

**Weekend Gold Coast  
Bulletin**

**Saturday 23/04/2011**

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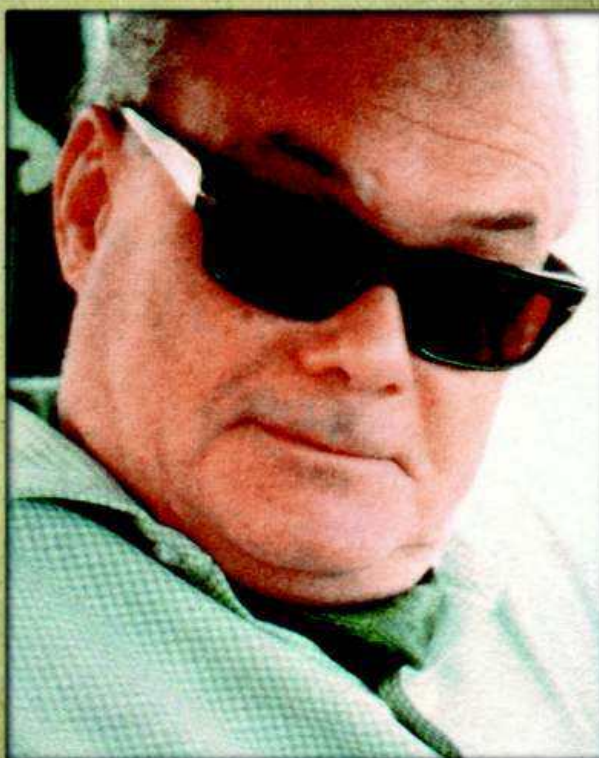
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# paradise

April 23-24, 2011



## the MILLIONAIRE'S secret

What LJ Hooker kept quiet for a lifetime

WIN A \$7000 ROYAL ENGAGEMENT RING - PAGE 19



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# the real mr hooker

He built an empire from nothing but few knew the secret of LJ Hooker. Now his granddaughter's book charts the rise of this most Australian entrepreneur

words:

**michael jacobson**

Instituted in 1901, the Immigration Restriction Act – soon to become better known as the White Australia Policy – aimed to exclude all non-European migrants from Australia. Particular bias was directed against Asians, such sentiment having flourished for years and evidenced by this excerpt from an 1887 edition of *The Bulletin*.

“No nigger, no Chinaman, no lascar, no Kanaka, no purveyor of cheap, coloured labour is an Australian.”

A year earlier, a *Bulletin* cartoon incited racism by depicting “the Mongolian octopus”, a beast with a Chinese man’s face and its tentacles representing the supposedly calamitous prospects arising from Asian immigration.

The list of evils included cheap labour, customs robbery, bribery, gambling, opium addiction, immorality and disease.

Yet even as his country legislated so callously against Asians, Leslie Joseph Tingyou was one man of Chinese heritage who believed in Australia as a land of opportunity.

Though his biological father was an unknown Chinese and his mother, Nellie, only raised him for eight years before succumbing to pulmonary tuberculosis, the young and idealistic Les would go on to defy the travails of his early years and literally change the Australian landscape.

In the city, the country and including

the Gold Coast, his name would become and remains among the best known in Australia.

Not Tingyou, but the name Leslie Joseph adopted by deed poll in 1925 to conceal his Chinese heritage, circumvent the White Australia Policy and be more acceptable to Australians with whom he hoped to do business and achieve his ambition to build a real estate empire.

The name he chose was Hooker.

Natalia Hooker is speaking from her home in Barcelona, where she works in publishing, having pursued other careers in the law, real estate and, in the early 2000s, as a member of the all-girl pop group BBB, described by the Italian media as the Milanese Spice Girls.

“Well, yes, I did have a very formal education and some very dry working experiences so I thought I needed a creative outlet. Hence the Milanese Spice Girls,” she explains.

