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POST DATE

29/12/2022

ISSUE NUMBER

JEHRHE #9

SECTION

Special issue

THEME OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Human resources: labor, social relations and industrial culture in the history of the oil and gas industry

KEYWORDS

Oil; Production; Mobility; Labour; Capitalism

DOI

in progress

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Chao Ren, "From the Allegheny to the Irrawaddy: American Oil Drillers in Colonial Burma", *Journal of Energy History/Revue d'Histoire de l'Énergie* [Online], n°9, published 29 December 2022, URL: energyhistory.eu/en/node/306

From the Allegheny to the Irrawaddy: American Oil Drillers in Colonial Burma

Abstract

Colonial Burma was once a major center of world petroleum production in the early 20th Century. A notable group in the oil-fields of Burma was the working-class American oil drillers, most of whom with ties to the oil regions of western Pennsylvania. Drawing from fragmented primary sources such as censuses, consular registrations, passport applications, and death reports, this article reconstructs the life story of three ordinary and obscure blue-collar American drillers working in Burma between 1905 and 1920. With an individual perspective, this article proposes a more human history of the non-human, which takes seriously the visions, desires, and experiences of ordinary people in the oil industry. For oil history, this approach decenters conventional narratives of state structures, national successes, or larger-than-life heroic figures in the making of the age of oil.

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1 Around the turn of the twentieth century, Burma once occupied a center-stage location in the global oil industry.¹ Not only was it one of the earliest places for industrial and commercial excavation (starting in the late nineteenth century), Burma was also the major oil-producing area in the British Empire, feeding the oil consumption of the whole of British India and beyond. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, large amounts of global capital swarmed into the Burmese oilfields, which mostly concentrated around the small town of Yenangyaung on the Irrawaddy River in Upper Burma. With this substantial influx of capital, the Yenangyaung oilfields witnessed the quick emergence of a vibrant plural society in this hinterland area, as Burmese oil-lords, Indian entrepreneurs, Parsi lawyers, Chinese agents, and American oil drillers all participated in this project of oil excavation at a time of heightened colonial domination.

2 A notable group in this mixture of people in Yenangyaung were the oil well drillers from the United States. Mostly coming from the Allegheny River region in western Pennsylvania, these American oil drillers came to Burma often in clusters of acquaintances—some having grown up in adjacent villages, and some as family friends for generations. As the oilfields in western Pennsylvania approached depletion around the turn of the twentieth century, the decades-long Pennsylvania oil boom came to an end, and families of oil drillers found themselves in need of work. It was at this moment when these oil drillers started to move to other oil producing areas for work—California, Oklahoma, Texas, and in our case, the British Indian province of Burma.

3 In the Burmese oilfields, the American drillers occupied a unique location in the social and racial landscape of the oil labor complex. On one hand, these American oil drillers differed

substantially from other fellow white people in the colony, either British colonial officials, corporate managerial personnel, or scientific experts, as the American oil drillers were predominantly blue-collar wage laborers that occupied a lower status in the social hierarchy. On the other hand, these American oil drillers were also qualitatively different from other non-white manual laborers in various kinds of racial capitalist labor regimes in tropical colonies, as they were recruited not as mere manual labor that was readily replaceable, but because of their ability (albeit low-tech) to manage the mechanized machineries of oil excavation. These two aspects combined rendered these American oil drillers a peculiar location in the colonial labor regimes in this oil frontier.

This article focuses on the life stories of these American oil drillers in colonial Burma, and tries to make sense of them in the broader discussions of oil history. Drawing from fragmented primary sources, such as death reports, censuses, and passport applications, this article reconstructs the lives of three American oil drillers in the 1910s—William C. Neil, Bartlett C. Slaughenhaus, and Walter S. Franks—all three of whom came from the Allegheny region and worked in Yenangyaung in colonial Burma. It is very difficult to locate primary source materials on the lives of American oil drillers in Burma, but a close reading of these limited historical records reveals a world of these drillers with their own life trajectories, social circles, family tensions, and personal ambitions. Such an individual perspective provides a precious angle of exploring the life-worlds and experiences of the workers themselves, rescuing the life experiences of manual laborers from being packaged in grand narratives of greater political or economic processes.

Historiographically, such a transregional labor history of American oil drillers in colonial Burma would both integrate the often neglected marginal spaces such as Burma into the mainstream narrative of global oil history and situate the United States into wider narratives of transregional circulation of oil-related labor. Moving between the Allegheny and the Irrawaddy Rivers, these

¹ Throughout this article, I am using the term “Burma” instead of the Burmese/Myanmar language word of “Myanmar” [*Myan-mā*] for two reasons: first, I use the Anglicized term “Burma” because this article deals almost exclusively with the British colonial period; second, the term “Burma” corresponds with the spelling in the English language primary sources cited in this article.

oil drillers present a collection of life stories that transcend the national boundaries of oil history writing and bridges locations not usually mentioned together. Their experience shows that the early oil industry was truly a transregional enterprise—one that was facilitated by the flow of capital and the circulation of technical labor around the world rather than organized by centralized governmental decisions or international coordination at the level of sovereign nation-states.

5 In the following sections, this article first introduces the historical background of the oil industry in colonial Burma, especially the peculiar and ambiguous status of the United States in the scramble for oil in Burma. The article then proceeds to describe the life experiences of the three abovementioned ordinary and obscure American oil drillers working in Burma in the 1910s. It then closes with a discussion on the historiographical ramifications of these stories of the oil drillers for oil history, history of labor migration, as well as the place of the United States in oil history. With these life stories, this article suggests ways in which such a labor history approach to oil history would address existing paradigms and conventions of oil history writing toward a more global and more humanistic understanding of human's engagements with petroleum.

6 A special note about the nature of historical sources explored in this article. It is incredibly difficult to retrieve empirical information on the social life in the oil town of Yenangyaung in the early twentieth century. This difficulty is largely due to two reasons. First, the historical records from Yenangyaung itself was mostly destroyed under Japanese invasion of Burma during World War II and the process of British retreat and denial. Second, the corporate archives, which hold the records of the oil companies then operating in Burma, are not interested in the everyday life of oil excavation in the oilfields and kept very few records on topics outside of headquarter-level business transactions.

7 Because of such historical and material conditions of the state archives as well as the

collection priorities of the corporate archives, a reconstruction of the social life in the oilfield demands a creative use of archival sources. In this article, I examine U.S. official archival holdings, especially censuses, passport applications, consular registrations, and death reports, to reconstruct the life of these American oil drillers in colonial Burma. The U.S. archives are rarely utilized for Burmese or Indian histories, and can provide a different angle from the more conventional destination of colonial state archives.

