

1

A DIFFERENT PATH

London, 12 July 2011. A week before he delivered his stumbling testimony to the committee of MPs, Rupert Murdoch was photographed power-walking the paths of Hyde Park. As his empire teetered, the head of News Corporation was determined to appear fighting fit. The committee would soon be told of his father's legacy, but today Rupert communicated a subtle, perhaps unintentional, message: his cap bore the name 'Rosehearty'.

Rosehearty was the simple fishing village on the barren Aberdeenshire coast where Keith's grandfather James had founded a Free Church of Scotland ministry in 1844. Brought up in the manse there, James's son Patrick went on to become Free Church minister of Cruden Bay, before following his own mission call to emigrate to Australia in 1884 away from the convulsions in the Free Church and the scourge of tuberculosis. The Murdochs were a family of solid Presbyterian stock with a Calvinistic dedication, propriety and diligence. But Rupert's crew cap came from another *Rosehearty* – his multimillion-dollar superyacht.¹ World leaders had been guests on that yacht and had seen the dining room with its wall-wide map of the world, America at the centre, the scene of secret unrecorded meetings. It was the stateless zone of the super-rich where deals could be struck and the media and political world carved up beyond the range of telephoto lenses. In 2008 it was to this Rosehearty that British Prime Minister David Cameron when still Leader of the Opposition had been flown by Gulfstream jet and

granted an audience in his successful effort to gain the support of the Murdoch press in the forthcoming election.

A century earlier Keith Murdoch had been in London, a handsome and physically imposing young man with intense brown eyes under a heavy brow. He was feeling homesick, and a casual glance would not have revealed him as the painfully shy man he then was. He also suffered from a cruelly debilitating condition: under stress his breaths became shorter and his throat muscles constricted, strangling his voice and shutting down his ability to communicate.

At just twenty-two, Keith had left Australia and the security of his father's manse in suburban Melbourne for the first time. He had arrived in London hoping to find immediate success in Fleet Street as well as the best expert on speech available. But he found himself in a strange and hostile city, torn between a passion to pursue a career in journalism and the pressure to continue in the line of family preachers. His plan to gain the valuable experience he craved in this centre of the world's press had so far come to nothing.

During one lonely, doubt-racked midsummer evening, Keith stopped to rest on a bench in Hyde Park. He was suddenly gripped by what he described in a letter to his father as a 'religious experience'. But he simply could not reconcile himself to devoting his whole life and career to the Church, as his stern clergyman father had always hoped. Journalism was a calling as much as the ministry, and Keith imbued his choice with a missionary zeal: 'Tonight I fancy that my path lies clearly along journalism, where undoubtedly great work can be accomplished.' He assured his father that however his future developed, he would pray 'for strength throughout the years to work for Christ'.

The break was made, the decision set. After all, as he pointed out, with his speech impediment he would not be a suitable preacher. Henceforth, Keith Murdoch and his descendants would find other platforms and a bigger congregation.

He was determined to make his name in the city and wouldn't leave, whatever the cost, until he was a good journalist. With Fleet Street as his training ground he was sure he would learn an enormous amount, and, all going well, he 'should become a power in Australia'.² As he told his father:

I know that you have never been keen on my profession and would have preferred a more stable walk of life nor do you trust press work for any good end. I assure you I would be happy and relieved to give it up but I see the opportunities and necessities and I shall go ahead to become a power for good. If I consulted my own inclination I would be in a much easier path than journalism but I see enormous possibilities ahead ...'

There was a caveat: '[T]hat is of course if I overcome my stammer.'³ But Keith saw a higher plan even in this. It was surely 'a dispensation of Providence, for to him that overcometh shall be given not a crown – I don't want that – but enlarged opportunities for useful service'.

Keith's letters reveal the bubbling cauldron of his mind – ambition clashing with a sense of inadequacy mixed with a Calvinistic streak of denial and Darwinian principles of self-improvement. He foresaw 'a pretty bad time' over the next eighteen months but faced it 'confidently because I want a struggle':

The 'survival of the fittest' principle is good because the fittest become very fit indeed. I've sacrificed a nice easy position, comforts, friends and hundreds of pounds by coming here but I hope to get very fit.⁴

His life, he felt, had 'been altogether too easy' so far.

