



Breaking Rockefeller: The Incredible Story of the Ambitious Rivals Who Toppled an Oil Empire

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The incredible tale of how ambitious oil rivals Marcus Samuel, Jr., and Henri Deterding joined forces to topple the Standard Oil empire

Marcus Samuel, Jr., is an unorthodox Jewish merchant trader. Henri Deterding is a take-no-prisoners oilman. In 1889, John D. Rockefeller is at the peak of his power. Having annihilated all competition and possessing near-total domination of the market, even the U.S. government is wary of challenging the great “anaconda” of Standard Oil. The Standard never loses—that is until Samuel and Deterding team up to form Royal Dutch Shell.

A riveting account of ambition, oil, and greed, *Breaking Rockefeller* traces Samuel’s rise from outsider to the heights of the British aristocracy, Deterding’s conquest of America, and the collapse of Rockefeller’s monopoly. The beginning of the twentieth century is a time when vast fortunes were made and lost. Taking readers through the rough and tumble of East London’s streets, the twilight turmoil of czarist Russia, to the halls of the British Parliament, and right down Broadway in New York City, Peter Doran offers a richly detailed, fresh perspective on how Samuel and Deterding beat the world’s richest man at his own game.

Breaking Rockefeller: The Incredible Story of the Ambitious Rivals Who Toppled an Oil Empire Details

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Evan Schneider says

This book was awesome. I learned a lot about how the world has come to be today because of Rockefeller, Samuel, and Deterding. The way Doran ties it into current affairs closes out the book magnificently

Lady Wesley says

Breaking Rockefeller is the best kind of popular history -- with fascinating characters fully brought to life in Peter Doran's lively prose. If you always thought that Teddy Roosevelt and the trust busters brought about the break-up of the Standard Oil behemoth (as I did), you know only a part of the story. Doran introduces the reader to Marcus Samuel, Jr., and Henri Deterding, who formed their own "team of rivals" to attack Rockefeller from outside the U.S.

The story of the oil industry's early days could have been dryly factual, but Doran makes it into a page-turner without sacrificing authenticity.

I was entertained, and I learned something. You can't ask for more.

Note: I received an advance copy of this book from the author in return for an honest review.

John says

As a student at the University of Texas, I recall one of my professors, who once had worked for a newspaper in Kahoka, Mo., talking about how the Standard Oil Co. practiced "cut to kill" in the town. That meant that any new gas station that tried to open up would soon be driven out of business. Standard would cut prices ridiculously low, then once the new competitor, who couldn't match the low prices, was gone, the Standard station would raise its price sky high. John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Co., using such predatory business practices, at first dominated the global oil industry. Who eventually helped break up Standard's monopoly? Investigative reporter Ida Tarbell was one. She was able, with connections such as Mark Twain, to gain access to the inner workings of the company and expose its shady practices. Also, trust busters such as Sen. John Sherman who originated the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and President Teddy Roosevelt who worked to enforce it. Then Royal Dutch Shell emerged as a powerful competitor. Lively characters, gushers, dry wells, political intrigue, oil tanker design and construction permeate this book. What's the difference between an illegal monopoly and a legal one? You'll find the answer here.

Haur Bin says

History of Royal Dutch Shell against the backdrop of Standard Oil domination of petroleum industry. Marcus Samuel's entrepreneurial ability coupled with being at the right place at the right time where he was

given an opportunity of a lifetime to capitalise on Russian oil boom in Baku where Rothschilds needed someone to move the oil to the Far East. With his earlier business connection as well as bold vision to win on logistics, probably gave rise to the invention of safe & efficient sea transportation for petroleum products. The design and success of Murex through Suez Canal gave Shell the advantage in capturing Far East market share.

Separately, Royal Dutch Company led by Kessler and eventually Henri Deterding struck oil in Dutch colonies in Indonesia. Rise of gasoline fuelled internal combustion automobile played to Royal Dutch's hands as the quality of their Indonesian crude oil possessed superior gasoline yield.

Both companies were competing against one another on top of price war from Standard Oil hence during early talks, Shell almost took over Royal Dutch playing into Deterding's fear of a Standard/Shell partnership that will crush him in his home ground, Far East. However Samuel missed his chance and the first attempt for merger failed.

After Standard Oil's dissolution due to Supreme Court order for anti-trust, Shell was threatened by the rise of socialism through Bolsheviks in Russia which wiped out significant Russian assets. This left Shell in a vulnerable state and Deterding, now having a stronger financial and strategic position, took this opportunity to merge the two companies.

Ultimately, Rockefeller was not broken by the rise of RDS but by the ruling from Supreme Court which ironically made him even richer than before.

Charlie Quimby says

Misleading, overstated title. So-so writing that circles around a point until you want to scream for mercy. For example, we get that naval ships could sail faster and gain tactical advantage if powered by oil instead of coal. But the repetition never yields a deeper understanding of how oil powered ships were different or precisely why, besides tradition and laziness, the British Admiralty resisted the new ships for so long. We simply hear it over and over.

Steven Peterson says

A fascinating book. John D. Rockefeller had established the Standard Oil Company, which used its near monopoly power to dominate the oil market in the United States. This book is a study in how two entrepreneurs--competitors at times and collaborators at other times--entered the American market and competed with Standard Oil. The success of the new group--Royal Dutch Shell--was a bit less than met the eye, but it was surely an important event in American oil business and policy and politics.

The progenitors of Royal Dutch Shell. . . Marcus Samuel began with developing a plan of action for oil from Baku and other sites in Russia. Thus became, over time, Shell Oil. Then, Henri Deterding, who used oil from Southeast Asia to create what became known as Royal Dutch. While they were working to develop their separate enterprises, Other figures were involved in the picture--such as the Rothschild family.

