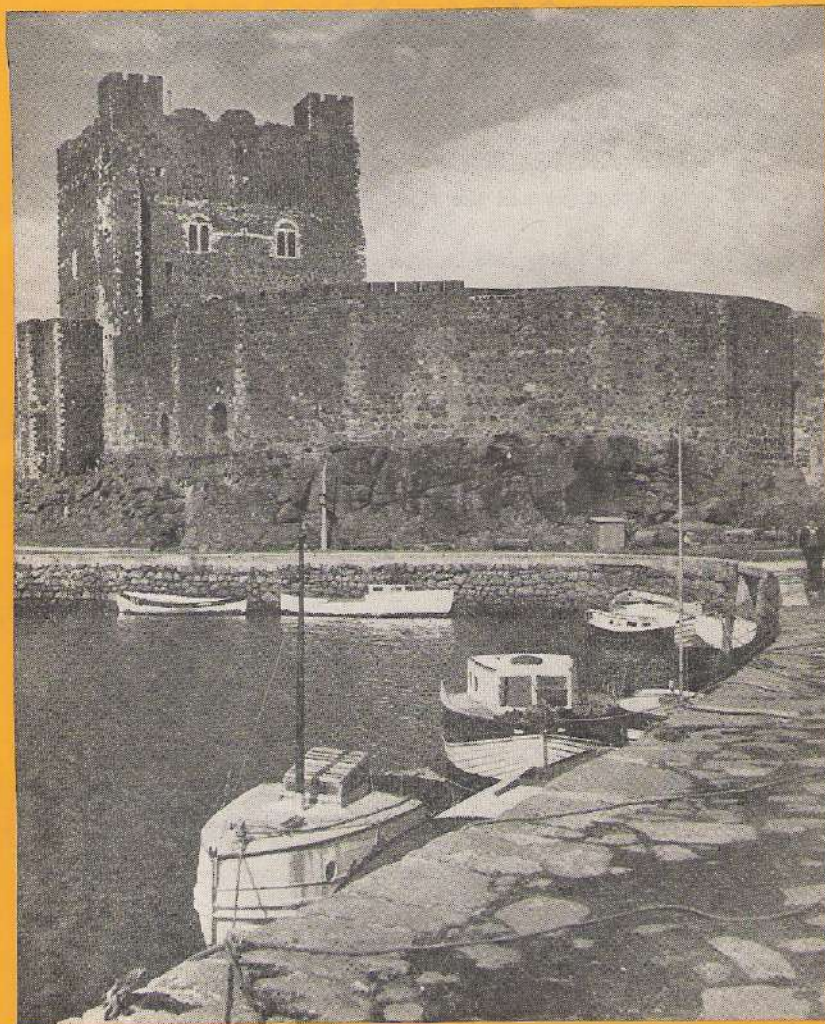


BRITAIN TO-DAY



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BRITONS IN PERSIA

By KENNETH YOUNG

THERE seems at first sight little in common between that half-forgotten religion of antiquity, Zoroastrianism, and the vast modern enterprise, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Yet the two share the distinction of being the only exploiters of the mineral riches deep beneath the soil of Persia. The Zoroastrians, who still exist among the Parsees of India, used to build their fire-temples in Persia over vents from which escaped a gas; this provided, by apparently miraculous means, an inexhaustible supply of fuel for the "eternal fire."

This "eternal fire," one of the natural by-products of oil as it gushes from the ground, was later used as an illuminant and sometimes as a cure for mange in camels. But it was not until centuries later, in fact until exactly fifty years ago, that a far-sighted Englishman, the late W. K. D'Arcy, chanced to read a memorandum by a French geologist, de Morgan. His interest aroused, he successfully negotiated a concession from the Persian government and set about "searching for, obtaining, exploiting, developing, rendering suitable for trade, carrying away and selling natural gas, asphalt and ozokerite throughout the whole extent of the Persian Empire" (with the exception of the five northern provinces).

To-day the refinery at Abadan, where the crude oil is processed into the various types of fuel, has become the largest in the world; but it is, so to speak, the end-product, the crown, of an immense amount of human toil, mental and physical, and enormous expenditure of money. The experiences of D'Arcy and his collaborators in the first twelve years of the concession were disappointing, unproductive and unprofitable. Not until funds were almost exhausted and immense difficulties surmounted was oil struck in large quantities at Masjid-i-Sulaiman. Refined petroleum products from Persia did not reach the world's markets until twelve years after the date of the concession—twelve years of almost super-human toil in unbelievably primitive surroundings.

I believe that these twelve years of toil left an indelible mark on the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. For the directors and chief

employees of the company have always been set apart from those of other companies in that they have from the beginning regarded themselves as something more than executives producing a commodity without which the great wheels of the modern world could not turn. No other company has undertaken such enormous or far-reaching schemes of welfare work and social improvement as has Anglo-Iranian.