8 However, this new angle of U.S. archives does not come without its own caveats. First, despite the detailed information on the biography of the drillers available in the records, in none of the archival materials do we get a direct voice from the drillers themselves. Second, people engage with bureaucratic information gathering in their own ways and to their own advantages, so inevitably there are inconsistencies or irregularities in the records.² Third, the source materials in the U.S. official archives do not reflect the deep layers of colonial power in the operation of the oilfields in Burma, nor do they provide much information on the political location of the American drillers in the colonial society. Finally, since the consular records and death reports pay more attention to U.S. citizens who died overseas, they inevitably leave the majority of American drillers who return home alive unelaborated. As I reconstruct the life of the drillers from these sources, I keep in my mind the potential pitfalls of these U.S. official records, although I am certainly not able to transcend the restrictions created by the limits of the sources.

BACKGROUND: OIL IN BURMA

9 Earth-oil excavation in Burma had a long history dating back hundreds of years.³ The exact origins of the oil industry in Burma has become

² For example, there are multiple different spellings of "Slaughenhaus" and a few different numbers for the birth year of Walter Franks. See below for details.

³ The phrase "earth-oil" was often used in the historical sources of the time to distinguish petroleum from other kinds of oil, especially plant-based oil such as palm oil.

a contentious topic of nationalist debate.⁴ The oil reserves around Yenangyaung were traditionally owned by a collective of 24 Burmese families, known as the *twinzayos*. The *twinzayos* held a hereditary “abstract right to dig” for oil with “vaguely defined boundaries,” and could alienate such rights for cash to others interested in digging.⁵ The production level was low, not only due to technological constraints, but more importantly, there were limited demands for petroleum—at that time, petroleum was still largely used as lubricants and water-proof painting for wooden structures. It was not until later in the nineteenth century when petroleum was gradually used for illumination purposes (kerosene lamp oil and candle wax) that the demand started to increase—and this was still much earlier than the early twentieth century transition when petroleum products were finally applied to engine energy consumption.

10 By the mid-nineteenth century, the British had already conquered much of Lower Burma, and had developed a keen interest in the oil reserves of Upper Burma.⁶ The Burmese royal court was also aware of this development. Starting in the 1850s, King Mindon of Burma gradually came to realize the growing importance of petroleum, and despite his recognition of the customary hereditary rights of the *twinzayos*, he appropriated some of the oil-bearing land for the Burmese

royal court.⁷ The king used these oil wells not to produce oil for industrial development domestically, but as leverage against the rising British encroachment and a potential source of much-needed revenue for the royal court.⁸

After the British conquest of Upper Burma in 1885, British involvement in the Burmese oil industry intensified. In 1886, a handful of British businessmen, headed by David Cargill and Kirkman Finlay, saw the emerging opportunity and founded the Burmah Oil Company (BOC) in Glasgow, which soon became a dominant force in the oilfields in Burma.⁹ Many others followed suit, including industrial capitalists from both Britain and India. By the 1910s, oil had already become one of the most important industries in colonial Burma—in terms of export value second only to Burma’s primary industry, rice production.¹⁰ As the major oil provider for the British Empire, the oil industry in Burma (mostly concentrated in and around Yenangyaung) received a major boost in the opening decades of the twentieth century, as the British Royal Navy gradually adopted oil as its primary energy source.¹¹ With

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4 M. B. K., *An Outline of Burma’s Oil Industry* (Rangoon: Myawaddy Press, 1982); Pagan U Khin Maung Gyi, *Memoirs of the Oil Industry in Burma, 905 A.D.-1980 A.D.: Technological, Structural, Social Aspects Coupled with Contemporary Historical, Economics & Cultural Backgrounds* (Rangoon: [s.n.], 1989); Than Tun, *Myan-mā ye-nan tha-maing* (Yangon: SMART Sā-pe, 2018).

5 Marilyn V. Longmuir, “Twinzayo and Twinza: Burmese ‘Oil Barons’ and the British Administration”, *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 22, n° 3, 1998, 345.

6 Marilyn V. Longmuir, *Oil in Burma: The Extraction of “Earth-Oil” to 1914* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001), 5-27. The term “Lower Burma” generally refers to the Irrawaddy Delta area around Rangoon and Pegu, and other coastal areas such as Rakhine, Mon States, and Tenasserim; the term “Upper Burma” generally includes the Irrawaddy basin area around Mandalay, as well as frontier areas of Chin, Kachin, and Shan States. Politically Upper Burma was annexed by the British after the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885, decades after the coastal areas of Lower Burma had fallen under British rule (1824, and then 1852).

7 Burma Research Society, *The Burma Petroleum Industry*, Burma Pamphlets No. 10 (Calcutta: Longmans, 1946), 2.

8 Hiram Cox, *Journal of a Residence in the Burmhan Empire* (London: John Warren, 1821), 41.

9 Thomas Anthony Buchanan Corley, *A History of the Burmah Oil Company, Volume I: 1886-1924* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 30-35. Business historian Mira Wilkins has theorized this kind of multinational corporations with no domestic operation around the turn of the twentieth century as the “free-standing company.” See Mira Wilkins, “The Free-Standing Company, 1870-1914: An Important Type of British Foreign Direct Investment”, *Economic History Review*, vol. 41, n° 2, 1988, 259-282; also Mira Wilkins, and Harm G. Schröter (eds.), *The Free-Standing Company in the World Economy, 1830-1996* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

10 Maung Shein, *Burma’s Transport and Foreign Trade (1885-1914) in Relation to the Economic Development of the Country* (Rangoon: Department of Economics, University of Rangoon, 1964), 218-219; Ian Brown, *Burma’s Economy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9.

11 Geoffrey G. Jones, *The State and the Emergence of the British Oil Industry* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 9-14; Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 150-153; Longmuir, *Oil in Burma*, 199-212; Brian C. Black, *Crude Reality: Petroleum in World History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 58-61; Corey Ross, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire:*

the new incoming capital, numerous smaller, late-comer companies came to be incorporated, and the oil well prices inflated exponentially. In a matter of fourteen years, the price per well site in Yenangyaung rose from about Rs. 20 to around 1895 to a shocking Rs. 60,000 in the second half of 1908.¹² For comparison, the wholesale price per hundred baskets of rice paddy in Rangoon was Rs. 110 in 1909–1910, and Rs. 130 in 1911.¹³ This huge inflation of oil well prices in turn attracted more speculative capital into this new battleground of fortunes.

- 12 In this scramble for oil, American capital proved to be a significant challenge to British interests. The most notable challenge was the Standard Oil Company of John D. Rockefeller, who planned to enter the Burma fields in the early 1900s. It was denied entry into Burma as the British colonial state tried to guard British mining interests and to secure rapid development for the Burmese oil industry.¹⁴ The British government declined applications for obtaining concession in Burma from almost all foreign companies or third parties.¹⁵ With the help of such favorable policies, the oil companies with ties to the British Empire

Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 212–213.

