



CHAPTER 1

“I’ll Be A Millionaire!”

JACK KENT COOKE WORKED HARD, HARDER THAN anyone he knew, to reach the peak of success. But he never had to work hard to be the center of attention. After all, he started there, revelling in the greenhouse love and admiration of his young mother, Nancy, only eighteen when she gave birth to Jack, her first child.¹

Sixteen-year-old Nancy Marion Jacobs, daughter of a Polish cabinet-maker, was living with her family in South Africa when a twenty-nine-year-old Australian salesman, Ralph Cooke, passed through on his way to England. Maybe it was their matching brilliant blue eyes, but something convinced the two otherwise improbably paired lovers to face their futures together, and in May 1911 they married. The couple then set off for England, where Ralph had been heading anyway, and then on to Canada, where they settled in Hamilton, Ontario. As part of Canada’s industrial “Golden Horsehoe” clustered around Lake Ontario, Hamilton thrived on iron and steel exports. Ralph did a brisk business selling picture frames, and the family moved frequently with Ralph’s changing sales positions. When Jack was six years old, the Cookes settled in a modest home in “The Beaches,” a lakefront resort section of eastern Toronto that recently had evolved into a year-round residential area.

Then, as now, Toronto was an international city, the destination for immigrants from all parts of the world, though its strongest identifi-

cation was with the United Kingdom. Jack's father, Ralph, was a member of the Anglican Church, but it was his attention to dress, style, and good posture, along with his piano playing and his salesman's intuition, that made an impression on his buoyantly cheerful oldest son. Nancy, too, played piano and had a keen eye for good investments, and of all the people Jack ever admired, she topped the list. "My mother was the smartest person I ever knew," he said in 1984, just shy of his 72nd birthday, "and I've known some pretty bright people."²

Nancy needed a lot of energy. After Jack was born on October 25, 1912, brother Harold and sister Marion soon followed. Nancy was twenty-three when she had her fourth and last child, Donald. Ralph spent much of his time on the road, but Nancy was a self-reliant and determined woman whose strong will and sense of humor sustained her through the long absences. Nancy was busy but not lonely. Her children, especially her ebullient and charming oldest, Jack, kept her well entertained. "I couldn't go out much, of course," Nancy once told a Toronto reporter, "but I didn't mind that. I'd rather be with the children than any people I knew."³

Jack and his mother enjoyed a special bond, not only because he was her first child but also because the two shared similar temperaments. While Ralph was described as gentle and polite, Nancy was a dynamo in the family. "You talk about energy," Jack recalled much later, "my mother had so much energy it was almost frightening."⁴ She loved to hear all of Jack's plans and encouraged him to believe that he could succeed. It became one of Jack Cooke's bedrock beliefs. Why, of course he would succeed. How could he possibly fail? Jack thrived on the constancy of his mother's support and attention. "I never in my life came into the house and called 'Mom' that she didn't answer," he said later.

When Jack was thirteen years old, he overheard his father and some other salesmen talking in the Cookes' living room about their sales commissions. One of the men announced proudly that he was making fifty dollars a week. To his mother's amusement Jack raced into the room and proclaimed, "Wait until I'm your age. I'll be a millionaire!" The men laughed, of course, as did Nancy. But no doubt Nancy also heard a familiar chord of determination in her son's youthful



Cooke, front and center, as a schoolboy in Canada c. 1920.

boast. Confidence in Jack was just one of the many things that mother and son shared. They also enjoyed listening to popular music on the radio at night, and she arranged music lessons for him—piano, clarinet, saxophone. Jack was a quick but restless student, moving from one instrument to another, writing and singing his own tunes, and daydreaming about performing in his own band—maybe even owning his own radio station.

Jack attended Balmy Beach and Williamson Road public schools in Toronto, then enrolled in high school at Malvern Collegiate Institute. There, as everywhere, he was the center of attention, though not necessarily at the head of his class. He was easily bored and sometimes grew impatient with teachers who did not measure up to the high standards of enthusiasm he had grown used to at home. While at Malvern Collegiate Jack skipped school for three months, spending his days in the downtown department stores studying sheet music and playing the pianos. Amazingly, his absence went undetected. “That’s not easy, you know,” he said later, his face beaming a singular grin so broad that it pushed his eyelids shut, as if he thought a flashbulb might soon go off.⁵ Jack Cooke’s infectious smile could light up an entire room, but it couldn’t overcome Malvern Collegiate’s dim view of his absences: he was held back a year for poor performance.

