Culture

Book review: The story of oil

A dirty business

A Pipeline Runs Through It. By Keith Fisher.

In 1908 drillers working for Weetman Pearson hit a gusher.

Pearson, a British industrialist, had done a deal with the anti-American government of Mexico for a 50-year oil concession that covered much of the state of Veracruz.

From a depth of 1,830 feet (558 metres), the Dos Bocas well exploded into a broiling fountain of oil that rose 1,000 feet into the air.

The ensuing fire raged uncontrolled for 57 days, spilling more than 10m barrels of oil and leaving a toxic environmental legacy that persists today.

A geologist at the site observed: “What had been lush monte [bush] was now a gaunt spectre of dead trees.

The air stunk with the smell of rotten eggs.

There no sign or sound of animal, bird or insect life…It smelled and looked like I imagined hell might look and smell.”

The oilfields opened up by this catastrophe were so prolific and profitable that they became known, apparently without irony, as the “Golden Lane”.

As Keith Fisher shows in “A Pipeline Runs Through It”, a sprawling, painstakingly researched history of oil from the Palaeolithic era to the first world war, black gold has been as much a curse as a blessing for the people on whose land it has been found.

Oil has always been a dirty business, both literally and metaphorically.

Mr Fisher begins with a slightly plodding survey of the uses found in bygone eras for the different kinds of oil that seeped from the ground.

It was an adhesive for toolmaking, a waterproofing agent for boats and roofs, a medicinal cure and a lubricant.

The Byzantines chucked a napalm-like substance, known as Greek Fire, over the walls of besieged cities.

The book gets into its stride when it reaches the late 18th century.

Then the extirpation of Native American nations paved the way for the development, just over 50 years later, of the “oil region” of Pennsylvania and New York states.

It was there that large-scale industrialised oil production first occurred.

The soaring demand for oil was driven mainly by its use for lighting (after being refined into kerosene).

It burned cleaner, brighter and with less smell than other oils, such as those derived from coal or whales.

The oil rush began in 1859 along what became known as Oil Creek, near Titusville, Pennsylvania, when an entrepreneur called Edwin Drake became the first American to drill for oil successfully.

As wildcatters rushed to the region, small refineries started popping up all over the place.

Railway companies cashed in by providing the only route to market until pipelines, which required large amounts of capital, could be constructed.

Into this Wild East of desperate competition—and prices that fluctuated madly as capacity grew either too fast or too slowly—stepped John D. Rockefeller, whose Standard Oil set out to control the industry through a process of “combination”, or monopolisation.

Such was Standard’s financial muscle and legislative clout that competitors sold it their assets before being driven out of business.

By controlling pipelines and refineries, Rockefeller could also dictate terms to producers.

文化板块

书评：石油的故事

一个肮脏的行业

《贯穿其中的管道》基思·费舍尔著

1908年，维特曼·皮尔逊手下的钻井工人发生了井喷事故。

皮尔逊是一位英国实业家，事故发生前，他与墨西哥反美政府达成了一项为期50年的石油特许权协议，该协议覆盖了韦拉克鲁斯州的大部分地区。

多斯博卡斯油井在1830英尺（558米）深的地方爆炸，形成了高达1000英尺的灼热石油喷泉，直冲天空。

随之而来的大火肆虐了57天，导致逾1000万桶石油泄漏，并产生了有毒物质，至今还在危害环境。

现场的一位地质学家说：“曾经郁郁葱葱的山地(灌木丛)现在成了枯树的幽灵。

空气中弥漫着臭鸡蛋的味道。

各种动物，哪怕是鸟类或昆虫的踪迹或声音都无处可寻…那里的味道和情形活像我想象中地狱的样子。”

由这场灾难开辟的油田产量如此之大，又如此有利可图，以至于它们被称为“黄金巷”，而这显然毫无讽刺意味。

《贯穿其中的管道》对旧石器时代到第一次世界大战时期的石油历史进行了详尽研究，正如基思·费舍尔在书中所展示的那样，对于发现了黑金的土地上的人来说，黑金既是一种祝福，也是一种诅咒。

石油一直是一个肮脏的行业，无论是从字面上还是从比喻意义上看都是如此。

费舍尔首先进行了一个略显乏味的调查，他调查了旧时发现的从地下渗出的各种石油的用途。

发现石油可以用作工具制造粘合剂、船只和屋顶的防水剂、药剂和润滑剂。

拜占庭人会在被围困城市的城墙上投掷一种被称为“希腊火”的凝固汽油弹状物质。

费舍尔在写到18世纪末的事情时开始游刃有余。

当时，美洲原住民的灭绝为50多年后宾夕法尼亚州和纽约州这两个“产油区”的开发铺平了道路。

大规模工业化石油生产正是在那里首次出现。

对石油需求飙升的主要原因是，石油在被提炼成煤油之后可用于照明。

相比其它油，比如从煤或鲸鱼中提取的油，煤油烧起来更干净、更明亮，气味也更淡。

1859年，在宾夕法尼亚州的泰特斯维尔附近，一位名叫埃德温·德雷克的企业家成为了第一个成功钻探石油的美国人，该地后来被称为石油溪，石油热潮就是由此开始的。

随着盲目开采油井者涌入该地区，小型炼油厂开始在各处涌现。

在需要大量资金的管道建成之前，铁路公司凭借提供通往市场的唯一路线从该领域牟利。

约翰·D·洛克菲勒踏入了这片充满绝望竞争的狂野东部——由于石油产能增长要么太快，要么太慢，当地的石油价格也疯狂波动——他的标准石油公司开始通过“合并”或垄断的过程控制石油行业。

标准石油公司的财力和立法影响力如此之大，以至于竞争对手在被赶出石油行业之前就把资产卖给了它。

通过控制管道和炼油厂，洛克菲勒甚至还可以向石油生产商发号施令。