

Powerful Henri Deterding Who Rivals Standard Oil

A Post-War Historian Surveys the Life and Activities

THE MOST POWERFUL IN THE WORLD: The Life of Sir Henri Deterding. 448 pages. With portrait by Glyn Roberts. New York: Covici-Friede.

By P. W. WILSON

THE sensation-mongers of Europe have amused themselves with speculation over two men of mystery. Both of these celebrities have been multi-millionaires. Both have achieved the ethical prestige that Machiavelli shared with Mephistopheles. On both of these benefactors, though aliens of grateful Britain conferred honor of knighthood.

Sir Basil Zaharoff, the Lehigh, supplied civilization with armaments. It has been the privilege of Sir Henri Deterding, the Dutchman, to promote the less abundant flow of petrol. He started as a boy in a bar in the Indies and, at the age of 18, he can look back upon oil fields that he has managed from Tripoli to Mosul.

In these pages, the care described and, in preparing the narrative, Mr. Roberts has aimed a good deal of source material. But he realizes that the public is apt to be impatient with arithmetic. Indeed, the arithmetic of commerce is often these days to be found on the scraps of paper. Sordid details like mergers, concessions, price fixing and other lapses to filthy lucre are handled therefore, in the impressive style that is more popular than mere precision. The book is an economic treatise. It is an apocalypse of power in a fiction energy that is wide as the veldt.

Mr. Roberts, whose sympathies are frankly with the League of Nations, writes for instance, in Spain—writing an evangelist among the reactionaries. Following the traditions of half a century, he treats petroleum as an ethical paradox. To produce this questionable commodity is presumption of guilt. To consume what has been produced is innocence. An oil magnate who insinuates serpentine pipelines into a garden of Eden like Mesopotamia must be Satan. But Adam, who drives his Eve along the Lincoln Highway at twenty miles to the gallon, is allowed to make a perfect getaway, without receiving so much as a ticket for his moral obliquity.

The villain of the piece used to be the elder Rockefeller. But Deterding, though an upstart, soon showed up the wizard of Cleveland as a mere tyro in oleaginous altruism. At some conference, the young fellow said something or other about oil somewhere and, according to Mr. Roberts, the world-wide supremacy of Rockefeller—if he ever desired such supremacy—was at an end.

The truth about Deterding is, according to Mr. Roberts, *l'èse majesté*. No Englishman is allowed to have his ears insulted by such veracity. Over newspapers and books, so we are told, there is spread subtle but impenetrable censorship, due to financial influences and the fear of liability under a strict enforcement of laws penalizing libel. The appearance of this volume is evidence, therefore, that, under

the Constitution of the United States, freedom of the press which includes the candor which is believed to be true of Americans can stand the shocks.

Censorship in Great Britain Mr. Roberts sees it, explains, he calls the "stupendous gulch" of that perpetually "focussed" country. British opinion is apathetic toward crusades against the unseen Golem of the street is thus regaled, not with the truth as Mr. Roberts sees the truth, but with truth a thrill. As he strolls around the countryside arrayed in squire in plus fours, Sir F. Deterding is suddenly magnified into a Gulliver among the Lilliputians. He is saluted as "the powerful man in the world."

A great merchant who with any natural product he can arrange for contacts. He must develop sources of supply. He must seek markets for his oil. He cannot be unknown to governments. For governments and governments chase what concessions yield these machinations we lead a good deal from Mr. Roberts.

The idea that things happen in a country because the oil has paid his usual call may be pressed, however, quite too far. This book itself debunks the tensions of its engaging narrative. Deterding has been useful servant of destiny. But destiny has been his master.

He married a White Russian and has violently opposed the Bolshevik regime. But that did not save oil wells, either in Russia or recently in Mexico. Late in life, a superman married a German and became pro-Nazi. But,

according to the reports which Mr. Roberts believes to be trustworthy, Deterding's international influence had to fill a large sum—least \$150,000,000—for Hitler's movement in order to obtain more favorable position in the man oil market. It may have been shrewd business. But it was only omnipotent.

Deterding, however, has been able to act in a genius—acting to Mr. Roberts, accompanied also—in respects. If there had been a Deterding system, it would be as big as business in oil. It has arisen inevitably out of the demand for oil. The very fact that Deterding is able to be

indicating the difference in his significance amid the maelstrom of transition that swept him into the haven of opulence.

Mr. Roberts holds that Franklin D. Roosevelt is "the most skillful doctor by whom the ailing capitalist system of America has been attended." Even so, that system is condemned in these pages. Oil,



Sir Henri Deterding.

Wide World Photo.

vision. We read:

The men who work to produce wealth * * * can and must take over control of production and distribution of wealth, less or worse befall.

Of the capitalists who seek to "turn back the clock"—die hard, as Deterding is declared to be—the only question is: "Can

It is a pertinent question. But we wonder whether Mr. Roberts has answered it. What is the problem to be solved?

Communities are national and live within frontiers. Oil is geological and distributed without reference to such communities. Is it most convenient to develop oil if it be better for nationalist governments to enter the arena with armaments backing commerce? Which costs most—a world war between Shell and Standard or a world war of democracies and dictatorships over the oil reserves of Rumania?

Mr. Roberts gives an account of what the intrusion of oil meant to diplomacy at the Genoa Conference, and his comments hardly suggest that nationalism, as a sparkplug, is conducive to the smooth working of the many cylinders in petroleum-driven machines. Also, Mr. Roberts does not appear to be wholly delighted with British participation in Persian petroleum, which, again, was governmental.

There is no difficulty in the State following the advice of Mr. Roberts and expropriating oil wells. Russia did it. Mexico is following the example of Moscow. But neither Russia nor Mexico, up to the present, has been conspicuously successful in providing their citizens with automobiles, motor boats, oil burners and Diesel engines. For the United States, as Mr. Roberts recognizes, the serious question is not who owns the oil wells but whether, in the future, there will be oil wells to be owned. Over that question there may be quite as much governmental anxiety as even Mr. Roberts would recommend, and not alone at Washington.