¹² *Report on a Committee Appointed to Investigate the Condition of the Twinza Reserves, Yenangyaung Oil-Field, Burma* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, Burma, 1908), 5, 7, IOR/L/E/7/608, India Office Records, British Library; *Report on the Administration of Burma for the Year 1907–08* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, Burma, 1908), 47. “Rs.” stands for Indian Rupee, as Burma was a province of British India at the time.

¹³ C. Morgan Webb (ed.), *Census of India, 1911*, Volume IX, Burma, Part I. Report (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1912), 40; Cheng Siok-Hwa, *The Rice Industry of Burma, 1852–1940* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968), 73.

¹⁴ “Affairs of Burma Oil Co. & Standard Oil Co.”. 1899–1903. R. & S. 426/99, Revenue and Statistics Department Papers, IOR/L/E/7/414, India Office Records, British Library; “Letterbook: Private”. 1903–1906. ARC134642, Burmah Oil Company Collection, BP Archives, Coventry; Geoffrey G. Jones, “The State and Economic Development in India, 1890–1947: The Case of Oil”, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 13, n° 3, 1979, 360–361.

¹⁵ Frederik Carel Gerretson, *History of the Royal Dutch* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958), vol. 2, 342; Corley, *A History of the Burmah Oil Company, Vol. I: 1886–1924*, 62–76, 118–127;

prospered in Burma. The Burmah Oil Company expanded from Burma well into the Indian market to establish multiple oil production and refinery centers in Assam (in Digboi) and Bengal (in Chittagong), and ultimately bought Assam Oil in its entirety in 1921.¹⁶ A series of smaller companies of British or Indian backgrounds, including Rangoon Oil Company, British Burma Petroleum Company, Yomah Oil Company, Nath Singh Oil Company, etc., also operated in Burma for extended periods of time.¹⁷ Although they ended up with varying degrees of success, they were not met with any particular state interference or hindrance like Standard Oil did.

It was against this background of both immense capital influx and British policy against American competition that the American oil workers came to the shores of the Irrawaddy River. The American oil drillers worked for oil companies of all sizes—from behemoths in the industry such as the Burmah Oil Company, to latecomer companies of much smaller financial leverage such as the Yomah Oil Company or the Yenangyaung Oilfields Southern Extension Ltd. Many American oil workers had to switch employers in the middle of their term in Burma, as the previous employer company either could not afford to fulfill wage

Longmuir, *Oil in Burma*, 163–168, 212–215; Than Tun, *Myan-mā ye-nan tha-maing*, 2.

¹⁶ Biplab Dasgupta, *The Oil Industry in India: Some Economic Aspects* (London: Frank Cass, 1971), 11; Raja Segaran Arumugam, *State and Oil in Burma: An Introductory Survey* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1977), 5–6; Jimmy Midwood (ed.), *Chinthe Tales: Reminiscences by Members of the Burmah Oil Society* (London: Burmah Oil Society, 1994), 70; S. N. Visvanath, *A Hundred Years of Oil: A Narrative Account of the Search for Oil in India* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1990), 34.

¹⁷ *Report on a Committee Appointed to Investigate the Condition of the Twinza Reserves*; “A Prospectus of the British Burmah Petroleum Company Limited for the issue of £525,000 six per cent. First mortgage debenture stock”. Aug 30, 1910. ARC128742A, Burmah Oil Company Collection, BP Archives, Coventry; “Agreement between The Burmah Oil Company Limited and Nath Singh [Nathsingh] Oil Company Limited regarding the purchase of crude oil”. Feb 3, 1914. ARC129171, Burmah Oil Company Collection, BP Archives, Coventry; “Indo Burma Oilfields (1920) Limited: Memorandum and Articles of Association”. 1920. BT 31/32375/163773. The National Archives, Kew; “Memorandum of Association of the Yomah Oil Company, Limited.” 1913. BT 31/21605/130158. The National Archives, Kew.

payments or went out of business completely. It should be noted that in many instances where an American worker died in Burma or other British colonies, these Americans were considered British persons due to their status working for British-related companies in British imperial territory. This fact was even recognized by the U.S. consular offices and the State Department themselves, who refrained from getting involved in the disposal of the property of the deceased American citizens.¹⁸ This ambiguous legal relationship between the British employer and the American worker may explain the extent to which the American oil drillers were employed in Burma despite the conscious state policy guarding against American companies.

- 14 Of all oil-producing areas in Burma, Yenangyaung was the one that enjoyed the highest regard in the industry, and it is the town where most American oil drillers lived in the 1910s and 1920s. Located in central Burma on the Irrawaddy River, Yenangyaung literally means “creek of stinking water” and got its name from the early history of precolonial petroleum excavation.¹⁹ But it was really in the nineteenth century with the influx of imperial capital that the oil industry of Yenangyaung received its most significant boost. Some even suggested that the oil production at Yenangyaung might have been the largest in the world in the nineteenth century.²⁰ Thanks to the presence of the Irrawaddy and Chindwin Rivers, Yenangyaung’s production could be exported quickly to the Indian market, as riverine transportation was the only viable mode of transportation between Yenangyaung and the maritime port in Rangoon.²¹

¹⁸ “Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, Singapore, S.S., March 6, 1914”; “Subject: Death of American Seaman, George Mathieson”. From American Consulate General, Singapore, S.S. to the Secretary of State, Washington D.C., March 6, 1914, *Central Decimal Files 1910-63*, India: 346D.11/91-346D.113. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

¹⁹ Longmuir, *Oil in Burma*, 31.

²⁰ Edgar Wesley Owen, *Trek of the Oil Finders: A History of Exploration for Petroleum* (Tulsa, OK: American Association of Petroleum Geologists, 1975), 2.

²¹ Marilyn V. Longmuir, “Yenangyaung and Its *Twinza*: The Burmese Indigenous ‘Earth-Oil’ Industry Re-examined”, *The Journal of Burma Studies*, vol. 5, 2000, 44.

Having enjoyed a quick rise to prosperity for half a century, Yenangyaung went through a sudden and disastrous destruction in the early 1940s due to Japanese invasion and reckless British retreat. The Japanese had always eyed the petroleum resources in Burma. In 1941, an official publication named *Economic Affairs of Burma* detailed the various industries and natural resources of Burma, noting the oil industry as the second most important in the economy after rice production. The book goes into excessive detail about the amount of annual oil production in multiple oilfield sites, tracing back the data for three decades, as well as the various potential uses of oil once it went through refinery.²² The Japanese economic sectors were fully prepared to capture the natural resources of Burma even before they set foot onto the land, and oil was close to the top of the list for their Burma campaign. Ultimately, as the British troops retreated from Upper Burma into the jungles of Assam, they burned the Yenangyaung oilfields to the ground in April 1942 in order to prevent the Japanese from accessing the oil resources. The oil derricks burned for weeks, and the oil industry in Yenangyaung never fully recovered ever since.²³ The life experiences of the American oil drillers who had worked in Yenangyaung also sank into oblivion in the bomb fires of war.

