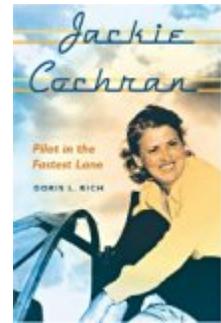


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Doris L. Rich. *Jackie Cochran: Pilot in the Fastest Lane*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. x + 279 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3043-2.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Bruton (University of Oxford)  
Published on H-Minerva (December, 2007)



## An Illuminating and Engaging Publication

Jacqueline “Jackie” Cochran held more speed, altitude, and distance aviation records in her career than any other pilot, male or female, in aviation history. During the Second World War, she was head of the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) that trained just over one thousand women as delivery pilots for the military, a position for which she received the Distinguished Service Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross. She was also a highly successful businesswoman and very talented at self-promotion. She accomplished all of this, and more, despite coming from a poverty-stricken and harsh childhood in the Florida panhandle. Notwithstanding these outstanding achievements, she has, for the most part, been forgotten in the annals of popular history and overlooked by biographers and aviation historians. There are a number of possible reasons for this: her contemporary, Amelia Earhart, whose mysterious disappearance encouraged a near-mythologization, has since overshadowed Cochran. Furthermore, Cochran was a bundle of contradictions; her determination and tenacity could (and sometimes was) viewed as stubbornness and egotism. A good example of Cochran’s egotistic nature, perceived or otherwise, is the title of one of her autobiographies, “Jackie Cochran: The Autobiography of the Greatest Woman Pilot in Aviation History” (1987). It can be said that the same “character flaws” that contributed to Cochran’s difficult reputation also created her outstanding dominance and legacy in the field of aviation. Consequently *Jackie Cochran: Pilot in the Fastest Lane*, the first extensive critical biography of Cochran, is a long-overdue publication.

Cochran was born Bessie Pittman to a poor family in the panhandle of Florida in 1906. Her family moved around frequently during her childhood, all in search of employment. Cochran was unhappy and her urge to flee such an environment and travel, even at a young age, was encapsulated by an attempt to run away and join the circus. Cochran’s childhood was to have a profound affect on her personality. She developed a desire for cleanliness, fear of water, hunger for success and attention, and a high standard of morality. She especially disliked inappropriate and immoral behaviour towards women after witnessing women and young girls being attacked and molested in the mill where she worked. Cochran also developed a strong sense of ambition that demanded to be realized. An adept and eager student, she was good at learning new skills and took advantage of any opportunities that came her way. “Each move from mill towns,” Doris L. Rich explains, “occurred after she had reached the limits of advancement in work skills and income” (p. 17).

Cochran became a beautician and businesswoman of sorts and gradually worked her way to New York City where she became “Jackie Cochran.” This would be one of the Cochran’s earliest fabrications devoted to her background—her new surname was that of a brief ex-husband and not picked at random from the phonebook, as she would later claim. Another myth frequently printed about Cochran’s background was her status as an orphan; despite caring for her family, she never publicly acknowledged them. While working in Miami in 1930 she met her future husband, the wealthy entrepreneur,

Floyd Odlum. With her husband, Cochran shared an apparently unlimited ambition and a strong drive to succeed. At this stage, she was looking to establish her own cosmetics and beauty company. Odlum suggested, in the midst of the economic depression that was occurring, that the only way to cover her business territory was to gain a pilot's license. In 1933, Cochran gained a commercial rating pilot's license and the following year obtained a transport rating. Even at this early stage, she stood apart from other female aviators: "At ease with male pilots, most of whom liked her and were generous with their advice, she chose to remain outside the circle and camaraderie of women pilots" (pp. 38-39). Between 1934 and 1939, Cochran built up her aviation and business experience and began to achieve public recognition—she won the Benidix Race and the Harmon Trophy in 1938, and obtained a number of important distance and speed aviation records.

