

ONLINE JOURNAL™

www.onlinejournal.com

Review

The Essence of Oil & Gas Depletion: Collected Papers and Excerpts

Compiled by C.J. Campbell

Multi-Science Publishing Company Ltd. ISBN: 0 906522 19 6

341 Pages. US \$48.00

Reviewed by Kéllia Ramares

Online Journal Associate Editor

December 30, 2003—I think there is a connection between the fact that the United States has billions to spend on war in the Persian Gulf and the fact that my local bus company “A.C. Transit” is in the red and has just cut service for the second time in 2003, with more cuts planned for next spring. I believe that connection is a phenomenon called “Peak.”

I also think “Peak” is a factor in why 9-11 happened, and why the United States has been working on rapprochement with OPEC member Libya. “Peak” is in the background of the pre-election machinations of failed oilman George W. Bush and his presumptive running mate, former Halliburton CEO Dick Cheney, who is fighting hard to keep much information about his secret energy task force from ever seeing the light of day.

It is vital that more and more people come to a better understanding of “Peak,” i.e., oil and gas depletion, as soon as possible.

Providing information on “Peak” is the reason C.J. Campbell produced “The Essence of Oil and Gas Depletion.” The book begins with what Campbell calls an Aspiration: “That knowledge of oil and gas depletion may help people and their governments understand the limits imposed by Nature such that they may be able to plan their future so as to live in better harmony with themselves, their environment and each other.”

Campbell is perhaps the best known of a group of world-class petrogeologists who are warning that the global peak in production of oil will come this decade, if it hasn’t happened already. This means that, as a whole, world oil production will soon start to decline a few percent per year. This permanent decline will have devastating effects on industrialized nations (e.g., U.S. and Western Europe) and industrializing nations (e.g., China and India) whose economic growth depends on the availability of cheap petroleum.

The political impacts of what used to be called “The Great Rollover,” but which is now more commonly referred to as “Peak,” are devastating as well. Consider that half of the world’s proven oil reserves are within the territory of five Persian Gulf states: Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Iran. Other nearby states: Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Yemen, are significant secondary suppliers in the region. Russia is currently the world’s largest oil supplier after Saudi Arabia. But its fields are mature and in decline, and its oil is more expensive to produce than Persian Gulf oil. As demand for petroleum increases with population increase and further industrial development, the rest of the world will depend more heavily on the Persian Gulf to produce oil as aggregate world production passes “Peak.” The Persian Gulf region is expected to peak last. Oil production in Iraq, for example, is expected to be among the last, if not the last, to peak, around the year 2030.

Campbell is one of the co-founders of The Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas (ASPO—gas was recently added to the name and the acronym was not changed). The introduction of “The Essence of Oil & Gas Depletion” states that ASPO “is a network of concerned scientists in European universities and institutions who are committed to study the issue of the peak of world oil and gas supply and to evaluate its impact.” ASPO has been producing monthly newsletters since 2000 and extracts from these letters comprise most of “The Essence of Oil and Gas Depletion.” The book also contains many graphs, some of ASPO’s statistical reviews, and it ends with a chapter called “SYNTHESIS.” The latter consists of several essays written by Campbell, who is also the author of the 1997 book, “The Coming Oil Crisis.”

Despite the fact that “The Essence of Oil & Gas Depletion” is a gold mine of information, it has some serious shortcomings, most of which are attributable to the book’s having been “compiled” rather than “edited.” The newsletters are printed “as is,” meaning that information on specific subjects is scattered among the newsletters, rather than edited into single chapters that would save the reader a lot of hunting. It would have been better, for example, to have the debates and discussions about “Peak” placed into a single chapter. Likewise, the country-by-country assessments of oil supplies could have been placed in a single chapter, with the countries arranged by region, e.g., Latin America, Persian Gulf, North Sea, etc. A regional grouping would have brought home to the reader the fact that some regions are much better off than others, and that some countries within regions are much better off than others. And the histories of particular countries, e.g., Saudi Arabia, could have been placed with the rest of that country’s assessment.

Additionally, while the bibliography is quite generous, the index to “The Essence of Oil and Gas Depletion” is very scanty. I tried to look in the index for OPEC in the hope of being directed to a list of the member nations. But the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) was not listed by name or acronym! There is also no separate listing of cited URLs in the back of the book. Now that we are in the Age of the Internet, publishers should consider separate listings for URLs rather than burying them in the general bibliography.

The writing in “The Essence of Oil and Gas Depletion” is very accessible to lay people. But the cost of the book (\$48 US), its many charts and graphs, and its organization make it unlikely that one would see commuters reading “The Essence of Oil and Gas Depletion” on the bus or train to work. But commuters, especially if they live in the energy-profligate United States, are the very people who need to learn about “Peak” quickly. For them, I recommend the more user-friendly and much less expensive [“The Party’s Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies.”](#) written by Richard Heinberg, with a foreword by C.J. Campbell. It is published by New Societies Press.

“The Essence of Oil and Gas Depletion” should find its way into college and even upper division secondary school classes and not just those in geology or earth science. Teachers of political science, economics, history, ecology, area studies, geography, and sociology could use this book to add “Peak” to their curricula.

Journalists who report on energy, the environment, economics, or politics, even on the local level, should add “The Essence of Oil and Gas Depletion” to their reference libraries. Policy wonks in and out of government should read it. Online readers who wish to access ASPO newsletters can find links to them on my web site: www.rise4news.net/Peak_Oil.html.

Kéllia Ramares’ audio interview with C.J. Campbell, recorded on September 2, 2002, is also available through www.rise4news.net/Peak_Oil.html.