Born the son of a poor Presbyterian minister in Northern Ontario, Canada, William Maxwell Aitken was brought up in the town of Newcastle, New Brunswick. It was a religious upbringing in austere surroundings. But while his father may have been a minister, Aitken was the pupil most acquainted with the schoolmaster's strap. His teacher described him as “the wildest imp of mischief I ever knew”, adding tellingly “but a born leader of men from the day he left the cradle”.

After failing to get into college, Aitken became a clerk for a local barrister. In 1897, he became involved in politics, helping future Canadian prime minister Richard Bedford Bennett win a seat on the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories. Moving to Halifax in 1898, he made friends with a leading businessman, J P Stairs. Stairs and several other investors formed the Royal Securities Corporation and put Aitken in charge. Soon he had set up a number of companies with wide-ranging interests, both in Canada and abroad, moved the company to Montreal and, by 1906, was worth a small fortune.

Aitken’s biggest deal in Canada was to consolidate the cement industry and create a cement trust. Although the deal made him even richer, it also made him some powerful enemies. Sensing that sentiment was turning against him, Aitken made the decision that would set him on the path to his career as a media baron. In 1910 he moved to England.

He arrived in London to raise money in the financial markets for another of his deals but found a new interest in British politics. Influential friends in England, such as Scottish-Canadian Bonar Law, encouraged him to run for Parliament. He stood as Conservative candidate for the seat of Ashton-under-Lyme in Lancashire. With only 10 days to go until the election, standing against an experienced local man, no one gave Aitken a chance. He won by 196 votes. It was a remarkable rise to favour for this young upstart from Canada. Incredibly, in 1911, having been in the country for less than two years, he was knighted in the Coronation honours.

Reluctant to return to Canada because of investigations into his business affairs and enjoying the influence his money and connections secured, Aitken settled in England. He continued to act as a catalyst for behind-the-scenes political manoeuvring. In 1916, against the backdrop of the first world war, he helped Lloyd George and Bonar Law depose Herbert Asquith as prime minister. As a reward, Aitken was given a peerage. Remembering the name of a place he had seen on a map of New Brunswick, Aitken became the first Lord Beaverbrook.

All the time Beaverbrook had been pulling the political strings, he had also been steadily acquiring stock in one of the UK's main newspapers, the Daily Express. By 1916 he had obtained a controlling interest in the paper, which he subsequently used to wield political influence. By then, a major falling-out with Lloyd George had forced Beaverbrook to resign from his position as minister of information and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Bloodied but unbowed, he retreated to the safety of his newspaper, from where he continued to wage war on Lloyd George.

For a time, Beaverbrook concentrated on his newspaper interests. He started the Sunday Express in 1918 and bought the
Evening Standard in 1923. The circulation of the flagship Daily Express increased from 400,000 in 1919 to 2,329,000 by 1938. He ruled his growing media empire from his country house, Cherkley Court, near Leatherhead, Surrey.

Beaverbrook often showed poor judgement in international affairs. His newspapers toed the appeasement line as Hitler rose to power. Right up to September 1938 Beaverbrook and the Daily Express were proclaiming that there would be no war in Europe “this year, or next year either”.

Beaverbrook made up for his lack of judgement with a sterling performance as minister of aircraft production during the second world war. He was given the position by Winston Churchill against the advice of King George VI. It was an inspired decision by Churchill and a particularly unselfish one, as Churchill and Beaverbrook had not always seen eye to eye. Churchill said that it was Beaverbrook’s “vital and vibrant energy” that convinced him that he was the right man for the job.

After the war, Beaverbrook’s interest in politics waned, as did his influence. Beaverbrook disliked Clement Atlee, who succeeded Churchill as prime minister. The feeling was mutual. Opinion was also moving against Beaverbrook’s pervasive influence in British society. In 1947, a Royal Commission was appointed to look into Beaverbrook’s activities. “I run the paper purely for propaganda purposes,” was Beaverbrook’s provocative response. But despite his comments, he managed to avoid serious censure.

Beaverbrook gradually withdrew from the day-to-day management of his business interests and took to travelling the world, writing and spending time with his family. His last years were spent at Cherkley Court from where he continued to make his presence felt by constantly checking up on his editors. The Daily Express continued to go from strength to strength. By 1960, its circulation was 4.3 million, making it the number-one British newspaper. Beaverbrook died at home in June 1964, shortly after his 85th birthday.

Resources
www.beaverbrookfoundation.org