At the outbreak of war in 1939, Cochran suggested a role for women aviators in national defence and transportation. In 1941, she flew a Lockheed Hudson V bomber to England and visited the Air Transport Command, an all-female contingent who transported military planes from factory to base. Thereafter, she was based briefly in Britain and became involved in recruiting qualified female aviators from the United States for the British Air Transport Auxiliary, a civilian-based ferry service. In September 1941, she returned stateside to begin the formation of the women's auxiliary air transport service she had envisioned at the beginning of the war. However, due to internal politicking and maneuvering within the military and possibly Cochran's stubborn personality, there were to be two women's auxiliary air transport service—Nancy Love's Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron and Cochran's Women's Flying Training Detachment. This marked the beginning of a competitive and sometimes petty rivalry between the two women and their organizations. In July 1944, these two organizations, along with all female pilots associated with the Army Air Force (AAF), were amalgamated to form WASP under Cochran's command. However, this would be a brief and hard-earned success, as Cochran "continued to make numerous enemies, both political and military, who attempted to either eliminate the Wasps or militarize them by placing them" in the Women's Army Corp (p. 133). By December 1944, it was apparent that due to low AAF casualties in Europe, the WASPs would be longer needed and they were disbanded.

In the aftermath of this disappointing failure, Cochran performed a number of diverse roles—working

for the Pentagon, operating as a war correspondent in Asia, and traveling around Europe after the war ended. She also lent her support and assistance to the fledgling AAF and the newly formed Women's Air Force. In addition, she gained a number of important aviation records in the postwar period and continued to promote her cosmetics empire. Cochran also dabbled in politics, working for Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidential election campaign in 1952 and unsuccessfully running for Congress in 1955; she remained childishly bitter about the latter for years afterwards. To a certain extent, her health problems and the ill health of her husband began to limit her activities, although this did not stop her becoming the first woman to fly faster than the speed of sound (Mach 1) in May 1953 and to reach Mach 2 at the age of fifty-eight in 1964. Cochran also published her first autobiography, *The Stars at Noon* (1954, reissued 1979), and continued to travel to exotic locations all other the globe. In 1971, she was inducted into the Aviation Hall of Fame, the first living woman to receive this honor. By now, Cochran's ill health had begun to impinge upon her boundless energy and she was forced to cease flying. At the end of 1975, her beloved husband, Floyd Odlum, died and Cochran's health and spirit never recovered. On August 9, 1980, Cochran died in her modest California ranch house. A number of memorial services were held and two years after Cochran's death, she was included in a Pioneers of Flight exhibit at the newly-opened National Air and Space Museum. At the opening of this exhibition, the curator, Claudia Oakes, described Cochran thus, "she had a personality like sandpaper. She had to be tough to fight her way out of really down-and-out poverty in the Florida panhandle into the sophisticated and expensive world of aviation. Jackie had to be hard" (p. 231).

*Jackie Cochran* is the fourth aviation biography by Rich and her third book on female aviators. Her previous tomes have been well-received and meticulously researched, and this approach is continued in this latest publication. As previously noted, Cochran is a difficult and contradictory subject. For example, she believed in the promotion of women as equal to men in some arenas while also believing that the role of a female aviator was outside of combat and space. She also detested the women's movement despite the many successes she had in raising the status of women as aviators and businesswomen. She was indeed a successful businesswoman in her own right but also relied heavily on her wealthy and successful husband, at least for the means, finances, and contacts to chase aviation records. This contradicted with the somewhat counterfactual ver-

sion of herself that she promoted—that of an impoverished orphan who fought her way up to her current position of esteem and success. This also further underscores a major problem, which Rich for the most part overcame: most of the material about Cochran was authored or provided by the woman herself; she published two autobiographies within her lifetime. Rich manages to overcome this with her meticulous and wide-ranging research but occasionally relies too heavily on material and anecdotes authored by Cochran without due analysis. However, in general, Rich is a perceptive author and researcher—she does not glorify Cochran and indeed succeeds in debunking a few myths about her subject. It is to the author's credit that she has written such an enjoyable and unbiased biography of a difficult, complex and occasionally unsympathetic subject.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-minerva>

**Citation:** Elizabeth Bruton. Review of Rich, Doris L., *Jackie Cochran: Pilot in the Fastest Lane*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. December, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13933>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).