

Alistair Cooke

Remembered

The cherished recollection of a personal relationship with this remarkable man.

By Michael D. Murray

With the retirement and subsequent passing of Alistair Cooke at age 95 this past March, America has lost a great international ambassador of good will. As the voice and interpreter of American culture to the world during the longest running one-man series in broadcasting history, Cooke maintained a tremendous worldwide audience over the BBC. But because he was recently most famous on our side of the Atlantic as host of *Masterpiece Theatre*, few Americans fully appreciated the role he had played both nationally and internationally for so many years. His early, eclectic television classic, *Omnibus*, the brainchild of Robert Saudek in the 1950s, aired for over a decade on all three major networks of that era, offering opera, ballet, theater, musicals and sometimes even science experiments. A youthful Cooke served as moderator/host. His televised bicentennial tour of the nineteen seventies, *America*, with a book of the same name that sold over two million copies to make him wealthy, also started to become a distant memory. And since so much time had passed since his departure from public television's *Masterpiece Theatre*, many Americans had lost track of him, even though his

BBC program continued on a worldwide basis almost right up to the time of his death. I shall always cherish a memory of a personal contact with him, beginning more than 30 years ago.

Cooke offered his broadcast audiences and readers seasoned perspective on the events of the day because of his wide range of experience and his keen and highly creative style of broadcast writing. The style he developed as a newspaper correspondent and radio reporter was one in which he would focus on a rather obscure issue, fact or personality and then tie it to something global and significant. This was consistent with his personalized approach to the documentary series, *America*. He visited many major points of interest. He compared the Boston Massacre to killings at Kent State University during the Vietnam era. He contrasted the American military dilemma in Vietnam to the British position in the American Revolutionary War. He discussed the influence of American jazz music while demonstrating prowess at the keyboard in New Orleans. But he also visited the underground plant of the Strategic Air Command in Omaha, and covered the important work of the Mayo Clinic in



Author Dr. Michael D. Murray (right), with Alistair Cooke at the reception preceding the Cooke lecture, "60 Years Before the Microphone and the Camera," sponsored by the Royal Television Society and held at the Cosmopolitan Club, New York City, December 3, 1997.

Minnesota, while diagnosing his own medical maladies from childhood.

Increasingly regarded as the ex-officio "Voice of America," Cooke became an American citizen in 1941 and his *Letters from America*, subsequently helped to shape the way the world regarded American culture – and its inhabitants – *The Americans*, the title of one of his other early books. His genial, soft-spoken yet authoritative approach to important topics translated well to both print and broadcasting and connected with audiences everywhere. He always tried to link news events with popular culture and key people in the news, including the art world and the Hollywood motion picture community. Under Cooke's tutelage, the audience got an interpretation of various aspects of the popular arts: such as music, particularly American jazz, with important lessons and ties to politics and history. This increased Anglo-American understanding. He also formed friendships with some important figures from American movies, such as Charlie Chaplin. He even worked in collaboration

with that film legend briefly on the development of a movie script. And while they were never able to bring the script to fruition, ties to Chaplin expanded Cooke's repertoire, reporting horizons, as well as his access to others in that cultural mix.

My own personal contact with Alistair Cooke began as part of a research project for graduate school over 30 years ago. Professor Edward C. Lambert of the University of Missouri School of Journalism required members of our graduate course dealing with television programming topics, to identify public-affairs programs that we highly valued and then to provide some kind of a rationale for our selection. I chose Cooke's *America* series because of its attempt to transport viewers to historic locations, to interpret important events and because of the excellent writing and repertoire of the host. I then began to explore my own ideas about the program's goals, its possible influence on viewers and also the historical accuracy. I published a piece about it in an academic journal and was encouraged by

another Missouri University professor to further follow-up and write to the consummate reporter, Cooke himself. I did, of course, and asked him about particular production aspects of the series and the people influencing his decisions on what particular topics to investigate – as well as those having the greatest impact on his work on this series – and life in America in general.