Natalia’s latest endeavour, however, is as her grandfather’s biographer. Though she barely knew LJ Hooker when he was alive, the past six years of research mean she is intimately acquainted with him now.

Natalia was only four when her grandfather died in Sydney in 1976 and she was understandably nervous when accepting the challenge to write his life story.

Fortunately, the stories she was told

by family and former colleagues of LJ Hooker confirmed she was writing about a good man, one of integrity and empathy and also one whose drive to succeed is entrenched in the DNA of his granddaughter.

“I came to recognise parts of myself, the way I am and the way I do things, in my grandfather’s story,” says Natalia, whose book *LJ Hooker, The Man* is a comprehensive personal tribute and an important account of a large slice of Australian business history.

“The more I learned about him, the more it kept me going. I found myself in awe of him, constantly inspired, and there were times I couldn’t believe I was so lucky to have a man like him in my family.

“Considering all he went through, from being orphaned as an eight-year-old, running away to sea in his teens and then dealing with the conflict arising from his Chinese heritage and its effect on his desire to succeed in business in an Australia under the White Australia Policy, well, it turned out to be quite a story to tell.”

Leslie Joseph Tingyou was born in Sydney in 1903, a time when the Chinese represented the fourth largest migrant group in Australia.

LJ Hooker, the company that still bears LJ’s adopted name, was born in 1928 in Maroubra, NSW.

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“My grandfather showed incredible drive from a young age,” says Natalia.

“He left school at 14 and had bought his first two properties – two blocks of land at Blacktown – by age 16 with money that he saved working with Japanese import-export firm Mitsui & Co.”

LJ’s philosophy on real estate was simple: “We are dealing with a basic commodity. You don’t have to be clever. All you have to do is buy – and sit on it for 10 years.”

However, not long after LJ launched the LJ Hooker brand in 1928, he barely had a chair to sit on, let alone a property portfolio.

Bankrupt and ashamed, he would pay all his creditors and begin again, surviving the rigours of the Great Depression and World War II, all the time living by a motto coined by former US president Calvin Coolidge.

“Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence,” it begins.

“Talent will not. Nothing is more common than unsuccessful men of talent.

“Genius will not. Unrewarded genius is almost a proverb.

“Education will not. The world is full of educated derelicts.

“Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.”

LJ also favoured other qualities, especially common sense.

“Common sense, drive, imagination and you have to have decision,” he said. “That’s the big problem today, getting men with drive and guts to make decisions. Too much vacillation today. A man has to make a mistake to learn. Experience contains the bones of past mistakes.”

Such thinking served him and the company well and, by the 1960s, LJ Hooker was being hailed as “the man who went from earning £5 a week to £5 million”, such was the empire he had built across suburban Sydney and into the rural expanses.

In one week in May, 1960, LJ brokered a takeover deal involving

more than 11,000 square miles (28,500sq km) of properties across four states, including Queensland.

“Thirty years after he started with nothing, he had created a massive business empire, was Australia’s largest landholder and the largest cattle owner in the world,” says Natalia.

“He also built extensive housing developments in all Australian states. He was a true pioneer.”

LJ even proved impervious to the infamous credit squeeze applied by the Menzies government in November 1960, which was designed to control consumption and inflation and reduce the national deficit.

Along with Australia’s first large shopping malls, major hotel developments and the introduction of agency franchising and other business innovations still in use today, Natalia says that, despite the extent of LJ Hooker’s business interests, her grandfather never lost his eye for a new opportunity.

Queensland offered one that LJ could not refuse, with his long association with the state beginning on the Gold Coast in 1958 with a subdivision at Palm Beach.

So confident was he about the Gold Coast, LJ ensured potential buyers also saw its potential by paying their airfares from Sydney and their accommodation. Obligation free. All they had to do was come up and look.

Advertisements at the time echoed LJ’s enthusiasm for the Gold Coast, gushing about ‘this tropical paradise that offers a life that is excitingly different’ and ‘every recreation and amenity your heart could desire’.