Athletics seemed to offer a better outlet for Jack's energies. He was quarterback on his high school football team and excelled at hockey and rugby. Football coach Ted Reeves, later a sports columnist for *The Telegram* in Toronto, described Jack as "a hard-eyed little guy with guts." Smaller than most of his teammates, Jack made up for it with hustle, grit, and a single-minded focus. "He wasn't the kind of kid who turned his head when a train went past," Reeves observed. Cooke's toughness and determination helped win two Toronto city titles for the Malvern rugby team. But Jack's favorite game was hockey. He was good enough to be scouted by the University of Michigan, which offered him a hockey scholarship. But he had missed too many credits at Malvern and would not graduate on time, so that opportunity passed him by.

It often has been said, inaccurately, that Jack Kent Cooke was a high school dropout. The Toronto schools offered a "junior matriculation certificate" after four years. The "junior matric" granted a certain graduation status but did not permit admission to college, which, in the Canadian system, required a fifth year of high school. The junior matric marked the end of eighteen-year-old Jack's formal schooling but by no means the end of his education, for the Great Depression had just struck. Ralph watched helplessly as picture-frame sales plummeted. He started selling encyclopedias door-to-door, often traveling far into Western Canada in search of customers. Jack had to put aside any thoughts about pursuing his senior certificate and college, and focus instead on helping provide for the family.

For the next few years, music and performing gave Jack the chance to organize his own business and earn some money. While still at Malvern he had formed his own twelve-person band, adopting the now quaint-sounding stage name of Oley Kent and His Bourgeois Canadians. A quarter-page ad in Malvern Collegiate's literary magazine for "Jack Cooke and His Band" announced its availability for parties, dinners, and weddings. During the summer months the band entertained passengers on Lake Ontario cruise ships under the name "The Canadian Aces." Jack sang, sometimes through a megaphone like Rudy Vallee, who recorded the famous Depression-era song

"Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" Jack also played piano, clarinet, and sax. On summer evenings Oley Kent played at the Balmy Beach Canoe Club, where hundreds of young Torontonians paid a quarter each to dance away their worries on a huge wooden floor.

In the booming 1920s, a gig at the Balmy Beach Canoe Club had generally paid \$60 to Jack and his eleven musicians. As the band's leader, Jack netted \$37.50. But like many entertainers, Jack also had a "day job." He earned his first salary—\$11 per week—as a stock runner, taking phone orders for the L. J. West brokerage house. Comparing his band profits to his L. J. West salary, Jack quickly grasped that working for himself paid better than working for someone else. But band gigs weren't a regular living, and for all his optimism Jack also was a business realist—sometimes you just had to make do with what you could get, at least for the time being. Still, there always was something better, something more that he thought he could do. Over the years some said that Jack Kent Cooke was overly ambitious, that his reach exceeded his grasp. In reply, Cooke liked to quote the nineteenth-century English poet Robert Browning, who once wrote, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

One evening at the Balmy Beach Canoe Club Jack noticed a particularly attractive young woman. It was one of those times that people can only chalk up to fate or "chemistry." Barbara Jean Carnegie, a student at Jarvis Collegiate high school in Toronto, noticed Jack too, but it was a while before she grew comfortable with his intense energy and gave in to his charm. In the spring of 1934, Jack and Jean were married, quietly and on their own, without imposing on their families the cost of a formal wedding. Jack's father was upset when he found out what the young couple had done. He was not opposed to the marriage, but he was a devout Anglican and wished that the two had been married in the Anglican church with their families present. So ten days later Jack and Jean went through another ceremony in St. Aidan's Church on Silver Birch Avenue, not far from the Cooke home.

