

Black Gold, the Real El Dorado

BY GERARD A. BESSON



Raleigh at the Pitch Lake, Trinidad

At that same time not too far away: The tall man, dressed in iron, examined the jet-black, viscous, semi-solid substance, the crudest oil, asphaltum. In the bay, his ship, the Lion's Whelp, anchored into the light air, bowed vaguely to the risen sun.

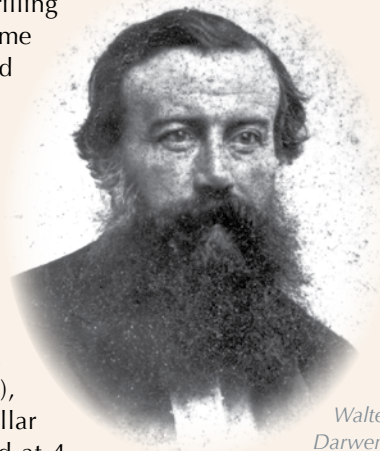
There were bright-red grains of hair still in his white, salty beard. It appeared better than the pitch of Norway; it would caulk her below the waterline before the voyage up the river, now marked 'Orinoco' on the chart. A useful specimen to join others, like the cohiba from a nearby island, which was smoked in a pipe called a tovacó.

But the great goal was the Kingdom of Gold, where the king of gold, the man who was covered in gold, lived in a city that was made of gold, the children entertaining their idle innocence with golden toys. 'El Dorado': that was to be his destiny, now bound by a royal oath, one that may not be violated. He had already named a land for her, Virginia. The first exporter squinted in to the brilliant morning warming the shining water of Guapo bay, near to the black lake at La Brea. His name was Walter Raleigh, knight errant.

DARWENT'S WELL

Then again, the rolling thunder of the cannon had vanished into the wilderness of the great plains. Atlanta had been burnt to cinders and the slaves were now free. The American Civil War had ended; it was 1866.

The year 1866 also meant discharge for the young captain in the Union Forces. He was not an American; in fact, he had been born in Norfolk in England in 1821, and had been apprenticed at the young age of fourteen to acquire a taste for mechanical engineering in a country where an extensive programme of building bridges, roads, railways and tunnels was under way – this being on account of the Industrial Revolution, already famous. Subsequently, he had married. It was a short marriage, and after an alternative dalliance, he fled with his second wife to Canada, where he settled and did a little mineral prospecting. It was in those years perhaps, that he may have ventured south, over the Canadian border and joined the American Union Army. Just before the war's end he was contacted by the West Indian Petroleum Company, incorporated in the United States of America in 1865. He was to be the company's superintendent for the purpose of exploring for oil, 'pitch oil' at La Brea, Trinidad. It is not clear what led to the appointment of the young adventurer, as he knew nothing about oil exploration – drilling perhaps, for water. His name was Walter Darwent. He did acquire thirty \$100 shares in the venture. [Note: The dollar used in the British West Indies from 1837 was a note issued in the first instance by the Colonial Bank and then by its successor, Barclays Bank DC&O (Dominion, Colonial and Overseas), based on the Mexican Pillar dollar, which was valued at 4 shillings and tuppence.]

