

To the Waters and the Wild. Petroleum Geology 1918 to 1941

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Book Reviews

To the Waters and the Wild Petroleum Geology 1918 to 1941

By Ellen S. Blakey
*American Association of Petroleum
Geologists, Tulsa, Oklahoma*
207 p., 1991, US \$38.00 (cloth)

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This is the second of what appears to be a planned series of coffee-table-style books on the history of the petroleum industry. Like its predecessor, *Oil on their Shoes* (1985), it strives for a balance between splendid photographs and entertaining text; and, on the whole, it strives successfully.

By 1918, the "heroic age" of the beginnings of petroleum production and exploitation was past. Oil was changing not only the world's economy, but also its very face, as the network of roads became denser and extended into areas hitherto undreamed. The excitement of the next twelve years, the sharp fall in the economy brought on by the Depression, and the beginning of a recovery, halted by the outbreak of war, are all well portrayed in words and illustrations.

Also brought to mind by this book is the prominence of petroleum geologists, not only in geological discovery, but also in the exploration of our globe. Victor Oppenheim, perilously scaling Andean heights; H.M. "Howdie" Kirk, crossing the deserts of southern Afghanistan; and those unnamed Dutch geologists in Borneo (p. 185-187) are only a few of the geologists whose adventures can be ranked as heroic. It is sad that their achievements, matching in excitement those of Henry Stanley or Richard Burton in the previous century, are so much less well known.

Especially enjoyable are the direct quotations from the letters and journals of these venturesome geologists. The diary of Robert H. Dott, Sr. is most extensively quoted, between p. 50 and p. 81, and fully merits this

extended treatment. The quotations from Victor Oppenheims's writings, scattered in several places through the text, whet one's reading appetite for his almost overlooked travel work, *Exploration East of the High Andes* (1958), for which I for one will now be seeking.

Ms. Blakey's own writings are decidedly in American, rather than in "British English". There were times when over-telegraphic sentences or paragraphs beginning, "But..." caused me to blench, as did phrases like, "the new had worn off the friendships" (p. 36). There are entertaining infelicities also, like: "By the time [Noble] returned, the district was off limits (p. 41; how, then, did he return to it?); "On just such an [social] occasion, Weeks met his first wife" (p. 44; had they married by mail, then?); and "the launch was inundated with arrows from the bank" (p. 119; very wet arrows, presumably?). A few sentences defied my comprehension, for example:

Because roads were abominable tracks, or nonexistent, they [the geologists] moved from spike camps set up wherever they could coax their old jalopy up to the foot of a mountain. (p. 133)

Will someone explain, please?

In fairness, however, such clumsiness is rare and the text is, in general, lucid and entertaining enough to satisfy any but the most critical of readers.

In my review of *Oil on their Shoes* (*Geoscience Canada*, v. 15, p. 74-75), I found reason to criticize the imbalance in world coverage; the too-numerous misprints; the imprecisions in, and omissions from, captions; and the irritating inconsistencies in the bibliography. In this second book, the international coverage can be applauded, and the bibliography, although not full enough to facilitate interlibrary loan requests, is much more consistent in presentation.

However, the other problems remain. Misprints are still too numerous: "chagrinned" (p. 19) and "cocoanut cream pie" (p. 21); the bracket left open at the foot of p. 123; and, on p. 180, "Helmand" in text, "Heimund" in photo caption. In the caption on p. 67, "Comodoro, Argentina" should read "Comodoro Rivadavia, Argentina", as is evident from text references on other pages. "We took off our

cloths" (p. 59) should surely read "clothes" or, if wrong in the original, should have been marked [sic] as were other errors.

The omissions from captions are tiresome. In the frontispiece and on p. 24, a town in the Seminole field is depicted, but *which* town? On p. 17, we are told that H.L. Doherty is depicted, but where is he among that group of Cities Services employees? The photo on p. 93 was taken on a Navajo reservation, but where? The photos on p. 139 were, I know, taken in Iran; but the two captions do not say so, nor is Iran mentioned on adjacent pages. All in all, like its predecessor, this book suffers from not having been given a thorough enough editorial check before going to press.

However, I shall not end on a sour note. I enjoyed this work and I believe that other readers, even if only marginally interested in the history of petroleum exploration, will likewise find it entertaining.

ERRATA

- The review by W.A.S. Sarjeant of *Dinosaur Stamps of the World* (v. 18, p. 179) stated that Beverly Halstead died "in a tragic accident on April 10, 1991". This date is incorrect: the actual date of Halstead's death was April 30, 1991. The editor thanks Dr. Sarjeant for bringing this error, which was not in his original typescript, to his attention.
- Baldwin's Books, the publisher of *Dinosaur Stamps of the World*, has written to advise of another error in the same review. The review stated that the price was £8. The actual price is £10 + £2 surface post & packing for overseas orders. We apologize for any inconvenience.