshihata where he began his memoir. Two and a half years later he returned to finish it. The result, *My Regards to Broadway* (1991), is a fascinating insight into the man and his times.

James was some \$164 million richer. Significantly, he had chosen to forgo a further \$265 million as he believed that would be a breach of a trust put in place by his father (for the benefit of young Warwick). In 1989, Daphne Guinness asked James if he "was having fun with this lovely lolly or whether it was weighing heavily on him?" His reply was, "I don't regard it in any way except I've got a bit more and it's no longer invested in Fairfax shares, so something else has to be done with it. It's not a burden. Neither is it an excitement."

One of the benefits of Warwick's ambition was that it liberated James to travel and to collect.

He began to acquire works by eighteenth-century French and Venetian artists. Throughout his life James was the most meticulous collector—stamps, letters, photos, books, bones, Georgian silver, Chinese dragon robes. His houses, be it Lindesay Avenue, Bilgola, Edward Street, Stanbridge Mill or Retford Park, were monuments to an exquisite taste; it was as if every single wall, every surface had been curated.

He had made his first acquisition at the age of twelve—a Paris street scene by his Cranbrook art master, Eric Wilson. As one of his nephews observed:

I realised talking with him that collecting wasn't something peripheral, something he did when he had a bit of time to spare; it wasn't something tacked on to his life: collecting was *vital* to him.

And so, later in his life, was giving it away.

In October 1994 the James Fairfax Galleries were opened at the New South Wales Art Gallery. Works by Tiepolo, Rubens, Ingres, Canaletto, Lorrain and Watteau were given so “more people than me can enjoy them”. The National Gallery of Victoria and other institutions around the country were also favoured.

But what of the man behind the spectacles? That waspish old country-house champion James Lees-Milne recorded in his diary in 1987, “We had James Fairfax to stay. A perfectly agreeable, dull Australian journalist. He owns all the [Australian] newspapers which Rupert Murdoch doesn't own, as well as our *Spectator*.” Lees-Milne clearly did not know his guest. James was not dull—he was laconic and had his fair share of Fairfax reserve. And while he was never showy, and a listener rather than a raconteur, he had an acute sense of humour, a ready laugh, and attracted and delighted in good company. And yet, despite the love of family and the affection of legions of friends, he remained prone to moments of loneliness and insecurity. Perhaps the result was a profound perception of his fellow man.

Max Suich referred to his tolerance; but another prevailing trait was wisdom. One of his nephews described him as “Yoda with a glass of champagne in his hand”. He always sought and took advice from the best—be it an investment adviser, a

banker, lawyer, architect, realtor, curator, designer. And yet in such a full life, he was never hurried; he could never be rushed. Schedules and itineraries, once put in place, were as good as Holy Writ. He always lived well—for most of his life in great luxury—and yet he managed to give the impression that he was not just delighted but somehow surprised by his good fortune. And this he shared with endless circles of friends. Some, in fact a very few, might have taken advantage of his generosity but even when he learnt of it, the friendship endured.

Patrick White had, of course, a somewhat trenchant view but perhaps there was something in it. As he wrote to Geoffrey Dutton:

there is much more in him than he cares to admit, but I expect he gets so outrageously flattered because he is a millionaire and a Fairfax, and he has withdrawn into himself in embarrassment.

He particularly enjoyed the company of a merry band of men-about-town—Frank McDonald, Dickie Keep, Leslie Walford, Terry Clune and Charles Lloyd-Jones—all lifelong friends. Among the many (often older) women he was fond of were some great characters—like Dorothy “Doff” Edwards, wife and widow of Sir Hughie Edwards, VC; Sue Du Val, a cousin of his brother-in-law, Philip Simpson; and Diana Walder, daughter-in-law of Sir Sam Walder, a former Lord Mayor of Sydney. He rarely travelled alone and valued good company—Mervyn Horton, Guilford Bell and Denis Kelynack, Richard Walker, Alan Norris, John Hahir, and that irrepressible duo, Harold Hertzberg and Morson Clift. Others like Billy McCann opened

the grandest doors in Europe, although James appeared, of his own accord, to know everyone. He would visit the Duke and Duchess of Bedford and Florence Packer in Monaco; Clarissa Avon in London, Heinie Thyssen-Bornemisza in Lugano, a string of grandees in Spain and survivors of the *ancien régime* in France.

When he returned to Sydney, following his sarsaparilla years, Patrick White and James became friends, as Lady Jim and Patrick's mother Ruth had been. Patrick called on James and Betty's experience when researching *The Eye of the Storm's* Dorothy Hunter's transformation from grazier's daughter to Princess de Lascabanes. James was to take quiet

Max Suich referred to his tolerance; but another prevailing trait was wisdom. One of his nephews described him as “Yoda with a glass of champagne in his hand”.

pleasure in the fact that, unlike most of those in the prickly laureate's life, they were to remain friends until Patrick's death.

He was never one to bear grudges. There was a period of estrangement from that other, very different proprietor, Kerry Packer, who would delight in booking himself into hospitals under the name of James Fairfax. But when James saw his old adversary, looking so ill, at a Double Bay restaurant a few years before Packer's death, he went up to him and offered his hand. Illustrating the big-heartedness of both of them, Sir Frank's heir asked Sir Warwick's heir to lunch at ACP headquarters in Park Street soon after, and the two scions were reconciled.

Although friendship with the extraordinary Mary was a bridge too far, James did reconcile with young Warwick, who joined the rest of the family at a private memorial service for his half-brother on February 8 this year.

IN 2010, James's rank as Officer of the Order of Australia was elevated to Companion (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"—among them Geelong Grammar's Michael Collins Persse Archives Centre, a tribute to his old Balliol friend.

James sat on the board of management of the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children from 1967 to 1985. (He endowed the Lorimer Dods School of Child Medicine at the University of Sydney.) He was on the Council of the Australian National Gallery from 1976 to 1984; on the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from 1971; and of the Council of International House, University of Sydney, from 1967 to 1979.

A final honour was the decision in 2015 to make a New South Wales state emblem of the 370-million-year-old fish fossil named after him and the creek where it was found. And so *Mandageria fairfaxi* joined the kookaburra, the platypus, the blue grouper and the black opal as emblematic of the state to which he and his family had contributed so much for so long.

Only months before his death, James bestowed his last home, at Bowral, the 1887 deep pink Italianate Retford Park, and thirty-three hectares of magnificent gardens, to the New South Wales National Trust, the single largest gift in its history. He also guaranteed its future by selling off nearby land for residential use.

Mary, at ninety-four, survives her stepson—as do her three Fairfax children, Warwick, Anna and Charles and their eight children. James's remarkable sister Caroline (the subject of a newly released collection of essays), died in 2003; his dashing half-brother Edward Gilly died in 2005; while his half-sister Annalise, a unifying force in the family, survives him—with their eleven children (James's nephews and nieces), and their children.

James had a good death, as he had had a good life, dying three days short of the thirtieth anniversary of his father's death. He died surrounded by his beloved Rhodesian ridgebacks and his devoted staff at Retford Park, the fourth generation to have cared for him (another mark of the man he was). It was fitting that Titian's *Portrait of a Nobleman* should be hanging on the wall above the dying James—a noble man and one of the most civilised citizens our country has known.

Mark McGinness, a noted obituarist, is living in the United Arab Emirates.