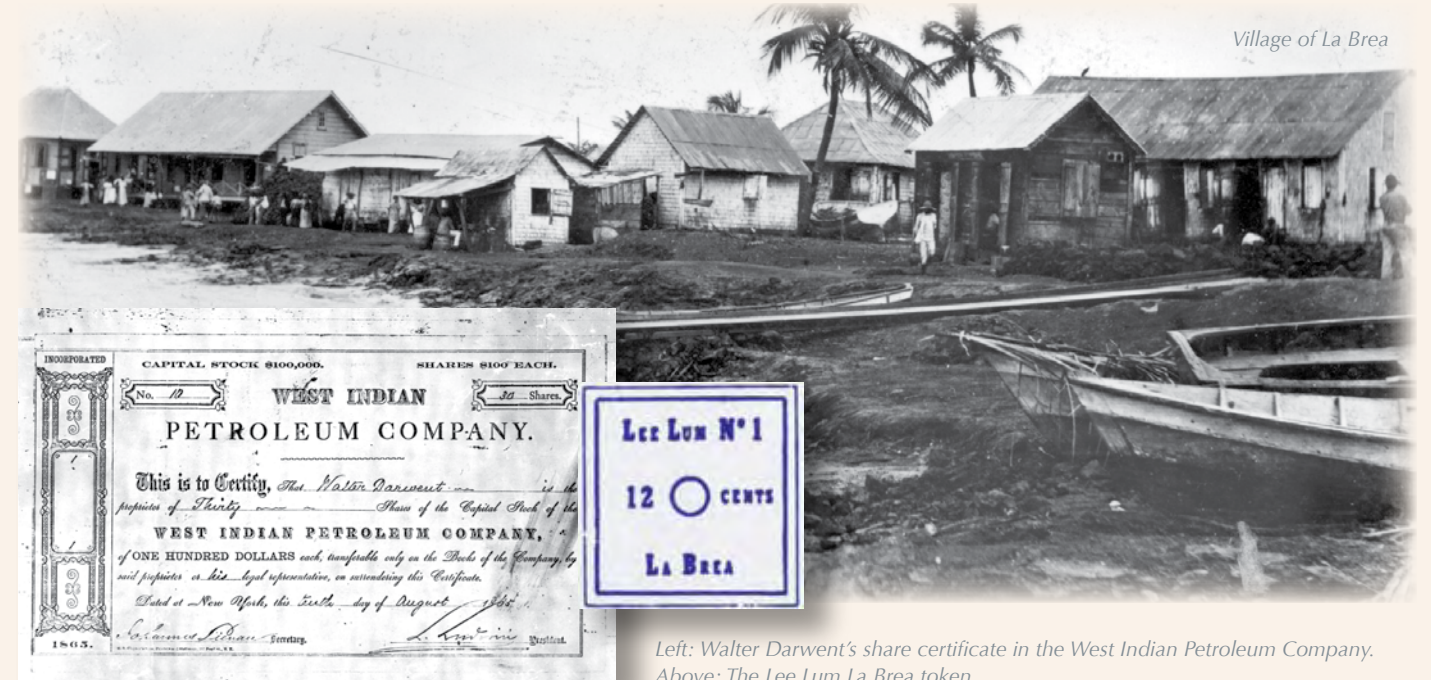


Walter Darwent

In 1895, he wasn't a very old man, but he looked it. He wore his hat upside-down on his head, as this left his hands free, because the hat, which was pretty worn, was full of mango doux-doux, tiny and yellow, sweet and pungent, which may have accounted for the small swarm of bees that had followed him out of the forest.

He was short and a little bow-legged, brown as a copper penny, and if you looked well at him, well, you could see that he was at least half Carib.

He had been tracking deer through the high woods of the Aripéro forest uplands, about four miles east of the Pitch Lake at La Brea, from the night before, without much to show for it, and had spent the night there, his hammock strung high in the branches of a huge calabash tree. The dawn call of the Bell Birds had awoken him. He eased himself out of his perch and stepped



Village of La Brea

Left: Walter Darwent's share certificate in the West Indian Petroleum Company. Above: The Lee Lum La Brea token

into something that at first he thought to be unmentionable, but as he looked at what was squishing from between his toes, he knew that it was 'pitch oil'. Its source was not far off, bubbling away out of a rusty pipe sunken sideways in the ground of the little dappled clearing where he had spent the night.

The oil was black and viscous, pungent, its source so original and so abundant and surprising to find there. He had seen 'pitch oil' before. There were seeps of it in various parts of his island, here, Trinidad, Land of the Hummingbird. Usually it just appeared out of the ground, but this oil was coming from a pipe. It was a curiosity and he would take some to show to Mr Fretiney – he had to go and look for him anyway. No one remembers his name.

His tokens, called chits, are now collectors' items. He had emigrated from Kwangtung (now Guangdong) in Southern China, to California to seek his fortune in the gold fields. He helped to lay the railroad tracks and had lived in the frontier towns. Later he travelled south to Mexico and came finally to Trinidad, arriving in 1885.

He imported goods from the Far East and exported cocoa, coffee and copra, eventually operating a chain of shops, 60 at one time, throughout the island.

There was a shortage of coinage on the island at the time and the plantation workers, his customers, paid in 'chits', IOUs. Finding that he was selling goods and being paid with estate IOUs, and having to give change, but not getting the chits

cashed until after the estate's crop was sold, he issued tokens so he could give change for goods purchased on the chits. These tokens were then accepted for future purchases in the store. They were first issued around 1880 and were marked 'La Brea'. John Lee Lum had intended to name his tokens for the areas in which he operated his shops, but didn't.

His first interest in oil arose from a meeting in the Crown Lands Department Office in Port of Spain, when Fretiney Pantin, an estate proprietor in the south, mentioned that a local hunter had come to him one morning bearing a sample of what was called 'pitch oil' on the island. It was the colloquial name for crude oil. He had told Pantin that he had found it bubbling out of a pipe in the Aripéro forest.

Walter Kerton, the manager of the Colonial Bank, suggested that he buy the disused sugar estate. The



John Lee Lum



Randolph
Rust

bank wanted to sell it, and at any rate, he was the agent of the Trinidad Lake Asphalt Company, and they would be certainly interested.

He had been 27 years old when he had come out to Trinidad to work for the firm Campbell Hannay & Company in 1881. He had been born in London in July 1854. Perceiving the prosperity of the colony in 1888, he and Harry Trowbridge had formed the firm Rust Trowbridge & Company. They traded, as most other firms at the time did, exporting the island's agricultural produce and importing food and consumer durables. Trinidad's economy was doing very well with sugar and increasingly with cocoa. This had led to the establishing of several commission agencies, insurance offices and banks, and the flourishing commercial sector created a growing government bureaucracy.

Randolph Rust had met John Lee Lum through their shared business interest. He may have been a dry goods and imported food supplier to Lee Lum's 60 shops, and may have sought him as a partner to help finance the purchase of the Aripere estate near to the Pitch Lake at La Brea, and later in seeking to obtain a Crown Land concession of over 50 square miles at Mayaro and Guayaguayare. Clearly their intention was oil exploration.

These then are the main cast of characters as the curtain went up on undoubtedly a most splendid performance, one that interestingly is still playing to packed audiences.

The demand for lighting oil was becoming an object for speculation. There was a worldwide shortage of lamp oil. The high quality sperm whale oil, which burnt clear and bright, was expensive; it sold at \$2.50 a gallon (equivalent to \$105/bbl) as the sperm whale grew more scarce. Oil obtained from shale or coal emitted unpleasant smells and was very smoky. Candles were expensive. As populations expanded and urban centres grew as a result of the Industrial Revolution, solutions for better lighting for homes and factories, streets and schools, were explored.

As always in human experience, necessity drove invention, and an enterprising young Canadian by the name of Abraham Gesner designed a technique for extracting kerosene (which

he named) from asphalt taken from the La Brea holdings of Admiral Thomas Cochrane, 10th Earl of Dundonald, who had been granted the original concession for working the Pitch Lake in Trinidad.

The distillate, a form of clarified oil or, as it was to be known, kerosene, was a revolutionary step, one that would change history, quickening the march into modern times. This new fuel was produced in England and in the USA, with asphalt shipped from Trinidad and the finished product reshipped to Trinidad as well as to other places.

