

JACK KENT COOKE

*by
Adrian
Kinnane*

A CAREER BIOGRAPHY

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JACK KENT COOKE CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1912

Jack Kent Cooke is born on October 25 in Hamilton, Ontario, the first of four children born to Ralph Ercil Cooke and Nancy Marion Jacobs Cooke.

1929

The stock market crash wipes out the savings and the job of Cooke's father, a salesman in a picture-frame manufacturing firm.

1926-1930

Cooke attends Malvern Collegiate Institute, a public high school in Toronto, and obtains a junior matriculation certificate (a secondary school diploma that does not qualify for Canadian university admission). The University of Michigan offers Cooke a hockey scholarship that he is obliged to turn down because, under the Canadian system, he requires a fifth year of high school in order to qualify for college.

While still at Malvern Collegiate, Cooke, who plays piano, saxophone and clarinet, organizes and leads an orchestra that plays on cruise ships and in Toronto dance halls.

1933

Cooke joins L. J. West & Company brokerage house and works as a runner on the floor of the Toronto Stock Exchange.

1934

After getting married, Cooke takes a job selling encyclopedias across Canada to help support his family during the Depression. However, he grows dissatisfied with encyclopedia sales and the lack of a promising future in that field, and takes a position as a salesman with Colgate-Palmolive.

1937

On January 1, Cooke makes a momentous decision, leaving his relatively secure and successful job at Colgate-Palmolive to work for much lower pay as a station manager at radio station CJCS in Stratford, Ontario. The station owner, and Cooke's boss, is Roy Thomson (later Right Honorable Lord Thomson of Fleet). In just six months Cooke turns the station from the red into profitability. Thomson gives Cooke three more stations to manage.

1941

Thomson makes Cooke a partner in his growing media empire of radio stations and newspapers.

1943

At the age of 31, Cooke has accrued assets worth a million dollars.

1944

Cooke purchases his own radio station, CKCL, in Toronto, and changes the call sign to CKEY. He introduces "block programming," lively disc jockeys and "no dead-air time." *Variety* magazine awards CKCL its Plaque Award for Local Station Initiative, selecting the station over 1,100 other radio stations in the United States and Canada.

1945

Cooke forms Radio Guild Features Ltd., creators and suppliers of programs for radio stations.

1946

Cooke and Thomson purchase the Canadian edition of a U.S. weekly news and literary magazine, *Liberty*, and rename it *New Liberty*. Cooke receives the Jewish Beth Sholom Brotherhood Award for his fair hiring practices.

1951

In his first sports business venture, Cooke purchases a baseball team, the Toronto Maple Leafs of the AAA International League.

1952

The Maple Leafs set an International League record for home attendance, and *Sporting News* awards Cooke a trophy for the best “Minor League Executive of 1952.” Cooke also purchases Consolidated Press, one of Canada’s largest magazine publishers.

1956

Cooke diversifies his businesses by acquiring two Ontario plastics factories (Micro Plastics Ltd. and Robinson Industrial Crafts Ltd.) and a Toronto aluminum foundry, Precision Die Castings Ltd.

1959

Cooke becomes vice president of a newly organized professional baseball league, the Continental League, with hopes for ownership of a franchise in Toronto.

1960

Convinced that great opportunities await him in the United States, Cooke decides to emigrate there from Canada. He sells most of his Canadian holdings and moves to California. In September he is named a U.S. citizen by a special act of Congress, Private Law 86-486, and is the only citizen ever so honored.

1961

Cooke buys a minority interest in the National Football League's Washington Redskins.

1964

Cooke sells the Toronto Maple Leafs baseball team. He forms Jack Kent Cooke Incorporated to create a cable television company that will bring high-quality television to areas with poor reception. Within a year, his company, American Cablevision, is one of the world's largest cable TV companies. In 1970 the company will merge into TelePrompTer Corp., which Cooke will lead from near-bankruptcy into the nation's largest cable TV company during the 1970s.

1965

Cooke buys the National Basketball Association's Los Angeles Lakers for \$5.2 million (a big price tag in its day). Cooke later will sign such NBA greats as Wilt Chamberlain, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Magic Johnson.

1966

Cooke acquires the National Hockey League-expansion franchise Los Angeles Kings. With several partners he also starts a professional soccer league, the United States Soccer Association. In 1967, it hosts the first professional soccer championship in American history.

1967

Cooke completes construction of the Los Angeles Forum, a 17,000-seat sports and entertainment facility. It is the first major sports center in America built with private instead of local government funds.

1971

Cooke originates closed-circuit telecasts of boxing matches to theater audiences when he bankrolls and co-promotes with Jerry Perenchio the first fight between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, billed as the "Fight of the Century" and held at Madison Square Garden in New York City. He pays each boxer the unprecedented sum of \$2.5 million.

1974

Cooke becomes majority owner of the Redskins.