On a Friday night before the wedding, Jack asked Jim West, his boss at the brokerage house, about a raise. He was going to be married

soon, he explained, and needed a promotion to stock trader and a raise to \$25 a week. “I remember he looked at me pretty hard,” Jack said years later. West could offer only \$16 a week. Jack turned it down and quit. After he and Jean were married, Jack borrowed \$50 from his father, set himself up with a stock of encyclopedias to sell door-to-door, and set out with Jean on a combined honeymoon-sales adventure to Western Canada. They would earn their way as they went.

Their 1930 Ford Roadster, black like most Ford cars at the time but with a set of flashy, red-wire wheels, carried them 1,500 miles through Ontario and Manitoba Provinces. The couple stayed with Jean’s relatives along the way. Then, twenty miles into the agricultural plains of Saskatchewan, they met a blinding summer rainstorm just outside the small town of Veregin. Jack remembered the rain pelting the car not just at an angle but horizontally, coming straight at the side windows like liquid pebbles. He and Jean huddled together through the night and in the morning walked into town, hungry, damp, and penniless. If they were to eat, Jack had to sell some encyclopedias.

It was a long day. Unable to register at the hotel, Jean sat in the hotel kitchen, famished, while cooks and bakers worked around her. No one offered her anything to eat. Meanwhile, Jack made the rounds of the small, rural town’s most likely customers, but with no luck. At last he reached the local school principal, his one remaining hope, at home. The principal was not interested. But Jack couldn’t afford any refusal by his only potential customer. He kept talking, figuring he might wear the man down if he could just keep it up. So keep it up he did, until seven o’clock in the evening, when, with his own dinner going cold, the principal finally relented and gave Jack a five-dollar deposit just to get rid of him. “That was the all-time low,” Jack later told a Toronto magazine writer. “It was never as bad after that.”⁶

When the newlyweds returned to Toronto, Jack paid a visit to Harry Sedgwick at radio station CFRB and asked for a job as an announcer. He was willing to work for \$10 a week, he said, but Sedgwick refused. Then Jack told him he would work for nothing, but Sedgwick remained firm. “It would cost us money,” he declared. So Jack pulled out all the stops. He’d be willing to *pay* CFRB \$10 a week just to learn



Cooke, nattily dressed and optimistic even in the Great Depression, poses with his Ford roadster c. 1930s.

the business. Amazingly, Sedgwick still turned him down. With characteristic optimism, Jack later recalled Sedgwick's rejection as "the best thing that ever happened to me." But it must not have felt that way in 1934, in the middle of the Depression. Only hindsight could have detected a silver lining in that cloud of disappointment.

With scant enthusiasm Jack took a job with Colgate-Palmolive, selling soap in northern Ontario. Sometimes Jean traveled with him, waiting in the car with her knitting while he visited his customers. Jack's territory included Kirkland Lake, a mining town 450 miles northwest of Toronto where gold had been discovered the year before Jack was born. His income with Colgate-Palmolive was about \$70 a week, which afforded a modest living during the year and a half he spent with the company. But Jack Kent Cooke didn't want a modest living, and he didn't much like working for someone else. Besides, Jean was expecting their first baby. So one day in November 1936, between customer visits in Kirkland Lake, Jack decided to leave the soap business behind and strike out for his own kind of gold.

It was a decisive moment in Jack Kent Cooke's career. He had been interested in radio for many years, but he knew nothing about the Kirkland Lake station. Deciding he may as well start there as any-

where, he found station CJKL, walked in, and asked to see the owner. Roy Thomson, an entrepreneur seventeen years Jack's senior who had won and lost fortunes many times over, was not there—he was in his newspaper office in Timmins, another gold mining town about twenty-five miles away. So Jack started up his car, drove to Timmins, and found Thomson in his office. At first Thomson turned him down, but as Jack continued with his pitch, Thomson realized that he was listening to no ordinary salesman. This youngster fairly burst with eagerness. He sparkled. He was charming. And he wouldn't take no for an answer. Thomson imagined what effect he might have on some of his reluctant advertising clients.

