

Legacy

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN MIDDLEBURG, Virginia, couldn't seat all the friends and well-wishers who showed up for Jack Kent Cooke's funeral service on Thursday morning, April 10, 1997. During a eulogy for his father, John Cooke wished that his brother Ralph could have lived to be there with him, "to see the respect and love you all have for our remarkable father."¹ He acknowledged that he had a tough assignment that day. "It is an impossible task to celebrate his life, because he did all the celebrating himself—and it took 84 years to do it." Indeed, Jack Kent Cooke was a larger-than-life figure and once had proclaimed, "My life is better than any F. Scott Fitzgerald novel you have ever read."²

An author once asked Cooke if he could interview him for a book he was writing on the world's five greatest salesmen. Cooke turned him down, stating archly, "Sir, I am not one of five anything." Shirley Povich, sportswriter and longtime friend, called Jack Kent Cooke a "three-word metaphor for the driven man." This "authentic genius in the art of the deal, the hard-fisted negotiator" was also "a pussycat in sentimental situations. Among children, he could be their fun-loving, adoring playmate, this man of many characters."³ In fact, when his daughter Jacqueline was young, Cooke was completely charmed by her and asked his office staff to help him learn Nintendo so that he could keep up with her.

Sportswriter, editor, and friend Milt Dunnell of the *Toronto Star* remembered Cooke as having “a personality as magnetic as that of any person I ever saw.”³ Looking back over Cooke’s career as a sports team owner, the ninety-eight-year-old Dunnell thought that Cooke had introduced a whole new level of promotion to professional sports. “He was the ideal guy for it,” said Dunnell about Cooke’s ownership of the Toronto Maple Leafs. “I always said Jack Kent Cooke was probably the one person who deserved to own a baseball team. He used the radio to promote the baseball team and the baseball team to promote the radio.”⁵

Former Lakers head coach and general manager Fred Schaus confirmed Cooke’s talent for promotion. In the late 1960s and early 1970s Cooke fitted out a large trailer truck with a basketball net that could be rolled out, then arranged to park it on Monday morning in a different Sears store parking lot every week with a sign announcing, “Coming this Saturday, Jerry West, Frank Selvy, and Elgin Baylor!” On Saturday Schaus and the players would show up, roll out the net, and conduct a basketball clinic for the neighborhood kids. Once Schaus came up with a promotion that offered a free basketball to anyone who bought a four-dollar ticket to a Lakers game. The only problem was that the basketballs cost five dollars each. “Well, that’s great,” Cooke told Schaus, “if you sell it out then you’re going to break me!” Schaus recalled the shrewd business sense behind Cooke’s promotions. For instance, Cooke always warned against scheduling promotions that took up too much of the halftime break in a game because fans needed time to make purchases at the concession stands. “He never missed a trick,” said Schaus.⁶

Jack Kent Cooke impressed, inspired, intimidated, irritated, and even awed others. But what was left after he passed away on April 6? How had the world been changed, how had other people been affected, by Cooke’s life and actions? In short, what was his legacy? One thinks of Cooke’s tangible creations: the “Fabulous Forum” in Los Angeles, the new Redskins stadium in Maryland, or the restored and refurbished Chrysler Building in Manhattan. Surely they will serve useful civic and social purposes for many years to come. But Jack Kent

Cooke wasn't just a builder; he was a presence and a personality. No structure could limit or contain his energies, which spread their lasting influence in numerous ways.

From start to finish, first and foremost, Jack Kent Cooke was a businessman—"one of the greatest entrepreneurs who ever lived," said Jim Lacher, who had joined Cooke full-time in 1966 and stayed with him until 1994.⁷ Much of Cooke's legacy therefore lies in the world of business, particularly communications, sports, and real estate. Cooke was also an executive with a unique style that others did not readily forget, or wish to. Those who competed against him felt a force that elicited respect and even admiration, if not always affection. At the same time, those who worked with and for Cooke came to know him as a teacher and mentor, someone who took a personal interest in helping them achieve goals they may not have dreamed possible for themselves. "I appreciated that he was always at his best when things were at their worst," said Joe Gibbs. "He never failed to encourage me when I needed it. Whether we were in our 0 wins–5 losses start in 1981 or in the 1987 season that ended with another Super Bowl victory, he was there to build us up." Many years later Gibbs still remembered Cooke's impassioned recitation of some lines by the seventeenth-century poet John Dryden: "I'm a little wounded but I am not slain; / I will lay me down for to bleed a while, / Then I'll rise and fight with you again."⁸

