

Looking back on the life of Galen Weston, a great man who built a business and philanthropic empire



\A few things remain to be said after the elegant remembrance of the late Galen Weston (1940-2021) in Toronto on Oct. 29. His talents as a businessman, and as a sportsman, his dashing style, extraordinary energy and unwavering devotion as a family man and as a friend were all attested to eloquently. And the undoubted success of his evidently able son and daughter in the highly competitive retail business in several countries confirms the remarkable fact that four consecutive generations of the Weston family have been outstandingly

successful in their chosen profession. What was not mentioned was that through the support of the Weston family for the Weston foundations and the gift to the foundations of large shareholdings in the Weston companies, the prodigious talents and almost demiurgic energies of Garfield, Galen and Gary Weston, and the current generation of Westons have been deployed to the benefit of the public directly through the distribution over many decades of a very large amount of money to a vast range of indisputably good causes. Certainly the Weston family benefits from its direct shareholdings in the Weston companies, but they are in some measure the employees as well as the managers of their foundations. A substantial portion of the fruit of their efforts has thus accrued directly to the foundations and the unquestionable good of the population in all of the countries where they have operated.

It is not uncommon to amass huge fortunes and eventually arrange for the distribution of much of it to the public good as has famously occurred with such families as the Rockefellers, Fords and Andrew Carnegie. The Weston formula of setting up charities as shareholders of their companies to share directly in the wealth generated by them and adhering to this policy for consecutive generations is an astounding, and as far as I know, a unique commitment of commerce to selfless generosity.

It was my privilege to have had several extensive conversations with Garfield Weston (1898-1978), and to have known Galen Weston well since 1965. With Garfield Weston, there was in his eyes and gestures a benign fervour, a tremendous enthusiasm and confidence in his purpose and ability that was fully justified by the astonishing expansion he engineered in building the George Weston bakery in Toronto into an immense food processing and distributing operation spanning four continents. It was the kind of fervour that is entirely positive – optimistic conviction without any of the narrow-mindedness or monomania displayed by some maladjusted

zealots. With Galen Weston, there was a seamless generational evolution to an equally confident and enthusiastic man, as was described by eulogists on Oct. 29, but elegantly dressed and with some of the tastes and habits of hereditary wealth: he was a formidable polo player and team owner and his home in England was the place from which King Edward VIII made his radio speech of abdication to the Empire in 1936.

Most of the Westons whom I have known well have been practising Christians and whether the current generation is or not, they also seem to adhere to the family's sense of philanthropic duty, a complete absence of pretension and a genuine egalitarianism that makes their gregarious affability an aspect of the very natural charm of all the members of that family whom I have known. Garfield Weston liked the simple pleasures – I remember seeing him after a trip to Niagara Falls in his late 70s, excited that he and his wife had been soaked by the spray. At the memorial on Oct. 29, though a rainy autumn evening, my thoughts ventured back to the sunny summer day of Galen and Hilary Weston's wedding at Henley-on-Thames in July 1966; Garfield Weston addressed the wedding guests and recalled that when his wife accepted his marriage proposal, she stipulated her desire to have 10 children. He said that he replied, "I'll do my best," and they had three sons and six daughters.

The ethos of the Westons for more than a century has been a novel form of Christian capitalism that is applied with great success and unwavering idealism to the management of very large corporations in perfect harmony with the ambitious pursuit of profitability. There is a slightly perceptible trace of practical spirituality, but never sanctimony, and without a hint of self-righteousness. Family businesses sometimes continue successfully through many generations and some financial corporations remain in the hands of a directing family for centuries, as with the Rothschilds, and I believe there are some European examples of large businesses being

controlled and led by the same families with the same corporate philosophy over a long period. But I know of no other family that has effectively chosen to be the employees of entities committed to dispersing their income to, and retaining their capital appreciation for, accredited charitable and benevolent causes. Of course, the Westons retain control of their foundations and determine the distribution of donations (a practice that the Rockefellers and Fords and others would have done well to follow). The Westons could at any point have retained well-endowed foundations while building and operating a conventionally owned parallel corporate group that would have greatly enriched them personally. In more than 50 years of often quite close relations with members of the Weston family, I have never detected that any such course was given a moment's consideration.

In their unflinching modesty and aversion to publicity, they have gone to great lengths not to emphasize the unique structure and inborn altruism of their companies. This is entirely consistent with the Weston family's policy of seeking no or minimal public recognition for their good works. Garfield Weston was the Conservative member of the British Parliament for Macclesfield from 1939 to 1945. During his time in the United Kingdom, he helped build the family business, served the public in Parliament, assisted the war effort and supported Canadian soldiers in many ways. He carried out a private mission on behalf of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to the leader of the Irish Republic, Eamon De Valera, seeking Irish co-operation in the most dangerous phase of the Second World War, from 1940-41. It was a dramatic and historic assignment that was unsuccessful because of the Irish leader's obdurate view of neutrality. But no one in the Weston family had much to say of it and it is almost impossible to find in even the most thorough histories of those stirring times.

Most of the remarkable qualities of Galen Weston and his wife Hilary, a popular lieutenant governor of Ontario from 1997 to 2002, were appropriately mentioned in the comments of the speakers on Oct. 29. The remarkable successes of his family, forbears and progeny were also in evidence. And the distinction of that family has not been more comprehensively demonstrated than in the grace and dignity with which Galen Weston's final illness was borne, especially by his wife. But on this one occasion, we should also pay homage to the unwavering dedication of four generations of the Weston family to a profoundly generous notion of commerce, with the great respect that it deserves. Galen Weston was a great man, a dear friend and the scion and continuator of a great family; he will be widely and fondly remembered.

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