Thomson hired Jack and placed him in charge of a radio station he had just purchased in Stratford, a town 100 miles southwest of Toronto, about halfway between Toronto and Detroit. Jack's salary would be \$25 a week, only a third of what Colgate-Palmolive was paying him. To make things even worse, Thomson warned Jack that he probably wouldn't be able to pay him for a while because the Stratford station, CJCS, was losing money. It was the Depression, after all, a difficult era to be selling advertising air time. Ralph Hart, who was Jack's sales manager at Colgate-Palmolive and became executive vice president and chief operating officer, later said he was sure that Cooke would have become the company's president and CEO if he had stayed. Hart himself went on to become president, CEO, and chairman of Heublein, Inc.

While Jean stayed with her in-laws in Toronto, Jack moved in at CJCS, working from early morning to midnight and sleeping in his office. He introduced the first "man-on-the-street" interviews ever done on Canadian radio, and wooed business advertising with creative promotion schemes, like broadcasting live out of the back of a dairy delivery truck. He took no salary for the first three months, until the station started to break even. After seven months CJCS was doing well enough for Roy Thomson to sell it at a profit. Jack was rewarded with a promotion to manager of Thomson's three remaining radio stations in northern Ontario at a salary of \$100 a week. Within months Jack had raised the profits of these stations, too. Now Jean could join him in Stratford.

By now Thomson knew that he had hired more than a salesman in Jack Kent Cooke. The hard-driving twenty-five-year-old, whom a former employee once called “a whirlwind in four walls,” was bright and ambitious, and had a remarkable facility with numbers and balance sheets.⁷ He also had a lively sense of humor. Maybe he would even make a good business partner. But Thomson bided his time, waiting for the right opportunity. He and Cooke spent most of their days working together, discussing radio prospects and newspapers. “Roy ate lunch with us every day for two-and-a-half years,” Jean recalled. “They talked business every minute.”⁸ On top of what he had learned at home, Cooke’s work with Thomson provided him an invaluable lesson in bare-knuckle business strategy. In addition, it provided jobs for Cooke’s brothers, Hal and Don, who helped out when Thomson’s Northern Broadcasting and Publishing Company purchased additional stations in the northwest mining regions of Quebec and in southern Ontario.

One day in 1941 Thomson made Jack an offer. If he could raise \$10,000, or half the purchase price for a radio station just eight miles east of Kirkland Lake in the Quebec border town of Rouyn, Thomson would buy the other half. The two would be partners on the deal. Jack persuaded a bank to loan him the money, and a year later, after the “whirlwind in four walls” had revamped the station’s programming and fattened its ad revenues, Thomson and Cooke sold it for \$105,000. Cooke now became a full partner in Thomson’s company. With the help and trust of his mentor, young Cooke had arrived.

Jack Cooke and Roy Thomson were very different—Cooke the stylish, exuberant extrovert, Thomson the quiet, slightly ruffled veteran with a hard-won understanding of life’s ironies. But Thomson greatly admired his younger partner’s combination of energy and brains, and reveled in what Thomson’s son Kenneth called Cooke’s “naive enthusiasm—I say ‘naive’ in a kindly sense, so confident, you know. He was just like a big kid.” Thomson once visited Jack in his home when he was sick. Jack looked up and said, “You know, Roy, isn’t it wonderful to know that they could just parachute us down anyplace in the United States, any place anywhere, without anything in our pockets, and we would get by?”

We'd survive because we know how to survive.”⁹

Besides sharing an acute business sense, Cooke and Thomson also enjoyed each other's company. Kenneth Thomson, who was in his teens when his father and Cooke worked together in northern Ontario, recalled how Roy and Jack would sometimes reach an impasse in solving some business problem, then decide to abandon their offices and resort to the local Kresge's

lunch counter for some specially fattening treat—“like Boston creme pie,” he chuckled. Usually the change of scenery helped, but such informality also reflected the close friendship that prospered between the two men during radio's pioneering years.

Toronto Star sports editor Milt Dunnell recalled his early newspaper days at Stratford's *Beacon Herald*, when Cooke was trying to persuade the paper's editor to print station CJCS's daily program. “Look, Jack,” said the editor, derisively, “all you've got is a turntable and a pile of records and there's no point in running it.” The real problem was that the newspaper and the radio station were rivals for local advertising dollars, and the newspaper man didn't want to draw his readers' attention to CJCS. But Cooke kept coming back, trying to get the editor to listen to the station and see for himself what its programming was like.