1979

Cooke sells the Lakers, the Kings and the Forum for \$67.5 million, then the largest business transaction in sports history. As part of that transaction, Cooke acquires the Chrysler Building in Manhattan. Cooke moves to Washington, D.C.

1981

Cooke hires San Diego Chargers Offensive Coordinator Joe Gibbs to be head coach of the Redskins. Cooke also sells TelePrompTer to Westinghouse for \$646 million, the largest purchase price in the history of broadcasting up to that time.

1983

On January 30 the Redskins win Super Bowl XVII, beating Miami 27-17. Cooke buys 1.7 million square feet of office space in downtown Phoenix.

1984

Cooke buys Elmendorf Farm, a 503-acre horse-breeding farm near Lexington, Kentucky.

1985

Cooke's company, Pro Football Incorporated, becomes sole owner of the Washington Redskins. Cooke also buys the *Los Angeles Daily News* from the Chicago Tribune Company.

1987

Cooke announces plans to build a new football stadium for the Redskins.

1988

On January 31, the Redskins win Super Bowl XXII, beating Denver 42-10.

1992

On January 26, the Redskins win Super Bowl XXVI, beating Buffalo 37-24. Later that year, the Redskins move into Redskin Park, a state-of-the-art training facility Cooke has built in Ashburn, VA.

1996

Concluding eight years of negotiations with officials in the District of Columbia, the town of Alexandria, VA, and Anne Arundel and Prince George's Counties in Maryland, Cooke secures a place to build his new stadium. He signs a contract for a 78,600-seat, \$160 million complex on a farm in Landover, MD. Jack Kent Cooke Stadium (known today as Fed-Ex Field) hosts its first Redskins game on September 14, 1997.

On December 22 osteoarthritis causes Cooke to miss the Redskins' final game at RFK Stadium, the only home game he has missed since moving to Washington.

1997

On April 6, Cooke suffers a cardiac arrest and collapses at his north-west Washington, D.C., home. He is taken to the hospital, where he is pronounced dead.

2000

On August 1, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, established by the will of Mr. Cooke, is founded.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE IDEA FOR A BOOK ABOUT THE CAREER OF JACK Kent Cooke began at the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. Though various national media had covered Cooke during most of his long life, the Foundation's directors and staff realized that many people, especially the students who will be applying for and receiving Jack Kent Cooke Foundation scholarships, might not know much about the man who made it all possible. This book is an opportunity for them, and others, to learn more about the career of Mr. Jack Kent Cooke.

This book's greatest debt is to those who shared with the author their memories and impressions of their remarkable business associate, colleague, and mentor—and, in the case of John Kent Cooke, father. In trying to capture an amazing life in business, this book focuses on the ups and downs, the challenges and surprises, and, unavoidably, the relentlessness of Jack Kent Cooke's pursuit of success. He was an achiever, and this book could only become primarily the story of his accomplishments. But Cooke was also an ardent supporter of others' desire to achieve. Most of the persons interviewed for this book benefited greatly from their relationship with him. He discerned their talents; he took time to teach them; he entrusted them with responsibility; he set the bar high for them, but no higher than he set for himself; and he rewarded generously their loyalty and success. They never forgot him and want him never to be forgotten.

No book of this size could capture fully the range and variety of experiences that Cooke's associates accrued over many years, even decades, of working with him. But this book tries to glean some of the essence of it all, to give strangers a sense of familiarity with a remarkable man, and to encourage achievers—fellow achievers with Mr. Cooke—to realize their dreams, as he would have wished them to do.

Most accomplishments are group efforts. This book is no exception. Every member of the Foundation's board of directors carefully reviewed the manuscript. Matthew Quinn, the Foundation's executive director, and Pete Mackey, its director of public affairs, offered useful editorial feedback. Pete also pitched in with some valuable interviews of persons who knew and worked with Cooke. At History Associates Incorporated, Ken Durr, director of the history division, and chief editor Gail Mathews provided many suggestions that improved the text. Historian Steven Swisdak conducted background research with an impressive combination of thoroughness and efficiency, while historian Garry Adelman brought the same combination of skills to the photo and image portion of the project. Carol Spielman provided valuable assistance with interview transcripts.

A special thanks is due to John Kent Cooke, who made available an extensive collection of his father's memorabilia, press clippings, and photographs. More than that, he shared openly his memories of his father, and provided timely and enthusiastic support whenever his assistance was requested.

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN JACK KENT COOKE WAS BORN, THE Ford Model T was just four years old. When he was two the Panama Canal opened. When Cooke was three, human voices were broadcast for the first time across the Atlantic Ocean. And when he died, just three years short of the bimillennium, mankind had waged world war twice, unlocked the atom, revolutionized science and communications several times over, and walked on the moon. The twentieth century favored the resourceful, the forward-looking, and the adaptable, and Jack Kent Cooke was all of these.