Los Angeles attorney Howard Soloway, who represented Cooke in many matters over the years, recalled that Cooke "occasionally would call me up when he knew things were tough, like in a lawsuit when we were getting clobbered, or when the attack was on me because this didn't work out or somebody said I didn't do it right. He would always say something like, 'I know how hard it is to be young and trying to do these things, and I know how self-doubt infects everybody, and I know that it is never easy to make your name and to struggle for success. But all you've got to do is never give up.'" Soloway remembered Cooke fondly, as a friend, adding, "He took a personal interest in my career and in the lives of my children and my wife. He was very kind to all of us."⁹

Cooke's businesses were not detached investments, managed impersonally from a paper portfolio. From his teenage days as Oley Kent on

the bandstand at the Balmy Beach Canoe Club, through the Depression years of selling encyclopedias, and on to the communications and sports operations that established him as one of the century's most successful entrepreneurs, Cooke always saw his business activities as extensions of himself. He cared deeply about his businesses, every aspect of them, from their structure and financing to how the phones were answered and where the pictures were hung. No detail escaped his scrutiny, including the choice of evergreen trees around the new Redskins stadium in Landover, Maryland, to eliminate leaf-raking every autumn. That level of commitment earned Cooke a reputation for thoroughness and competence that, in itself, became one of his strongest assets and part of his legacy of examples for others to follow.

Those who negotiated business deals with Jack Kent Cooke came away with a universally shared impression: he was one of the toughest, hardest-driving, most persuasive people they had ever met. Key to his style was a total confidence in his ability to make decisions and a dogged determination to win. "As a businessman," said attorney Jay Ricks, "he was a formidable personality because he never doubted his own intuition. Making a decision is sometimes as important as what the decision is, and those who have difficulty reaching decisions will sometimes delay where any decision would probably have been all right, but the delay is injurious to the business. Jack never had trouble making a decision."¹⁰ Howard Soloway agreed. "Jack was a very positive fellow," he said, "and he was able to project that positive attitude, which made people who worked with him eager to jump in the fray and help him out. To the extent he had doubts he kept them to himself."¹¹

"He had tremendous courage," said Jerry Perenchio, who had helped Cooke organize the 1971 Ali-Frazier fight, and who became chairman and CEO of Univision, a successful Spanish-language TV network. "He was tough and he knew what he wanted. He was one of the greatest salesmen I've ever met and I'm a salesman."¹² Cooke learned the secrets of good salesmanship partly from his father and partly from his own experience. Some of his knowledge seemed counterintuitive. For example, working for Colgate-Palmolive in northern Ontario during the Depression, he learned never to carry business

cards. Often a prospective customer would put him off in the waiting room by instructing the receptionist to have Cooke leave his business card, but if he didn't have any to leave he had a better chance of getting a face-to-face meeting.

Other sales skills were pure Cooke, spontaneous and clever. For instance, on one occasion in his Toronto days, Cooke had just wrung a verbal agreement from a government official who was known for changing his mind overnight. Cooke looked around the man's office. There had been no witnesses to their conversation, and he didn't want to antagonize the official by asking for something in writing. Suddenly he had an idea. "Sir!" he exclaimed, "I'm so excited about this. My wife is home waiting to hear and I can't think of anything more wonderful for us both than her getting this marvelous news right from your lips. With your permission, I'll just dial her right now and you tell her. It will be something we'll remember all our lives." Cornered, the official made the call and later honored his agreement.¹³

Attorney Stuart Haney, Cooke's in-house counsel in Middleburg, observed that Cooke "would negotiate way beyond what he thought was a good deal for himself, but that was part of the negotiations."¹⁴ When the transaction was over, however, the tough-minded dealmaker gave way to a fair-minded companion with a smile and a handshake. Deals were very personal for Cooke, but he didn't take them personally. The deal was a challenge, but when it was over it was done and life moved on, not grimly or with bad feeling but with grace, style, and a smile.

