

***Oil Sands Scientist: The Letters of Karl A. Clark 1920-1949*, (ed)  
Mary Clark Sheppard, Edmonton, University of Alberta Press,  
1989. Pp xvi + 498, illus., index, cloth \$30.00**

James P. Hull

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## BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

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*Oil Sands Scientist: The Letters of Karl A. Clark 1920-1949*, (ed) Mary Clark Sheppard, Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 1989. Pp xvi + 498, illus., index, cloth \$30.00.

This labour of love by the daughter of Karl Clark (1888-1966) chronicles his role in the development of the hot water separation process used to extract oil from the bituminous sands of the Athabasca region of northern Alberta. Part One is a 98-page discussion of Clark's life and work and a capsule history of the tar sands research effort. The bulk of the book, Part Two, contains 162 documents, written by Clark and arranged chronologically. The documents are an edited selection of Clark's letters, reports and such like, held in the Archives of the University of Alberta, the Public Archives of Alberta or in the possession of Mrs Sheppard. Four indexes are provided to letters, people, places and institutions, but there is no topical index. The book is enriched and enlivened by scores of fascinating illustrations, many of them photographs taken by Clark. Setting side by side drawings and photographs of the same apparatus provides salutary lessons.

All the documents are written by Clark; no incoming correspondence is reproduced. Occasionally this obscures the meaning of passages, though this problem is not pervasive. The letters are given without commentary excepting a brief identification of the recipient. Unfortunately it is not always clear, without referring back to Part One, in what capacity Clark is writing. No full description of the complete archival holdings of Clark material is given, in particular no clear indication of how much incoming correspondence is preserved. As to her choice of documents, the editor states that 'only those letters which were either too long, too repetitive, too technical, or not directly relevant to the story have been eliminated' (xiv).

While Part One could easily have been pure hagiography, and is certainly laudatory, it is informed by some of the better literature on the history of scientific industrial research, both in Canada and elsewhere. The material in this book constitutes a valuable record of one phase of the tar sands investigations. It is a rare and welcome portrait of a Canadian scientist working in an area of applied research. It sets in better context the long interest in the sands as a source of road surfacing material, not a source of fuel. Here, some reference to Bruce Seely's excellent study of the US Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) would have been useful as Clark drew upon BPR results. Sheppard, unfortunately, gives her own reworking of the standard and erroneous mythology regarding the founding of the National Research Council. Perhaps under the influence of Bob Blair, who writes the book's forward, she also places an excessive stress on

federal-provincial disputes. As well, a too-uncritical assessment is made of H.M. Tory's judgement and motives. Overall, however, this book is a welcome supplement to Ferguson's fine study of the oil sands; indeed the two works should be used together.

This publication is a clear study of how bench, field, pilot and semi-commercial scale investigations related to eventual commercialization. One cannot fail to be impressed by how much expertise could be gathered for a project in a remote area of Canada's mid-North. It shows the many individuals and organizations, both public and private, involved in tar sands research over the years. One of the most fascinating aspects of this book is the picture which emerges of Clark as a 'gatekeeper,' changing the flow of technical information to and from many interested parties. This is a critical aspect of the effective functioning of the research infrastructure.

Oil Sands Scientist is a valuable resource for historians interested in a variety of topics on the history of industrial research in Canada, not just the tar sands. The specialist will welcome the depth of technical detail, while the general reader will not be obstructed by it. This book shows well the central role of scientific research and the mobilization of technical knowledge for the assault on the sands. This factor is too frequently neglected in favour of the details of financial and political manoeuvrings in studies of staples exploitation. Anyone interested in the history of resource development in Canada will find this book valuable. Sheppard and the University of Alberta Press are to be congratulated for making this material more accessible and better known to scholars.

James P. Hull

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**James P. Hull** teaches in the Department of History, Okanagan College, Kelowna, B.C. and is Editor of this journal.

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