One day the editor agreed, so when the time came for a particular announcement that Cooke wanted him to hear, Cooke switched on the radio and tuned it to CJCS, only to hear loud laughter coming from the set. Cooke was startled. The two men looked at each other, then back at the radio as another burst of laughter came over the air. Cooke ran out of the office and across the street to the radio station,



Roy Thomson, Lord Thomson of Fleet, and Jack Kent Cooke. Cooke remained friends with his mentor in radio and publishing during the 1930s and 1940s in Canada.

which was housed in the Windsor Hotel. When he arrived he saw the station engineer standing behind the announcer, tickling him whenever he tried to speak into the microphone. Jack immediately fired the jokester—Dunnell remembered that Cooke's words, "You're fired!" came over the airwaves—but the man then said that he owned the station's transmitter. "If I go, it goes," he threatened. Then he offered to sell it to Cooke and Thomson for \$900. Cooke didn't have the money but he called Thomson and outlined the problem. Thomson quickly sent a check. After purchasing the transmitter, Cooke fired the engineer again. This time he succeeded, but the *Beacon Herald* never did run the station's program schedule.¹⁰

In 1943 Thomson sold his chain of radio stations in order to concentrate on his newspaper business. Cooke's share of the profits was \$55,000 in Canadian dollars, the equivalent of about half-a-million dollars today. Now Cooke had some independent running room in the business world. He moved back to Toronto and looked to make the most of it. World War II spending had effectively ended the Depression a few years earlier, with defense-related jobs putting spending money back in consumers' pockets and, more importantly, in stores' cash registers. It wasn't luxury or prosperity by any stretch, since many goods were rationed or in short supply. But still, rising employment gave some sustenance to the limping economies of Canada and the United States for the first time in more than a decade. Cooke's eye had long been set on radio station CKCL in Toronto. Later he said that as a teenager he often had passed by the station on the bus, thinking "Oh boy, wait 'til I own that place!" Now, maybe he could.

Cooke had about \$100,000 in the bank, but Henry Gooderham, who owned the twenty-year-old radio station, was asking \$1 million for it, "not because it was worth it but because he didn't want to sell," Cooke thought.¹¹ For the next year, every time Cooke saw Gooderham he mentioned how much he would like to buy the station, and each time Gooderham said "no." At last the day came when Gooderham answered, "Well, maybe," and Cooke said he'd be around soon with the necessary paperwork. Gooderham replied that he'd be wasting his

time getting it ready. But Cooke persisted. One of Cooke's employees once said, "When you're alone with Jack in a room, he outnumbers you."¹² Cooke had Gooderham outnumbered. Under the pressure of Cooke's relentless enthusiasm and cajoling, Gooderham soon signed his intention to sell CKCL.

After consulting with his attorney, Cooke returned to Gooderham with a specific offer—half-a-million dollars in the form of a mortgage, to be paid with interest over time, rather than \$1 million in cash all at one time. The arrangement offered Gooderham even more than he had originally asked, while relieving Cooke of the necessity to come up with \$1 million in cash. Gooderham accepted. Now Cooke had just one month to come up with half-a-million dollars. Rather than try to borrow all the money on his own, he formed a syndicate of seven buyers, each of whom would contribute a share of the purchase price. Cooke could later buy them out. Cooke found six buyers but then was stalled. He just couldn't find a seventh.

With time running out he paid a call on J. P. Bickell, a wealthy mining executive and philanthropist who also had invested in the Toronto Maple Leafs professional hockey team. Bickell told Cooke he wasn't interested in any new investments at the moment, but he did not exactly say "no" and he did not throw Cooke out. So Cooke kept talking. If he could not get over the high wall of Bickell's apparent rejection, he could at least try to wear it down a little. "I talked about everything, even the height of the building," he later told a reporter. "I figured as long as I could keep him from saying 'no' I had a chance."¹³ Bickell said he'd sleep on it. The next day he called Cooke and told him he'd invest.