With the development of oil tankers that could traverse the Suez Canal, Samuels experienced a breakthrough. Over time, he and Deterding developed a prickly business relationship.

In the United States, Standard Oil was torn apart under the aegis of antitrust laws. At a point in time, Royal Dutch Shell entered the American market and succeeded. Calling this a Rockefeller "breaking" is a bit off target, since Standard Oil had been weakened by government action. Nonetheless, a fascinating book about oil politics and business. . . .

Chess says

Great read on the powerful men Marcus Samuels and Deterding with their companies Shell and Royal Dutch and how they came to surpass and invade the oil monopoly ran by Rockefeller. Beautiful work of world history lost in time.

Jill Stevenson says

Dana review- the title implies some master counter stroke but it is merely the tale of natural forces at work.

Paul says

A long magazine article filled out with some ancillary wandering. The writing wasn't strong enough to points he was trying to make into a cohesive piece.

Margaret Rusciolelli says

Who knew the world of oil from crude to refined could be interesting? Peter Dorian's book of oil tycoons is history in an easy to digest form. The fluctuating gas prices we experience in the 21st century have always been part and parcel of this industry. Well written, no pun intended.

Bimal Patel says

What an awesome book written on history of petroleum business by Peter Doran. The author's story telling style makes this book very riveting. The book starts out by giving the readers a glimpse of the birth of Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company and how it came to rule the petroleum business all over the world. It's fascinating to learn about a Jewish merchant's son in England and a Dutch tobacco agent, who eventually created a company that could go head to head with Standard Oil of Rockefeller. Still if it weren't for US legal system, Standard would have been the most powerful company even now. Thanks to the creation of antitrust laws that eventually gave fair fighting chance to other player and made US land of opportunities in business. This book couldn't come at a better time when oil price are at an all time low and the geopolitical map for oil business is an changing.

I am sure this book will find its audience among history buffs but even if you are not a history buff, you will still come out with a good deal of knowledge about the history of petroleum business.

That being said, I highly recommend it.

Sankari says

A history of the oil industry including all the major players like Standard Oil and Royal Dutch Shell. Peter Doran does an excellent job of not only accurately depicting the historical events that occurred in the time but also of storytelling. He really delves into the nuances of ambition and greed and different personality types that would prove to be so incredibly influential in the oil industry. I learned so much from this book, and am really disturbed by a lot of things, such as the the Jones Act.

Andrew says

More about Shell and Royal Dutch than about Rockefeller or how he was toppled. Misleading title, but interesting nonetheless.

Marks54 says

This book is an engaging account of the origins of the Royal Dutch Shell group in the oil industry. The author is a policy/energy wonk and not a professional historian. The story tends to focus on individuals rather than the complexities of corporate structures, antitrust law, or geological strata. This is not a huge problem, since the individuals in this story are literally of world historical scope - John D. Rockefeller, Henri Deterding, Marcus Samuel, Winston Churchill, Teddy Roosevelt, and others. The result is a book that tells an important and highly readable story and is similar in style to authors like Erik Larson.

I especially liked several aspects of how Mr. Doran told this story.

First, business strategies are not seen as developing by themselves as if they were garden plants. Instead, these strategies develop in opposition to those of other firms (and governments). Shell and Royal Dutch develop in opposition to Standard Oil and Rockefeller. That opposition is central to the development of these firms, their amalgamation and their entry into the US market. This is the difference between seeing strategy as a plan versus seeing it as a game, in which subsequent actions depend upon the moves of an opponent.

Second, government - in this case really big government - is an inherent part of the story. Shell could not have succeeded against Standard without the antitrust attacks on Standard by US Federal and state governments. Doran clearly wants to cast Samuel and Deterding as plowing free market field to free the oil business from the stranglehold imposed by Standard oil. However, this is not the free market mayhem of the open outcry markets in Chicago of days past but instead a battle among would be oligarchs who all want to dominate their business to the extent possible.

Third, technology, collusion, and competition are all interlinked in this story. Sure, one needs to have a sufficiently sophisticated technology or else one will not get the required scale and scope of production and

will lose out to better endowed competitors. However, that technology needs to fit within the business context of the industry in order to provide its intended value. The best technologies do not always win out, especially in the short run. For example, the development of the ultrasafe tanker by Shell was critical to its strategy of taking on Standard. For the technological superiority of the tanker to help Shell, however, the design of the ship had to be accepted as safe by the Suez Canal authorities, the opposition to the acceptance of that design had to be defeated, and the Canal had to be under the control of the British government. Once all of these stars fell in line, then Shell had a competitive advantage, at least for a while. Until they did, the enhanced tanker design could not help Shell enough to make a difference.

Finally, the book argues for the importance of history and the need to understand it to appreciate the present. While such claims can prove dubious, especially in books targeted to policy audiences, I think Mr. Doran has a case here and his concluding chapter is worthwhile. The linkage with contemporary Russia and Gazprom and the crisis in the Ukraine is reasonable and shows that Standard Oil has provided a playbook that is still relevant.

On top of all this, it is a very entertaining book.

Sherrie Pilkington says

I won this book in a GoodReads Giveaway

4.5 stars. Interesting and engaging. The author let the story meander through different stories and ideas as he told the tale of how Rockefeller's empire was brought down. There were strong personalities, scandals, intrigue, and it read more like a novel than a history book. It was very hard to put down as it kept touching on fresh ideas and situations.

My only complaint is the final chapter. In trying to make parallels with modern times, he ended up writing a political tirade against the Jones Act. While I don't disagree with his arguments, it was a very awkward way to end such a fine book.
