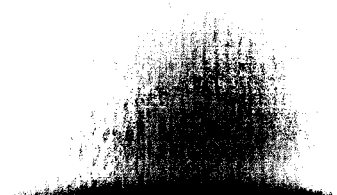

THE BRITISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PORTUGAL

TWENTY SIXTH ANNUAL REPORT
AND REVIEW 1999

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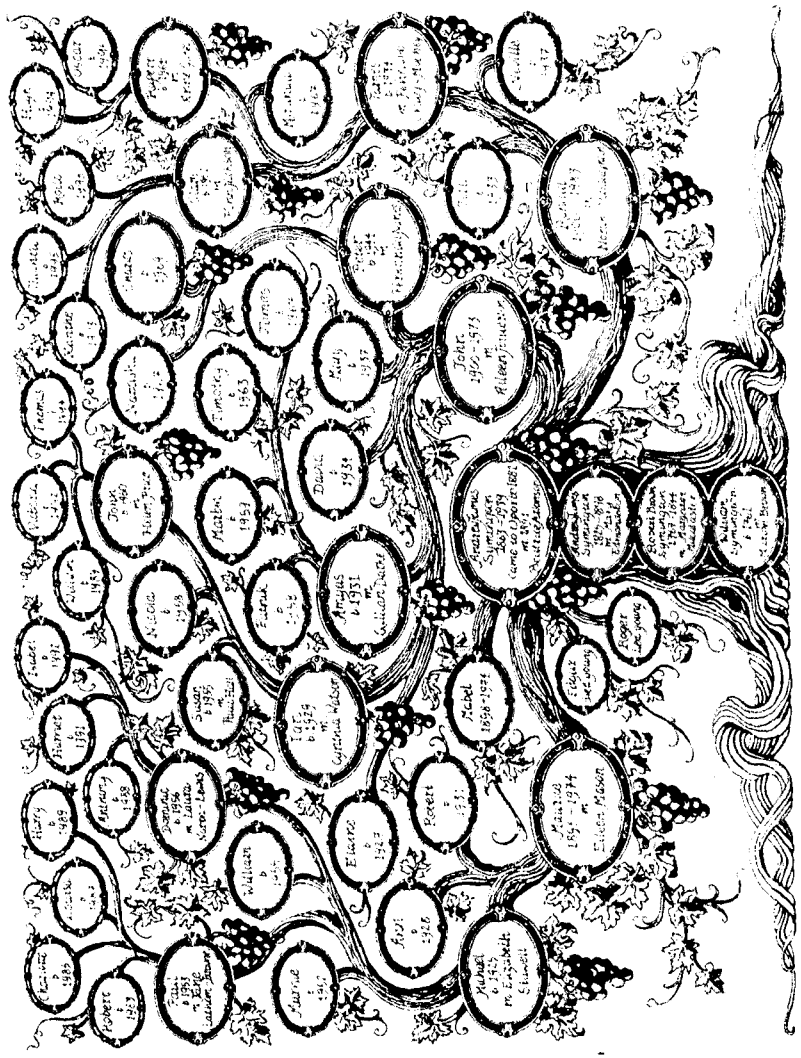


Port and the Symingtons: family members involved in the trade (indicated by bunches of grapes)

PORT AND THE SYMINGTON FAMILY

"The British wine-shipping colony of Oporto is one of the more romantic phenomena in the history of settlers abroad, its members might mostly themselves repudiate the adjective: but nevertheless it is apt. The romance lies largely in their trade, and the circumstances which surround it; the culture of the vines in the magnificent country of the upper Douro valley, the beauty of the mountain *Quintas* of the wine firms, the gathering of the grapes and the making of the wine, its shipping down the great wild reaches of the Douro to the picturesque wine lodges of Vila Nova de Gaia...the rich hues and bouquet of the port itself, the part it played for two and a half centuries in English life..." – Thus wrote Rose Macaulay some 50 years ago...! (*They Went to Portugal,* London, 1946).

True, the wine now goes by road rather than by *barco rabelo,* but this remains a succinct summing up of a remarkably unchanging trade. Port's people, as much as the splendid countryside in which it is set, contribute to the allure: merchant venturers who centuries ago settled in the north of Portugal with their families and set up trading partnerships there and who, eventually, by stabilising wine and brandy for shipment, invented the world's finest and most luxurious fortified wine.

