

Graham D. Taylor, *Imperial Standard: Imperial Oil, Exxon, and the Canadian Oil Industry from 1880*. Calgary, AB: [University of Calgary Press](#), 2019. xii + 368pp., maps, figures, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. Paper; ISBN 978-1-77385-035-1, \$39.99, EPUB; ISBN 978-1-77385-038-2, MOBI; ISBN 978-1-77385-039-9.

A defining feature of big business since the industrial revolution has been the ability for companies to consistently treat unintended consequences and harmful impacts as externalities. It should come as no surprise, then, that historians of big business might also treat dimensions of economic activity, such as colonialism, social exploitation, and environmental degradation, as largely external to their work. By focusing on a particular company, situated within a specific sector of the economy, histories of big business necessarily become valuable sources of difficult to find information. But when historians of big business limit their studies to the corporate perspective and the experiences of managers and executives, the result leaves us with more questions than answers.

In his book, *Imperial Standard: Imperial Oil, Exxon, and the Canadian Oil Industry from the 1880s*, Professor Emeritus Graham D. Taylor draws on the rich archives of Imperial Oil and Exxon-Mobil to provide a detailed comprehensive history of the relationship between the Canadian oil company and its main shareholder and investor, Jersey Standard/Exxon. The author chronicles their combined influence on the oil industry in Canada, including the broader political and economic context of both companies' operations over the last century and a half. As Taylor points out (although he does not meaningfully engage with the literature on the subject), business history in Canada has long been "focused on the role of foreign-owned corporations in the Canadian economy" (ix). Rather than debate whether foreign ownership is good or bad, Taylor devotes his efforts to piecing together an incredibly complicated and confusing history, and demonstrates that over the course of its 130-year history, Imperial Oil operated with a large degree of autonomy and existed mainly because of the financial, technological, and managerial support of Jersey Standard and Exxon.

Taylor provides a meticulous account of the development of the oil industry in Canada, but only rarely offers any explicit insights into why the details matter to understanding its history. The narrative is largely descriptive, draws on secondary literature only to fill out the details of the story, and misses many opportunities to make important historiographical contributions to Canadian history, the history of big business, and the history of oil and energy. Taylor's tendency to focus his study exclusively on the high-level developments, debates, and decisions within Imperial Oil and Jersey Standard/Exxon comes at the expense of a more nuanced analysis of the social relations that underpinned the existence and operation of the company. Given the substantial archival records at Taylor's disposal, a study of Imperial Oil seemed to present an oddly well-suited opportunity to examine the impact of big business on Indigenous people, workers, and the environment. Unfortunately, these dimensions are largely absent from the book.

Near the start of the book, Taylor insists that Imperial Oil 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). In chapter 6, entitled "Winning the West," Taylor remarks, entirely uncritically, that the Northwest Company – formed by Imperial and Standard to explore for oil in the Northwest Territories – was named "in part as tribute to an exploratory enterprise more than a century before which had opened the way to the development of western Canada" (117). Nowhere does Taylor acknowledge the parallels between the imperial and colonial projects of these two companies, the irony of their shared name, or the continued impact of resource exploitation on Indigenous people living in the region. Earlier in the book, Taylor also explains how Imperial employees and managers transferred their experience, knowledge, and skill working in the oil fields of Peru and Colombia during the interwar years to operations in Western Canada after World War II. Imperial sold its assets in Latin America to pay for its extension into Alberta's oil fields. Taylor cuts his analysis off there, without analyzing the significance of the company having used the benefits it accrued from imperial exploitation in South America to extend colonialism through energy resource extraction in Canada.

The book reads as a celebration of the fortitude and resolve of great white men who made the oil industry in Canada and brought their product to market. It offers very little perspective on the lives of the thousands of people affected by the oil industry, such as workers and their families, or displaced rural and Indigenous communities. When Taylor does discuss the concerns and needs of local communities and workers, he frames their interests as an obstacle to Imperial's success. Undoubtedly a reflection of the company sources he had to work with, Taylor depicts organized labour as if it were a malignant tumour, or "contagion" (114), that had to be held "at bay" (107), because of its "militancy" (113). There are several moments in the book when it seems that Taylor has an opportunity to move beyond the elites and pull in the voices of regular people, such as in 1949 when the Interprovincial Pipeline Company sent representatives to talk to landowners and communities in the path of the proposed pipeline. But there is no sense of what these people thought and felt, or whether these consultations shaped corporate decisions. Instead, Taylor is consistently sympathetic to Imperial and provides little criticism of the company. For example, when Taylor refers to the company's early years – when managers visited politicians in Ottawa to cut deals – as "the good old days" (207), without any hint of irony, the book reads almost as if it were written in the 1960s.

Strangely, the epilogue starts with 60 pages left in the book. Quite tellingly, the final chapter covers the environmental consequences of the oil industry in Canada. The best part of this chapter deals with the industry's resistance to the regulation of carbon emissions, but Taylor's analysis comes across as somewhat ideological when he describes climate change as "a debate" (279), and "[t]he greatest threat... to the industry" (289). Rather than integrate the environmental consequences into the chronological organization of earlier chapters, Taylor decided to tack it onto the end. On the one hand, this might seem a sensible editorial choice, because readers interested in the environmental impacts of the industry can easily find it. But on the other hand, by adding it to the end of the book, Taylor seems to be suggesting that it is not an important part of this business history, reflecting the industry's own treatment of the environment as external to its operations.

Ultimately, Taylor's biography of Imperial Oil, and the Canadian oil industry in general, is highly sympathetic to its subject. He pulls many punches, and seems to reproduce many of the same biases as his source base. The book will prove to be valuable for years to come, as Canada and the industrialized world transitions away from fossil fuels and needs to understand how to dismantle the behemoth oil companies. But the insights from this history will largely be left for others to write.

Andrew Watson
University of Saskatchewan