An American company called Merrimac Oil in 1856 or thereabout set up works at La Brea for the manufacture of lamp and lubricating oil. There were somewhat half-hearted attempts to start similar plants locally, but this came to nothing. Interestingly, by the 1880s, the government of Trinidad realised some £16,000 per year in kerosene ('illuminating oil') duties, a tax "that weighs mainly on the masses" as a dispatch from



Right: Darwent's Aripere well was resuscitated in the 1890s, when this photograph was taken. It was the first oil well of its kind in the world

the United States consul in Trinidad reported in June of 1889. This was one of the distinguishing hallmarks of the colonial era.

The advent of the paraffin lamp using clear-burning kerosene, very different from flickering candles or smoky chimneys, made reading in the evening easier, learning quicker, and education a blessing for a greater number of people. Streets that were pitch-black on nights when the moon did not appear became safe, as street lighting spread through the towns. This allowed for visiting and greater conviviality. Cooking was made less arduous as stoves, with ranges of two, three and sometime four burners, came into being.

'Trinidad Oil' they would name it. In a letter to the Earl of Dundonald, dated 25th April 1857, Conrad Frederick Stollmeyer, acting as agent for the Earl, reported that "Dr Philbrick's Company, associated with Hiram Hyde of Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Samuel Dower of Boston, also makes oil from pitch ... and gives a specific name to the oil – 'Trinidad Oil' ... Philbrick et al wish to use Trinidad Pitch to make the oil in Boston."

C.F. Stollmeyer, from 1849 onwards, looked after the Earl of Dundonald's holdings at La Brea, digging asphalt from the Pitch Lake and shipping it to the United States and Europe. Born in 1813 in the ancient city of Ulm in Germany, he had migrated to the US in 1833 and came out to Trinidad in 1845 on his way to Venezuela. However, he was persuaded to stay in Trinidad, where he became interested in the possibilities of asphalt and may well be called the 'father of the pitch industry in Trinidad'.

It was out of all this interest that the young Captain Darwent set out on an adventure, and in so doing was to leave his name in the history books.

The first known reference to Darwent's Aripere well appears in the *Trinidad Chronicle* of the 1st May 1866. There are extant two volumes of this newspaper – those of 1866 and 1867. The extract reads:

"Disinterested information. The following appears in a late number of the *Money Market Review*: 'The Trinidad Petroleum



Ships loading pitch at La Brea, an early photograph, probably of the 1870s. The ships at anchor are all square riggers. This photograph was taken by Charles Cazabon

Company Limited have received information, by the West Indian mail from Trinidad, that oil has been struck at Aripere, and the quality was in all respects equal to Pennsylvanian. The yield was expected to be enormous. More particulars by next mail.' An accidental looseness of expression in this paragraph is likely to convey the idea that the informants have some special interest in the news they forwarded for publication. To counteract an impression which might be injurious to the shareholders of the Petroleum Company we remark, for the benefit of readers in England, that Aripere, where the oil has been struck, is above four miles from the domains of the Petroleum Company: that the oil yielding lands belongs to Mr Paul Lange and the TPLC are still in hopes of a similar stroke of good luck."

Thus was perhaps inaugurated the notion of shareholder confidence building, with "an accidental looseness of expression" that is still in use in the oil industry today.

Darwent's first well in the south of the island, close to San Fernando, proved to be a dry hole and was abandoned. His newly-formed Paria Oil Company – it would appear that he was no longer associated with the West Indian Petroleum Company – with a capital of \$9,200 in \$50 shares, made another try on the Aripere estate in May 1866. W.F. Penny, who wrote one of the earliest histories of 'Trinidad's Oil', remarked that "the



Conrad
Frederick
Stollmeyer

records afford sufficient detail to identify what is perhaps the first recorded fishing job. On the 20th September 1866, work was begun to recover tools broken in the first attempt. The operation was successfully completed on October 11th. Five-inch 'tubing' was seated in rock at 100 feet and 20 feet of oil-bearing strata was exposed below this depth. This formation was tested and produced 2.5 bbls of oil in seven hours. A caving in the 'tubing' was riveted with rolled

casing and the hole deepened to 160 feet on the 15th March 1867. A test at this depth proved impracticable due to caving. The manager of the Aripere estate found the oil from the well was superior in lubricating qualities to coconut oil normally used, and it was estimated it could be sold locally for at least a dollar per gallon. Darwent proposed sinking a shaft at a cost of \$2,000. He estimated to produce at least sixty gallons of oil in a week, which would yield a return of 15 per cent on \$20,000 capital".

This well, near to the famous Pitch Lake, is thought to be the first of its type in the world.

It was agreed to send Darwent to the States for more modern drilling equipment. But his unexpected death at La Brea prevented further operations; the extra capital was not raised and the project was abandoned.

Charles Kingsley, one of the Empire's more intrepid travellers, who was actually literate, wrote in his book *At Last – a Christmas in the West Indies* in 1870 that he had come upon the remains of the machinery of the well that could still be pumped. He remarked on the loathsome smell of the oil, not realising that that was the sweet smell of money.

Darwent's untimely death terminated this earliest phase of Trinidad's oil history. In the next thirty years, there was just one solitary incident connected with oil. Around 1870, a hunter from Mayaro brought a sample of oil to the warden, Henri Ganteaume, which he had collected from a seep near Moruga. The warden sent it to the Colonial Secretary, who forwarded it to England for analysis. It was diagnosed as an artificial product.

