

Katharine Graham's autobiography, *Personal History* is a retelling of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Graham was an owner and publisher of the Washington Post. She died last July, aged 84.

Graham recounts a life filled with entertaining and influencing presidents, business leaders, and celebrities. Access to her world was largely constrained to rich American nobles. She affords fleeting glimpses of lower American classes across the chasm that separates hers from theirs.

Graham's life was centred around events defining Washington as a complex city state - a closed universe, but also the American political capital and a fulcrum of global events.

She had remarkable friendships with exceptional people. She led a patrician's life launched by inherited wealth, but sustained by her intellect, resilience and terrier-like determination. Graham proved that women needn't be restricted to secondary roles as men rise to become the top dogs.

Graham's father, a pup from a distinguished Jewish family, made a small fortune in California and on Wall Street between 1890 and 1916. Graham's mother was gentile and the daughter of a New York city lawyer. Katharine was raised on a manor by the Hudson River and in a large apartment in New York. She enjoyed an idyllic childhood interspersed with irritating episodes of anti-Semitism. Her wealth opened doors that for most of her contemporaries were forever locked regardless of their other personal attributes or potentials.

Her father's net worth was \$50 million in 1917 when he decided to retire and work for the public good. This brought him to Washington. He volunteered as a dollar-a-year man, and worked under seven presidents. With no previous newspaper experience, he bought the money-losing Post in 1933. With acumen, luck, and deep pockets, he slowly resuscitated the Post. He bestowed the paper upon Phil Graham, Katharine's husband.

Phil was a Harvard law grad, intelligent, but with no previous newspaper experience either. His appointment was feudal. Phil excelled. He maintained the Post's profitability and expanded into radio and television. He oversaw the acquisition of Newsweek, the creation of a news service and an international daily.

Tragically, Phil Graham was manic depressive. Katharine's account of his aberrant behaviour, attempts to recover and premature death are sobering.

Katharine's unexpected ascension to head of the Post transformed her. The world of newspaper executives was an all male kennel, but she ultimately reigned. She was a personal friend of Lyndon Johnson and a confidante of John F. Kennedy. This helped the heads of state and the Post, but not necessarily the public. Graham published the Pentagon Papers and hounded Richard Nixon.

Most revealing was Graham's description of a strike. She recounts that the Post had half a dozen unions representing workers divided not only by skills, but by race. Workers were locked into castes. Black Americans were restricted to menial work and excluded from trades dominated by Irish Americans. There were union thugs and premeditated violence. But most reprehensible were labour laws that allowed replacement workers to be hired during labour-management impasse rather than using mediation or binding arbitration.

Frustrated strikers chased their tails while their masters modernized production, eliminated jobs and sated shareholders. Racism and violence smeared the unions, but regressive labour laws were the greater smear on a nation proud of its espoused egalitarian values. A generation later, I wonder if racist castes have disappeared and if improved labour laws have created equal opportunities or if cash remains the key.

"In Washington", quotes Graham, "if you want a friend, get a dog." I hope this hasn't become, "if you want to get ahead, rob a bank."