The syndicate now was complete. In August 1944 ownership of Toronto station CKCL transferred to Cooke and his syndicate, the Toronto Broadcasting Company, and Cooke severed his formal connection with Roy Thomson's Northern Broadcasting and Publishing Company. At thirty-two, Jack Kent Cooke had become Canada's youngest radio station owner-operator. Always in high gear, he now shifted to overdrive in order to prepare CKCL for its debut on Monday morning, August 28. First, he changed the call letters to CKEY. Then he made what were, at the time, radical changes in programming and

format. CKEY would broadcast around the clock, twenty-four hours a day. Advertisers, who previously had enjoyed large influence in determining a show's content, now could buy only the air time for their commercials, not a seat in the programming office. Cooke would decide what Toronto's listeners wanted to hear, not the advertisers. In any event, Cooke was sure that his programming would succeed and that advertisers would be plenty satisfied with the large audiences CKEY would attract.

Cooke started the first "block programming" in Canadian radio. Previously, stations had broadcast in quarter-hour segments—fifteen minutes of news, fifteen minutes of music, fifteen minutes of interviews, for instance. But Cooke knew that many listeners didn't like having to change their dial every fifteen minutes to find another music program. His hour-long "block" of music, even when interrupted by brief commercials, would win them over, especially if he chose popular music, threw out any record that had the slightest scratch on it, adopted catchy station jingles, kept his disc jockeys lively, and made it a station policy never, ever to have any "dead air" time. Every minute would be exciting; not a second would be wasted. Cooke had tried out the formula while managing the northern Ontario stations for Roy Thomson. It had worked there, and there was no reason it should not work in Toronto. It was from Jack Kent Cooke's own talents as a musician, entertainer, and salesman and from his hard-earned experience in Canada's mining towns during the Depression that CKEY drew its first breath and its subsequent life.

Cooke practically lived at the CKEY facility at 444 University Avenue that August, preparing for the big day on August 28. "No one got much sleep," said Don Insley, who was among the fifty-two station employees who helped transform CKCL into the new CKEY. "For a week or so after it was launched, we worked almost around the clock. It was an incredible time." Jack's mother, Nancy, was up before dawn with the whole family to hear CKEY go on the air at 5:00 a.m. "When it happened, I got the shivers and both Jean and I started to cry. We could hardly believe it," Nancy later recalled.¹⁴ That morning Nancy and Ralph sent Jack a telegram: "On this wonderful occasion we wish

you good luck, prosperity, and God’s blessing—Mom and Dad.” Jean also sent a message: “Congratulations Jack Dear and every success in everything you do. All my love, Jeanie.” Jack’s son, Ralph, then seven years old, shared in the excitement. A second son, John, not quite three, knew only that his dad had done something special and that everyone was happy.

Several months later CKEY’s daytime ratings—the highest of Toronto’s four stations—validated Cooke’s strategy, as did CKEY’s ad revenues, which placed it among the top revenue-producing stations in Canada. CKEY had only been on the air a few months when *Variety*, the newspaper of show business, awarded the station its Plaque Award for Local Station Initiative for 1944, selecting CKEY over 1,100 other radio stations in the United States and Canada. It was the first time in the twelve-year history of the award that *Variety* had given it to a Canadian station. Soon CKEY boosted its broadcasting power from 1,000 to 5,000 watts, expanding its reach beyond Toronto into southern Ontario.

But Cooke didn’t change everything at the station. He kept many former CKCL employees, including oak-throated newscaster Lorne Greene, later to become famous in the role of Ben Cartwright in the U.S. television western *Ponderosa*. Cooke even found an outlet at CKEY for his avid interest in books by conducting, anonymously, a Sunday evening book review show. Cooke himself chose the books and reviewed them on the air. By 1948 he had bought out the other members of the syndicate, all of whom realized a handsome profit on their initial investment.



Cooke at the microphone in the studio at his radio station, CKEY, in Toronto, June 1960. He purchased the station in 1944 and held it until he moved to the United States in 1960.