The company, of course, was not a benevolent society; the blessings it brought to Persia bore a strict relation to its success in producing and selling oil; and its welfare work fitted the situation in the concessionary areas as the glove fits the hand. Nothing was imposed from above; no return was demanded. For example, Persia is a Moslem country; a mosque was needed at Masjid-i-Sulaiman, but no money was available. So the company contributed largely towards the building of the mosque and has recently been giving similar help in the building of another at Abadan.

But to understand exactly what this welfare work has been one needs to consider in broad outline the operations of extracting and refining oil in Persia, for the work began in an attempt to lighten the toil of the 70,000 Persian employees and their families concerned with those operations.

Oil in Persia gushes forth under its own impetus and requires no pumping to bring it to the surface. But the gushes are unfortunately in the most inhospitable and distant parts of the country. Installations and living accommodation are often in almost desert terrain. Staffs have to be maintained there and also at points down the pipelines which convey the crude oil, either to the refinery at Abadan, or to the oil port, Bandar Mashur, further down the Gulf from where it is shipped in its crude state for refining abroad. Most of the staff, however, are at Abadan. In the refinery there the crude oil is passed through complicated and delicate machinery until it emerges in five main forms: fuel oil, by far the biggest product, used for powering ships, large central heating installations and so on; diesel oils, for ships and railway engines; kerosene, for lighting and running small engines, including the jet; and petrol and aviation spirit, both of which are removed from the crude oil as gases, liquefied and then stabilized.

About sixteen million gallons of crude oil are normally refined every day at Abadan. The basic motive power for the refinery comes from electricity; this is produced in the largest generating station in the Middle East (65,000 kw. daily), with another of 60,000 k.w. capacity nearing completion. For various and manifold purposes, more water is daily pumped through the refinery than passes through the mains operated by the London Water Board for its 8½ million population. The last process in the refinery is the pumping of the various products aboard the appropriate tankers which lie off the town in the Shatt-el-Arab.

The refinery itself covers about three square miles. The visitor's first sight of it is as breath-taking as the vista of New York's skyscrapers. It is an extraordinary place of towering and strangely-shaped buildings, some like enormous silver footballs, others reminiscent of gasholders, others again like Brobdingnagian versions of the inside of a motor-car, vast cylinders in the air with huge pipes turning and twisting from them. And surmounting all, the aluminium-coloured station chimneys, rows and rows in the strict order of soldiers on parade. One of the many safety precautions will fascinate those who are intrigued by railway engines. The refinery is so extensive that it has its own railway with toy-like locomotives with neither firebox nor tender—yet working on steam. The steam is, so to speak, bottled from the refinery supply and inserted into the locomotive rather in the way a battery is put into a torch. Each charge lasts about two hours. This method avoids the danger of fire in the gas areas which would be possible in the conventionally-fired steam locomotive. Diesel engines are also in use.

But at least as great a problem as the industrial and technological one was, from the start, that of housing and feeding the large numbers of men, women and children who formed the employees. Forty years ago, Abadan was a salty, desolate island; there were a few huts of baked mud, no streets, no water supply, indeed no town at all. In that short time, the company has built 21,000 permanent houses and further building was planned; it has transformed the barren island into a modern municipality with roads, shops, electric lighting, a drainage system, canteens, schools, cinemas, swimming pools and clubs.

The same development on a smaller scale has taken place in the oilfields themselves.

Anglo-Iranian has financed the setting up of brickworks, the largest of which, at Janghieh near Ahwaz, has a capacity of four million bricks a month. Two dairy farms have been financed; and local farmers have continually been helped by loans of machinery and gifts of seed and other agricultural materials not easily obtainable in Persia. To get the food and other materials, both locally produced and imported, to the workers, the company opened shops where the goods were subsidized so as to bring them within the range of every worker's pocket. Following the visit of a British Co-operative Society expert, two flourishing Co-operatives were started with over 5,000 members.

When the company first began work, Persia was periodically ravaged by cholera, plague, smallpox and malaria. By 1950 the report of the observers sent out by the International Labour Office in Geneva to study Labour conditions in the Persian oil industry stated:

No one who visits the company's areas can fail to recognize the effort which the company has made in organizing its health and medical services. . . . Although they were designed primarily for the company's own employees, they are in fact used extensively by the workers' families and even by people who have no connections with the company.