As the technology and the economy of the new century grew ever more complex, higher education was transformed from the luxury of a relative few to a necessity for the many. As a high school graduate only, Jack Kent Cooke had one foot on each side of that great educational divide. He spanned the difference on his own, through determined and voracious reading. He learned to relish books and words for the joy they brought, for the wonders they revealed, and for the edge they gave to a sharp and ambitious mind.

Language—precisely crafted language—is central to understanding how Jack Kent Cooke engaged his world. Like duplicate keys made at the hardware store, some words open the door and some need further cutting and polishing. Cooke loved to fix imperfect words, his own as well as others'. Once a *Los Angeles Times* reporter wrote an article in

which he called Cooke “flamboyant.” The word sent Cooke to his Oxford dictionary. He then phoned the reporter. “You called me flamboyant. Do you know the difference between flamboyant and colorful? I’m colorful.”¹

Over time Cooke became expert at which keys opened the locks and which would just rattle in the tumblers. For him, words were not just a convenient means of communicating; they also were an organizing principle—“a means of keeping order in one’s life,” he once told TV interviewer Charlie Rose, “so that you don’t go awry by believing things that are not so, or by cloaking them with ambiguous and gobbledeygook terms that will lead you to some kind of downfall.”² Cooke was seventy-three years old when Washington, D.C. sports reporter Glenn Brenner asked him, “What motivates you at this point in your life?” Cooke hesitated only a second or two. “There’s not really much motivation,” he replied, “it’s just a compulsion to continue. I’m going to stay alive as long as I can, and one of the ways is by this business of working, working.”

The word “compulsion,” an action so forceful that it needs no additional “push” or motivation, succinctly and clearly described Cooke’s understanding of why he lived as he did. It was who he was. Life and work—he loved them both and felt no more need to explain them, or even to distinguish between them, than to explain why he breathed.

Those who worked with Jack Kent Cooke experienced the full force of this “compulsion,” his full-bore engagement with the world. Those who did not often wondered what it would be like. In that same interview Brenner asked Cooke, “What do you demand of [Redskins head coach] Joe Gibbs and his staff?” Cooke looked toward the ground for a moment, as he often did when he didn’t like the way a question was phrased. “Well, that word ‘demand,’” he started to say. Brenner saw what was coming. “OK, ‘expect,’ then.” “Yes,” Cooke agreed, “that’s better.”

“Demand” implied that Cooke would have to pressure Gibbs to meet Cooke’s goals, but “expect” implied shared goals and values—a cooperative rather than a coerced relationship between coach and owner. Said Cooke, “I expect that Joe and the entire staff of the

Redskins and of the various other companies that I'm proud to own will work almost as hard as I do to reach each particular goal of success that they set for themselves and that I in turn set for them.”³

Jack Kent Cooke was no cipher or mystery. “Jack’s feelings were easy to see,” said attorney and friend Jay Ricks.⁴ If Cooke thought it or felt it or believed it, he did so clearly and decisively, and expressed himself accordingly. A man of words and a man of his word, he embraced life with a robust spontaneity remarkably undiminished through a life span of eighty-four years. Sometimes he would call his tax director, Linda King, and start the conversation by singing a verse of song—“just whatever struck his fancy,” she laughed.⁵ Wanda Wisner, Cooke’s vice president for finance, was “bowled over by how jovial he was” when they first ran into each other, literally, at a swinging door in Cooke’s Middleburg home.⁶ Every morning was fresh, every day the best he ever had lived or ever would. Every new venture was sure to succeed, every setback merely the chance for a fresh start. Was all that optimism and energy just for show? “Not a ‘tall,” he would have said, “Not a ‘tall.”

Jack Kent Cooke’s special drive came from sources he did not fully understand any more than did those who saw it in action. He once confessed to a Toronto reporter, “I’ve read all sorts of books [on psychology] but I have never come across anything that could be a tag for myself.”⁷ Jerry Perenchio, who worked with Cooke to arrange the famous Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier boxing match in 1971, offered that “Jack was an ebullient, fun-loving man who was a very tough taskmaster, very decisive, a perfectionist and very bulldogged when he decided he wanted something. He didn’t have an ounce of ‘quit’ in him.”⁸ People often described Cooke, but even friends like Perenchio couldn’t fully grasp the passion for life and success that drove him.

This biography focuses on Cooke’s business career, not his personality or his personal life. But that career was so much an expression of the man that the line between these areas is not always very clear. Cooke often said that his work was his life, not in a self-denying or ascetic way but quite the opposite: he positively loved his work. It gave him great pleasure to discover new business opportunities, to build them to their maximum potential, and to inspire his colleagues and

employees to believe they could reach higher than they ever imagined. As he told Redskins head coach Joe Gibbs before the season's opening game in 1983, "The goal is clear; and you can reach it. Destiny demands that you do better than your supposed best." Coming from Cooke, this maxim was not just cheerleading or rosy rhetoric. It was what he had done with his own career.