BURIED AT SEA: WILLIAM C. NEIL (1878-1918)

January 24th, 1918. A 39-year-old American man died of pneumonia in Singapore General Hospital. At the time of death, he was on his way returning from Burma back to the United States. Accompanying him on the trip were two other Americans working in Burma. The man’s employer, British Burma Petroleum Company, entrusted them with the task of taking care of him on the ship journey back to the California

²² *Biruma kēzai jiyō* (Taipei: Taiwan ginkō Taihoku tōdō-riseki chyōsaka, Shōwa 16 [1941]), 220-248.

²³ “Oil Denial in Burma”. Jan-Mar 1942. WO 193/608. The National Archives, Kew; Thomas Anthony Buchanan Corley, *A History of the Burmah Oil Company, Volume II: 1924-1966* (London: Heinemann, 1988), 74-105; Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 157-159.

coast, as he was known to be “not only ill but also of unsound mind and irresponsible.”²⁴ Before they were able to reach the wide waves of the Pacific, the man became critically ill and unable to continue with his trip. They stopped in Singapore, and the man was taken to Singapore General Hospital. He died at 2:20pm on January 24th. The next morning at 9am he was buried in Bidadari Cemetery in central Singapore.

17 The man’s name was William C. Neil. Born in May 1878 in Butler County, Pennsylvania, Neil grew up in the oilfield communities of Venango and Bradford in western Pennsylvania.²⁵ In August 1914, he embarked on a ship in New York City to travel to Burma to work as an oil well driller. He was contracted with the British Burma Petroleum Company, a medium-sized oil company incorporated in Britain in 1910 with its operations exclusively in Burma.²⁶ In his three years in Burma, Neil lived in Yenangyaung, and worked on the oil wells for the British company in the Yenangyaung oilfield area. By the second half of 1917, Neil’s health condition had deteriorated. He applied for an emergency passport in September 1917 citing ill health as a reason for his departure.²⁷

18 The two Americans who accompanied William C. Neil on his trip were F. J. Hanks, a personal friend of his, and Mrs. Pierce, a trained nurse.²⁸ Both of them were living in Yenangyaung at the time. F. J. Hanks was also working for the British Burma Petroleum Company, and Mrs. Pierce’s

husband, Francis O. Pierce, was working for the larger Burmah Oil Company operating in the same region.²⁹ Moreover, Hanks was not only Neil’s colleague at work; they also came from the same area back home: Hanks also listed Bradford, Pennsylvania as his residence, while Neil’s sister still lived in Bradford at the time of Neil’s death.³⁰ This double connection made him a good candidate for the company to entrust him with the task of escorting Neil back to the United States.

19 What else do we know about William C. Neil the man? He certainly occupies a very ephemeral presence in the historical records, but we do know two other things about him, drawing from patchwork fragments of historical sources. First, he wasn’t alone in his social world as an American oil driller working and living in Burma. In addition to F. J. Hanks, who also came from Bradford, Pennsylvania, there were also other American drillers in Burma whom Neil had known for years. One of them was Richard W. Ogle, a native of Noble County in southeastern Ohio who was also working as an oil well driller in Yenangyaung. Ogle was two years younger than Neil, and they got to know each other in their mid-twenties (early 1900s), most likely through the oil drilling workers’ circles. Although Ogle had moved to Oklahoma for work by the mid-1910s, he and Neil both testified for each other as the affidavit person when they applied for emergency passports through U.S. consular offices in Burma. In their affidavits, they both stated that they had known each other for 15 years by the time of application (1917).³¹ If what they said was true, it can be concluded that Neil had some old American friends with him in the

²⁴ “Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, Singapore, S.S., January 30, 1918”. *Central Decimal Files 1910-63*, India: 346D.11/91-346D.113. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

²⁵ Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900. T623, 1; Year: 1900; Census Place: Bradford, McKean, Pennsylvania, Enumeration District: 0102. 188 A.

²⁶ T. L. Hughes, “The British Contribution to the Industrial Development of Burma”, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 98, n° 4811, 1949, 124.

²⁷ *Emergency Passport Applications, 1914-1922*, Volume 001: Rangoon, India. Passport No. 208. “William C. Neil”. Issued September 15th 1917. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

²⁸ “Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, Singapore, S.S., January 30, 1918”.

²⁹ “Certificate of Registration of American Citizen: 71501, Francis O. Pierce”. Bureau of Citizenship, *Consular Registration Certificates, 1907-1918*, Applications 71500 to 71999, Volume 146, 9/15/1916-7/5/1917, Box 4942, ARC ID 1244186, Entry A1 548. RG59 General Records of the Department of State, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C. N.d., acknowledged April 3, 1916.

³⁰ “Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, Singapore, S.S., January 30, 1918”.

³¹ *Emergency Passport Applications, 1914-1922*, Volume 001: Rangoon, India. Passport No. 207. “Richard W. Ogle”. Issued September 14th 1917; *Emergency Passport Applications, 1914-1922*, Volume 001: Rangoon, India. Passport No. 208. “William C. Neil”. Issued September 15th 1917. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

Burma oilfields, both acquaintances from back home in western Pennsylvania as well as friends through the oil drillers' connections much prior to his departure for Burma.

20 The other thing we know about Neil was his belongings. Attached to Neil's death report was an "Inventory of Personal Effects," which lists in tremendous detail Neil's personal belongings at the time of his passing. Without going into the excessive details, most of which were about his clothing, two things can be inferred from this list of personal belongings. On one hand, compared to the numerous native coolies and indentured laborers who populated the tropical colonies at that time, Neil lived a rather comfortable material life in Yenangyaung. He was probably a man attentive to his presentation: In his passport application photo, in addition to the suit and shirt that were standard to men of his time, he particularly wore a bowtie, which distinguished him from others. It seems that in Yenangyaung, he was to a large extent able to maintain this attention to his appearances. On the other hand, however, it should also be noted that the list of belongings consists mostly of clothing, and contains nothing that would put him in the class of colonial officials or white collar elites—even while traveling, the complete absence of any writing facilities or paper products (books, notebooks, pens, etc.) shows that he was not a man of letters, and probably not well schooled.³² Therefore despite the relatively comfortable material life he enjoyed in Burma, it was comfortable only compared to native coolies, but not to colonial elites. Among the white colonial personnel, Neil was still a blue collar worker, earning daily wages with his manual labor.

