

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Graham D. Taylor, Imperial Standard: Imperial Oil, Exxon, and the Canadian Oil Industry from 1880

Ian Wereley

Volume 85, printemps 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070917ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2020.0016>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Wereley, I. (2020). Compte rendu de [Graham D. Taylor, Imperial Standard: Imperial Oil, Exxon, and the Canadian Oil Industry from 1880]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 85, 304–306. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2020.0016>

bassist and composer Charles Mingus got into an altercation with a member of the BC Lions football team is a good example. Quoting at length, Jago contrasts subjective recollections to implicitly illustrate how memory functions as a mechanism for situating oneself in time and in place. She subsequently explains: “[R]aised consistently as a point of reference by interviewees, [Mingus’s stay at The Cellar] served as a tool for recognition ... and as a point of mutual experience that still ... separates those who were part of the scene from those who were not.” (182)

Published through UBC Press, this study on the development of Canadian jazz is a valuable addition to a growing corpus of works that trace their origins to the 1980s when Mark Miller and John Gilmore published *Jazz in Canada: Fourteen Lives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) and *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montreal* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1989), respectively. If the latter provided the incentive for the establishment of a jazz collection at Concordia University, an exceptional repository of oral interviews and archival documents with no parallels in Canada, one can hope that *Live at the Cellar* will inspire the creation of a similar repository for Vancouver and British Columbia. By bringing to the fore artist-run co-operatives in Calgary, Edmonton, and Halifax, Jago also ultimately makes the case that these cities have jazz histories worth pursuing. Her research thus lays some of the much-needed groundwork for the development of new perspectives on jazz in Canada.

ERIC FILLION

University of Toronto

Graham D. Taylor, *Imperial Standard: Imperial Oil, Exxon, and the Canadian Oil Industry from 1880* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press 2019)

IN *IMPERIAL STANDARD*, Graham D. Taylor reconstructs the rich, transnational history of the Imperial Oil Company from 1880 to the present day. For most of its history, Imperial was the largest oil company in Canada and one of the most successful corporate entities in the country. Despite its incalculable significance for Canadian energy history, there is practically no scholarly work on the Imperial Oil Company; James Laxer and Ann Martin’s 1976 monograph assessing Imperial’s impact on the Canadian economy, and several books and articles published by the company are the rare exceptions. Perhaps not surprisingly, the large American oil companies and their histories have a significant body of literature. Taylor’s study thus fills a longstanding gap in the literature on Canadian oil history and is particularly welcome at this critical moment in the country’s energy trajectory.

Taylor is a business historian whose work focusses on the growth of multinational corporations during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In *Imperial Standard*, Taylor makes his first book-length foray into the Canadian oil and gas industry, which he asserts was “arguably as important for the nation’s economic development in the twentieth century as was the Canadian Pacific Railway in the nineteenth century and the Hudson’s Bay Company in the years before Confederation.” (3) The central thesis of the book is that over the past 140 years the Canadian oil and gas industry played a foundational role in the social, political, and economic life of Canadians and, more specifically, that Imperial was a corporate leader in the unfolding of the age of oil both in Canada and around the world.

Imperial Standard consists of thirteen chapters of varying length, which are divided into three chronological parts: Part I ("Foundations," 1860–1917) examines the early years of Imperial Oil and its takeover by Standard in 1898; Part II ("Before Leduc," 1917–1947) follows the expansion of Imperial operations across Canada and the world; Part III ("After Leduc," 1947–1980) focuses on the challenges faced by Imperial in the tumultuous post-war decades; the Epilogue contains three chapters that account for the company's activities from 1980 up to the present day. The book ends with several appendices containing maps, diagrams, and statistical data. A prominent feature of this book is the depth of research and the extensive use of archival materials. Taylor has been researching this project for more than forty years, and during that time he has consulted the Imperial Oil records held at the Glenbow Archives in Calgary, Alberta, and the Standard/Exxon records held at the Dolph Briscoe Centre for American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. In addition to corporate records, Taylor also makes extensive use of official histories and reports, company journals, trade literature, newspapers, and photographs. The author states that this is not an official history of Imperial, and that all of the records he consulted are freely available to the public.

Several aspects of this book stand out as noteworthy. *Imperial Standard* is an engaging business history that reconstructs Imperial's boardroom decisions, traces its acquisitions and mergers, and narrates the rise and fall of the company's economic and political fortunes across the oil-producing world, from Mexico and Peru to Iran and Russia. While primarily a study of Imperial, this book is also a history of its much larger American parent company, Standard Oil (later Esso and later still Exxon).