The Symington family, relative newcomers by Oporto criteria (although their direct forebear, John Atkinson, settled in Oporto in the late 18th century) continue into the 21st century the traditions of those early wine traders.

Andrew James Symington arrived in Oporto from Glasgow in 1882. Born in Scotland in 1863 (a great vintage for Port) young 'A.J.', as he became known, began by working for the Graham family's textile firm in Oporto. He was almost immediately attracted to the Port trade and left Graham's, quickly building up a knowledge of Port and becoming a keen and experienced taster.

In 1905 A.J. Symington became a partner in the firm of Warre & Co. and, within a few years, he became its sole owner. This led to the situation where the Warres were the owners of Dow's but no longer had any interest in the company bearing their family name.

In 1912 George Warre decided to return to England and invited A.J. to run the Portuguese end of Dow's, including the three vineyards in the Douro and the lodges in Gaia. Following George Warre's death a year later, a share swap took place that gave A.J. Symington a 30 per cent stake in Dow's, while retaining his partnership in Warre's.

The Warre family continued to control Dow's sales from London. George Francis ('Ginger') Warre became the company chairman, followed in succession by Amyas, Philip and Francis Warre. This partnership between the Warre family, responsible for sales in London, and the Symington family, in charge of production in the Douro and Oporto, continued for nearly half a century, until 1961 when the Symingtons took control.

In 1891 A.J. married Beatrice Atkinson, daughter of John Whiteley Atkinson and Maria José de Sousa e Barros Leitão de Carvalhosa de Mesquita, whose respective families were well-known, long established members of Oporto society. They had five sons: Edgar and Roger who died young, Maurice (born in 1895) and twins John and Ronald (born in 1900). They lived in an imposing house on the *Avenida da Boavista*, a short drive from the firm's lodges in Vila Nova de Gaia and from the beaches at Foz. The boys grew up in the thriving British community, which had its own school, sports club, rowing club and even a small hospital. The Factory House continued to be the focal point for the annual balls and the traditional Wednesday lunch of Port shippers.

During the summer the family would move to Leça, a small seaside village to the north of Oporto. Bullock carts transported all the necessary household goods; cars could not for some years navigate the old Roman bridge over the river Leça. The boys would spend their summers on the beach along with the other children of

the community. The nearby harbour was still under construction, and the boys would rent boats to fish at night for squid and sole with long spears and lanterns perched over the side. The family would also decamp to the Upper Douro to visit the *Quintas*, a more arduous journey than that to Leça. The Symington boys grew to love the wild and remote Douro countryside and the *Quintas*. Years later, when John returned to Portugal after the Second World War, he wrote in the *Bomfim* visitor's book: 'After four and a half years in the RAF it's wonderful to be in the Douro again... I've visualised it all so often that I feel I must just make this note and leave it at that. All Douro lovers will know my feelings.'

A.J. Symington's rise to prominence in Dow's coincided with a particularly turbulent time for Portugal and a downturn in the Port trade. An outstandingly good and well received vintage declaration in 1896 marked the calm before a series of storms. The first of these calamities hit in 1899. The improvement in Oporto's sanitary conditions that had taken place in the second half of the 19th century were insufficient to prevent a particularly virulent bout of the plague, which arrived by ship from the Orient. To prevent the spread of disease. A ' sanitary cordon' was established around Oporto, restricting the movement of all the city's inhabitants.

As vintage time drew near the Port shippers, with sublime confidence, appealed through the British Consul for the right to visit their properties in the Douro. The Minister for Foreign Affairs in Lisbon replied, unsurprisingly, that 'he could not consider such a question' and that 'as no exceptions were allowed in the case of the native Portuguese, they could not grant favours to foreigners'. The Port shippers were effectively imprisoned in Oporto, the vintage had to take place without them. Perhaps as a result of their absence, the shippers 'formed none too good an opinion' of the 1899 vintage, to quote a contemporary diarist.

Meanwhile, political troubles had been brewing. King Carlos I was assassinated along with his eldest son and heir in 1908 as they drove in an open carriage through the streets of Lisbon. The throne was thrust upon the young and unprepared Manuel II, who visited

Dow's lodges and planted an oak tree *(O Carvalho do Rei)* shortly after the death of his father. Manuel himself only occupied the throne for two years before he abdicated and left for exile in England. Portugal became a republic.

The sixteen years of Portugal's so-called 'First Republic' were some of the most unstable in the country's history. Between 1910 and 1926, the nation was ruled by no less than 49 different administrations as revolution followed revolution.