But Keith's childhood in Melbourne had not been easy in some ways. Determined and vocal, Reverend Patrick Murdoch held a series of prominent positions in the Presbyterian Church of Australia, including a time at its head as moderator-general. A 'cleric who valued social connexions',⁵ his standing in society was high, but his clergyman's stipend remained low. And so, though Keith grew up playing with the sons of the wealthy and influential, he did so, as he would painfully recall, in patched pants. The importance of capital – or at least access to and friendship with those who had it – was a lesson Keith absorbed early in life. He also felt the weight of family expectation, for he had been named Keith Arthur Murdoch after his father's youngest brother, who had left Scotland to make his career in London and died of tuberculosis, aged twenty, two years before young Keith's birth.⁶

Keith was also the eldest son, as his older brother, George, had died tragically soon after Keith's own birth on 12 August 1885.

School had been an ordeal for a boy who could not read aloud in class,⁷ yet Keith had applied himself diligently. He attended various local schools, including the small coaching college set up by his uncle Walter Murdoch, who became a prominent journalist and essayist. There he was drilled in the belief that clear written English is the bedrock to success, and Walter's stint as a parliamentary reporter for the *Argus* helped inspire Keith's interest in journalism as a career.⁸ Keith had decided against going to university, fearing the cost and the effect it would have on the upbringing and potential opportunities for his younger brothers (Ivon, Frank, Alan and Alec) and sister Helen, just a year his senior.⁹ It was a sacrifice he would come to regret in London, where he felt wholly out of his depth: 'a baby in thought and knowledge'.¹⁰

In other ways Keith's path had been smoothed for his career as a journalist; before he left he had been given a job at the *Melbourne Age*. The Scots-born proprietor David Syme no doubt accepted him as a favour to the Murdoch family, as he and the Reverend Patrick Murdoch were friends and their wives were on visiting terms. Keith impressed his prospective employer by his initiative in having already learned the crucial skill of shorthand.¹¹

The going was tough, however. As a lowly suburban reporter Keith had to battle to work up stories and establish contacts. This was made even more difficult because of his stammer, so bad that he often had to resort to drafting notes in order to communicate, even to buy a train ticket. Keith's livelihood depended entirely on the sub-editor's willingness to publish the stories he submitted. He cannily cultivated the 'bearded old terror', marking the start of a pattern he would repeat with increasing utility throughout the first half of his career. After five years of this hard graft, by 1908 he had managed to earn and save more towards his London trip than if he had been a regular staff reporter.¹²

When he set out from Melbourne, Keith had safely stowed in his trunk a light but precious cargo: a sheaf of letters of introduction, including one from his employer praising his 'zeal and industry'.¹³ Other letters had been requested from leading figures connected to the

Presbyterian Church. But potentially most useful and certainly most impressive, with its embossed Commonwealth of Australia letterhead, was the letter from his father's friend Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, introducing 'a well known and much respected young journalist'.¹⁴

The letters of introduction might have been impressive but the list of contacts Keith had to pursue after his arrival in Britain was hardly at the dynamic edge of Fleet Street. Trusting that God's support was already in the bag, his more mundane hopes of gaining the entrée to experience rested on the church journalist and publisher William Robertson Nicoll.¹⁵ However, Nicoll delivered a rebuff and the 'cold stern slaughter of some hopes', saying he was only prepared to help Keith indirectly. Nevertheless, writing up pieces from the Pan-Anglican Congress for the *Church Family* newspaper gave Keith three days' work. A few freelance pieces in the *British Weekly* and *Daily News* on church politics followed. But Keith was soon worn out with worry that his writing was going nowhere. Still, his resolve and ambition reasserted themselves and he told his father, 'I'm going to become a moving force yet.'¹⁶

On the other side of the world, Patrick Murdoch could only worry at his son's state of mind. Keith admitted to having had a breakdown, which in London had manifested itself as 'repeated headaches, a constant feeling of weakness, clouded depression over the brain, condition of speechlessness with strangers, fear now and then of doing mad things – in fact, pure nervous depression through over work'.¹⁷ He had tried to do too much too quickly. It was time to put the piecemeal, desperate attempts at press work to one side and instead confront the underlying block to his prospects of success.