Two years later Cooke's interest in literature and publishing led him back to Roy Thomson. In December 1946 the two former partners joined up again to purchase the Canadian edition of a U.S. weekly news and literary magazine, *Liberty*, for \$400,000. Cooke, thirty-four, became president and publisher; Thomson was chairman of the board. *Liberty* already enjoyed a wide circulation in Canada, but the dominance of U.S. content and writers always grated on the nationalist and cultural sensitivities of Canadian readers, who wanted more Canadian talent between the covers. Cooke gave it to them in a renamed *New Liberty*, without surrendering their access to the most interesting items from the United States. Over the next few years he hired a renowned Canadian poet, Edwin John Pratt, to check the language and phrasing in *New Liberty* and also featured University of Toronto professor Marshall McLuhan, later one of the century's most widely read communications theorists, as a regular contributor.

Over the next twelve years Jack would grow restive, particularly under the restrictions that Canadian authorities placed on his expansion plans. In 1949, for instance, the Board of Broadcast Governors (BBG), a Canadian regulatory agency roughly equivalent to the Federal Communications Commission in the United States, turned down Cooke's request for a TV station license and also disallowed his bid to own part interest in an Ottawa radio station. The BBG was concerned that one individual might exert a disproportionate influence on what was seen as a public resource, i.e., the airwaves. Cooke regarded the BBG's worries as unwarranted. He felt that the public, not the BBG, should decide for itself what it wanted to see or hear. So he circumvented the BBG's denial of ownership by arranging a consulting contract with the Ottawa station CKOY, which soon adopted the block programming format of CKEY.

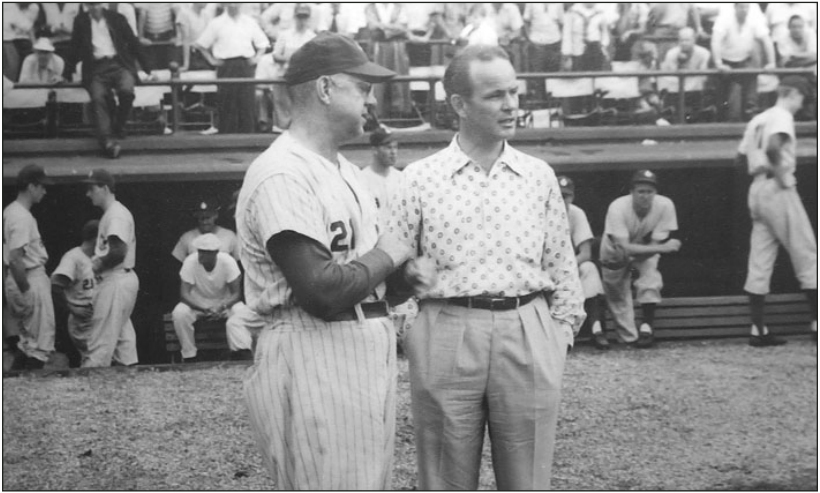
Cooke's disagreements with the BBG annoyed him, but not enough to make him feel cramped or stifled in Toronto. In July 1951 he purchased Toronto's minor league baseball team, the Maple Leafs of the International League, for \$200,000. The Maple Leafs were a losing team, and attendance had slackened with the team's lackluster performance. Nevertheless, Maple Leafs fans remained enthusiastic, if

not ardent, and Cooke detected some sparks of interest that he could coax into flame. He cleaned up the Leafs' dilapidated stadium and spent \$208,000 in his first year recruiting ball players. Other professional teams unloaded some of their best-known, but fading, players on the rookie owner, but Cooke only needed one lesson. He quickly schooled himself to become an astute judge of sports talent.

Cooke also brought the first black players to Toronto, Charlie White and Leon Day, a move that most Canadians hailed as both fair to the players and good for professional baseball. Just as he had done at *New Liberty*, where he won the Jewish Beth Sholom Brotherhood Award for his fair hiring practices, Cooke brought to his enterprises a single-minded focus on succeeding. "I'm not crusading for minorities," he said, "I'm looking for someone who can do a better job than anyone else."¹⁵ He also brought a showman's instinct for pleasing crowds. He introduced fireworks and flagpole sitters to the Maple Leafs' stadium, along with pony rides for children and casts of musicals to entertain the fans. There was ladies night, and carnation night, and black cat night, and hot dog night, among many others. Cooke issued free passes for senior citizens, earning him public thanks from Toronto alderman Margaret Campbell. And he inaugurated an annual event at the stadium, Variety Village Baseball Night, when the entire proceeds of the evening were donated to a home for handicapped children.