Andew James Symington
1882 - 1939

In one incident, A.J. Symington, was returning to Oporto, after dining at the Golf Club in Espinho of which he was a founder member. Unbeknown to him a curfew had been imposed while the troops searched for the recently deposed Prime Minister. Crossing the top deck of the splendid iron bridge that links Vila Nova de Gaia with Oporto, he drove into the *Praça da Batalha* where he came upon some troops. Before he could take evasive action they aimed and fired – fortunately missing the car by inches just as he turned the corner out of the square. The beleaguered ex-Prime Minister was apparently found two days later – disguised as a lift boy in the *Grande Hotel do Porto.*

Andrew and Beatrice Symington's sons Maurice, John and Ronald were all destined to join the family firm at a challenging time. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 saw the entire British community set to work in support of the war effort. The able-bodied men went to fight in the trenches, while the older generation were left to run the Port firms.

On leaving school in 1914, the 19-year old Maurice Symington immediately joined up and was commissioned in the Royal Field Artillery. (He had just been provisionally selected to play cricket for Warwickshire, but the outbreak of war put a stop to his sporting ambitions...) When Portugal entered the war on the side of the Allies in 1916 Maurice, with his knowledge of Portuguese, became part of the British Mission to the Portuguese Corps in which he served (rising to the rank of Captain) until the end of the hostilities. The desperation of those fighting in the trenches at the height of the war is well represented in the many letters written by Maurice to his family throughout the war.

As things turned out, Maurice Symington was one of the fortunate members of his regiment to survive. He served with some distinction; he was decorated by the Portuguese government, who gave him the Military Cross of the Order of Avis – he was also Mentioned in Dispatches for 'gallant and distinguished services in the field' on 7th April 1918, in a document signed 'Winston S. Churchill – Minister of War'. The two were not unacquainted: one of the strange quirks of war was that, despite the hell and confusion at the Front, Maurice's pleas for supplies from home were answered, and reached him safely. A surreal picture is drawn of the pair enjoying a glass of Dow's Royal Dry (a very fine old tawny) together in the trenches, where Churchill served for a time following his resignation from the Government due to the Gallipoli disaster. When they met by chance in London years later, Churchill took one look at Symington and exclaimed 'Port!'

Meanwhile the Port trade had German submarines to add to the usual list of hazards. Although shipping had become increasingly difficult (sailing ships were pressed into service after many steamers

had been sunk), Port grew in popularity. This new found business was bolstered by post war euphoria and, in spite of the loss of the Russian market following the 1917 revolution, Port began to enjoy a minor boom. Such was the demand that wines were offered in the UK on the basis of 'PRWS' – price ruling when shipped.

The reputation of the family's Ports had never been higher. In July 1920, the great connoisseur Professor George Saintsbury wrote that 'there is no Shipper's wine that I have found better than the best of Dow's, 1878 and 1890 especially'. Maurice Symington had returned, and the identical twins, John and Ron, were becoming experienced Port tasters in their own right. Dow's declared the exceptional 1927, eventually offered in the UK at £70 a pipe.

The twins' other interest was wildlife. As small boys they kept a huge variety of pets: lizards were apt to appear between the sheets in the guest bedroom. In later life the twins were to form an impressive collection of butterflies from the Douro and Oporto. Ron and John joined their father in the business in 1919, and Ron began working in the Dow's tasting room – the 'Sample Room' – from which the blending and ageing operations are run; a job that he was to continue to do until his retirement in 1965. John Symington married Aileen Foulerton, a cousin of the Sellers and the Cobbs; Ron wed Norah O'Callaghan, who had spent much of her early life in Australia and Argentina. The three brothers' young families spent many happy summers at *Quinta do Bomfim* and *Senhora da Ribeira.*

John Symington eventually took charge of the production of Warre's Port, while from the mid-1920s Ron took on responsibility for the production and tasting of Dow's – including the remarkable vintage declarations of 1927 and 1945. Identical in many respects (sometimes even arriving at work wearing the same neckties), there was one immutable difference: John would drink Warre's at home, Ron Dow's.

The political instability that had dogged Portugal since the republic was proclaimed in 1910 continued well into the 1920s. In February 1927 there was a revolt against the government of General

Oscar Carmona. Fierce fighting broke out in Oporto, and the local correspondent for the London based Wine Trade Review wrote that the bombardment which took place across the River Douro from the heights of Arrábida (now the site of the Arrábida Bridge) 'was as good as any I have heard on the Western Front'. Dow's reported in the same journal that a couple of stray shells fell on their lodges but otherwise the British community survived unscathed.

