A passion for privacy is one of the legendary attributes of the Mellons. A few years ago a frustrated investigator for the *New York Times* fueled that legend with the observation that the one characteristic shared by the entire family was "an intense craving for privacy." He marveled at the decision of one branch to engage a public relations firm to keep their names out of the literature.

An examination of the literature, however, reveals that the legend is more mythical than real. Like others of the "super-rich," the Ludwigs and the MacArthurs for example, their quest is to avoid notoriety, and it should never be confused with a preference for anonymity. The intent is to manage and to manipulate, to maintain an appropriate public image which will shield them from the wrath of scandal seekers and populist politicians such as the late Wright Patman. They are also concerned that they secure a favorable place in history, somewhere other than in the recesses of plutocratic reaction to which the "old left" of Harvey O'Connor and his *Mellon's Millions* (New York: John Day, 1933) and the "new left" of William S. Hoffman and his *Paul Mellon, Portrait of an Oil Baron* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Co., 1974) have consigned them.

Beginning with the memoirs of the patriarch, *Thomas Mellon and his Times* (Pittsburgh: privately printed, 1885), and continuing to Burton Hersh's *The Mellon Family: A Fortune in History* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1978), the Mellons have tried to influence if not predetermine their niche in history. They hoped to have as great an impact on the writing of history as they have had in the making of it. The legend of reclusiveness emanates from the misleading reports of those denied access to the inner

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sanctum. It ignores the author/historians who were chosen to propagate their perspectives. These include Charles J. V. Murphy, "The Mellons of Pittsburgh," *Fortune* (October-December 1967), and Frank Denton, *The Mellons of Pittsburgh* (New York: The Newcomen Society, 1948), two exemplars of hagiography at its best.

More significantly, the legend overlooks the substantial body of literature produced by family members, either personally or in collaboration. Included in this category are: Thomas Mellon, Jr., *Army "Y" Diary* (Pittsburgh: The Crescent Press, 1920); James Ross Mellon, *Letters* (Pittsburgh: privately printed, 1929, 1935); and William Larimer Mellon, with Boyden Sparkes, *Judge Mellon's Sons* (Pittsburgh: privately printed, 1948). The most recent illustration of this genre is James Mellon's *African Hunter* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), a revealing self-portrait. The family has even generated its own "house" historian, Dr. Matthew T. Mellon, author of *The Watermelons, The Story of a Family That Loved the Water* (Kitzbuhel, Austria: privately printed, 1974) and editor of an abridged version of *Thomas Mellon and his Times* (Belfast: privately printed, 1968). The latter was issued in conjunction with the dedication of the restored ancestral home in Northern Ireland and presaged the reappearance of the original a year later by Kraus Reprint Company of New York. Dr. Mellon is also fond of publishing his own memorabilia: *The Grand Tour: 1914* (publication data unavailable); *War Logs: 1917-18* (privately printed, 1975); and *Zwei Vortage* (Kitzbuhel, Austria: Ritzerdruck, n.d.).

As the foregoing suggests, attempts to augment the family's historical persona often assume the form of expositions with private imprints. Like the old judge's reminiscences, supposedly collected "for his family and descendants exclusively," their expressions invariably find their way into the public domain. That they fall into public hands — even such ostensibly personal items as Paul Mellon's poem, "Thoughts in a Mellon Patch" — may be no accident. Judge Mellon himself began the practice of "leaking" by violating his own admonition and circulating his memoirs about Pittsburgh. His son Andrew was horrified at the exposure, but he learned later in his treasury years that the print medium could be employed effectively for inculcating his ideas and for shaping the image of himself, his family, and his fortune. Witness his *Taxation: The People's Business* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1924) and authorized magazine articles such as William P. Beazell's "My Brother and I," *World's Work* (March-April 1932). How far the family is willing to go in
creating their own historical image reached its zenith when Paul Mellon employed Burton Hendricks to immortalize his father and then suppressed the manuscript for failing to meet his expectations. But even that was “leaked” to Allan Nevins for his laudatory sketch of A.W. in the Dictionary of American Biography.