In the British autumn of 1908 Keith 'decided to run for health and speech'¹⁸ back to Scotland and the safe, comforting haunts of Rosehearty and Cruden.¹⁹ Travelling between relatives and enjoying golf in Dumfries, he regained his spirit and concentrated on eliminating his stammer.²⁰ While still in London, he had sought out the best elocutionist and voice expert he could. Madame Behnke claimed that, having practised her method for forty years, she had identified the main cause of the problem for those afflicted: blockages in the nasal and respiratory passages. Contributory factors included 'public-school

life' and, less convincingly, 'worms'.²¹ After assessing Keith, Madame delivered her expert opinion: he was suffering from 'rheumatism of the throat', a condition not helped by the damp, foggy conditions of the approaching London winter. Strict adherence to the Behnke Method's program of rigorous muscle exercise was deemed necessary not just for the sufferer, but 'for the sake of his ... possible descendants'.²² While he laboriously repeated 'rhythmic speaking' Keith planned to purchase the latest travelling typewriter with which he could bash out words as fast and fluently as the keys could strike.

Though this whole British adventure would leave him 'poorer in pocket', Keith took comfort in the hope that by its end he would be 'richer in justified and settled ambitions and ideals, and richer in knowledge and friends'.²³ But so far, with his travel between London and Scotland, boarding with family members, and finding conversation difficult,²⁴ friends had eluded him. Trusting that his contacts would still secure him openings in London, Keith settled on a new path. He announced to his father, 'I'm going to study. I want a room to myself; a freedom from responsible work. I shall find classes, books, teachers and literary work.' Fearing that his father might think that he had not taken on responsible work, Keith explained his aim: he was going 'to study men and politics'.²⁵ Back in London with 'an abundance of hopeful spirits and a determination to do well', Keith was able to tell his father that he had enrolled at the new London School of Economics (LSE).²⁶

The search for student digs had been an eye-opening experience. Following a day spent 'hunting in queer holes about the north and west', he suddenly came across the Caledonian Christian Club.²⁷ Although it was badly run, adjoined a singing school, the bathroom was next door, there were 'fleas in the bed' and a drunkard lived above, Keith declared it 'OK'. Character-firming self-denial aside, he had a positive reason to overlook its negatives: its address. The lodgings were centrally located in Bloomsbury. But Keith would have neither time nor inclination to become a worshipper at the Regent Square church just around the corner – the church where the Reverend Patrick Murdoch had once served as an assistant minister.²⁸ The centres of press and political power were now in reach. He could walk to Fleet Street and Westminster.²⁹

Keith's Scots-linked press connections in London were still fresh. Aided by his Scots heritage and a passion for golf he scored a lunch with Sir Robert Donald, editor of the *Daily Chronicle*³⁰ – 'a very "big" man in London ... I was never so anxious in my life'. Donald told him that his 'colonial experience' was useless and that training him up would be pointless in view of his plans to return to Australia. Nevertheless, Keith managed to secure Donald's informal support and a new sheaf of letters of introduction.

The connections were certainly helping Keith's fortunes. He told his father, 'now the balls are rolling I shall endeavour to get an insight into a London newspaper office'. With this LSE course of study set and with the counsel of his visiting uncle and mentor Walter, Keith's spirits were rising: 'I feel more a part of London now and quite confident that a year of study will be very useful in the future.'³¹

Just before Christmas in 1908, Keith sat down in the room he had tried to make 'cosy' with his growing collection of books and some pictures, to reflect on his routine, fears and hopes:

I'm spending about 1 hour daily reading aloud and exercising. Two hours writing pieces for the *Daily Chronicle* or *Westminster Gazette* (which usually refuse them) and eight or nine hours attending lectures and reading. I'm learning a great deal and feel much amazed and grieved at my ignorance.³²