GUAYAGUAYARE – LOVE'S LABOURS LOST

However, in this interval, the uses for mineral oil were multiplying in an increasingly mechanical age. The planters and proprietors of estates and lands in Moruga could not fail to be aware of the extensive oil seepages in that locality. Another hunter brought a sample of oil to one of these planters, Mr Pantin. He had obtained it bubbling from a pipe in the ground in the Aripere forest. Pantin mentioned this to Randolph Rust, whom he had met in the Land & Surveys Office in Port of Spain, while in the company of Mr Kerton of the Colonial Bank.

It was not until 1893 that Rust enters the picture, as a booklet of the Petroleum Association of Trinidad of 1952 remembers: "He had estates at Guayaguayare, bounding estates belonging to Mr Lee Lum, with whom he was friendly". It was about this time that the great oilfields in Russia and the United States sprang into prominence. This, combined with some successful attempts by Mr Stollmeyer to run a steamer at Icacos on a mixture of lignite and pitch, must have reminded Mr Lee Lum of the ancient reports of seepages in the forest. At any rate he obtained a sample and took it to his friend Rust, who at that time was in business and lived in Port of Spain. The sample was sent to Redwoods in London who made a favourable report, and from then on, Mr Rust directed all his life and energy to the discovery of oil in south west Trinidad. Letters written by Randolph Rust during this time show that from the time he ▷



Loading pitch at Brighton Pier, circa 1890s

◁ took up this work, it was no narrow ambition.

He looked for the time when Trinidad should become a major oil producing country in the British Empire. Indeed, it would be for decades the largest single source of purely British oil, and functioned as refuelling base for the Royal Navy. How far advanced Randolph Rust's views were may be judged from the fact that it was not until 1910 that Sir Winston Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, perhaps prompted by information, as we shall see, of Trinidad's oil potential started the conversion of the British Navy from coal to oil firing. This may have been signalled to him by the Colonial Office, who would have been involved into looking into its future potentialities in the context of Britain's scientific advances. This interest and its attendant activity prompting the *Port of Spain Gazette* to headline: "Brighton could become one of the fuel depots of the Caribbean". So in the First World War and later in the Second World War, when high-test gasoline for aircraft was added, Trinidad's oil made a notable contribution to the efforts of a successful conclusion to those conflicts.

For six years Randolph Rust laboured unsuccessfully in the high woods of south Trinidad. The virgin forest of gigantic mora and mahogany trees teemed with deadly perils: venomous snakes were too lethal not to think about. But most insidious of all were the mosquitoes, bearing malaria, yellow fever, dengue and other fevers for which names would not be invented for several years. Initially, Rust got no financial support; himself and Lee Lum financed the entire enterprise themselves.

In 1901, Rust travelled to Canada. He had married Kate MacDonald, a lady connected to the well-known Hudson family, who had given their name to the Bay. It had been a board-ship romance. This journey brought him into contact with the Walkerville Whisky Company of Canada and, after much negotiation, the Oil Exploration Syndicate of Canada was formed. Following a

visit by Dr Ells, a Canadian geologist, the first well was located at Guayaguayare.

People 'in the oil' say that it often happens that the first well in an area gives greater promise than subsequent drilling justifies. This was the case with Well No. 1 at Guayaguayare; it produced about 300 barrels initially and encouraged the company to drill ten more wells, none of which was successful. By 1907 funds were exhausted and the Walkerville Whisky Company withdrew. Which is like giving up at 6-Up.

Rust travelled to London in 1910 to raise capital for yet another company, General Petroleum Properties of Trinidad Limited. Speaking at the Royal Victoria Institute in Port of Spain, Trinidad, he said: "In the light of my discoveries, I felt that Trinidad, England's most valuable possession in the West Indies, being as it is the keys to the Panama Canal ... might herself one day be one of the chief sources of supply of oil fuel, and thanks to that and her unique position might become one of our most important naval bases." Thirty years later, in World War II, his words would come true.

Within a few years, the word was out. This meant for Trinidad and Tobago the commencement of another economy. Prior to this, the islands' economy had been essentially agricultural, based upon the exportation of granulated sugar and molasses, cocoa (said to be the best in the world), coffee, tonka beans, coconut-based products and other locally-grown produce, and of course asphalt from the Pitch Lake.

Wild speculation was the order of the day, with the selling of land and oil rights all over southern Trinidad. Some 60 companies were registered between 1909 and 1912. Amongst them was a firm called the Texas Company, they "had a small presence as early as 1912, marketing kerosene," as George Higgins would recall in his *A History of Trinidad Oil*. Money changed hands. The

sleepy agricultural economy experienced a dramatic uplift: fortunes were made. However, 28 oil exploration companies had folded by 1918.

There were three types of lease in Trinidad at that time:

1. Lands acquired under the old Spanish titles, giving the owner all and every right over the surface and the contents below the surface.
2. Lands purchased in the 1860s but before February 1902, which gave the owner similar rights, except for stones and minerals which might be found below the surface (these belonged to the Crown).
3. Land bought after February 1902, in which case the government reserved all oil and mineral rights and the right to give permits for exploration of these rights.

The government of the day sought to encourage as many local people as possible to enter the oil industry, and licences on small parcels of land could be readily obtained.

Compensation was also paid for loss of agricultural land that was now put to other uses. Roads were developed to hitherto unknown parts of the island, 'behind God's back' as it was said. The construction of oil camps brought a fresh wave of immigrants from all over the English-speaking Caribbean. The composition of Trinidad's population was to slowly alter, as the island's Creole soul gave way to a Caribbean reality.

In these remarkable years, three significant companies evolved: Trinidad Central Oilfields in 1911, United British Oilfields of Trinidad (UBOT) in 1913 and Trinidad Leaseholds Limited (TLL), also in 1913.