However, the momentary drama of the revolt paled into insignificance beside the effects of the worldwide upheaval caused by the 1929 Wall Street crash. As a number of weaker Port shippers failed, the Symingtons in Oporto and the Warres in London had to steer a tight course in order to keep the family company afloat. For the first time since before the outbreak of phylloxera in the 1870s, over production became a problem. The Portuguese government, under the iron fist of Prime Minister António d'Oliveira Salazar, now stepped in to create the *Casa do Douro*, the *Instituto do Vinho do Porto* (Port Wine Institute) and the *Grémio dos Exportadores do Vinho do Porto* – three institutions which have survived more or less intact up to the present day. Maurice Symington became one of just two British shippers to be appointed as a director of the new *Grémio* (Port Exporters' Guild), forerunner of today's Port Wine Exporters' Association.

As a result of the worldwide slump, British shippers passed over the extraordinary fine 1931 vintage – perhaps the best year never to be declared. However, ten pipes of Dow's were shipped to the Army & Navy Stores in London and, as was the custom, a few bottles remained in Oporto. (These were later 'liberated' by Bob and Amyas Symington, two family members who shared their birth year with this fabled but undeclared vintage.)

Prospects for the Port trade improved briefly in the mid-1930s, helped by the lifting of Prohibition in the United States and a growing penchant for Port in France. Dow's was particularly strong in continental European markets, especially France, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark and Germany. In Germany, Count von Ribbentrop acted as the company's agent. (Ribbentrop's career went

downhill thereafter: he forsook his wine firm to become German ambassador in London 1936-38, and German Foreign Minister during the was years.) Dow's maintained a sales office in Paris until the outbreak of the Second World War.

However, the British market, reinforced by an advertising campaign on the side of London buses, continued to be by far the strongest, accounting for around half of all shipments. A list dated 1939 from Dublin wine merchants Robert E. Turbett & Sons shows the F.O.B. price of a pipe of Dow's ranging from £25 for standard ruby, tawny and white Ports up to £140 for 'Very Fine Old Tawny' – less 14 shillings if the pipe was returned to Oporto. Although his firm is no longer trading, Mr. Turbett is still remembered in Gaia, having fallen down the lodge lift shaft following a particularly good lunch, breaking his leg in the process.

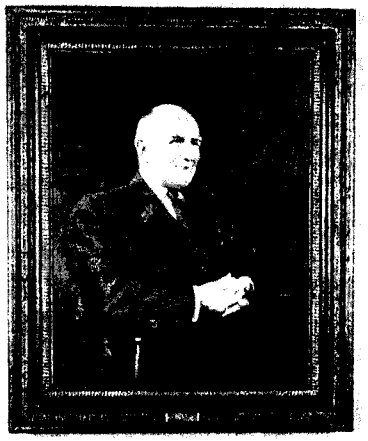
When war broke out once more in September 1939, the Port trade effectively came to a standstill. The British Government advised all British families to leave Oporto and a destroyer was sent to Lexões to oversee the evacuation. No such upheaval was necessary, though, for the founding father of the Symington family's Port connections: A.J. died in the same year. In 1941 John Symington left for England with his family to join the RAF; they lived in Devon for much of the war, and their eldest son, Peter, was born there in1944.

Ron stayed behind, incapacitated by a serious illness, while his wife and children moved to Canada. They flew via New York on the 'Dixie Clipper' – the Boeing flying boat that was later to carry Roosevelt to the historic Casablanca Conference.

Maurice Symington was left in sole charge of the company for much of the war. As Senior Director of the *Grémio*, he went over to the UK in 1942 to negotiate the first annual Port quota with the Minister of Food, Lord Woolton. The system divided Port into two grades; grade one for inexpensive Ports and grade two for 'superior wines' like old Tawnies. Until the quota was suspended in 1949, the latter represented just five per cent of annual shipments. For those

remaining behind, Portugal (which stayed neutral throughout the war) was a land of relative comfort and plenty. Compared to Lisbon, which became a hot-bed of intrigue and espionage, Oporto remained a quiet backwater. Nothing was imported, and there was certainly no surplus for export; but nevertheless food was sufficient in both quantity and quantity.