A JOURNEY OF NO RETURN: BARTLETT C. SLAUGHENHAUP (1859-1919)

21 Most of the American oil well drillers working in colonial Burma were in the upper 30s and lower-to-mid 40s age group.³³ However, one man in

³² "Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, Singapore, S.S., January 30, 1918".

³³ *Emergency Passport Applications, 1914-1922*, Volume 001: Rangoon, India. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

particular stood out as coming from a different generation. A contemporary of William C. Neil in Yenangyaung, Bartlett C. Slaughenhaup was almost twenty years older than Neil. Born in 1859, Slaughenhaup grew up in New Bethlehem in Clarion County, in the same western Pennsylvania region where Neil and Hanks came from. In the mid-1870s, he got married to a woman named Marietta Johnston (known as Mary or Etta), who was four years elder than him, and the couple lived with Mary's parents. The Johnston family had always lived in the Calensburgh, also in Clarion County, Pennsylvania, about fifteen miles away from where Slaughenhaup grew up. The young couple first had a daughter in 1876, and then had a son, John B. Slaughenhaup, in 1880. Bartlett Slaughenhaup initially worked as a farm laborer in his early 20s, before later becoming an oil well driller.³⁴

In 1905, like many from western Pennsylvania who would later follow his footsteps, Slaughenhaup went on a journey from his home in Clarion County to Upper Burma. He was one of the earlier ones to make this trip, as the oil boom in Burma was just beginning to take off around the turn of the century. He boarded the ship (most likely in New York City) on March 11th, 1905, and disembarked in Rangoon on May 3rd before eventually making his trip upstream to Yenangyaung. For about a decade, he was working as an oil driller for the larger Burmah Oil Company (the employer of the abovementioned Francis O. Pierce). By 1913, while Slaughenhaup was still in Burma, Mary and her son John had moved to her namesake town, Marietta, in southeastern Ohio—another area where many oil drillers were connected to, including the aforementioned Richard Ogle.³⁵ In 1917, Slaughenhaup was still living in

³⁴ Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1880. T9, 1; Year: 1880; Census Place: Easton, Clarion, Pennsylvania; Roll: 1117; Enumeration District: 070. Page No. 23. 168 C. Record Group 29.

³⁵ "Certificate of Registration of American Citizen: 37449, Bartlett C. Slaughenhauh [sic]". Bureau of Citizenship, *Consular Registration Certificates, 1907-1918*, Applications 37000 to 37499, Volume 75, 1/7-2/6/1913, Box 4871, ARC ID 1244186, Entry A1 548. RG59 General Records of the Department of State, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

Yenangyaung, but had changed his employer to work for the British Burma Petroleum Company, the same company that Neil worked for. On the other side of the ocean, his son John, now almost 40 years old, was still living in the same household with his mom in Marietta, Ohio, and was working as a manual laborer.³⁶

23 At 9:30pm on July 14th, 1919, Bartlett Slaughenhaup died of apoplexy in the Burmah Oil Company Hospital in Nyaungghla, an oil reserve area located in the outskirts of Yenangyaung. He had just turned 60 years old the previous month. He was buried in the local Yenangyaung cemetery and was not allowed to be exhumed or relocated within 14 years. Nor did he want to be: By the mid-to-late 1910s, Slaughenhaup had probably already decided to leave his family behind and start a new life. We do not know what exactly happened, but in his 1917 registration with the U.S. consular offices in Rangoon, he claimed that his wife had already died. His employer and the consulate found out otherwise, and were therefore able to inform his wife by cable soon after his death.³⁷ Why did he tell the consulate that his wife had died, when she clearly had not? There didn't seem to be any particular reasons or noticeable benefits for him to do so. The most plausible explanation would be that Slaughenhaup was resolved to split with his wife and leave his family back in the Appalachians, and to start his life anew in his late 50s in the remote river valley oilfields of inland Burma, where he had already spent more than a decade of his life.

24 Slaughenhaup's resolution to start a new life in Burma—and probably also end his life there—can

³⁶ “Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, Rangoon, Burma, India, August 13, 1919”. *Central Decimal Files 1910-63*, India: 355.113/156-345.113 D74. No. 259. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.; United States Selective Service System, *World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918*, Ohio, Washington County, Serial Number 4252, Order Number A3621: John Bartlet Slaughenhaup. M1509. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

³⁷ “Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, Rangoon, Burma, India, August 13, 1919”.

be somewhat corroborated by the personal belongings he had left behind at the time of his death. Unlike other American oil drillers, whose belongings were largely just personal clothing and cutleries, Slaughenhaup had accumulated an extensive amount of personal items much beyond the daily necessities of an itinerant wage laborer on a temporary contract in Burma. A comprehensive inventory of his personal belongings took up three typewritten, double-column pages. The items were broken down into multiple categories, including a trunk full of items, a suitcase full of stuff, a wooden box of things, furnitures, a pony, food stores, dishes, papers, and fire arms.³⁸ Unlike Neil who died on a trip, Slaughenhaup had belongings that included household paper items such as a bible, a picture book about Burma, and his bank account booklet with the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation branch in Rangoon. Among other items, a number of them stood out in particular as they were certainly not ordinary items that American oil drillers would own in Burma:

2 Clippers, horse ...
5 Sets Thamin horns, Mtd. ...
1 Pony, bridle and saddle ...
38 Cal Colts lo chamber
Automatic Revolver
No. 39697.
Certificate of Registration
No. 240.³⁹

With the horse and the firearms, it seems 25 that Slaughenhaup was trying to rebuild his Appalachian lifestyle in Yenangyaung. Horses were definitely not a regular acquisition for the American oil drillers, who normally lived in company-provided accommodations close to the oil wells and would go to work together with other

³⁸ “Inventory of the property and belongings of the late B. C. Slaughenhaup who died at the Burma Oil Company Hospital, Nyaungghla, at 10 PM, on the 14th July 1919. Yenangyaung, Burma. July 17th 1919”. In “Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, Rangoon, Burma, India, August 13, 1919”.

³⁹ Ibid. All spellings and capitalizations original.

coworkers.⁴⁰ A horse would have been a huge investment for an American driller, and a quite unnecessary one in Yenangyaung. The same could be said about firearms. The most likely explanation would be that Slaughenhaus was planning to stay in Burma for long term, and possibly retire there, after he somehow decided to part ways with his family back home. When Slaughenhaus boarded his ship in New York City in 1905, he probably had very little idea that this would be a journey of no return. At 58 years of age, abandoning his family, claiming his wife was dead, Slaughenhaus embarked on a one-way journey, a journey from which he never came back, nor did he want to anymore.