The entry of 'big oil' into Trinidad was sparked by the growing concern of the British Admiralty, whose interest in well-run operations in the South Atlantic had assumed great importance. UBOT, a member of the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company (Shell) through the medium of the Colonial Office, created an agreement with the British and Foreign General Securities and Investment Trust, the Burmah Oil Company and the British Western Isles Syndicate. This agreement sought to combine their interest in the production and the transportation of oil in Trinidad, British Guiana, Venezuela and Colombia. This company negotiated



His Excellency George R. Le Hunte CCMG, Governor 1909-16, at Guayaguayare, visiting the wells pioneered by Randolph Rust and John Lee Lum

rights to over 200,000 acres of Crown lands.

Several small companies were to consolidate under the aegis of the South African firm Central Mining and Investment Company, and together with the Hoover Brothers Investment and Consulting Company, created syndicates that accommodated a number of smaller interests, including Randolph Rust's GPP of Trinidad. This consolidation produced Trinidad Leaseholds. By the start of the First World War, Trinidad's production had risen to one million barrels per year.

The infrastructural demands to enable oil exploration had to be addressed, as dams were built, waterways diverted, the ancient forest felled and the swamps of the Oropouche lagoon drained.

TRINIDAD OIL, THE REAL McCOY

By the start of the First World War, Trinidad's production had risen to one million barrels per year. This was achieved through tremendous hard and dangerous work. Huge trees in an ancient forest had to be felled, the massive logs cut and moved, to be later used on site to build rigs, houses and even roads. Narrow gauge rail was laid so as bring in heavy equipment. It rained for half of the year. Malaria was common, and yellow fever took the lives of many. Living in the high woods for sometimes weeks on end, the men came to know how quickly death could strike



Mining raw asphalt at the Pitch Lake, La Brea, circa 1920s



Narrow gauge rail lines took early prospectors into the forested interior of Trinidad. Felled lumber was prepared for use in the building of sleepers for railways, oil derricks, roads, and houses for the workers. Circa 1920s

and, like the old cocoa planters of a previous century, they were to become well acquainted with the ways of the mapapie and coral snakes, scorpions and foot-long centipedes.

Another problem was the nature of the equipment, which was often not suitable. Drilling rigs were huge, wooden contraptions. Roads through the forest were made of slippery hardwood logs, the so-called corduroy roads. Manpower was supplemented by steam engines and by oxen power, as the internal combustion engine was still in its infancy.

The history of Trinidad is the history of its evolving economies, and oil was the latest. These economies over time tended to reflect the nature of the island's cosmopolitan population. The French colonists, who had come in the 18th century by invitation of the Spanish government, introduced African slave labour and created a plantation economy, cultivating sugar, cotton, coffee and cocoa. The British Empire builders, who were establishing a mercantile global empire based on trade, manufacturing, and shipping, introduced East Indian indentureship to the colony, mostly for the sugar industry. Apart from the Africans and the Indians, who were in the majority, various other nationalities came, because business was good. Fortune seekers from Europe, adventurous young people from the Middle East, indentured labourers from China, Portuguese from Madeira, on through to British West Indian islanders, all came to Trinidad seeking a better life. Everybody was kept firmly in their place by the pressure of colonial prejudice, supported by the ubiquitous gunboat.

The oil companies required a steady increase in their labour force, which resulted in the increase of immigration from the other Caribbean islands. This produced the establishment of new villages in areas which had been previously uninhabited. Their names tell the story: Retrench, Hard Bargain, Monkey Town, Mile End and Point Fortin, close to the Pitch Lake. In 1921, the immigration figures were substantial: 47,667 people came from the other islands, a number that ten years later held steady with another 46,391 persons. Barbados, Grenada and St Vincent were the largest contributors to the population of Trinidad during this period. Not all came to work in the oil, but oil provided an economy in Trinidad and Tobago that offered work, work that they would not have found in their home islands.

Oil exploration was then a land-based activity and required the extension of the island's infrastructure. The network of roads and bridges was improved. Electricity arrived in places where the evenings had not changed much since the days of the Spanish conquistadors. Water, pipe-borne, appeared, but not much, and not always, not to mention the alarming ring of the telephone. There was no ice in the bush. The railways, introduced primarily to move the agricultural produce from the estates to the port, were expanded.

The intellectual capital of the colony grew exponentially in this period, as a more diverse coterie of professionals came, some to make their homes and to contribute to the quality of life by an increasingly wider interface with their local counterparts. New techniques, in fact new inventions, valves, were created in the workshops of field stations deep in the forest on afternoons when the sun went down like thunder over Venezuela, across the Bay. The school system was influenced as more young men turned to the sciences, and engineering, in all its persuasions, became more and more a career of choice.

The sector of the economy based on traditional estate agriculture, producing cane, coffee and cocoa was, despite the pressures of world supply and demand, very sound. Cane sugar production rose from 43,000 tonnes in 1913 to 72,000 tonnes in 1917. Prices rose. In the case of cocoa in 1920, the price of the 'golden bean' stood at \$23.19 per fanega, which was seen as very impressive by those who understood such measures. This would not last.

The price of oil, however, displaced discussions of the price of cocoa in the hotel bars and gentlemen's clubs of the colony. By 1918, there was an oil boom on the London stock market. \$500 per acre was the asking price for land in Trinidad that was considered to be oil-bearing. Remarkable, when one considers that land in that same part of the country went, just 30 or 50 years before, for as little as \$15 per acre.

The age of oil made an impact on Trinidad long before it did in many places in the Caribbean, indeed in the world. Trinidad's coastal steamers, for example, were converted to oil, so too the power stations. Oil fuel drove the water works. The British Navy took oil from Trinidad. There were three loading wharves capable of taking vessels 8 metres in draught. The entire southern half of the island was improved: from Guayaguayare in the west, to the Cedros peninsula in the east, roads and bridges were built. Oil was used to fight mosquitoes in their breeding places, and kerosene, pitch oil, had replaced coconut oil for lighting in the countryside. Cars and motorbuses began to make their hesitant appearance.