With this letter to his father Keith enclosed the LSE syllabus,³³ although he felt 'a trifle uneasy' about whether the Reverend would approve of the radical views of L. T. Hobhouse and the other lecturers. Stressing that Hobhouse was 'a fine Christian and I fancy will be the leader of Liberal thought in the next decade', Keith conceded that 'the influence of the school is rather anti-Christian. It tends to Rationalism – which of course is not a religion and thus is really a negative.'³⁴

The coming months were a testing time for Keith's faith, spurred on not just by his readings in the new social liberalism but by his experience of the gross inequity of Edwardian London. He was stunned by its contradictions, by the 'squalor, cold and hunger and deformity' of the east 'too near [the] luxurious culture' of the west. But while

‘London disgusts’, with ‘immorality stalking the streets’, it still held ‘a subtle fascination’ for Keith. After all, ‘Here is the hub of the world and the centre of 20th century life!’ It was underlying ambition that anchored him fast as he fretted over his future:

Journalism certainly is precarious. But I’m young and strong and should not fear. My whole desire I think is to be useful in the world, really useful to the highest causes. And surely if I keep that ambition untarnished I should get my chances.³⁵

During the thick fogs of the London winter, Keith bunkered down in his lodgings, away from the corrupting streets, to absorb the texts from the LSE reading list. Keith recommended his father should read Hobhouse’s *Mind in Evolution* and *Democracy and Reaction*: ‘it will convince you of the need for collectivism’.³⁶ But he also took the time to devour as many of the city’s newspapers and reviews as he could. Keith was ‘still very hopeful’ that he would get ‘the sight I want of a London newspaper office’: ‘I want 6 months good London experience, and I must have it.’³⁷

For the moment, however, loneliness was Keith’s main experience. Eight months into his trip, he could count just ‘one friend in London’, an outsider like himself, whom he did not name: ‘A true son of liberty loving Helvetia: a boy with the finest natural impulses I’ve seen in a man.’³⁸ Keith was racked with ‘fits of beastly depression’. Deeply unhappy and unfulfilled in the present, he pined for a future where he could finally do ‘great work’ and receive ‘those gifts of God, bright children, faithful friends, and a comfortable home’ that he ‘so earnestly desire[d]’.³⁹

The time scarred him. Years later he inadvertently revealed the pathetic low point he had reached. In an article on international politics and defence, he recalled:

In the heart of London, Bedford Square, W.C., there stands a quiet home, and in its front room there sit around the table each evening a pleased father, and a satisfied mother, and a bevy of small, laughing children. And the table is pleasantly laden, and the children are

pleasantly clothed and the scene is the pleasantest on earth. I know it, because I saw it. I peeped beneath the lowered window-blind, and my loneliness became a great and despairing loneliness.⁴⁰

As the sapping, damp northern winter set in, Keith was thinking of the return home. He asked his father once more to network on his behalf and call on Geoffrey Syme at the *Age* (Syme's father David had died). In the meantime, he was starting to feel 'very unsettled' in his beliefs. One night his roaming took him to the Embankment of the Thames. A parading ground for the fashionable in the daytime, after nightfall it took on an entirely different character. Keith witnessed dozens of starving men and women sleeping rough. The sight affected him deeply, stirring him to political thoughts: 'London is a Socialistic influence.' Predicting his father might be shocked by the turn his thoughts had taken, he explained: 'The trouble is to reconcile Socialism with (1) self-help, (2) justice, (3) liberty.'⁴¹

Inspired by his LSE readings, he resolved to direct himself in the model of Plato's philosopher-kings – 'Marcus Aurelius has it: We ought to check in the series of our thoughts everything that is without a purpose and useless, but most of all the over-curious and the malignant.'⁴² Though he was dejected and alone, at least the hours of studying were paying off – 'My mind is certainly broadening and gaining in stature: but what is ahead?'⁴³