LONESOME SPECULATOR: WALTER S. FRANKS (1872-1919)

26 Although a significant portion of the American oil drillers in Burma came directly from the Allegheny region in western Pennsylvania, there were still others who claimed to be from other areas of the United States, though most of them did have connections, one way or another, to major oil producing areas in the United States, such as Pennsylvania, West Virginia, or Oklahoma. Meanwhile, although many American oil drillers embraced a blue collar, working class lifestyle that involved significant splurge spending such as heavy drinking or irresponsible gambling, this was also not necessarily the case for all of them. Some had a more entrepreneurial mentality than others, trying to make more profit from the money they earned from wage labor. Some of them loaned out money to others to collect interests, while some others bought stock shares of the oil companies to participate in the fortune game of oil scramble.⁴¹

⁴⁰ For an example of the accommodation arrangements of the drillers, see the housing allowance sections in “Letterbook: Rangoon to London and copy of local correspondence. Includes blueprint for Yenangyaung church”. Jan to Dec 1914. ARC257493, Burmah Oil Company Collection, BP Archives, Coventry.

⁴¹ *Emergency Passport Applications, 1914-1922*, Volume 001: Rangoon, India. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

27 Walter S. Franks was among such people who participated in this fortune game. He also did not come directly from the western Pennsylvania region: At the time of his departure for Burma, he was living in Baltimore, with his brother, Horace L. Franks, who was seven years elder than he was. But Franks’ family indeed had connections with the oil region. Born on October 14th, 1872, Walter Franks grew up in a family of seven in Burton, Wetzel County in West Virginia, right on the border between West Virginia and southwestern Pennsylvania.⁴² His father, George K. Franks, had moved across the state border from Pennsylvania, probably in the early 1860s, working as a physician.⁴³ Sometime in the 1880s, Horace, the eldest son of the Franks family, moved from Burton, West Virginia to Baltimore, Maryland to practice medicine there, and married a woman from Maryland.⁴⁴ After Walter’s mother died in Burton in 1901, the entire Franks family moved to Baltimore to follow Horace.⁴⁵ Walter, the youngest son of the family, worked as an oil driller in Baltimore in the early 1900s.⁴⁶

⁴² Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1880. Year: 1880; Census Place: Church District (Burton), Wetzel, West Virginia; Roll: 1415; Enumeration District: 102. Page No. 20D. Record Group 29. Enumerated on June 16th, 1880.

⁴³ Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1850. T9, 1; Year: 1850; Census Place: First Ward Kensington, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Roll: M432_806; Page No. 6B. Record Group 29. Enumerated on July 23rd, 1850; Bureau of the Census, *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1870. Year: 1870; Census Place: Church Township, Wetzel, Pennsylvania; Roll: M593; Page No. 19. Record Group 29. Enumerated on August 10th, 1870.

⁴⁴ Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900. Year: 1900; Census Place: Baltimore Ward 23, Baltimore City, Maryland; Roll: T623_618; Enumeration District: 295. Page No. 11A. Enumerated on June 9th, 1900.

⁴⁵ Gravestone of Frances L. Franks (née Golden), 1 Dec 1946-29 July 1901, Harmony Cemetery, Burton, Wetzel County, West Virginia; Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1910. Year: 1910; Census Place: Baltimore Ward 23, Baltimore City, Maryland; Roll: T624_561; Enumeration District: 0388. Page No. 6A. Enumerated on April 22nd, 1910.

⁴⁶ “Walter Scott Frank”, U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925, Passport Applications, January 2, 1906-March 31, 1925,

28 It was not clear how and why Walter Franks went into the oil business: after all, his family had been a family of physicians and doctors. The most probable explanation would be his exposure to the oil industry while growing up on the West Virginia-Pennsylvania border. Professionally speaking, he was probably the black sheep of the family. But his oil drilling work did take him to faraway places of the world. After working in Baltimore for a few years, Franks joined his fellow oil drillers of the Allegheny region and went to Burma. By 1909, Franks had already spent a substantial amount of time in Burma working as an oil driller.⁴⁷ Similar to Slaughenaupt, Franks lived for an extended period of time in Burma—certainly more than ten years. It was not clear which company he worked for at the beginning, but in the late 1910s Franks was employed by the Twinza Oil Company, a relatively newer company formed around 1908 with a smaller amount of capital.⁴⁸

29 Like most of the American oil drillers in Burma, Walter Franks left preciously few traces in the historical records. The next thing we know about him, he was dead. On August 4th, 1919, while working for the Twinza Oil Company as an oil driller, Franks died of nephritis and heart failure at 1:30pm on Khodoung Road in Yenangyaung. He was 47 years old. With a careful reading of the official death report, filed 23 days after his death by the American Consular Service in Rangoon, we can come to learn two things about Franks the man: First, he was probably a lonesome character, or someone with a highly individualistic personality. Second, while in Burma, he was active in entrepreneurial and financial activities

alongside his work as an oil driller. This entrepreneurship can also be understood in light of his individualistic character, which could in turn explain the distance between his and other oil drillers' lifestyles.⁴⁹

30 Walter Franks was probably a rather unsocial person. After his entire big family moved to Baltimore to start a new life with his brother Horace, he insisted on maintaining ongoing ties with Wetzel, West Virginia, to the extent that he would soon leave his entire family. At the time of his death in 1919, he still had in possession a passbook with the Wetzel County Bank, with a substantial amount of credit balance on it (\$1,558.15), almost two decades after his whole family had moved to Baltimore. Although the last account activity was August 24th, 1908, which probably means he was not able to return to Wetzel County in the preceding eleven years, he nonetheless still kept the account with substantial savings.⁵⁰ Compared to the trajectory of his big family, he was certainly the one who did not follow the crowd.

31 His death report also reveals some traces of his lonesome character. At the time of his death, he was accompanied by his Burmese personal servant, Maung Kho Bu. This was rather unusual for an American driller in Burma—many of them had company-provided coolies or cooks, but to have a personal servant attending him was certainly not a common practice among the American drillers.⁵¹ Moreover, in the death report, Franks' age was mistakenly reported as 45 as a near

1908-1910, Roll 0087, Certificate 7122, 28 May 1909. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Report on the Administration of Burma for the Year 1909-10* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, Burma, 1911), 62. Although it bore the name of "twinza," there was no clear evidence that the Twinza Oil Company was a Burmese-owned oil company, and employed many Americans as drillers, engineers, and managers. The small amount of capital and the late-coming timing rendered the company ultimately unsuccessful and short-lived. See *Petroleum Times*, Volume 21 (London: Jan-Jun 1929), 643.