His response surprised me for its quickness and candor. He listed many influences including his own professors – both at Cambridge and Harvard, as well as popular American writers including his mentor, H. L. Mencken, the iconoclastic and controversial columnist for *The Baltimore Sun*. He also profiled Walter Lippmann, the journalist and counselor to Presidents, and subject of an anniversary piece for one of Cooke's books, *America Observed*. This is one of the best remembered of the dozen books he published, which were mostly collections of his broadcasts. Cooke mentioned some others as well, who were – often subliminally – most influential: E.B. White, Westbrook Pegler and Q (Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch).” He suggested that I might also want to add the English diarist and drama critic James Agate to that list since the nine volumes of his *Ego* were among some of Alistair's most favorite entertainment-oriented reading. Alistair also mentioned the overriding influence of Mark Twain in his writing and choice of words, adding the famed Twain advisory to writers about the difference between a perfect word and a near perfect word being like the difference between “lightning and a lightning bug.”

We corresponded sporadically as I investigated various aspects of his

success as a broadcast writer for well over a quarter century. I would sometimes be surprised to get a speedy response on a specific inquiry, but learned at the start that it would take quite awhile to get a reply when he was in San Francisco, his favorite western outpost. And I also discovered that his creativity belied what appeared on the surface as a total lack of organization. I once asked for copies of some old letters and he apologized profusely, saying his filing system compared unfavorably with that of W. C. Fields. But I also learned that his memory and personal contact with people and stories he retained about them more than made up for the challenges of being less than well organized. He also shared the fact that he had been regularly donating his work to the Mugar Memorial Library at Boston University, which I also discovered to be a treasure trove of source material on early broadcasting and Hollywood film. I formed a friendship with the Director of the Special Collections, Howard Gotlieb, and exchanged material whenever I published something about Alistair Cooke or his broadcasts, and he sometimes noted when Alistair himself was on tap for a visit to his collection.

As a result of my own scholarly work, I also became good friends with the British biographer and broadcaster, Nick Clarke, host of the BBC's daily *World at One* program and a close Cooke confidante. We compared notes on the oddity of someone like Alistair who had become so famous on two different continents – for two different aspects of broadcasting. We enjoyed the perception of Alistair by Americans as a most urbane of English gentlemen while the British viewed him as a rather unusually sophisticated American. But we always

agreed that success in both instances and in both places, was a by-product of his keen ability as a writer – to write the way we spoke. This was true whether as master storyteller for a Public Broadcasting Service series consisting of British imports to the U.S. and also the long-standing radio assignment explaining America and Americans for the BBC's international audience. He simply had no peer.

Honored to be invited to celebrate Cooke's 50th year anniversary broadcast when the Royal Television Society met in December, 1997, I gathered with luminaries to pay tribute to Alistair at New York's Cosmopolitan Club. The range of guests at that event included a Who's Who of people in American arts and letters, and reflected the depth of Cooke's cultural impact. Standing in an informal reception line, Lauren Bacall cued up in front of me to congratulate and shake the master broadcaster's hand. Her late husband, Humphrey Bogart, had been the subject of one of Cooke's best known personality profiles, which had also appeared in his classic book, *Six Men*. In it, he described "Bogie" as a very thoughtful, quiet and rather introspective person, at odds with his tough guy film image, more at ease saying "Tennis Anyone?" (His first theatrical line) than typical film talk, "Drop the Gun Louie." Cooke also wrote in that book about Charlie Chaplin. Not surprisingly, Cooke's first published book, *Garbo and the Nightwatchmen*, was an anthology of classic film reviews from the early film era.

Standing right behind me in the reception line was William F. Buckley. He took time to congratulate Cooke's wife, Jane White, the artist. As professional communicators – in print and broadcast,

Buckley and Cooke had a great deal in common. Ever the conservative, Cooke wrote *A Generation on Trial*, explaining McCarthyism in the 1950s while Buckley had co-authored *McCarthy and His Enemies*, a polemic on those opposing the Senator. Both were against '60s liberal causes they regarded as excessive. Prolific authors, they appeared on the PBS network during the next two decades – but in different contexts, Buckley as the brainy, effervescent host of *Firing Line* and with Cooke hosting, or what he referred to as being like a head waiter for *Masterpiece Theatre*. Regularly showing off their notorious sense of humor, on this particular occasion, Buckley told me at the time that he, like Cooke, had once been invited to host a PBS dramatic series. It was hard to tell if he was pulling my leg because he also explained that his children had talked him out of it, saying he would not attract many viewers, blowing a chance for *Sesame Street* recognition on a par with "Alistair Cookie."