“In 1962, LJ Hooker Ltd in Queensland carried out 1954 auctions,” says Natalia.

“By 1968, the number had risen to 3350. In 1979 there were 34 franchise offices in Queensland and by 1988 there were 100. In 2010, there were 148 Queensland franchises.

“He had a great connection with

Queensland, starting with Palm Beach, and he loved coming to Queensland for family holidays.”

Today LJ Hooker is one of the best known real estate brands in Australasia, with almost 700 offices, 3200 residential agents and 2000 support staff behind 40,000 sales worth \$17 billion a year.

Add 120,000 properties under management and worth around \$40 billion and it makes the growth of what began as a one-man agency in Maroubra all the more astounding.

Natalia says her grandfather created more than a real estate company that became a real estate empire.

“Throughout his career he was highly respected and recognised for his ethical business practices but so, too, was he devoted to his family,” she says.

Or, as another of LJ’s granddaughters, Penny Sampson, once observed: “Grandpa was like a moving Christmas tree, full of sparkling lights.”

Knighted in 1973, Sir Leslie Joseph Hooker died three years later and, to quote Penny: “The lights went out.”

The company he founded continued to thrive and expand until 1986 when, after failed takeover attempts by Malaysian interests, Bond Corporation and Ariadne, the soon-to-be discredited company raider George Herscu acquired a controlling interest and proceeded to plunge the company into ruin.

By 1989, laden with debt, the company filed for bankruptcy and the Hooker family’s ties to the company were severed.

They remained severed until 2009 when another LJ, Natalia’s brother Leslie Janusz Hooker, bought the real estate side of the business and brought the Hooker name back into the family’s embrace.

Natalia couldn’t have been happier.

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“My grandfather once said ‘real estate is not about houses, it’s about people’. He understood that buying, selling and leasing property affects people and their emotions.

“I hope this book shows him in that light, that personal light.

“LJ Hooker was a business pioneer but so, too, was he a person of enormous integrity.

“He had a very big family in the end. There was his own family and the one he created through his

company. That family stretches all across Australia.”

While LJ Hooker’s name is known nationwide, until now hardly anything was known about the man himself.

Natalia has changed that, honouring her grandfather and the dedication and determination of the man who truly did transform the landscape of Australia.

And to think it all began with a dream and a secret.

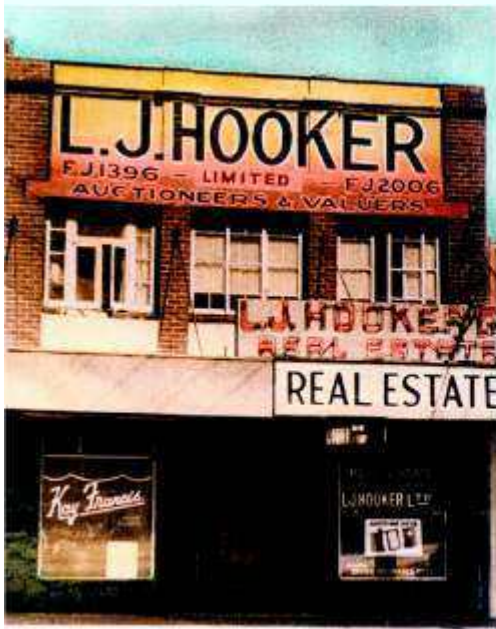
In 1985, nine years after his death,

a Sydney newspaper revealed LJ Hooker’s Chinese heritage.

His secret had remained for 60 years, even outlasting the reason for its being: the White Australia Policy.

To paraphrase a familiar LJ Hooker slogan, nobody could have done it better.