⁴⁹ American Consulate, Rangoon, to the Secretary of State, Washington, D.C., "Report of the Death of Mr. Walter S. Franks, an American Citizen". In "Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, Rangoon, Burma, India, Aug. 27, 1919", *Central Decimal Files 1910-63*, India: 355.113/156-345.113 D74. No. 265. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

⁵⁰ "List of Properties etc. of Mr. W.S. Franks – Deceased". In "Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, Rangoon, Burma, India, Aug. 27, 1919".

⁵¹ For an example on the provision of company-arranged domestic service personnel to oil drillers in Yenangyaung, see "Letterbook: Rangoon to London and copy of local correspondence. Includes blueprint for Yenangyaung church". Jan to Dec 1914. ARC257493, Burmah Oil Company Collection, BP Archives, Coventry.

estimate (while he was actually 47). This inaccuracy shows that the death was probably a sudden one, and Franks did not have other acquaintances around him at the time of death who knew his exact age or the whereabouts of his legal documents. Although it was reported that two of his American friends did arrive shortly after his death, neither of them provided accurate information about Franks' age.⁵² The fact that the death report was filed 23 days after his death, yet still unable to verify his exact age, shows that Franks was probably an individualistic, unsociable character who did not mingle much with other American drillers, either at work or after in the American Club, the pubs, or the gambling houses, so no one around him was able to provide such information to local authorities.

32 What marked Walter Franks particularly different from other American oil drillers in Burma, such as Neil or Slaughenhaus, was his distinctive entrepreneurial vision and practice alongside his work as an oil driller. Like other death reports, Frank's death report was followed by a list of his personal belongings at the time of his death. Yet unlike other lists of personal belongings, Franks' list had very few items of everyday use, but included an extensive catalog of the various financial records he kept in possession. In this list of two pages, financial records took up a page and a half, with a multiplicity of items such as:

Paper for 675 Debenture Bonds Rangoon Oil Company Nos. 2611 – 2615.

Colonial Share Certificates British Burma Petroleum Company Limited Nos: 6930 for 247 shares. ...

1 Pass Book on Wetzel County Bank United States of America showing a credit balance on August 24th: 1908 of \$1558.15.

Rangoon Oil Company Interest on Debenture Warrent [sic] No: 371 for Rs.68/9/- dated February 15th: 1919.

Letter from Mackness & Co., brokers, Rangoon, dated 26th: February 1919.

Letter from Hongkong and Shanghai Bank dated March 20th: 1918 covering fixed deposit receipts for Rs.13229/-.

On demand Note for Rs.1000/- due by M.D. Adby dated May 2nd: 1916.

British Burma Petroleum Company dividend warrent [sic] No: 960 for Rs.115/4/- dated 1st: March 1919. ...

1 Bundle Bank of Burma in liquidation correspondence (in large bundle).

1 Bundle Twinzas Oil Company litigation papers unsigned. ...⁵³

This long list of financial documents clearly shows that Walter Franks was engaging in extensive financial and speculative activities while working as an oil driller in Burma. If it were not for his job description on various registration records throughout his career across two continents that equivocally described him as an oil driller, we might imagine from this list of documents that he could well be a business broker in the oilfields instead of a driller on the wells. He was certainly not thinking like an ordinary blue collar worker; rather, he saw himself as an individual venturing entrepreneur, who tried to ride the waves of the oil boom by participating in the capital games of fortune at the time. With the huge increase in the value of property and assets associated with the oil business, Franks envisioned a prosperous financial future for himself, one that went much beyond the meagre (though certainly affluent compared to native coolies) income he received as a manual laborer. This different economic vision was something that marked himself different from others, which can probably explain why that Franks maintained a rather distant social relationship with the other oil drillers in Yenangyaung. His capital gains, though not enough to lift him out of the daily toils of manual labor, had certainly been enough to get him a Burmese personal servant, in addition to the household coolies provided by the company.

33

⁵² "Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, Rangoon, Burma, India, Aug. 27, 1919".

⁵³ "List of Properties etc. of Mr. W.S. Franks – Deceased". In "Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, Rangoon, Burma, India, Aug. 27, 1919".

34 Unfortunately what we know about Franks ends with this inventory. Did Franks ever specify what to do with the money he left behind? Similar to the other two drillers mentioned above, it did not seem like Franks had left any will before his death. With the amount of dealings going on, Franks mostly likely had not expected his death to come so soon, as he was still planning for his long-term financial future. We also have no idea what happened with his money after his death. In the case of Neil, the accompanying oil company employee and the U.S. consular officers handled his remaining possessions. But for Franks, no such information was available regarding his property.

TOWARD A MORE HUMAN HISTORY OF THE NON-HUMAN

35 How should we make sense of these American oil drillers in colonial Burma? What do these life stories of individual drillers tell us about oil history writing? There are three main takeaways that the lives of William Neil, Bartlett Slaughenhaus, and Walter Franks (and of course, many, many more) can inform us: the value of an individual perspective in understanding labor migration and oil history, the attention to global labor circulation and its ramifications for the national (and nationalist) tendencies of oil history, and a decentering and repositioning of the United States in global oil history. All three of these takeaways point to what I call a “more human history of the non-human”—a humanistic approach to the human beings who participated in human’s hubristic engagements with fossil fuel excavation and consumption, which eventually led to various kinds of environmental, political, and economic detriments in the twentieth century and beyond.

36 First, the live stories of these ordinary American drillers in Burma provide us with a precious individual perspective on the lives of an otherwise obscure group of people in the oil industry. In oil history and business history, it is more often than not that the voices and experiences of the leadership personnel (ownership, managerial, scientific expertise, state representatives, etc.)

get pronounced, through archives of various kinds (governmental or corporate) and also via individual memoirs and commissioned company histories.⁵⁴ The drillers, however, occupied a very different social space from that of the leadership personnel. Since the drillers, like most manual laborers, were usually considered more replaceable and less important than the leadership personnel, the archives have not been particularly interested in preserving records related to them. Nor were they usually literary-minded enough to leave an account of their own lives, which makes the historical reconstruction of these people’s lives more challenging. However, state registration records and death reports can provide an important venue for a peek into these people’s individual experiences.