When it was my turn to offer Alistair congratulations, I introduced myself as the esteemed "Cooke Professor from Missouri" because his disdain for academic "types" was very well known. But he quickly brushed it off with: "Oh Mike, I know who you are." He then reversed field and complimented me about a profile that I had just written about him for the alumni magazine at Cambridge University. Alistair then joked that he only wished that he could remember half as much about his broadcasting career as I had. When I mentioned to him the confusion about his continuing level of broadcast activity well after leaving *Masterpiece Theatre* in America he described regular instances of mistaken identity, particularly on the

golf course, a game he greatly loved. As an inside joke, he told me how he often enjoyed confusing people by claiming to be some other celebrity, especially Bob Hope. This usually worked, he said, until he ran into the real Bob Hope's wife, whom he did not recognize. But she responded to him with, "Well, that's interesting because I'm *Mrs.* Bob Hope. But hey, I must say, you're really looking great, *Bob.*"

In formal remarks to those who gathered to honor his on-air anniversary, he claimed to have almost lost his early television *Omnibus* job to a then actor, Ronald Reagan, noting with pride that later, as *President* Reagan, the retired actor offered praise, complimenting *America* for making history vivid and memorable. This kind of praise was very well received by Alistair – but not unusual. His *Letter from America* was presented on BBC radio through the course of eleven U.S. presidential terms. Cooke reported from the United Nations and became known in England as a voice reflecting national admiration for Franklin Roosevelt, and highly critical of Joseph McCarthy and the methods of McCarthyism of nineteen fifties America. Cooke's book about the Alger Hiss case established his credentials as a serious long-form writer. Of course Cooke became somewhat conservative himself during his later years, particularly during the next decade – the nineteen sixties, when much about America's values and American culture came to be regarded as especially coarse, inconsistent, and confusing to outsiders.

In his anniversary talk and in conversations with me, Cooke described instances in which he reported history in the making: covering a Nazi rally in Madison Square Garden with large

posters of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Adolf Hitler centered over the speaker's platform. He accounted for the shock of his first sight of a paraplegic President Franklin Roosevelt being lifted from a car, experiencing the effectiveness of Martin Luther King's oratory firsthand. Years later, he was at the location of Senator Robert Kennedy's assassination on the campaign trail in Los Angeles, the most indelible example of his reporting. Cooke sometimes alluded to the reporter's unique function, to try to offer insight while seldom in a position to accurately portray an event as it really played out. He always described himself as an observer of America but also understood the important role of journalism in a free society; the special status some reporter's enjoy as a result.

He often quoted his literary hero H.L. Mencken about the qualities and benefits of a reporter being able to "lay in all the worldly wisdom of a police lieutenant, a bartender, a shyster lawyer and a midwife." Cooke frequently tackled unorthodox stories, suggesting, for example, that some of the best reporters have trouble hiding big egos, secretly aspiring upon passing to have their obituaries on the newspaper front page, as a demonstration that they achieved notoriety on the level of the people they had covered. He also pointed out the particular oddity of preparing profile obituaries from afar, recalling one special broadcast essay, "Please Die Before Noon" in which he discussed anticipating and then creating an elaborate homage for the ultimate demise of Mencken himself, just so Cooke could meet his international broadcast deadline.

Alistair Cooke was a tremendous "on air" storyteller who skillfully conveyed important ideas and a love for his

adopted land. Of course his own story – an immigrant of modest means overcoming the odds – succeeding through talent, tenacity and educational opportunities to become an international literary figure via television and radio – it really sounds so much like some

“Hollywood version,” but any film account of this career might seem a little far-fetched. As he sometimes said on-air – “Only in America!”

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