On one occasion automobiles and other valuables were given to fans who had drawn lucky program numbers. Gambling! cried Toronto's guardians of probity, who until 1950 had managed to ban professional baseball games from being played on Sundays, and who enforced a 6:00 p.m. Sunday curfew on professional sports until the early 1960s. A magistrate gave Cooke a light rap on the knuckles for the misdemeanor charge of running an illegal lottery, but Toronto's sportswriters leapt to his defense and fans kept pouring into the Maple Leafs' stadium. Toronto's paid home attendance in the 1952 season was 512,325, an International League record. *Sporting News* awarded Cooke a trophy for the best "Minor League Executive of 1952."

Despite such successes, or perhaps because of them, some people accused Cooke of pandering to the crowds with low-brow gimmicks. He



Cooke with Toronto Maple Leafs Manager Bernie Grimes, 1950s. Cooke didn't know much about professional baseball when he bought the Maple Leafs in 1951 but he studied hard and learned quickly. The following year the Leafs made the playoffs for the first time in seven years.

was sensitive to the criticism, especially after CKEY's programming of hit parade rock 'n' roll music incurred the censure of some cultured Torontonians. But he countered the critics by challenging their assumptions about "culture" and beauty. "If you watch baseball players on the field," he once said, "you can see more grace and coordination of movement than you'd see in a ballet performance."¹⁶ The vast majority of fans agreed. They found Cooke's side attractions at ball games amusing, entertaining, and, most important, a sign that the team's owner cared about them and their support. If enough of them kept cheering and if Cooke spent his money wisely, the Maple Leafs would become winners again. And they did, as surely as if someone had planned it that way. Between 1954 and 1957 the Maple Leafs won the International League pennant three times. "Fabulous!" cried Cooke. "Fabulous," meaning "almost impossible to believe," became one of his favorite words when describing his team of winners and their accomplishments.¹⁷

In 1952, while Cooke was pumping life into the Maple Leafs, he was also expanding his publication business. In October he purchased

Consolidated Press, publisher of several magazines. But Cooke was interested only in one of them, a highly regarded, sixty-five-year-old literary magazine called *Saturday Night*, so he sold off the others over the next several months. The recently hired editor of *Saturday Night* promptly resigned, reluctant to be associated with a man known for his popular music station and for putting on “circus” shows at baseball games. Determined, as he put it, to turn out “the best d_____d literary publication Canada has ever seen,” Cooke asked poet E. J. Pratt, whom he had hired for *New Liberty*, to work on *Saturday Night*’s editorial board.¹⁸ He also recruited for the board the well-known Canadian novelist Robertson Davies and Victoria College philosophy professor and writer John H. Irving.

Cooke’s publishing work received an important endorsement in 1951 from Canadian-born William Maxwell Aitken, who had moved to England in 1911 and won election to the House of Commons before being appointed Minister of Information in Lloyd George’s wartime government. In 1918 Aitken was given a peerage and honored with the title Lord Beaverbrook. Aitken entered newspaper publishing during World War I, became highly successful at it, and served in Winston Churchill’s cabinet during World War II. It was quite an accolade, then, when he wrote of Cooke after meeting him, “He has qualities that sometimes provoke dislike: invincible confidence in himself, a fluent, rushing anxiety to tell you about his work and his projects. Yet Cooke is most likeable. He is sincere and straightforward, and he has humour. Cooke, I am convinced, is a new leader in Canadian journalism.”¹⁹

Lord Beaverbrook’s approbation reflected the strength of Cooke’s desire to nurture his expanding business ventures in Canada. Though he had become the millionaire he said he would become, it remained to be seen whether Beaverbrook’s endorsement and Cooke’s affinity for his own homeland would be enough to keep Canada’s most dynamic and newsworthy businessman from seeking even larger venues for success.