Roy Thomson's son Kenneth recalled an example from Toronto, early in World War II, when auto plants had been turned to military use and civilian automobiles were hard to come by. Kenneth had purchased a fine coupe, "a real gem," from a serviceman who had been posted overseas, but then had to put it up for sale when he too received orders to go abroad. When a friend expressed interest in buying it, Kenneth promised he would sell him the car. But then Cooke found out about the car and called Kenneth on the phone. "You've got to sell it to me," he insisted. "I need that car." Kenneth explained that he'd already promised it to a friend. Cooke brushed that aside. "Friend,

friend—*I'm a friend, of your father's. You've got to sell me that car. I need it desperately.*"

Kenneth, about ten years Cooke's junior, found himself in a dilemma. He went to his friend and explained that he couldn't sell it to him, that he had to sell it to Cooke instead. But the friend objected, reminding him of his promise. So Kenneth, very upset, went down to Cooke's office at station CKEY. Cooke had someone in his office but he stuck his head in, apologized for interrupting, and said, "Now Jack, if I sell the car to you, I lose a friend. Do you want me to lose a friend?" Said Cooke, "No, Ken, I don't want you to lose a friend. Sell it to him." Kenneth had experienced firsthand Cooke the hard-ball player, pushing as far as he could to get what he wanted. "But when Jack found out he couldn't make the deal properly," he recalled, "then he instantly resigned himself to that fact and said, just as cheerfully as you want, 'Well, go ahead and sell it to him.'"¹⁵

Many of Cooke's associates described him as an "old-fashioned" businessman, someone "from the old school." This did not mean that they thought he was out of date, but that his concept of business integrity came from tried-and-true values, like trustworthiness and honesty. "He was very good at sensing if a person was telling him the truth or dodging," said Bill Bresnan. "And if he saw somebody trying to smooth things over or spin something, he would just zero in on it."¹⁶ John Cooke noted that "Character was paramount in importance to my father. And what is character? In my father's mind it was somebody who does the right thing, who works hard and doesn't cut corners, one who is candid and speaks his mind when it doesn't hurt people."¹⁷ Cooke's word and a handshake were as good as any written contract. Once that word was given, he would never try to duck out of a commitment, even if it turned out that technically and legally he could do so.

At times this cost him dearly, as with the Chrysler Building in the early 1990s, when the New York commercial real estate market plummeted and Cooke found himself trying to cover a quarter-billion-dollar loan on a building whose market value had dropped to only about \$170 million. During one stretch Cooke was losing a million dollars a

month. He had a “non-recourse” loan on the property, which meant that if he defaulted on the loan the bank could not seize any of his assets other than the property itself. That is, the bank’s only recourse if Cooke walked away from the Chrysler Building and its losses would be to take over the building itself— and its losses.

The non-recourse loan was a perfectly legal instrument that had been popular in a booming real estate market with lessees of excellent credit like Jack Kent Cooke. Now that the market was depressed, Cooke would have been within his legal rights to turn the keys to the Chrysler over to the lender, or to use the threat of doing that to obtain more favorable loan terms. His own legal and financial advisors counseled him to do just that. But, as attorney Stuart Haney put it when asked which of Cooke’s business decisions had been the most difficult, “the most difficult business decision he had to make, he didn’t make.” “Stuart,” Cooke said, “I’ve never defaulted on anything in my life, and I’m not about to start.”¹⁸ Cooke kept up the payments and endured the losses until he died, whereupon it was left to his executors to renegotiate with the lenders in order to protect his estate.

