Kenneth Warren’s biography of Henry Clay Frick is an admirable book, but it is not an outstanding biography in the vein of Joseph Wall’s epic treatment of Andrew Carnegie or Maury Klein’s revisionist account of Jay Gould. Warren has no overriding viewpoint as Klein did; nor has he fully developed the varied political, private, and cultural aspects of his subject’s life as Wall did. Rather, Warren focuses on Frick’s business career, and accepts varied judgements on it. Warren gained full access to the Henry Clay Frick papers, and partial access to the U.S. Steel papers, and so his account has texture and authority. These sources amply demonstrate Frick’s leading roles in developing the Connellsville coke industry, in managing the Carnegie Steel enterprise, and in directing the U.S. Steel combine (and a clutch of railroads).

Although Warren is concerned to refute the more wide-reaching myths propounded of Frick’s career, he does not attempt to manufacture a kinder, gentler Frick from the historical evidence. Indeed, the evidence rather confirms his reputation as a hard man. Coal-mining in southwestern Pennsylvania was a tough business. Clay Frick’s father was an unsuccessful farmer, with dreams of becoming a painter. His grandfather, the Overholt of whiskey fame, provided an example of wealth, and assistance in launching his business career. He lived for some years with his uncle, a bank president, then was chief bookkeeper for his grandfather. In partnership with his cousins Frick first entered the coal business in 1871, buying 123 acres of coal lands and securing a $10,000 loan from the Pittsburgh banker Thomas Mellon. Two years later Frick & Company owned 400 acres of coal lands and 200 beehive ovens for making coke. From here, Frick demonstrated a single-minded focus on expanding his company’s ability to mine coal and manufacture it into coke, an essential input for Pittsburgh’s expanding iron industry.

Frick’s fateful attachment with the Carnegie enterprise is Warren’s principal theme. While Andrew Carnegie had long appreciated the strategic place of coke in ironmaking, it was Henry Phipps and Tom Carnegie who advocated an association with Frick in the early 1880s. (Two much-quoted sources, Burton Hendrick’s Life of Andrew Carnegie [1932] and Carnegie’s own Autobiography [1920], are faulty on this and other points, Warren believes.) In 1882, the Carnegie partners together held 11.25 percent of the newly formed H. C. Frick Coke Company, about one-third Clay Frick’s own share in the $2 million company. Frick’s desire for expansion fit well with Carnegie’s needs for fuel, but it was a hard bargain. Five years later, in the hard-fought 1887 coal strike -- during which a Chicago colleague advised Frick to conduct the strike “as Grant conducted his campaigns ... pound them hard” (p. 52) -- it was the steel company’s insistence on an uninterrupted supply of coke that prevailed over the coke company’s desire to put down a wage increase. Facing an ultimatum from Carnegie, and with his ownership now just one- third that of the Carnegie associates (they owned 73.5% of the company in 1888), Frick angrily left the presidency of “his” company for six months. Frick’s relations with Carnegie deteriorated across the next dozen years, as Warren relates it, until in 1900 Frick was forcibly removed from the Carnegie partnership.
Perhaps is it the biographer’s responsibility to make the most of such a traumatic life event. Certainly Frick never forgave Carnegie. But beyond this personal drama there persists the question of how -- precisely -- Carnegie Steel was built into a world-beating company during the very years when Frick was its leading executive (1892-99). Historians have oscillated between crediting Carnegie and Frick for this achievement, and I expected that his archival evidence would allow Warren to make a strong case for Frick. The evidence appears mixed, however, in that Frick was not always on the ‘right’ side of the debate. Warren carefully treats each of the principal episodes: the union-busting rationalization of Homestead after the 1892 strike; the lucrative armor contracts for the U.S. Navy; the building of the Union Railroad; the struggle with the Pennsylvania Railroad for cheap freight rates; the acquisitions of the Duquesne works, the Carrie furnaces, and the Minnesota ore lands; and the rail link to Lake Erie. On the varied evidence one must conclude that Carnegie Steel’s resulting financial and technological supremacy was not solely Frick’s achievement.

Warren returns to less-well-known material with Frick’s post-1900 career as a director of U.S. Steel and of a number of railroads and banks. He gives fresh insight into the struggle for control within U.S. Steel, and the gradual purge of the ex-Carnegie managers down to 1911. Frick himself served the steel combine until his death, not as a manager but on the board of directors, the finance committee, and several special committees evaluating major purchases. During these years, Frick also was very active in financial ventures, becoming the largest owner of real estate in Pittsburgh and the largest (personal) owner of railroad stocks in the country. It is expressive of his obsession to get back at Carnegie that the Frick Building in Pittsburgh was built with 20 stories, to overtop the 15-story Carnegie Building; and that Frick spent $5.4 million on his home in Manhattan (now the Frick Collection), reportedly to “make Carnegie’s [million-dollar mansion] look like a miner’s shack” (p. 338). Both men died in 1919, characteristically enough, on opposite sides of the League of Nations question. As the architect Ernest Graham put it, “Frick poisoned himself with hatred for Carnegie” (p. 346).

Thomas J. Misa