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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.

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In Search of the "Real" Jackie

In *Jackie Cochran*, Doris L. Rich presents the first critical biography of pioneering aviator Jackie Cochran. By offering a detailed account of both the positive and negative aspects of Cochran's career and personality, Rich seeks to reveal "the 'real' Jackie" among the complexity and contradictions that characterize accounts of Cochran's life (p. x). Based on four years of research, the book draws from a wide variety of sources, including Cochran's personal papers at the Dwight D. Eisenhower library, contemporary newspaper and magazine accounts, oral histories, and rare interviews with surviving members of Cochran's family.

Previously, those interested in Cochran's history had to rely primarily on her own writings–writings that she frequently modified to portray herself in the best light. Whenever possible, Rich compares Cochran's account of events with perspectives from other people involved. While Rich's extensive research does an excellent job of filling in many gaps in the historical record of Cochran's life, at times the abundance of evidence overwhelms her narrative. This not only further obscures the story Rich is attempting to uncover, but also leaves the reader searching for further analysis and direction.

Rich's most groundbreaking work appears in the section of the book on Cochran's childhood and family background, a period previously surrounded by confusion and myth. Born Bessie Pittman in Muscogee, Florida, in 1906, Cochran grew up in a poor family. Her father worked as a carpenter and foreman for the Southern States Lumber Company, and the family relocated frequently, following him from job to job. Feisty and determined to leave behind the lumber camps and mill towns of her childhood, Cochran dreamed of a future in which she would be "clean, well mannered, and dressed in fashionable clothing," not to mention "rich [with] a big automobile" (p. 11). Though she had only two years of formal education, Cochran pursued every opportunity for advancement, working as a beautician, training as a nurse (though she never took the licensing examination), and traveling as a saleswoman. By 1929, at the age of twenty-three, she had moved to New York City, renamed herself "Jacqueline Cochran," and secured a job at the famous Antoine's Salon inside Saks Fifth Avenue.

In her 1954 autobiography, *The Stars at Noon*, Cochran wrote " '[I] might have been born in a hovel but I was determined to travel with the wind and the stars' " (p. 19). In pursuit of this goal, she reinvented herself as a successful and fashionable self-made woman, rewriting her personal history to better fit this evolving persona. For example, throughout her life, Cochran publicly claimed that she was an orphan taken in by the Pittman family at the age of four. Rich's interviews with several surviving relatives, however, reveal evidence that the Pittmans were indeed Cochran's biological family. Rich asserts that the Pittmans had always viewed Cochran's claims of orphanhood as "pure fictions dreamed up by Bessie to further dramatize the Cinderella theme of her biography," but refrained from disputing them to spare her embarrassment (p. 3).

After moving to New York, Cochran finally began to achieve some of the success and recognition that she craved. At a dinner party in Miami, she met her future husband, the millionaire industrialist and financier Floyd Odlum. It was Odlum who first suggested Cochran try flying. After hearing her plans to start her own cosmetics company in the midst of the Great Depression, he informed her that to cover enough territory to make a profit, she should "get [her] pilot's license" (p. 23). Then,

her exploits as a female aviator would also serve as free publicity for her beauty products. After only seventeen days of lessons, Cochran received her private pilot's license on August 17, 1932. With Odlum's backing, she formed her cosmetics company, Wings to Beauty, and set off to make a name for herself (and her products) as an aviator.

The remainder of the book covers more familiar territory. Rich recounts Cochran's growing success as a record-breaking aviator and her acceptance into the elite circles of aviation, the military, and the federal government. During World War II, Cochran served as head of the Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs). While Rich recognizes Cochran's many accomplishments, she also presents a critical perspective that does not shy away from the less laudatory aspects of Cochran's personality. Pushy, egotistical, and brash, Cochran did not hesitate to use her connections to get what she wanted. Her fame and Odlum's wealth provided Cochran with access to aircraft and facilities beyond the reach of most other aviators and allowed her to pursue her record-breaking goals.

Rich also confronts the many contradictions in Cochran's views, especially those related to female pilots. A pioneer in woman's aviation who fought for acceptance on an equal basis among male pilots, Cochran believed women had no place as commercial or combat pilots, and testified against training female astronauts in the space program. She opposed the women's movement, saying "repeatedly that a woman's place was at home with children lest she lose her femininity," even though she was rarely at home and pursued multiple successful careers (p. 163). Although "at ease with male pilots, most of whom liked her and were generous with their advice," Cochran "chose to remain outside the circle and camaraderie of women pilots," cooperating with such networks only in pursuit of specific goals (pp. 38-39). Rich carefully points out the existence of these contradictions, but she never examines the exciting interpretive questions that they bring to mind: What was it like to be a female pilot in this period? What position did other female pilots take on such issues as women pilots in commercial aviation, combat, or space travel? To what extent did Cochran's opinions on the role of female pilots affect their place in aviation? A careful consideration of these and other questions are vital for understanding Cochran's historical significance and for translating Cochran's individual life experiences into a broader examination of the role of gender in such traditionally male-dominated fields as aviation and the military.

In general, Rich's text is so focused on providing a balanced and comprehensive account of Cochran's life that it leaves little room for interpretation or analysis. This approach is largely intentional, designed to let readers draw their own conclusions. At times, however, the thread of the story and a sense of Cochran herself–her passions, her motivations, and her personality–become obscured in the detailed descriptions of the individual record-setting flights, trips, and events on which Rich focuses so much of her narrative.

Few reviews can list an overabundance of information and an account that leaves the reader wanting to know more as the primary flaws in a text. Rich's work is an impressive achievement. Well-researched and informative, it provides new information and insight into a complex figure. By the end of her life, Cochran, "the woman of wealth who played poker with generals and called congressmen by their first names," boasted an impressive list of accomplishments (p. 175). She was the first woman to break the sound barrier and reached Mach 2 twice at the age of fifty-eight. She also held over two hundred aviation records for speed, altitude, and distance. Rich's biography promises to help Cochran attain the prominent place in aviation history that she richly deserves.

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