In London, the wine trade went through rather more turbulent times. Dow's were bombed out of their offices at 14 Water Lane in the City in December 1941, and the company temporarily shared offices with J. Turner & Co. in Philpot Lane – with a blanket to divide the single room in two – before relocating to St. Dunstan's Lane. When the chairman, Francis Warre, visited the Water Lane bomb site, he found builders pouring the remains of the bottles of Dow's pre-war Vintage Port (considerably *estufado* from the heat) into an old kettle and drinking it from tin mugs....



Maurice M. Symington
1895 - 1974

Maurice Symington married Eileen Hardey Mason in 1924. She was the daughter of George Hardy Mason who, with his brother, had spent 30 years in charge of Port shippers Kopke. Maurice and Eileen had a son, Michael, born in 1925. He and his cousin Ian,

John's son, were educated at the Oporto British School (which Ian, who lived on the city's outskirts, had sometimes to reach on horseback), and then in England – as the Second World War loomed. Michael became a Rifleman on leaving school in 1943, and went on to serve in Egypt and Greece; Ian's time in the British Army was served in the Seaforth Highlanders. Michael recalls that he only saw his father twice in the seven years of the war and its aftermath. He returned to Oporto in 1947, by which time Salazar had established his stern, bureaucratic regime in Portugal – and, as a 'foreigner' entering the country, Michael had to apply for a Resident Permit and a Work Licence before he became the first of the third generation to join the family firm. Michael's return to post-war Portugal came as something of a culture shock: 'whereas everything had changed in the UK, Oporto and the Douro were in a time-warp. Social structures in Portugal remained the same, and I was surprised to return to an upstairs-downstairs world'.

William Warre, who first visited Oporto in the following year, 1948, also found a world of 'semi-luxury' accompanied by 'Victorian service'. Apprenticed to Ron Symington for six months in the Dow's tasting room, he arrived from England by steamer which crossed the bar of the Douro and moored right alongside the lodges on the waterfront at Vila Nova de Gaia. Trade was still slack: a large part of his duties seems to have been beating for shooting parties on the great Aveiro marshes and in the Douro. Ron and John, who had spent so much of their childhood in the Douro, were well-known as accurate and expert shots. With their great friend Dick Yeatman of Taylor's they shared for many years a humble cottage in Veiros, on the edge of the marsh, which they christened 'Snipe Lodge'.

On his return to Oporto after the war, Michael Symington, too, gained experience in the tasting room, spending three years under the guidance of his Uncle Ron and Manuel Rocha, who together had kept the company going during the later war years. Much time was spent working out the costings of different blends on old mechanical calculating machines, in the confident expectation of a boom as soon as trade restrictions were lifted. But unlike the period that followed the First World War, this time there was no immediate

recovery; a great depression settled over the whole Port trade both in Oporto and among the farmers in the Douro.

In spite of the stringent quotas still in force at the time, Dow's and Warre's declared vintages in both 1945 and 1947. On tasting the '45, both Ron and John Symington agreed that it would be a 'crime not to declare', given the outstanding quality of the wine. Exceptionally, because of the shipping restrictions, 100 pipes out of a total declaration of 125 were bottled in Gaia in 1947 – much of it, thanks to a shortage of glass, in brown sherry bottles. This took place with the caveat that if the wine didn't find a market it could always be uncorked and blended into good ruby...Dow's 1945 is today acknowledged as one of the greatest Vintage Ports of the century.

It is worth recording that in 1947 just two per cent of all Port was bottled in Oporto. The rest continued to be shipped in cask, often accompanied by the appropriate labels. In those days before the event of sophisticated marketing, Dow's spawned numerous brand names for different customers and markets. 'Red Stripe', 'Royal Dry', 'One Star', 'Invalid', 'Royal Crowns', 'Four Diamonds', 'Westminster', and 'SOS' (Soft Old Superior) represent a smattering of the multifarious names attached to Dow's Ports from the 1940s to the 1960s. One of Dow's first Vintage Character Ports was known by the name of 'Dark Club' – substantial quantities of which were sold to the Vatican. In the UK, most Port continued to be bottled and sold under the buyer's own label.