Most significant, however, was the creation of new exploration companies. Among those that appeared in the 1920s were Apex (Trinidad) Oilfields Limited at Fyzabad, Ière Oil at Barrackpore, Globe Oilfields at Otaheite, Petroleum Options at Thick Village, Uroz at Piparo, Charuma British Union at Tabaquite, Anglo



An early tank farm, circa 1920s, Forest Reserve



A group of company officials looking at a gushing oil well in the Forest Reserve area



The gushing pipe close up

Trinidad Oil Company at San Francique and several more. By 1919, there were five distilleries in operation, and production reached 1.9 million barrels annually. 66 per cent of crude production was refined locally. More professionals emerged, surveyors, doctors, engineers, geologists, lawyers, accountants, as well as supply and service companies, shipping agents and the importers of heavy machinery.

The advent of Trinidad oil made itself known in other Caribbean territories. West Indian coaling stations, once the centrepiece of harbour activities in the smaller islands, ceased operations. Coal prices at \$24.75 per ton were not able to compete with oil at \$16.80 per ton.

Profound social changes would also emerge in Trinidad life. On the one hand, the development of oilfield camp life generated new and negative forms of racist attitudes and elitism with institutionalised 'separatism', adding fresh versions to the already entrenched racism of the colony. It would always be remembered that the largest and most significant of the oil Companies, Trinidad Leaseholds Limited was founded by South African interest, the Central Mining & Investment Company and many South Africans would work in the oil in Trinidad. On the other hand, a vibrant trade union emerged, The Workingman's Association, born in the crucible of the anti Crown Colony rule sentiment, the Reform Movement, which had its roots in an ambitious and educated Afro, French Creole, and Indian middle class who resented the inevitable glass ceiling of colonialism.

MODERN TIMES – WHEN JOHNNY COMES MARCHING HOME

During the First World War, hundreds of men from Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean had seen a different life in Europe, one where the stereotype of the 'white boss' was broken forever in the common despair of the trenches. As they returned, to what for all intent and purpose was an old way, a degrading way of life, they could not help but think of change. In any case, poverty was hell. Some had returned with a heightened political consciousness, with news of the Russian Revolution and socialism. The compensation they received from the imperial government left much to be desired, and they resented that treatment.

At the end of the First World War, as the colony took its first halting steps into an industry-based economy, the economic landscape in Trinidad had certainly changed forever. During the war, shipping between Europe and the West Indies had been severely disrupted. Shortages of every sort had halted trade, agriculture and infrastructure development. Inflation climbed to an unprecedented 145 per cent by 1919.



Captain Arthur Andrew Cipriani at a labour meeting



Tubal Uriah 'Buzz' Butler



Adrian Cola Rienzi

The cocoa economy, so vital to the cash flow of many small and medium import-export companies, almost ceased to exist as its main markets in Europe lay in shambles. Sugar, King Sugar, was also failing on the world markets. Unemployment climbed steadily as more and more men returned home, some finding jobs in the oil. Working people would soon group themselves into strong trade unions, seeking not only a fair day's pay, but also social justice for all. Arthur Cipriani, Cola Rienzi and Uriah Butler were powerful leaders, who with others stood up for the cause of all workers. In the 1920s, it was the oilfield workers in particular and the trade union movement in general who, by staging strikes, forced the hand of the all-powerful colonial government to look at the poor wages paid to workers, at the dreadful working and living conditions that had to be endured, and at the introduction of electoral participation in the lawmaking process of the colony – a mantle that inspires the Oilfield Workers Trade Union and other trade unions to this day.

There were other developments in the world that were to ▷

**Come to No 66 George St.
TO-NIGHT,
Thursday, 1st December, 1933,
at 8 p.m. Sharp**
**Subject :
Masters & Servants Ordinance**

It is worthy to note, THAT THIS BILL WHICH HAD IT SECOND READING IN THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ON FRIDAY LAST IS 93 Years Old. It is PASSED in THE Year 1840 THIS IS AN OLD TID SLAVE LAW. It is being revoked. But termed REVENUED THE BILL directly aims AT TRADE UNION MOVEMENT THE RIGHT TO STRIKE IT WAS PASSED just after the abolition of SLAVERY

It comes at the Same Time when Hitler THE NAZI DICTATOR is Bellowing for the former German Colonies in Africa which would mean extermination of the negroes there the present campaign that has been waged against the Jews in Germany are glaring examples of the fate that await the negroes there. In the light of these experiences. We must protest.

WORKERS OF EVERY CLASS
INTELLECTUALS TRADE UNIONIST DOMESTIC
SERVANT-COME!
AN OPEN LETTER WILL ALSO BE READ FROM
PROMINENT NEGROES FROM AFRICA.
ISSUED BY THE NEGRO WELFARE CULTURAL
ASSOCIATION.

Above: A pamphlet produced to generate awareness among workers with regard to a change in the law



Above: Colonel Arthur S. Mavrogordato In Jerusalem, 1922. Before taking up his position in Trinidad as Commandant of Police and Commander of local forces in 1937, Colonel Mavrogordato had been appointed the first Commissioner of Police to Sierra Leone in 1913. He was transferred to Palestine as Commissioner of Police in 1921, after the British Mandate had been established, and to Trinidad in 1934. After completing his tenure in Trinidad in 1939 he was appointed Commissioner of Police in Nigeria. At the outbreak of WWII he was seconded to the British security mission in Beirut and promoted to the rank of Brigadier. He served with the 9th Army in Syria and in Lebanon. After the war he returned to Trinidad, where he made his home until his death in 1964

◁ impact on Trinidad. The discovery of very large oilfields in Texas and other parts of the USA had the result of a steep decline in oil prices. Against all this, the stock market crashed, and automobile production in the United States fell by some 47 per cent. This too contributed to the oversupply of oil. From 1930 onwards, oil prices dropped from over \$1 a barrel to as low as ten cents.

