

Actress, academic, journalist,
parliamentarian and grazier... the
Hon Dr Elisabeth Kirkby OAM boasts
a remarkable lifetime resume.

Story by Rosamund Burton

No limit to achievement

Life Stories

Scrambling up her steep back garden on the Western Foreshore's Morning Bay is about the only place that 97-year-old, The Hon Dr Elisabeth Kirkby OAM, doesn't go. She travels to Sydney weekly, staying in her apartment at Potts Point, has just returned from the 70th birthday celebrations of former Australian Democrat Senator Meg Lees in Adelaide, and makes regular trips to Asia and Europe.

This remarkable nonagenarian has been an actress, journalist, parliamentarian and grazier – all before deciding to enter the realms of academia. Having taken the ferry to Halls Wharf I walk along the bush track to Morning Bay and follow her clear instructions to come down through her neighbours' garden, hers being overgrown, to her backdoor.

She is sitting in her study in front of a large computer screen. Later she tells me she reads six online newspapers every day including *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Conversation*.

Five years ago, aged 92, Elisabeth Kirkby became Australia's oldest PhD, having written a thesis about the impact of the Depression in Australia from an historical and social perspective.

"After years of being pushed to the limits and under constant criticism, it felt a wonderful achievement," she says. "I didn't think I could do it, but I did."

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However, she admits that the graduation ceremony was "all a bit untidy" as she was given a huge bouquet of flowers when she walked onto the platform at the University of Sydney.

"I was clutching my mortar board on one hand, the bouquet with the other, and trying to shake hands with the vice chancellor and take the certificate."

Born in Bolton in Lancashire in 1921, Elisabeth grew up in an 18th century rectory on the moors. She remembers electricity being installed, and the labourers on the nearby farm cutting hay with scythes. Even as a child she knew she wanted to be an actress, and at the start of World War II she was working with the Manchester Repertory Theatre. When she turned 21 she was called up to the Auxiliary Territorial Service. She joined 'Stars in Battledress', a military entertainment unit, and appeared in Terrence Rattigan's play, *Flare Path*, which toured army camps in Southern England.

Elisabeth was performing at the Manchester Library Theatre in a play written by a leading gynaecologist, Tex Rickard. Rickard's registrar Derek Llewellyn-Jones, who later wrote the women's health bestseller *Everywoman*, came to see the play. Elisabeth and he married and they moved to Singapore with her son Tony, as Llewellyn-Jones had been asked to work in a practice there. Twelve months later they moved to Kuala Lum-

pur, where they lived for 12 years, and had two children, Deborah and Robert.

Having done some broadcasting work for the BBC in England, Elisabeth worked for Radio Malaya, writing and producing radio plays and features.

In the large book case, she points out a biography of Singapore's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew. Because her family and she arrived in Sydney within a couple of days of Singapore becoming independent of Malaysia, she was asked by the ABC to do an op ed about the sovereign city-state and its future.

She tells me that Malcolm Turnbull's recent farewell reminded her of Lee Kuan Yew's emotional farewell to the Federation of Malaysia.

"When Malcolm Turnbull picked up his grandson and carried him out, I thought that will go down in history, because it was such a moving moment."

Newly arrived in Australia, in 1965 she asked to audition as an ABC newsreader to be told by the head of the news division:

"Don't be silly. Who's going to listen to a woman reading the news." However, she did work as a freelancer for the ABC, hosting a radio program called *'Morning Call'*, and also, lugging her 18-kilogram portable reel-to-reel recorder, doing documentaries on issues such as housing and education. She also appeared in acting roles, including in the early 1970s

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as Lucy Sutcliffe in the classic soap opera *Number 96*, which made her a household name.

It was Colin Mason, head of the ABC talks and features unit, who persuaded her to join the new centrist parliamentary party, the Australian Democrats. Kirkby became a candidate, standing for a bi-election in Cessnock in 1978, and three years later was elected to the New South Wales Legislative Council.

Her children were all adult by then: Tony was well-established in his acting career; Deborah, who had also trodden the boards, had married Larry Eastwood (who featured in the September issue of *Pittwater Life*), had her daughter, Gemma, and was a film accountant; and Robert was a psychiatrist and working in England. It was also at this time that Llewellyn-Jones and she separated.

Kirkby went on to become the Australian Democrats' New South Wales state leader for many years, and the longest-serving Australian Democrat member of parliament before she retired in 1998.

In 1995, she had bought about 800

acres near Temora, and now in her late 70s moved from parliament to paddocks, growing arable crops and producing fine wool. She also served as a councillor on the Temora Shire Council for four years.

"In the 2004 council elections I was not re-elected," she recounts, "so I strode about the kitchen thinking... 'now what do I do?'" She decided on a degree in history through Charles Sturt University's distance education program. This was followed by an honours degree, the sale of her property and a move back to Sydney.

She enrolled at the University of Sydney to do a master's degree, but after four months her tutor, Emeritus Professor Greg Patmore, had other plans.

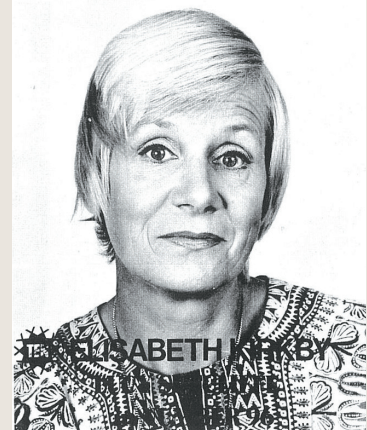
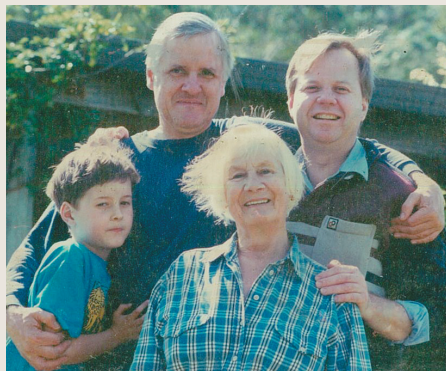
"You're not going to do a master's, you're going to do a doctorate," he said. "Don't be silly," I replied. "Yes, you are. Come with me and I'll re-enrol you." He took me to the registrar's office and registered me as a PhD student."

In 2012, she was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for service to the Parliament of NSW, to the community of

Temora and to the performing arts. The same year she moved to Morning Bay, next door to daughter Deborah and son-in-law Larry. When two years ago they sold their house and moved to Avalon to be nearer their daughter and grandchildren, Elisabeth decided to stay.

She describes the past few years living in Morning Bay as "perhaps the happiest in my life. I love being on the water and the quiet," she says. But she certainly isn't leading a quiet life. In addition to enjoying seeing her grandchildren and great-grandchildren growing up, she is writing a paper about the establishment of Federation and has been in the Mitchell Library going through boxes of handwritten correspondence by Deakin, Parkes and Barton. She attends lectures and seminars at the University of Sydney, is a regular theatre-goer and keeps up with friends across the world.

When asked what the recipe is for such a rich and fulfilling life at the age of 97, she says it's having a passion, in her case history and politics, and the good luck to have good health to follow it.



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: At home in Morning Bay; wearing her AOM with pride; with sons Robert and Tom; a 1970s publicity photo; wearing her mortar board to accept her PhD; on stage in *'The Devil's Advocate'* in the '70s; with her Rhodesian Ridgeback pups near Morisset.