The latest historical excursions into the Mellons are indicative of a continuing predilection for shaping the record, though the family is not likely to be as pleased with the efforts of commercial entrepreneurs as they are with their own essays. Both Burton Hersh and David Koskoff, The Mellons: The Chronicle of America’s Richest Family (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1978) were aided in their research, with the former more clearly favored than the latter. While Hersh may not have been in the family employ, The Mellon Family closely approximates a sanctioned collective biography. Nearly one hundred Mellons, friends, and retainers sat for interviews, but his technique, and that of Koskoff, who spoke with a dozen Mellons, could hardly be described as consonant with the methodology of oral history. Paul Mellon also made available to Hersh some of his papers and those remaining of his father.

Because of the chronological structures and the examinations of the same personalities, there is a superficial and misleading similarity between The Mellons and The Mellon Family. Reading each, however, reveals decided differences in the depth of coverage accorded many individuals and issues and the capacity of the respective authors to interpret evidence. For the historian, Koskoff’s volume is the superior. On the other hand, Hersh’s investigation will be of greater interest to voyeurs for whom gossip and catty references are more to their liking. Hersh is inexplicably delicate in his treatment of family skeletons of years gone by, but relishes in revealing the “warts and all” of the current generation. Some Mellons may regret their candor which led Hersh to treat them with a familiarity bordering on contempt. Neither writer is a professional historian, although both have some experience in the field. Koskoff penned Joseph P. Kennedy: A Life and Time (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974) and Hersh probed the same group in The Education of Edward Kennedy: A Family Biography (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1972). Despite these forays, both are as apparently unaware of the techniques of family history as they are of those of oral history.

Trained in literature and the law, Koskoff has the greater familiarity with the historian’s craft. More important, he has a sense of
history and a command of the literature, two attributes sorely lacking in Hersh. Koskoff's knowledge of economics, art, philosophy, and other subjects enables him to assess and evaluate family business enterprises and foundations, the collecting practices of A.W. and Paul, the philosophical treatises of Dr. Matthew, and so on. He is not afraid of confronting complicated issues as is evidenced in his analysis of whether A.W. had a conflict of interest while serving as secretary of the treasury. Perhaps because he was not so blessed by the family largesse, Koskoff thoroughly pursued all the primary and secondary sources. In the process, he shed considerable light on such forgotten chapters as A.W.'s divorce and Matthew's infatuation with Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

Hersh is much more the victim than the beneficiary of the family's willingness to cooperate. With a plethora of firsthand accounts and access to family records, he fails to establish adequately the context of the "fortune in history." He accepts uncritically verbal renditions without cross-checking his sources. And much that he obtained from friendly witnesses was hardly arcanum. David Finley's remembrance that A.W. was "lonely" or Larimer Mellon's observation that his grandfather, James Ross, "was as funny as a crutch" hardly serve as profound insights. Stylistically, The Mellon Family is a veritable disaster. Whether because of the "new journalism" or sloppy editing in the race to be first into print, Hersh's disdain for the rules of grammar and syntax are disconcerting. Nearly every paragraph begins with a sentence fragment or two, many read like note cards, and solecisms are commonplace. His metaphors, similes, and analogies may flatter his vanity as a demonstration of his erudition, yet they add little to the text and are as likely to confound as clarify. For Hersh, how you say something is more important than what you say.

Taken together, what can be garnered from The Mellons and The Mellon Family which has not already been scrutinized? Concerning the founding generation, both authors rely almost exclusively on Thomas Mellon and his Times, and reading the original can be more rewarding and entertaining than penetrating their syntheses. The second generation, dominated by A.W. and R.B., has previously been examined by this author and other professional historians, and very little that is new emerges. Koskoff does amplify on several areas, occasionally to the point of tedium, while Hersh simply plows over old ground. When approaching the era of Paul and R.K. and the progeny of their generation, however, much can be gained, and Hersh is the
stronger of the two. However, the value of what is unearthed — such things as R.K.'s problem with alcohol or Tommy Hitchcock's illegal dealings in international finance and LSD — is open to question. Fascinating reading it may be, but for the historian seeking to assess the family's place in the sweep of events during the last half century, the revelations are not much more useful than William S. Hoffman's indictments of Paul for buying paintings and keeping them sequestered in his home. Trying to manage their place in history and to avoid notoriety when dealing with commercial writers has proved to be for the Mellons herculean and frustrating tasks with only mixed results. A reversion to writers-for-hire or private imprints may well be in the offing.