In September of 1931, Great Britain had gone off the gold standard, and in 1932, the United States introduced an import duty on petroleum products. As a result, Trinidad's refined products began to

seek a market in the United Kingdom.

Trinidad's oil economy was soon caught up in this free-falling tumble, as both management and staff in the oil business were laid off. Trained people left the fields, some never to return. The happy days of easy worker-management cooperation ended abruptly. Workers could not understand what was taking place in the 'real world': they only saw the hunger in the faces of their families and only felt the frustration and increasing desperation in themselves.

Oil technologist George Higgins writes in his book *A History of Trinidad Oil*: "The Petroleum Association of Trinidad considered all possible ways of reducing the hardship and attempted to keep as many people employed as possible. Working hours were reduced from nine to eight hours a day and drilling shifts were changed from two of twelve hours to three of eight to spread out the work."

Every effort was made to become more cost effective. More efficient production methods resulted in a record 10 million barrels being produced in 1930. This work was to pay off as the years went by, resulting in a production of 20 million barrels ten years later in 1940.

Before this, however, some hard times lay ahead. Nature played a dreadful card in the midst of all of this. In 1933, a hurricane struck the island, and oil production was severely interrupted. The hurricane – and in those days they were not decorated by names of people we know – struck the east coast at Guayaguayare at about 4pm on June 26th, arriving at



Members of the Trinidad Constabulary Reserve Platoon who went into action on June 19, 1937, during the 'Butler riots' at Fyzabad



A party of oilfield workers on strike at the main gate at Apex, where a confrontation took place

maximum intensity at 6pm, howling all night. The damage was extensive. The mora forest, very old and very valuable to the colony's economy, was devastated, and some of the coconut estates were destroyed forever. Infrastructure damage to roads, bridges, telephone and electricity lines was considerable. In the oilfields, 90 wooden derricks were completely destroyed and another 150 badly damaged. Wellhead connections were destroyed. The industry was brought almost to a stop. Labour, now considerably more organised, rose to the occasion and worked shoulder to shoulder with the management to restore order and production to the devastated fields.

During the 1930s, despite increased oil production, the hardships experienced by the oil workers as a result of low wages, only got worse. Once again, nature worked against the economy. In 1934, a drought struck the colony. Hunger marches started in central Trinidad. Workers at Apex Oilfields, led by Uriah Butler of the Trinidad Labour Party (TLP), which had evolved from the Trinidad Workingman's Association, went on strike and planned a march on Port of



Above: All over the world, the return of the survivors of the Great War would mark and trigger dramatic changes in the social order. Trinidad and Tobago's modest contribution to the war effort began to make its return in May 1919. They were greeted by a tumultuous welcome, it seemed that the entire population of Port of Spain had turned out to welcome them

Spain. The march was stopped by Captain Arthur Cipriani and the police. Cipriani's condemnation of the strike action and the subsequent expulsion of Butler and Cola Rienzi from the TLP placed Cipriani in opprobrium in the eyes of many oil workers, even to this day.

1937 had witnessed a marked improvement in the selling ▷

◁ price of oil and a consequent expansion of profits, but, as was mentioned before, this did not translate in to a fair day's pay for the labourers in the oilfields. The average annual pay of oilfield worker in the 30s was only £70, less than \$300, whereas it had been £78 in the period 1913-27 – a substantial decrease in the face of rising cost. During the first half of 1937, the minimum rate of pay was increased from 7¢ per hour to 8¢, but this had been a case of too little and certainly too late.

The oil workers' grievances were real. Profits were being made, but their wages were low. European staff were living comfortably in company houses and driving cars. Their lifestyles had not changed. Unrest grew, as clearly there were other issues involved. The steady expansion of the fields, the upgrading of plants and expertise were immediately affected by the widening unrest. Uriah 'Buzz' Butler became more active among the oilfield workers and moved them to take strike action. In 1937, riots and strikes spread through the oil belt. The colonial government reacted predictably with a heavy hand.

Brutality was the order of the day, and it was played out true to form on both sides. There were several confrontations at Apex and at Fyzabad. Several workers died, many were wounded. On the other hand, Inspector William Bradburn and Police Corporal Carl (Charlie) King, while they were performing their lawful duty, were murdered; Corporal King by a mob that burnt his still alive body. An uneasy peace settled on the colony after landing parties were put ashore from the HMS Ajax and the HMS Exeter.