Jerry Perenchio recalled a time when Cooke’s notion of fairness had tempered his instinct for tough bargaining. In 1970 he and Cooke agreed on a 50/50 split of the Ali-Frazier fight profits. But several weeks later, when Madison Square Garden insisted on an irrevocable letter of credit and Cooke had to commit \$4.3 million worth of his stocks as collateral, the 50/50 split no longer seemed the right way to divide the gains. When Cooke brought the issue up, Perenchio swallowed hard. It was too late to back out, and now Cooke was totally in control. “If he offered me 75/25 or 80/20, what could I do? I would have to take it,” Perenchio recalled. Cooke offered him 60/40 and Perenchio took a deep breath of relief. “Done,” he said. Years later he recalled his gratitude: “Jack really could have taken it to me, but he didn’t.”¹⁹

Cooke was as good as his word not only when he was negotiating but also when employees negotiated on his behalf. Stuart Haney remembered an occasion when he was on his own, had misunderstood some instructions, and wound up agreeing to something that Cooke particularly had not wanted. Haney noted that many executives

would have called the deal off on that score, claiming that their attorney had not been authorized to make the decision. “Mr. Cooke didn’t do that,” Haney said. “I hadn’t come with any papers saying I was legally entitled to make this agreement, but his business ethic said that when you’re representing me, you represent me. I caught hell for what I did, but he didn’t embarrass me by saying I wasn’t authorized to do it, and he didn’t embarrass himself by wiggling out of a deal that was done.”²⁰ Dan Ritchie, formerly of Group W Cable, echoed Haney’s observations: “Jack was tough as nails but once you had a deal, you had a deal. He was very principled.”²¹

Over the years Jack Kent Cooke earned a reputation as a perfectionist and taskmaster, albeit he also was known for rewarding generously those who measured up to his high expectations. But few people ever heard about those times when Cooke’s generosity extended to employees who could not perform at all. Debi Ramey, Stuart Haney’s secretary at Cooke’s Middleburg offices, was teaching another secretary to ride a horse when she fell and suffered a severe leg and hip injury. Ramey had only been with Jack Kent Cooke Incorporated for a few weeks, and now she would be out for months while undergoing extensive rehabilitation. Cooke did not know Ramey well but he kept her on the payroll, paying all her medical insurance expenses when coverage ran out, then welcoming her back to the company when she had recovered. “She ultimately became his personal secretary, and a darn good one, too,” said Haney.

Wanda Wiser, who started as a bookkeeper and became vice president for finance, had been at Cooke’s Middleburg office for just two weeks when her father had a massive stroke. She spent time with him in the hospital over the weekend, then showed up for work on Monday morning in Middleburg. She was sitting at her desk in the back of the office when Cooke came in and walked back to her. He put his hands on his hips—“He had a habit of doing this,” she said—and asked, “Young lady, what are you doing here?” Wiser looked up, wondering what might be wrong. “Well, I’m working,” she answered. “I understand your father’s ill,” he said. “Yes, sir, he is.” “Well, you put that stuff away right away and you go and stay with your father and don’t you come back until he’s safely out of the woods.” Wiser was taken aback

and just stared at her boss. “And don’t you worry about getting paid, young lady. You’ll be paid,” he added. Wisner recalled, “I saw that aspect of him time after time after time.”²²

Wiser was among the many employees whose potential Cooke spotted early on and encouraged. He disdained bureaucratic structure and pigeon-hole job categories and stretched employees beyond what any job description could capture. Future stars and leaders, whether Lorne Greene, Marc Nathanson, Sparky Anderson, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Magic Johnson, or Joe Gibbs, flourished as part of his organizations. He had an uncanny knack for identifying talent and setting expectations that great talent could meet. When an employee met those expectations, said Linda King, Cooke’s tax director, Cooke’s attitude tended to be, “Well, I knew you could do it, and here’s some more!” He appreciated excellence and success, but he always was skeptical of all limitations, including such self-defined limits as “I’ve done my best.” “You never know what your best is,” was his position. When he was a boy, as throughout his life, his mother had given him reason to believe anything was possible. In Cooke’s early days Roy Thomson had allowed him to do all that he was willing to do. Now Cooke wanted to make the same opportunity available to others.

