

How I came to write *The Oracle of Oil*

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In 2008, I attended a meeting of the American Geophysical Union (AGU), where two prominent climate scientists, James Hansen of NASA and Ken Caldeira of the Carnegie Institution for Science, spoke in a press conference about the idea of peak oil. Their argument was basically this: there may be limits on oil resources, but if we want to avoid severe climate change, there was still a lot more fossil fuels than the world could burn, and still keep temperatures tolerable.¹

If oil ran short, the world could make oil out of coal. “Coal’s abundance, and its carbon intensity, is far more than enough to keep carbon dioxide levels above what we consider dangerous well into the next century,” said climatologist Pushker Kharecha at that AGU meeting.

The message I took away from it was: Peak oil won’t spare the climate.

At that point I’d been reporting on climate science for a couple of years, and was on a fellowship to report on climate change impacts and adaptation in Bangladesh. I thought I had a fairly strong grasp of the overall energy picture. However, I hadn’t heard of this idea of peak oil, and I found it intriguing. Nonetheless I found the arguments at the AGU conference convincing, and I continued to think that the main issue facing the world was simply that there was too much carbon that we could burn, and somehow we had to get people to stop burning it.

At the time I first learned of peak oil, I was living in Karachi, Pakistan. (That's a whole other story.) The main English-language bookstore there, Liberty Books, was small but it had a wide-ranging and somewhat idiosyncratic selection, which made browsing interesting. There I ran across a book called *The Last Oil Shock* by David Strahan and that was my first real introduction to a more nuanced look at peak oil. I got hooked.

Before going into writing, I had received my bachelor's degree in physics, so the notion of peak oil made perfect sense-that is, it was natural that oil would get harder and harder to find and extract, and that the rate of oil production would at some point hit a peak, and then eventually decline to zero. I started digging around for more information and came across various papers on the issue, as well as website The Oil Drum.

In reading Strahan's book and other work on peak oil, I often came across mentions of M. King Hubbert, a geologist who worked for Shell and became famous for his prescient oil predictions. At first I got the impression that Hubbert was a narrowly focused researcher who specialized in forecasting the future of oil-which, I presumed, was his task at Shell.

But as I read more I learned that Hubbert was actually one of the top geologists of the twentieth century, and that he had made wide-ranging contributions to science. I learned that he didn't have the job of forecasting the future of oil for Shell. Instead he made his forecasts despite his company's opposition, and despite strong backlash from the wider oil industry as well as government researchers. Yet Hubbert was stubborn and kept improving his forecasts and reiterating his warnings about a coming peak for oil production in the US and, later, the world. He turned out to be right about the US, and I believe he'll be proved to be largely right about the world as well.

As I read more about Hubbert, I realized he was also a big-picture thinker who tried to put modern industrial civilization in a long-term perspective-and for him, "long term" mean thousands of years. I came across a post on The Oil Drum titled "Hubbert: King of the Technocrats," which told of Hubbert's role in co-founding a movement called Technocracy in the early 1930s.

The Technocrats aimed to revamp the U.S. economy-and the whole of society-to try to pull the nation out of the Great Depression. I began

reading more about Technocracy and learned of how they argued that machines were putting people out of work-and that was a good thing. The promise of machines, fueled by fossil fuels, was that they could free people from toil and give us leisure time. But they would only fulfill that promise if the fruits of the machines-all the products they could make-were shared equally among people. If, instead, everyone had to compete for the dwindling number of jobs available, that was a recipe for economic collapse and civil unrest-which was exactly the situation in the United States at the time Technocracy was founded. The movement started as just a handful of scientists and engineers in New York City, but quickly became a media sensation and branches of the movement sprang up spontaneously across the country.

Many of the Technocrats' ideas were naïve. (Keep in mind that when Hubbert co-founded the group, he was only 28.) Nonetheless, I found it incredibly intriguing. This episode of Hubbert's life showed me he was a big picture thinker and an activist. Many knew him for his oil forecasts, which had earned Hubbert a reputation as a pessimist. But actually he was trying to get society to plan ahead and make a transition off of oil, and eventually off of fossil fuels. That is, he was talking about sustainability long before most anyone else. And he was optimistic that, eventually, people would take action.

I looked around for a biography of Hubbert, and but no one seemed to have written one. Through the wonders of the internet, even while I was in Pakistan, I found that there was be a lot of material to draw on: Hubbert's letters and other papers were collected at the University of Wyoming, and he gave a long oral history just before his death in 1989 in which he told many stories of his intellectual battles. Since no one else had published a biography of Hubbert, I decided to try to do it myself.

Actually writing that book was in some ways much easier than I expected, but in other ways much harder. I was able to quickly get the interest of an agent who agreed to help sell the book idea to a publisher, and that encouraged me that there was actually interest in a biography of Hubbert.

However, writing the story of Hubbert's life was harder than I imagined. First, I had to learn how to write a long narrative, something I had never done before. I thought that Hubbert's life was so fascinating that his story would, in effect, write itself. But, sadly, things were

not that simple. (For anyone thinking of writing narrative, I highly recommend the book *Storycraft* by Jack Hart, which incidentally came out just as I was struggling with learning how to write narrative.)

Also, Hubbert's story was complex, spanning decades, and as I did more research, I found there was almost too much material to draw on. Hubbert saved essentially all of his letters, he wrote many academic papers and long reports, gave testimony in Congress, and was covered in the media. And then I had to grapple with all the arguments, from all sides, about the notion of peak oil, and more broadly any limits to resources or limits to growth (of economies, of consumption, of populations).

Fortunately my agent was able to get the interest of a top publisher, W.W. Norton, and with time and the guidance of my editor there, I was able to winnow down the material into a coherent story. It took five years, but I'm happy to see the book finally published, and the positive responses from many readers have been very gratifying. Many of the early readers were those who had long known of Hubbert's work. Some said that reading my book, they learned a lot about him that they didn't know, and felt like, finally, they knew him as a person.

My hope all along was that by telling the story of Hubbert's life, it would also engage readers who might not normally read about topics such as the history of oil or the potential fate of industrial civilization. Time will tell whether that is actually the case.

Endnote

1. The ideas presented at the AGU conference were summed up well by the journalist Kurt Kleiner in "Peak energy: promise or peril?," *Nature Reports Climate Change*, 19 February 2009, doi:10.1038/climate.2009.19