As hinted in his title, Taylor historicizes both companies simultaneously by reconstructing their complicated, often fraught, yet nonetheless profitable relationship over the past 140 years. Employing this wide-angle approach enables Taylor to situate Imperial's history in local, regional, national, continental, and global contexts, expertly weaving his narrative through all of these scales. The reader is brought on a fascinating journey across time and space, from nineteenth-century oilfields in Ontario to twenty-first century offshore drilling platforms in Newfoundland, and of course the vast oil resources of Alberta.

Another valuable aspect of this book is its accessibility to a range of audiences. For the non-specialist, *Imperial Standard* is an epic tale of "Romance, danger, [and] adventure." (122) Taylor presents a balanced mixture of statistics and imaginative spectacle, intimate details about shareholder dividends mixed with stories about the search for oil in the "remote wilds of northern Canada," (138) "the sprawling tentacles of the Standard Oil 'octopus,'" (12) and the close relationship between William Lyon Mackenzie King, R.B. Bennett, and the American oil billionaire, John D. Rockefeller. In addition to these historical agents, the reader is introduced to controversial contemporary figures like Rex Tillerson (former Exxon CEO) and Donald Trump, as well as familiar throwbacks from Canadian oil culture; Esso's "Put a tiger in your tank" slogan and Imperial's longstanding sponsorship of Hockey Night in Canada are two particularly entertaining examples. At other more serious moments in the narrative, Taylor provides historical insight into some of the most pressing energy issues we face today, including boom-bust cycles, the construction of pipelines, environmental and indigenous resistance, regional conflicts between east and west, political conflicts between

provinces and the federal government, and the influence of the United States on Canadian energy policy.

For all its undoubted strengths, some readers may regret the book's lack of theoretical engagement or discussion of issues like class, gender, or race. The author's approach is decidedly top-down. Taylor pays much attention to Imperial's preeminent status within the Canadian business community, but less on the social and cultural aspects of Imperial's legacy. Workers and their experiences are not included in the book, and Taylor's examination of the class dynamics between Imperial's board of directors and the rank and file is limited to a few anecdotes. Chapter 5 briefly delves into the establishment of safety programs, benefit and retirement packages, and social clubs for Imperial workers during the 1910s and 1920s, but these developments are framed not as part of a growing class consciousness but, instead, as "policies that would hold the labour unions at bay." (107) Taylor's history of Imperial contains virtually no discussion of women and gender, either. The first and only mention of women and their role in the company's history appears at page 275, in a paragraph on geologist Diane Loranger. There is very little on the history of the company's marketing activities – many of which were aimed at women – and while Taylor describes the minutia of boardroom decision-making, analysis of the company's methods of actually *selling* its products to the public is surprisingly lacking. Lastly, there was also room for more discussion about Indigenous issues beyond how much money oil companies have made, lost, or doled out. The book is also marred by some typographical and formatting errors, but it remains an impressive piece of archival research.

Imperial Standard will be valuable to readers in Canadian history, business history, and the history of oil. Taylor

has produced a detailed reconstruction of Imperial Oil's activities over the past 140 years, which reveal how the company skillfully navigated changing and uncertain energy landscapes, triangulating itself between global energy hegemony while forging a uniquely Canadian path. Much more than a corporate history, *Imperial Standard* offers a window onto the rise of the age of oil in Canada and beyond.

IAN WERELEY

University of Calgary

E. Sylvia Pankhurst, edited with an Introduction by Katherine Connelly, *A Suffragette in America: Reflections on Prisoners, Pickets and Political Change* (London: Pluto Press 2019)

TRAVEL WAS AN integral part of the early twentieth century international suffrage movement. Suffragists, especially those from North America and Europe, built international organizations of solidarity, visited other nations as political tourists, and created alliances and friendships as they lectured in other countries. Travel was primarily the prerogative of the more affluent, though some socialist suffragists also moved in international circles, and some suffrage lecturers paid their own way through lecturing fees. The latter arrangement was used by Sylvia Pankhurst in her 1911 and 1912 visits to the US and Canada.

A Suffragette in America traces Sylvia's two North American tours through the manuscript she prepared about the visit, which was never published. Katherine Connelly has assembled and edited pieces of the unfinished manuscript, available through the International Institute of Social History, and added a long introduction as well as short introductions to each section. The result is an extremely valuable and enlightening picture of