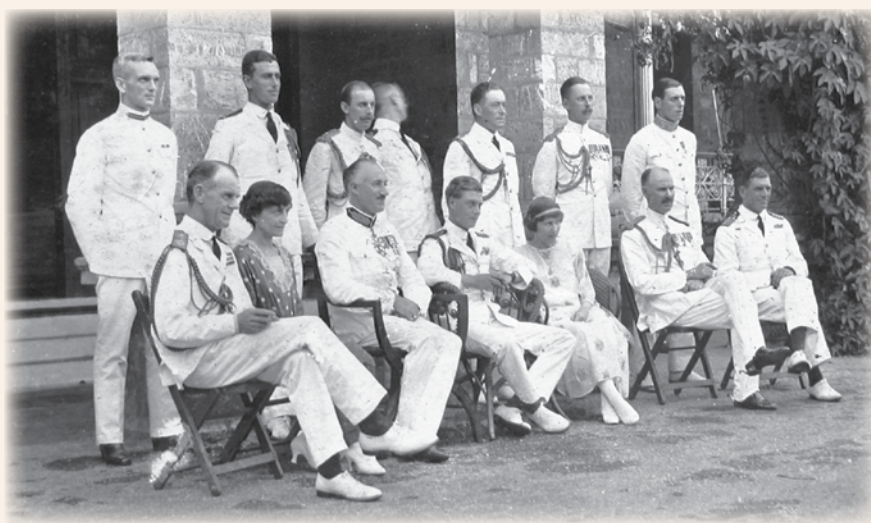
Uriah Butler was arrested. When he was released from jail in 1939, he was welcomed back in the oilbelt with 'warmth and adulation', as historian Michael Anthony writes in his book *The Making of Port of Spain*. "His old and tried companion, Rienzi, was overjoyed. Rienzi showed his feeling at a Legislative Council meeting on June 16, 1939, during a debate on public holidays. Rienzi called on government to declare the date of the oilfield riots a public holiday in place of Empire Day. Turning to the Attorney General, Rienzi said: 'June the 19th, Sir, is a day which in the minds of the workers marks a landmark in the history of the working class movement.' This holiday was not granted until 1973. As George Higgins, author of *A History of Trinidad Oil*, concludes his chapter about the years of depression and recovery (1930-39): "By 1939, operations were back to normal and looking up. But on the horizon and across the seas in Europe the war clouds were looming, soon to break and affect profoundly the direction in which the Trinidad operations were heading."

From the perspective of the management of the companies that operated the oilfields, the strikes, the deaths and all that followed had been created and exploited by labour leaders who had "fermented the hitherto somewhat inarticulate and dispersed unrest, but had no idea how to control and direct the men towards a settlement of their complaints. (Penny & L. Harris)" After all, the British Empire was not to be overthrown by events at Apex and Fyzabad in Trinidad.

The actual conditions in which the workers lived, the poverty, malnutrition, lack of sanitation, the ignorance that only indigence can cause, all these were taken for granted by the 'ruling class' of that period, which was just about at the apogee of the British Empire. Workers in England, India, Australia, and all over Africa lived and worked and survived in conditions that were similar to what was experienced in Trinidad.

The inflammatory speeches did precipitate a dangerous situation. It was claimed by the management that 'their workers' in the fields were "innately good-natured and with respect for law and order". It should be borne in mind that the workers in the oilfields had come straight off the estates and were almost entirely agricultural workers, accustomed to hard work, low wages, seasonal employment, and the paternalism of the mostly French Creole cocoa estate proprietors. So despite the grinding poverty, good-humouredness was indeed often the case, and the workers, "did much to reduce occurrences of violence, tending to confine them to their points of origin".

It was believed that the places of origin of the unrest in the oil belt were the shanty towns on the perimeter of the fields, which were



HRH Edward, Prince of Wales, seated fourth from the left, and his cousin Lord Louis Mountbatten, standing second from the left, visited T&T in 1920. His Majesty King George V was anxious that – before the ardour of comradeship and loyalty to the Crown had cooled – his son should set out at once on a series of tours to thank the various countries in the Empire and the Commonwealth on the King's behalf for their contributions to the Great War



President Franklyn D. Roosevelt, like his relative President Theodore Roosevelt visited Trinidad. In the case of President Franklyn Roosevelt he was on his way to the Pan American Conference of 1937, where plans were made for the setting up of a permanent American Aeronautical Commission. Trinidad, a British colony at the time, possessing its petroleum potential, refineries and fuelling facilities was a natural element in this endeavour, which as it turned out did not materialise in the form intended. Left: With the Police Band in attendance and all aboard the official party sets off for Government House

‘hotbeds of hooliganism’. The powers that be held the view that the workers were inflamed by the speakers whose speeches had a quasi-religious background, “and, as often the case with people of primitive education, the women were mainly responsible for some of the very regrettable incidents which took place...” (Penny & L. Harris). P.E.T. O’Connor, as a Trinidadian employee of Kern (Trinidad) Oilfields at the time, puts these ‘hotbeds of hooliganism’ into perspective in his book *Some Trinidad Yesterdays*, published in 1979, by saying, “But while we in the camps enjoyed our social round and worked in relatively comfortable surroundings, the conditions in the neighbouring villages were poor and squalid. The oil companies had as yet made no effort to house their labour force and as the fields grew and attracted more and more labour, the adjacent villages were bursting at the seams and there was an acute shortage of housing. There were no social amenities in these villages, no recreational facilities other than the rum shops and no public transport. Few workmen could afford a bicycle and a worker, after his 12 hour shift, might have to walk four or six miles

to get home.” These and other circumstances, mostly having to do with the poverty that affected the entire colony, had arranged themselves to produce the situation that had exploded in 1937 with the oilfield riots.

In the period following the unrest in the oilfields, the Royal Commission that was set up to look into its causes made a number of recommendations with regard to the oil industry. Perhaps the more important of these was the appointment of a ‘Secretary of Labour’ to conduct conciliation between employers and employed. Apprenticeship training, better housing, and proper compensation for injury were to be implemented. Law and order had to be imposed in the overcrowded villages such as La Brea and Fyzabad, which were considered as the breeding grounds for various forms of illegal activity. Primary and apprentice trade schools, improved dispensaries, hospitals and housing were built for some workers over the next few years, and recreation fields appeared in the shadow of the derricks and the slowly bowing pumps, where on a Sunday in the dry season in spanking white flannels, cricket, lovely cricket, would be the solvent that would appear to hold the Empire together, at least for the time being, notwithstanding all and everything. □