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Alfred I. du Pont: The Man and His Family

Joseph Frazier Wall

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If Alfred I. du Pont was born to "the purple and ermine" of an American industrial dynasty, his life was far from peaceful, pampered, indolent. Beginning at the bottom as little more than a teamster and handyman, within fifteen years young du Pont was widely recognized as "the best black powderman in the nation" and the mechanical genius of the du Pont family. In 1902, upon the death of Eugene du Pont, Alfred was brash and confident enough to claim for himself the company his elders wanted to sell to their major competitor, Laflin and Rand. With two cousins, he formed a triumvirate which ultimately converted the old gunpowder company into the great chemical empire it is today.
In this brilliantly written, in-depth biography, Joseph Frazier Wall ranges from Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours's spectacular rise in pre-Revolutionary France, to the family's migration to America and the founding of the Du Pont Company in Wilmington, to Alfred's death in 1935, charting the growth of one of America's great industrial dynasties. We meet Henry du Pont, the conservative leader of the third generation (he favored candles over electric lights in the office), who organized the entire gunpowder industry; Lammot du Pont, the crown prince of the third generation, who died tragically in an explosion at the Repauno plant; Eugene du Pont, whom Wall describes as "a director without direction"; and a host of other du Pont men and women. But Alfred du Pont remains the center of the narrative. Wall details his rejuvenation of the family company after Eugene's death, the bitter family feud that followed his marriage to his cousin Alicia, the fifteen-year battle that he waged with some of the family's most powerful members (leading to his ouster from the company in 1916), and his brilliant second career in Florida (where he pioneered the development of sound banking, transportation, and the paper industry).
This is the first biography of Alfred du Pont to appear in half a century. In preparing it, Wall had complete access both to Alfred's own papers in Florida as well as the vast collection of the du Pont archives in Wilmington. The result is a compelling story of one of America's most creative businessmen as well as an inside look at one of our most historically significant families.

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