John's son, Ian, followed his cousin Michael into the company in 1949, and vividly recalls the long, lean years that followed the war. As many Port shippers either merged or went under, it became a fight for survival. Ian Symington remembers the struggle each year to reach the critical level of orders, adding that 'we only survived by the skin of our teeth'. Antony Warre, who had been awarded the Military Cross in the Second World War, joined the London side of the firm in order to try and boost sales. But to help keep Dow's afloat in the early 1950s both *Quintas Senhora da Ribeira* and *Zimbro* had to be sold, though Dow's continued to make the wine. John Symington's short, emotional entry in the *Bomfim*

visitor's book for May 21 1954 records: 'Went to *Senhora da Ribeira* to conclude sale...It's been a most sad occasion but we leave the happiest memories and many good and faithful friends there'. Even the beloved *Quinta do Bomfim*, Dow's single remaining Douro vineyard, only narrowly escaped being sold.

The so-called *lei do terço* (law of one third) was then to inflict a further burden on an already beleaguered industry when the government announced its introduction in September 1959. This obliged all Port shippers to maintain stocks of at least three times their annual sales. Before it came into force just four months later in January 1960, most Port shippers were living from hand to mouth, buying in stocks of wine from farmers and brokers to fulfil large orders.

For example, in 1958 Dow's began the year with stocks of 1,200 pipes and shipped 1,300 over the ensuing twelve months. Under the new law this position was untenable, and the Symingtons were greatly helped by João Serôdio, owner of *Quinta do Bom Retiro Pequeno* and an important Douro farmer, who placed a large amount of his stock in Dow's name. João Serôdio's sons, António, Jorge and José, continue to work alongside the Symington family today.

The efforts of Michael and Ian to sell and promote Port in these difficult times, when many believed that it had no future, was to pay dividends in years to come. The fortunes of Port slowly began to revive in the 1960s – but for many shippers it was already too late. A number of well known families who had weathered a variety of storms in previous years sold out. The Symingtons stood firm against a depressing background of mergers and take-overs.

For the Symington family the first glimmer of hope for Port came with the 1963 vintage. It was clear that, after a long warm summer and perfect conditions at the time of harvest, 1963 would produce some outstanding wines. Declared by Dow's, Warre's and the majority of shippers, the wines were well received by the trade. 'We began to realise that things were picking up when we sold more 1963 Vintage Port in the UK than the 1896, making it the most

successful declaration for over sixty years', said Michael Symington in an interview at the time. The Swinging Sixties had also begun, as he pointed out '...to blow away the cobwebs from the Port image which has so damaged us in the past'.

Although Portugal (still on a tight leash under the authoritarian Salazar) was hardly swinging, it certainly began to change through the 1960s. Foot-treading in stone *lagares* (the time-honoured method for extracting colour and tannin from Port grapes) became increasingly impractical. The Douro underwent a technological revolution as new methods of vinification were adopted. The 1963 was the Dow's last Vintage Port to be entirely trodden by foot, and the new *adega* (winery) built the following year was among the first in the Douro to be equipped with modern autovinification tanks.

Gradually an increasing volume of Port began to be bottled at source as shippers installed bottling lines in Vila Nova de Gaia. Dow's 1960 Vintage Port became the first to be offered to the trade either in bottle (F.O.B. Oporto) or in pipe. A decade later when Dow's declared the 1970 vintage, almost all the orders were for wines bottled in Gaia. In 1973 a law was passed making it obligatory for all future Vintage Port declarations to be bottled at source.

Following his father A.J.'s example, Maurice Symington, OBE retired in 1960, formalising what how now become a family rule that all members retire from active responsibilities at the age of 65.

In the same year, Ron Symington's son, James, followed his cousins Michael and Ian into the firm. Having served in the King's African Rifles during the Mau Mau reign of terror in Kenya, James returned to Oporto and became responsible for the tasting room for eleven years, overseeing the highly-regarded 1966 and 1970 vintages. Although it was an unwritten family rule that only the eldest son should follow his father into the business, as this expanded over the years and more help was needed, it was fortunate that younger brothers were available at this time and thus James was

followed by John's younger sons (and Ian's brothers): Peter in 1964 and Amyas some years later. In fact, only two of A.J. Symington's grandsons, who live in Portugal, have never worked in the family group: Robert (Bob) Symington, Maurice's younger son and Michael's brother, who lives in Sintra, followed a commercial career and was appointed OBE in 1990, the year he retired; and David, a younger son of John (and brother to Ian, Amyas and Peter) who has, for many years, worked and lived in the Algarve.

