

REVIEW: NORTH SEA TIGERS

Christopher Harvie

Bill Mackie, **The Oilmen: the North Sea Tigers**, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004, 263 pp, 114 photos, 10 maps and diagrams. Pb, £ 14.99, ISBN 1841583022.

I wrote my history of North Sea Oil – **Fool’s Gold** (Hamish Hamilton, 1994) – in 1993-4, in about six months of study-leave, against a deadline, because the TV producer Denys Blakeway required copy, chapter by chapter, for his three-hour Channel Four series ‘Wasted Windfall’. Such was the pressure that I rarely saw the outside of the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. This routine only ended when a minor but undignified operation hospitalised me for a week, just in time to revise the manuscript. The exigencies of this situation confined my interviews to business men, journalists and politicians, although a treasure-trove of archive material came to hand in the papers of Richard Funkhouser, the U.S. consul in Edinburgh, now deposited at Aberdeen University.

The account was tolerable enough, if skewed in favour of the political and cultural impact. It lost out on the experience of working offshore, about which I was dependent on written-up accounts and interviews. Nor had I been on a rig or platform (very difficult to arrange at that time, although Denys got out to one with a Health and Safety Executive inspection): the closest I got personally was to see them up close in the Cromarty Firth in 1976, and viewing a German TV documentary on the Norwegian sector. If you presented the photo-negative of this experience you would get something close to Bill Mackie’s absorbing book.

Mackie is a journalist who in his sixties wrote an Aberdeen PhD on the impact of the oil industry in North-East Scotland. One of his main sources

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was oral history, to which he added his own interviews. The result should give him some claim to be the Studs Terkel of the oil industry.

After an initial couple of chapters on the early years of gas and oil exploration, in which the narrative element is for obvious reasons more derivative, **The Oilmen** is structured in ten thematic chapters on life on the rigs, divers, helicopter pilots, women in the industry, and so on. Like the great pioneer of the *genre*, Henry Mayhew, Mackie asks the right questions, edits his subjects well, and fades out of the frame. This is rich stuff, well cantilevered into the history of the industry. Mackie's journalistic skills make his chapters compulsively readable; the 114 photographs are an integral part of the narrative; there are useful explanatory diagrams of platform types, production and employment statistics, and an essential glossary of technical terms and acronyms. There isn't an index: a big black mark.

Mackie makes the point, as I did, that in the context of conventional industrial relations the huge offshore programme more-than-incidentally reinforced the autonomy of management and the marginalisation of workers' rights. He is not writing to a political programme – sometimes organised labour comes off badly in his account – but maintains that management's victory had long-term costs which told against the industry as a whole. In the latter part of the book the theme of safety, dramatised by the explosion which wiped out Piper Alpha on 6 July 1988, takes centre stage. Mackie attributes the inevitability of such a major disaster to the collapse in the price of oil from \$30 to \$10 a barrel in 1986, which put the economics of the whole production region under threat and led to postponed maintenance and to corners being cut. The generally anti-union attitude (even today, scarcely 10% of the offshore workforce are organised) meant that such cost-cutting was not challenged, although ironically Occidental was one of the few concerns to grant union rights.

Mackie goes beyond the disaster and Lord Cullen's Court of Inquiry to record the first major labour disputes, from 1989 on, with the formation of the Offshore Industry Liaison Committee (OILC), and the simultaneous drastic rationalisation – Cost Reduction in a New Era (CRINE) – undertaken by the companies. This has already been the subject of John Foster, Charles Woolfson and Ulrich Beck's **Paying the Piper** (1996), but Mackie's interviews contribute valuable material on the human impact and give rather alarming examples of increasingly run-down, under-maintained production plants.

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North Sea oil has been curiously neglected by political historians. In none of the three biographies of Harold Wilson, prime minister at the crucial point of government intervention in 1975, does it appear. New Labour has taken little interest in it, and none in the issues of mutual responsibility that Mackie raises; yet without it the present UK economic 'success' bruted by Gordon Brown and the Murdoch press would look distinctly unconvincing. As Mackie writes, the North Sea is by no means at the end of its resources or prospects, though whether the multinationals, and UK politicians desperate for big donations from someone – anyone – are the best custodians of it is another matter. In contrast to Norway, where a state-driven regime has delivered wealth to the citizenry, technological capability, safety (and five times as many women on the rigs) the UK achievement has been distinctly mixed, and the jury is still out on its overall economic impact. Mackie promises a second volume on the onshore business. I can't wait. If he calls it **The Tigers II** he can give us an index as well.

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