As winter started to lift, so did Keith's spirits and his enthusiasm for what London could offer culturally. His mother Annie – a shy, gentle woman who combined an 'artistic temperament and love of beautiful things' with ambition for her sons⁴⁴ – had come for a visit, and he was happy to show her the sights. Here was Keith's excuse to neglect his studies for dinner parties and trips to the theatre and picture galleries.⁴⁵

Keith's parents gave him an interesting dual inheritance that helps explain the apparent contradictions in his character: a strict Calvinistic work ethic and moral conservatism clashing with a sensual streak and an appreciation of the finer things in life. In later years this tension propelled Keith to accumulate the material markers of success, his devotion to hard work enabling him to fund his increasingly conspicuous consumption.

Later in 1909 Keith crossed the English Channel for a cultural and sensory adventure, taking in Switzerland, Venice and Rouen before finally exploring Paris. The city proved a revelation and Keith felt an instant affinity and ease with its people. The young man so racked with doubts and questioning of his religious faith recognised that ‘devotion to art has taken the place of the priesthood of France’.⁴⁶ Matisse’s startling, huge canvas *Dance I* with its joyfully vivid pink figures springing from a green and blue abstract landscape had recently been exhibited, marking a new dawn in modern art. Keith decried this new ‘barbaric modernism’⁴⁷ as ‘art without moral laws’, but nevertheless felt ‘much broadened in view’. He loved the Louvre, deeming the demurely bare-breasted Venus de Milo ‘magnificent’: a more classically palatable form of art perhaps than Matisse’s exuberantly naked dancers and their ilk.

The passion that was to develop into a lifetime’s devotion to fine art and collecting had been stirred. At the moment all he could afford to assemble was ‘a good collection of photographs and pictures’.⁴⁸ It would be another decade before his earning power was sufficient to start funding the worldwide search for antiques, furniture and art that would ultimately form one of the finest collections in private hands in the southern hemisphere.⁴⁹

By widening his horizons, socialising and engaging more with people in the know on the spot in London rather than relying on connections made from afar, Keith was reorientating his view on the press figures he had assumed would be his ticket to Fleet Street opportunity. He wrote bluntly, ‘I find Robertson Nicoll is very generally detested in London ... the unanimous opinion that he is a vitriolic, selfish, slave-driving conceited old bear.’⁵⁰ In his growing confidence he decided to have nothing to do with the old British establishment either. Witnessing the pomp and pageantry of the official opening of Parliament, the ranks of Royal Horse Guards and the gilt coaches Keith declared it ‘all beastly humbug’. To him the king was simply ‘a most useful public servant’.⁵¹

By March of 1909 Keith was feeling optimistic. Spring, which had ‘made a wonderful difference to the appearance of London’,⁵² had finally come. He was following in the path of history-shaping figures

as diverse as Marx, Lenin, Kipling and Twain by now studying in the British Museum reading room, his favourite place for work that ‘contains the best brains of all generations. So there may be something in telepathy after all (!)’.

Keith was studying with such intensity (‘this week – history and scope of journalism’) that he was suffering terrible headaches.⁵³ As well as books on journalism Keith was absorbing G. H. Lewes’s ‘excellent’ *Success in Literature*. The Victorian philosopher and evolutionary psychologist argued that literature was at once the cause and effect of social progress. Its successful application had become not only the ambition of the highest minds but the ambition of minds intensely occupied with other means of influencing their fellows. Statesmen and rulers dissatisfied with the reach of their usual power could discover ‘the nobler privilege of exercising a generous sway over the minds and hearts of readers’. For Lewes, simplicity of expression based on sincerity of thought was the key principle. After all, it was ‘idle to write in hieroglyphics for the mass when only priests can read the sacred symbols’.⁵⁴

This reading about mastering the pen ran alongside Keith’s attempts to investigate every single book the British Library held on what he called ‘voice moderation’. As a result he now fancied himself as quite an expert, telling his mother he would make short work of his younger brother Ivon’s own stammer when he got home.⁵⁵ But it was back in Edinburgh that Keith found an instructor for himself, and one far more sympathetic and effective than Madame Behnke.