*LJ Hooker, The Man*, by Natalia Hooker, distributed by Macmillan



Far left: Where it all began, LJ Hooker’s first real estate agency in Maroubra, Sydney

Left: Natalia Hooker writes the story of her grandfather in *LJ Hooker, The Man*



Sir Leslie Joseph Hooker with wife Madeline and children David (left), Annette and Ross in 1950s

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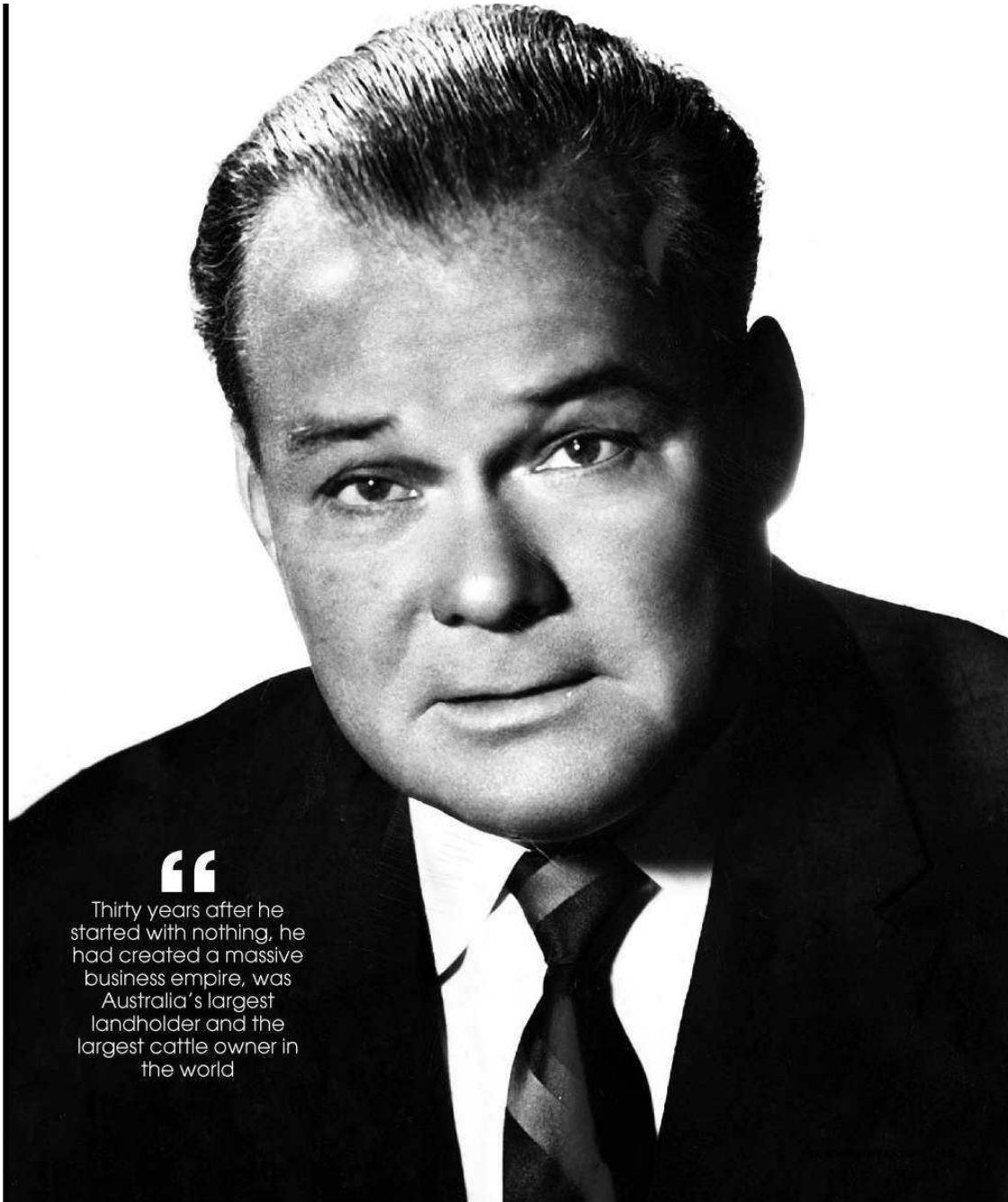
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