The company always aimed at developing a medical service for the Persians which they could operate entirely on their own. There were about 100 specialists and medical officers; 90 fully trained nurses (and a school of nursing); and 853 hospital beds in the company's areas. Of the medical staff 57 per cent. were Persians. Two fully equipped hospitals—the only ones in the town—were maintained in Abadan. There are modern hospitals at Masjid-i-Sulaiman and Agha Jari. The company has given help to other municipalities in opening clinics; a £100,000 endowment was made for a wing of a hospital outside Teheran, the capital; the company's wedding gift of £25,000 to the Shah is, at his wish, to be devoted to building a dispensary in the slum quarter of Teheran.

The results of the company's enterprise have had a beneficial effect on the general health of the whole country. There have

been no serious outbreaks of plague or cholera in the last twenty-five years; the number of malaria cases has fallen; mass vaccinations by the company, co-operating with the Persian Ministry of Health, have greatly reduced the endemic smallpox.

But perhaps the most important work of the company has been in education—important, that is, to the future of the Persian State and people. The International Labour Office report had this to say:

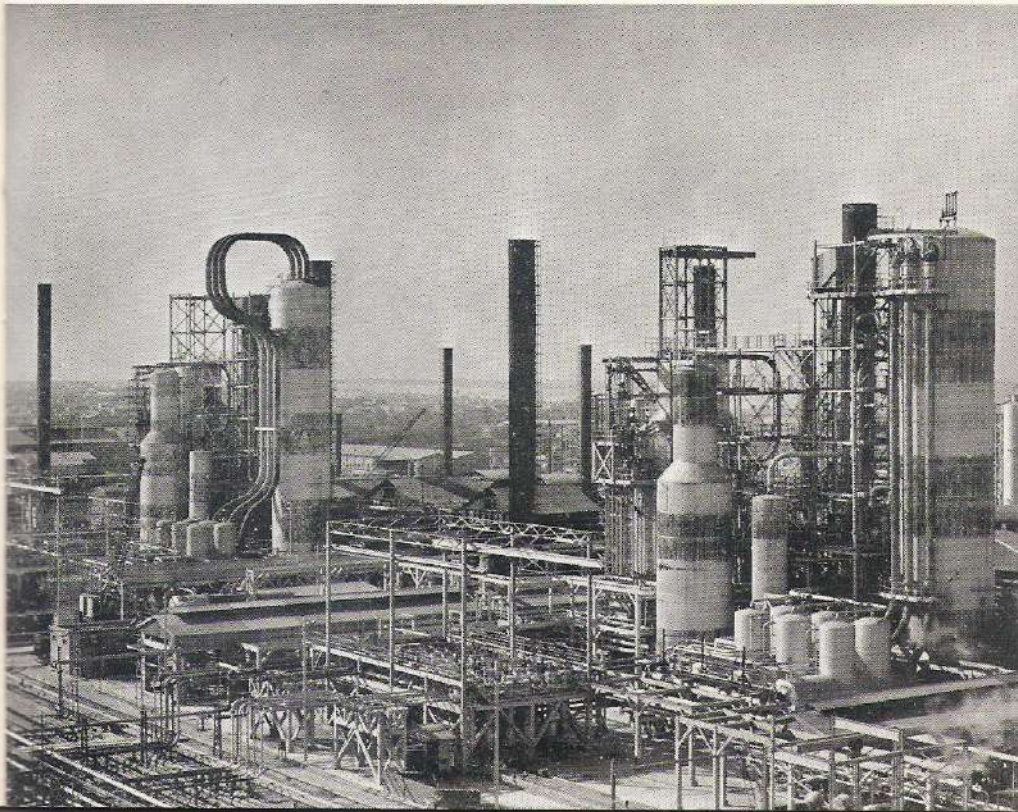
The future industrial and social development of Persia will be influenced in a high degree by the progress which is made in the sphere of education, and the efforts put forward in the company's areas to provide increased educational facilities will produce their reward not only for the company but for the country generally.

The company has equipped and built more than thirty schools, attended by 20,000 pupils, and it maintained houses for many of the teachers. A full range of primary and secondary education was available in Abadan, and this was not restricted to children of employees. In addition, there were adult and apprentice training schemes, higher technical and commercial training at the Company-owned Abadan Technical Institute, and every year the company maintained entirely at its own expense about eighty Persians in colleges and universities in Great Britain.

The company's prime aim in all this has been to enable more and more Persians to take over the key positions in the oil industry in Persia. As the Geneva report said: "There is no reluctance on the part of the company to promote Persians for those (higher and supervisory) categories." But the broader aim of enrichment of the whole of Persian life is not overlooked. At this moment, the equipment of the University Technical faculty at Teheran is nearing completion at a cost of about £200,000 to the Anglo-Iranian company.



The refinery at Abadan; and (below) two of the giant distillation units





(i) *The apprentices' swimming pool*
(ii) *The X-ray department of the Company's hospital at Abadan*