Mrs Caldwell was a fine woman and, Keith assured his parents, quite genuine. She had also been a stammerer herself for many years. Perceptively, she diagnosed Keith as a ‘mental’ stammerer and was realistic in advising that a complete cure would be impossible. After all, as Keith noted wryly, she had not completely cured herself.⁵⁶ Her methods were still gruelling, however, with Keith finding himself required to undertake ‘forced speaking in a strange way in public’.⁵⁷

Marking a distinct shift away from the previous introversion and self-absorption of his correspondence, Keith was now holding forth at length on international and political matters of the day such as the

Naval Race,⁵⁸ testing out his journalistic style in letters to his father and pieces for journals and using these as the impetus for musings on political philosophy. Keith wrote:

It seems to be impossible to get efficiency with class rule. I have no faith in rampant democracy – in fact I have no faith in government of men by themselves. They seem to be quite incapable of the task. I don't think they are better fit now than they were 1800 years ago – in fact they would welcome a tyrant now who would give them security and not charge them too much for it.⁵⁹

He had formed this view after attending a Naval League meeting where he had witnessed a fascinating phenomenon. Keith had discovered how 'It is as easy to play upon the feelings and emotions of the British public as it is to whip up highly strung horses.'⁶⁰

Increasingly preoccupied with attending political meetings and gatherings, Keith bravely told his father about the loss of his Christian faith, seeing 'no evidence of soul in man'. While he claimed to have 'not settled on any new beliefs – that all is clouded and confused', he nevertheless held tight to one core belief, 'the one undying law – morality'. This he argued was indispensable if men were to live together. 'Without it, the family life, on which rests the State and all civilisations, becomes impossible.' Though he conceded that it was impossible to know what 'the complete evolution of human nature' could be, he foresaw an evolutionary golden age that would 'carry humanity to a higher plane'.

Keith was shocked by the widespread 'blind unmoral surrender to passion' among modern people and by the 'advanced biological thought' that proposed 'that love is a physical product'. Keith's father could trust that his son would continue to follow the teachings of the Church and home, even in the absence of faith. Keith would also continue to 'love morally': 'Perhaps I am not tempted as other men appear to be.' There was a strict utility to sex: 'For that passion must be groomed to produce good fruit. It is man's servant and must not be his master.' He found consolation in thoughts of a lineage to come: 'the only everlasting things I produce are my deeds, and my

loves ... I mean of course ... my life that I live in my children and in theirs'.⁶¹

Keith's next letter to his father marked a remarkable shift in tone and topic. He announced, 'I am going to get rid of my stammer: and prepare myself for great work.' He had joined the Colonial Institute⁶² and the Press Club;⁶³ watched a match between Australia and the MCC at Lords; and 'had a most interesting night' in the viewing gallery of the House of Commons where he was impressed by the Liberal speakers. His spirits had been raised further by Reverend Murdoch's positive report of meeting with Geoffrey Syme. Keith's zeal for and belief in his career was back:

Syme will evidently give me a good chance. Well, I think *The Age* can be made an even greater power for good than it is, and I think if I have strength and ability I should serve my generation well through it – to commence with.⁶⁴

A month later, in June 1909, representatives of the press from all around the Empire came to London to attend the First Imperial Press Conference. Keith was surprised that so few working journalists were among them and incredulous that the Syme who represented the *Age* was a Collins Street surgeon who had nothing to do with the day-to-day running of the paper. In the same spirit, he railed against the land-boom solicitor Theodore Fink, declaring that he was interested in the *Herald* simply because he 'has a few shares in it'.⁶⁵ (Fink, who was actually much more hands-on than Keith thought, was to become a future employer, business partner and ultimately bitter rival.)

