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The Bronfmans: The Rise and Fall of the House of Seagram

Nicholas Faith

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The story of the Bronfman family is a fascinating and improbable saga. It is dominated by "Mr. Sam," the single greatest figure in the history of the liquor business, the man who made drinking whiskey respectable in the United States and who in the 1950s and 1960s built Seagram into the first worldwide empire in wine and spirits.
After Sam's death in 1971, his oldest son, Edgar, maintained the business, though he was distracted by his matrimonial problems. Nevertheless, in the 1980s he masterminded a major coup when he translated a small investment in oil made by his father into a 25 percent stake in the mighty DuPont company.
But in the 1990s, Edgar allowed his second son, Edgar Jr., to indulge his ambition to become a media tycoon. The stake in DuPont was sold, and the money reinvested in Universal, the film and theme-park empire. Edgar Jr. then paid more than $10 billion to buy Polygram Records and thus fulfill his fancy to be king of the world's music business. But at the same time, he remained in charge of the liquor business, which started to stagnate—indeed, to fall apart. Then came the final disaster when the increasingly divided family sold out to Jean-Marie Messier, overreaching empire builder of Vivendi, the French conglomerate.
But the story of this amazing family over the past century is about more than booze and business. *The Bronfmans* is a spectacular account that details the larger-than-life personalities and bitter rivalries that have made the family so famous and, sometimes, so infamous.

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