Why is it important to reconstruct the lives of these drillers, and why is an individual perspective a worthwhile approach? The decades-long phenomenon of American oil drillers working in Burma in the early twentieth century was an example of the global circulation of labor at a time of a special techno-labor formation: imperial capital was swarming into colonial Burma for the oil boom, which required an increasingly extractive excavation method on the ground, whereas American oil drillers from the Allegheny region provided crucial skills of operating high-capacity oil drilling machinery due to their drilling experiences in the region since Titusville (1859). The English language had certainly also served as a common ground between the British colonial endeavor in Burma and the American oil drillers. Such a techno-labor formation of American oil drillers working in colonial Burma was therefore very specific to that particular historical moment, with the conjunction of a wide variety of factors, including the British

⁵⁴ Some examples of this genre include Ronald W. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum Company, Volume I: The Developing Years, 1901-1932* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Corley, *A History of the Burmah Oil Company, Volume I: 1886-1924*; Corley, *A History of the Burmah Oil Company, Volume II: 1924-1966*; Yergin, *The Prize*; Hriday Nath Kaul, *K. D. Malaviya and the Evolution of India’s Oil Policy* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1991); Ron Chernow, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* (New York: Random House, 1998).

conquest of Upper Burma, the global transition from coal to oil for energy consumption, the confidence of global capital in the imperial project, the huge need for oil machinery operation skills in Burma, and the gradual depletion of the Allegheny oilfields. These factors combined made the American drillers working in Burma possible in that very specific window of historical time.

38 These larger structural factors aside, the life stories of the American oil drillers in Burma can offer a valuable individual perspective that reminds us of the individual experiences, emotions, and envisioned futures that were so central to these drillers' own lives. These life stories can provide an important balance between global, structural narratives and individual on-ground experiences, which both shaped and were shaped by these larger historical processes. Such an individual perspective is particularly valuable for oil history and the history of global labor migration, where individual voices and experiences tend to be overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the larger processes, and humans get subsumed into numbers and statistics. The personal belongings, the family ties, and the social worlds of these American drillers remind us that such larger historical processes all consisted of human beings who were part of them, and each of these human beings had their own experiences, understandings, and visions of the larger processes as they inhabited them.

39 Second, the story of the American oil drillers working in colonial Burma presents a narrative of global labor circulation transcending national boundaries. Much of oil history, especially oil history on the mid-twentieth century onwards, has taken a rather national narrative framework, often focusing on political issues such as the functioning of state power or the process of state formation, especially in light of the making of authoritarian regimes or quasi-imperial orders.⁵⁵ Other more international-minded

oil history scholarship has inclined more toward an "international history" approach, with particular attention to issues such as decolonization, sovereignty, Third World-ism, and the making of an international order of petroleum in the second half of the twentieth century.⁵⁶ What the Allegheny oil drillers present is neither a national story of state formation, nor an international story of decision-making national elites. Their stories remind us that oil history, at least global oil history of the early twentieth century, consists of numerous obscure individuals striving to make a good living for themselves regardless, or even in spite of, national boundaries. Needless to say, the ability to migrate was a privilege of the few in the age of high colonial domination, but in the case of these American drillers, they were also certainly nowhere near the elite class, which makes them individuals of modest statuses in their own contexts.

Finally, the life stories of these American oil drillers in Burma contribute to a decentering and repositioning of the United States in global oil history. Conventional narratives in the English language, both academic and popular, still often celebrate Edwin Drake and Titusville as the starting point of the modern global oil history.⁵⁷ In a way, such narratives reinforce an implicitly American exceptionalism understanding of oil history, with Edwin Drake's story retold as one of frontier pioneers venturing into an empty land,

and Revolution in Mexico (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011); Judd C. Kinzley, *Natural Resources and the New Frontier: Constructing Modern China's Borderlands* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

⁵⁶ For an example of this approach, see Christopher R. W. Dietrich, *Oil Revolution: Anticolonial Elites, Sovereign Rights, and the Economic Culture of Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Matthew Shutzer, "Oil, Money and Decolonization in South Asia", *Past & Present*, 2022.

⁵⁷ For example, see Yergin, *The Prize*; Black, *Crude Reality*.

⁵⁵ Some examples include: Carl E. Solberg, *Oil and Nationalism in Argentina: A History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979); G. Jones, *The State and the Emergence of the British Oil Industry*; Jonathan C. Brown, *Oil*

echoing the residues of the Frederick Jackson Turner thesis.⁵⁸ Furthermore, after Titusville, with the subsequent industrial and commercial success of Standard Oil, and the famous anti-monopoly case surrounding the company, John D. Rockefeller and his Standard Oil Company become another focus of this American exceptionalism narrative of oil history, where the United States is celebrated both as a land of opportunity for larger-than-life business figures to succeed and as a land of justice and conscience against corporate greed.⁵⁹

41 The story of the American drillers in Burma, however, presents a very different location of the United States in early global oil history. Standard Oil made an attempt to enter the Burma oilfields, but was fended off by British political intervention. For the oil companies operating in Burma, Standard Oil and the American capital associated with it were a source of destabilizing threat for the oil industry in Burma. Yet despite such animosity against American corporate forces, the oil companies operating in Burma extensively recruited American oil drillers for on-ground production. In this landscape of oil history, the United States was no longer a grand progenitor of amazing business pioneers or managerial geniuses. Rather, on one hand, the United States was a provider of manual labor, which, in the schemes of labor migration, positions the United States closer to India and China as a source of manual labor in colonial Southeast Asia. This is certainly not to make a flattened comparison between these places: there were undoubtedly significant differences between Indian or

Chinese laborers in colonial Southeast Asia and the American oil drillers in Burma. But this repositioning of the United States as a source of manual labor does reveal another side of oil history hitherto rarely discussed, a story of the United States as a source of manual laborers and not of capital and expertise, and this repositioning also serves to challenge the mythical status of the United States as the assumed origin of modern global oil history.

42 On the other hand, in this alternative history of oil technology and labor migration, the United States, as an exporter of white laborers, also inevitably participated in the construction and consolidation of the colonial racialized labor regime. The white American drillers claimed superiority over the native Burmese and Indian manual laborers with a convergence of racial hierarchy and technological distinction. The presence of these American drillers, while maximizing the profit of oil production for the colonial companies, also denied any possibility of the Asian laborers getting trained in oil drilling technology—and the job prospects associated with such training. Such absence of technological training further contributed to the colonial racial stigma that the Asians were inferior to the whites technologically. This racial-technological-economic distinction-making in the oilfields ultimately brewed a vehemently hostile, anti-capitalist economic nationalism that became a main feature of the anticolonial movements in mid-twentieth century Burma.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”, *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894), 199–227; Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920). For an example of a popular rendition of this American exceptionalism narrative of early oil history in the United States, see the short film *Born in Freedom: The Story of Colonel Drake* (1954).

⁵⁹ For some examples of this genre, see Chernow, *Titan*; Kathleen Brady, *Ida Tarbell: Portrait of a Muckraker* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989); Steve Weinberg, *Taking on the Trust: How Ida Tarbell Brought Down John D. Rockefeller and Standard Oil* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008).

⁶⁰ Po Hla Gyi, *Tha-beik sit pwe* [The Strike War], Reprinted in the Myanmar Literature Project (Druck: Universität Passau, 2010).

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