The seat of Empire was putting on the pomp to impress delegates with extravagant banquets and whistle-stop sightseeing tours in ranks of shining new motor cars, all topped off with an orchestrated display of naval might in the Solent.⁶⁶ Keith was struck by the message of strengthening Empire ties and communication in the face of the growing threats in Europe.⁶⁷ But one editorial declared bluntly that the conference had been 'turned into a kind of amateur "war council", largely organised by the directors of the "Daily Mail"'.⁶⁸

Keith managed to attend all the meetings and a number of the ‘great social functions’, but he bitterly regretted not having invested in a frock coat to further penetrate these elevated circles. Deakin’s letter of introduction had proved invaluable, he found, for it took him anywhere. Keith admitted that he had probably appeared rather pushy, but reminded his father that ‘you cannot disapprove for your last words were, “Don’t lack cheek”’.⁶⁹

Dizzy with admiration, Keith revelled in detailing his impressions of ‘all the great men here’. All the speakers, he noted approvingly, attached enormous importance to the influence of newspapers. But as a lifelong stammerer his greatest revelation came from observing someone who conveyed his importance without having to deliver a speech:

A prominent figure has been Lord Northcliffe (Harmsworth). He never speaks, but his management can be detected in all the splendid arrangements for this conference. He is tall, fair with a large head and a very kindly face. He does not give an impression of great strength (though certainly strength is there) but rather of clear sighted, deep general capability. He seems to have a great knowledge, and to be simple and direct in his purposes. That I think is the secret of his success. He knows what he wants and goes straight for it.

As well as this focus, direction and drive, Northcliffe, the founder and proprietor of the *Daily Mail*, also appeared to fit the mould of Calvinistic material denial. ‘I expected to find him a bounding, unscrupulous, showy man of the world, but he seems to be simple and kind (he wears steel framed spectacles) and I must say I liked his appearance.’ But it was the reach of Northcliffe’s growing press empire that impressed Keith most: ‘He now owns *The Times* ... and a great many London and provincial papers and one Paris newspaper.’⁷⁰ This man would later become the greatest single influence on Keith Murdoch’s life and success.

Two plays of the time gave another view of press proprietors and their machinations, one probably not lost on the theatre-loving Keith. Arnold Bennett’s *What the Public Wants* was a satirical comedy

portraying a ‘Napoleon of the Press’. More serious was *The Earth: A Modern Play* by James Bernard Fagan, described as ‘a furious attack on the halfpenny daily newspaper, made strongly personal by presenting, as the villain of the piece, the owner of several such newspapers’. For theatre critic and playwright George Bernard Shaw it was the most significant play of early 1909.⁷¹ For G. K. Chesterton, this ‘fantastic picture of the Press, put before the footlights for the frivolous’ nevertheless ‘spoke of some real things that were never mentioned in the whole of the [Imperial] Press Conference’; an example of how it was often only in ‘amusing entertainments’ that ‘the serious truth is told’.⁷² The *London Illustrated News* reviewer found the themes explored in *The Earth* – ‘the sins of the “Yellow” Press, its moneygrubbing, sensation-mongering, advertisement-seeking policy, its readiness to pander to the worst tastes of its public and to encourage prejudices and vulgarities of the more ignorant classes’ – all recognisably persuasive.⁷³

For most theatregoers, the inspiration behind the villainous character at the heart of the play was patently clear. The depiction of the circulation-obsessed main character, his predilection for stirring up controversy and exercising dubious justice, as well as his megalomaniacal mission to expand his empire until the circulation of all his papers was the same as the population of the world, closely mirrored the career and ambitions of Northcliffe himself. The script was peppered with bons mots and satirical swipes at the self-importance and claims of press proprietors, with statements such as, ‘My circulation is the proof that I represent public opinion.’⁷⁴

Tales of the most powerful figures in press and politics might have been drawing audiences to the theatres, but Keith was now in touching distance of real press power. A special lunch at the House of Commons proved simply ‘glorious’ as he mixed with the famous and influential. London life was suddenly busy and fulfilling. Previously, Keith had jumped at any opportunity to escape the city and run to Scotland on the invitation of relatives. Now he wrote of declining an invitation to head north again because ‘I must remain here to pick up all the crumbs [of experience] I can get’.⁷⁵