Other things were changing too: James recalls that the move towards Oporto bottling was also accompanied by a much more active approach to the marketing of Port. This was greatly helped by improving travel facilities to and from Oporto. The opening of international flights from the airport at *Pedras Rubras* greatly cut the journey time to London. Where the trip to the United Kingdom had previously involved a rail journey to Lisbon, an overnight stay followed by a three-day sea voyage – or an arduous train marathon across Spain and France – the travelling time was suddenly cut to less than three hours.

Then, the year after Maurice left and James joined, an era ended. In 1961 the Warre family sold the last of their shares to the Symingtons, thus bringing to a close more than two centuries in the Port business, and Dow's finally closed their London sales office.

Thereafter all the major decisions affecting the worldwide distribution of Dow's and Warre's would be taken by the Symingtons in Vila Nova de Gaia; the family members now developed a much more hands-on approach with the firm's customers.

In 1970 – the year that Warre's celebrated its tercentenary – there came a new and exciting development. The Symingtons acquired the Port shippers W.& J. Graham & Co, (along with its sister company Smith Woodhouse & Co.) from the Graham family – the very firm for which, ironically, A.J. Symington had first worked on his arrival in Oporto nearly a century previously.

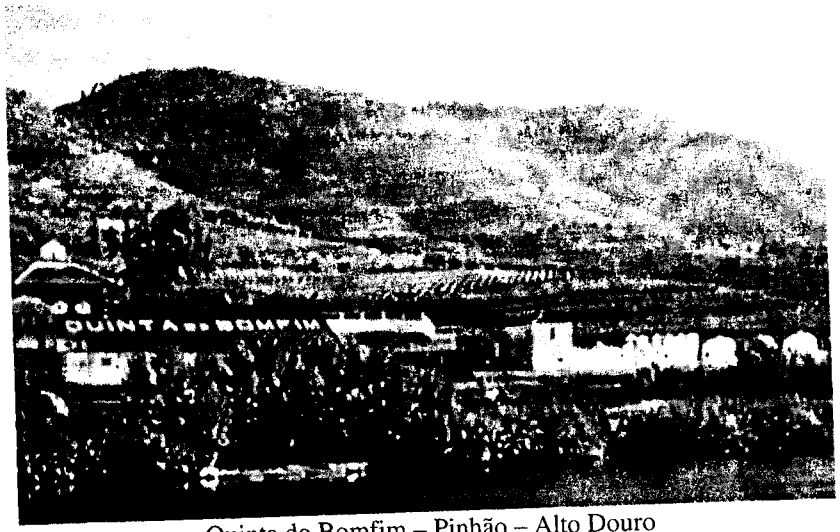
Then, just as the post-war slump was ebbing away and Port sales were at last steadily increasing, the British community in Oporto was stunned by the military *coup d'état* which rocked Lisbon on the morning of the 25th April 1974. In the wake of nearly fifty years of the rigid Salazar regime (Salazar himself died in 1970), pent-up frustrations exploded into the street with – once again – revolutionary force. In the event, the new military President, General António Spínola, resigned during the vintage in 1974 having lasted just six months in office: this opened the way for over a year of extreme political instability. A huge swathe of the Portuguese economy was nationalised in March 1975, leading to the so-called *Verão Quente* (hot summer) when, had it not been for the abrupt removal of the pro-Communist Prime Minister, the Port trade might also have been taken over by the state.

Michael Symington remembers that anxious time. A *plenário* (plenary meeting) was held for all employees of the Port houses and, after much filibustering, those remaining in the early hours of the morning voted for an all-out strike. Dow's staff voted overwhelmingly against the strike, but the Symington family advised them to form their own picket-line outside the lodges to prevent outsiders from marching in. In one incident, employees of another large Oporto-based wine producer set the fire hoses on the approaching mob to stop them from seizing control.

In a year made chaotic by rampant take-overs and nationalisations, it was clear to the Port firms that they could not conduct the vintage in the normal way, buying grapes from local farmers. At any minute, it seemed, they might themselves be nationalised. Up in the Douro the Symington family announced that their winery was open to all their regular growers but that title to the wine, which would be made free of charge, would remain with the farmers until the situation became clearer. All the regular growers delivered their grapes under these terms, and within a few months Dow's was able to buy in the wine as normal.

Finally, after two years of coup and counter-coup, Portugal settled down in 1976 with a democratically elected government – the

first for over 50 years. In the same year the Symington family purchased the firm of John E. Fells Ltd., an old established British wine merchant, which has subsequently become the company's own UK distributor. This was followed in 1985 by the establishment of Premium Port Wines Inc. in the USA. Together these two companies have enabled the family to consolidate their position in the world's two most important quality driven markets for Port.