Many testified to Cooke’s legacy as a teacher. Haney said he had completed eight years of college, including law school, and Jack Kent Cooke had been the best teacher he’d ever had. “He’d give me a book to read, then two or three days later he’d ask me, ‘What did you think about it?’ and then he’d follow up with questions to probe. You couldn’t bluff your way through.” Cooke read quickly and could write quickly, too, if he had to, dictating succinct letters off the top of his head. But he also might edit a letter over and over for hours to make the words read just the way he thought they should. “He was a beautiful writer,” said Haney, and a thorough teacher. But, as many also noted, Cooke didn’t suffer fools gladly. “He didn’t really want to have to tell you the second time, and he’d get angry about that. But he spent an enormous amount of time to teaching you to do things the right way.”²³

Greg Dillon came to work for Cooke in March 1990 as a twenty-five-year-old accountant at Redskin Park. Five years later he became

involved in the Maryland stadium negotiations, impressed Cooke, and soon was made controller of Jack Kent Cooke Incorporated. When Wanda Wiser retired shortly afterwards, Dillon replaced her as Cooke's vice president for finance. "He gave me that opportunity," said Dillon, "but it was because of his willingness to work with me that I was able to achieve the success that I achieved and am achieving today. He was the best teacher, tutor, mentor that I had in thirty-nine years. He taught me how to communicate—oral, written, and behavioral communication."²⁴

Jack Kent Cooke's life and work touched millions of people. On a personal level, as with Dillon, King, Wiser, Haney, and hundreds more, his influence left indelible, life-changing impressions. Perhaps not unexpectedly, Cooke's capacity to effect change in others' lives did not end with his death. Long before he died he made plans to ensure that his assets would continue working when he could no longer work, to nurture activities he regarded as meaningful and worthwhile. Cooke's vision was to help people through educational scholarships that would open doors for them that might otherwise remain closed. That vision took shape as the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which organized in 2000 and two years later awarded its first scholarships "to help young people of exceptional promise reach their full potential through education."²⁵ Its scholarships already attract thousands of applicants every year and comprise some of the largest scholarships available anywhere.

"I have been very fortunate in my life," Linda King remembered Cooke saying, "and so many of these young people could be so much more; they have so much potential, and all they need is a little good fortune themselves."²⁶ Howard Soloway thought that Cooke "relished the idea of talking to the young, being with the young, guiding the young, helping the young, giving them a pep talk now and then. He knew that it wasn't always easy, and there are a lot of bumps in the road. But helping young people is the whole idea of the Foundation. He carried that through past the grave."²⁷ Jack Kent Cooke had worked for everything he had, through the worst and the best of times. But he also had enjoyed a loving, supportive home and a timely apprenticeship with a master entrepreneur, the late Lord Thomson of Fleet.

Cooke knew he had been fortunate, and he wanted to pass a measure of that good fortune forward to others.

John Cooke especially values two of the many gifts he received from his father over the years. One was a dictionary given to him on his thirteenth birthday with an inscription by his father, “Consult this friend often.” Another gift came after his father died. It was the first item in Jack Kent Cooke’s will—a Patek Philippe watch that Nancy, his mother, had given him sixty years earlier. It was a superbly made watch, the best in the world, John noted, and his father had never gone anywhere without it. Nancy had purchased it on time from Eaton’s department store in Toronto in the depths of the Great Depression, when money was scarce and she was struggling to cover household expenses with the funds that husband Ralph sent home from his sales trips. The watch may have been an extravagant expense at such a time, but that wasn’t the way Nancy saw it. To her, it was an expression of love and faith in her son’s ability to succeed. Nancy, too, was sure that life would be better, and that her son Jack would help make it so. It was just a matter of time. Now, it was fitting that the watch be passed from father to son.

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation captures the spirit of these two gifts, the one reflecting its founder’s love of language and learning, the other expressing his confidence in the future. Cooke wished that his good fortune would help others fulfill their dreams. That wish, realized in the Foundation, is his most enduring legacy.