He might be short of money still, but he had developed a taste for London life. Keith was making new connections that straddled

the worlds of politics, business and international relations rather than relying on Church networks.⁷⁶ As he told his father, he was ‘having a very good time now in club land!’⁷⁷

The associations were helping raise his profile and self-esteem. Submitting a letter for publication to the *Nation* weekly Keith signed off with a flourish by adding the impressive-sounding address of the ‘Grosvenor Club, Piccadilly, W’.⁷⁸ Keith found the Grosvenor ‘tremendously swell’ if ‘rather stiff’.⁷⁹ It had started life as the Clergy Club, but had changed its name, dropped the religious ties and expanded its membership so that it now declared itself ‘almost cosmopolitan in character’.⁸⁰ This was a shift reflecting Keith’s own.⁸¹

There was now energy for a trip to the Open Golf Championship at Deal and a £10 investment in a frock coat and tall hat.⁸² It was not long before Keith was ‘getting very fat’ as his socialising in club land expanded along with his girth. But he was keen to keep in touch with both sides of the city, heading to the East End’s music halls to see ‘how the people there spend their nights’, gaining that insight into the popular imagination he desired. He found it a mixed blessing.

I was very favourably impressed with the shows and their onlookers, but the crowds in the filthy parts were horrible. The music hall people love to roar out choruses led by some fat songstresses past their prime, but they spend jolly, pleasant and clean nights. The people would be A1 here if given good wages. With low wages they can’t live decently and their self-respect is injured.

For Keith, this was ‘the great mistake’ in the English system. The rich prided themselves on their superiority, holding up their wealth as the test of worth: ‘The common people greatly believe this, and they are as conservative as the wealthy.’⁸³ He implored his father to read *The Condition of England* by the journalist and Liberal MP Charles Masterman. The book was a blistering attack on what lay beneath the imperial splendour – echoing Keith’s own identifications – of a society ‘fissured into unnatural plenitude on the one hand and ... an unnatural privation on the other’.⁸⁴

Masterman's analysis now reads as a prescient account of the decline of Empire and the rise of popular culture and a consumerist mindset. He feared where 'the grasp of money power more and more concentrated in the hands of enormous corporations', together with the 'edifice of credit', would lead.⁸⁵ Masterman particularly targeted the 'yellow' or popular press because of its dumbing down of culture and its hypocrisy:

The young men of the suburban society, especially, are being accused of a mere childish absorption in vicarious sport and trivial amusements. It is curious to find this accusation driven home by just that variety of newspapers which has most completely exploited the nascent hunger of the sedentary boyhood of these classes for the excitements of gambling and adventure. The cheap and sensational Press found here a field ripe for its energies. It attained an immense commercial success from the provision of the stuff which this population demanded.

Defined by 'vacuous vulgarity', the yellow press was 'mean, tawdry and debased'. While the world was living through a time of enormous technological advances, a time of 'telegraphs, telephones, electricity, bombs and aeroplanes', moral progress had been left languishing. Religious faith had become 'irrelevant to the business of the day', the whole edifice collapsing 'slowly and in silence'.⁸⁶

Masterman might have viewed the popular press as both symptom and cause of the moral collapse, but Keith retained his faith in the form. For Keith, the press offered a solution to the modern condition: a way to lead the masses as religion lost its grip. As a journalist and – dare he hope – perhaps one day, a press tycoon in the mould of Northcliffe, he could become the 'power for good' he felt driven to be.

Keith was now torn between remaining in London and going home to Melbourne; he was 'burning' with 'a hundred separate strong desires' for his career and it was difficult to know which to follow.⁸⁷ The reason for this was that Keith had wasted his chance of getting work with the *Pall Mall Gazette*.⁸⁸ As a result of Deakin's letter and his rollcall of introductions, he had been interviewed for the job of managing a new branch office.⁸⁹ He had passed all the tests with the

managers and sub-editors, but when he came to the final one – the few minutes' talk with the editor – his 'speaking collapsed'. As Keith sat in front of the editor mute, 'we both realised that I would not do'.⁹⁰ After all his months of effort, the hours of daily exercises and practice, his stammer had let him down.