Quinta do Bomfim – Pinhão – Alto Douro

In line with this commitment to quality Port – especially Vintage, for which Dow's, Warre's and Graham's enjoy a worldwide reputation – the Symington family have redressed the balance of the dark days when they had to sell *Zimbro* and *Senhora da Ribeira,* and have built up their vineyard holdings in the Douro once more. *Quinta da Cavadinha* was acquired by Warre's in 1978. In 1989 the Symingtons went a step further and bought the magnificent and historic 400-hectare *Quinta do Vesuvio,* now established as a company in its own right, and in 1998, much to everyone's joy, *Quinta da Senhora da Ribeira* was bought back from the family that it had been sold to nearly 50 years previously! Over the same period

Quinta do Bomfim, which had been producing Dow's finest Ports for over a century, was extensively replanted and enlarged to include surrounding properties.

The family plays a leading role in the local community. Maurice Symington, as the senior member, was decorated by the Portuguese Government in 1970 with the *Ordem de Mérito* when one of the family's Port companies, Warre's, celebrated its 300th anniversary (it is the oldest British Port firm). Today many of the family devote time to supporting the various institutions within the Port trade and the local community. Shortly before his retirement, Michael Symington heard that he had been awarded the CBE for his work in this area.

Life in Oporto today for the Symingtons is much changed from the days when their ancestor first arrived in the city. They live in houses on the outskirts of Oporto; their children attend the Oporto British School – the oldest on the continent of Europe and one which today has by far a majority of Portuguese children. However some things are unchanged. The Douro continues to be their favourite place. Several of the families have, over the years, acquired their own *quintas*. These form a valuable source of top-quality wines for the Symington's Port firms. The river is now dammed, allowing for water sports that would have been unthinkable in the days of the winter rapids or the reduced summer flow, the result of the long summer droughts. This remote region has a harsh climate, cold wet winters followed by intense summer heat, but the Symington's favourite pastime in the Douro is long walks through the mountainous valleys, followed by big family picnics.

Michael Symington's son Paul joined the family firm in 1979, followed by Ian's son, Johnny, in 1987 and Dominic, Michael's youngest son, in 1990. Together with James's son Rupert, who joined in 1992, and Péter's son Charles in 1995 they represent the fourth generation to take charge of the family firm. James's daughter Clare represents Dow's Vintage Ports in the United Kingdom. With eight members of the family now actively involved

on a day-to-day basis, major policy decisions are always agreed at family meetings chaired by the Senior Director or Partner.

A group of Symington "family" Directors in late 1990's

In 1988 the President of Portugal, Dr. Mário Soares, opened the new purpose-built bottling plant at *Quinta do Marco* in Vila Nova de Gaia. Michael Symington also served as Treasurer of the Factory House (effectively the position of Chairman) in the same year, and invited the President to dine there. This was the first time that a Portuguese Head of State had dined at the Factory House since the country's king, Dom Manuel II, visited Oporto in 1908.

In the 1990s, with worldwide shipments reaching record levels, the market for Port continues to develop. The USA and Canada have become hugely important markets for quality wines. For the first time in the history of Port, shipments to the USA of the 1991 Vintage Port exceeded those to the UK. Markets in the Far East

are also gaining ground – and in 1997 the Symington family shipped 100 cases of Port to Russia, exactly 80 years after the revolution effectively closed the market.

As Dow's celebrates its bicentenary, 116 years after A.J. Symington first landed in Oporto, Michael, Ian and James (as successive Senior Partners) have seen the family's five different Port firms – Dow's, Warre's, Graham's, Smith Woodhouse and Quarles Harris – together become the largest single producer of Port. Even more important, they form the leading producer and exporter of premium quality Ports (Vintage Character, Reserve, L.B.V., Old Tawny and Vintage Port) which account for nearly 40 per cent of their sales. This compares with an average throughout the Port Trade of nine per cent.

Many different families over the centuries have built up these companies and brands, which have become famous names in the ever expanding world of wine and now with eight members of the fourth generation of the Symingtons still at the helm and a fifth generation on the way, the family commitment to their heritage has never been stronger.

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This edited extract above was based on "The Story of Dow's Port" written by Richard Mayson. The author has written several books and articles on wine and lectures for the Wine & Spirit Education Trust and Leith's School of Food and Wine in London.