Extracting the Past from the Present: Exotic Prizes, Empty Wilderness, and Commercial Conquest in Two Oil Company Advertisements, 1925–2012

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Abstract: This article undertakes a comparative analysis of two oil company advertisements—British Petroleum’s (BP) “Persian Series”, published in London in 1925, and Cenovus Energy’s “Canadian Ideas at Work”, published across Canada in 2012. These advertisements are separated by eighty-seven years, and were produced in different countries, by different companies, and for different audiences. Yet, a closer reading of these documents reveals that they are two sides of the same coin: both narrate the extraction of oil as a great game of commercial conquest, whereby exotic prizes trapped beneath wild and empty landscapes are unlocked by oil companies. How could two advertisements that appear so radically distant feel so close? In what ways do the oil cultures of the past inflect those of the present? This article engages with such questions by critically deconstructing and comparing the imagined worlds of oil presented in BP and Cenovus’ advertisements, tracing the ways in which the resource is represented through the binaries of ancient and modern, empty and urban, wild and civilized. By configuring oil as a constellation of ideas rather than a system of things, this investigation reveals how the colonial legacies of the past continue to seep through the oil cultures of the present.

Keywords: oil; oil cultures; petrocultures; energy; energy humanities; advertising; British Petroleum; Cenovus Energy; Persia; Alberta; oil sands

“Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority, he is entitled either to own or to expend (or both) the majority of the world’s resources.”
—Edward Said, Orientalism [1]

1. Introduction: Oil Cultures Past and Present

The oil cultures of the past are alive and well in the present, constantly shaping how we think about and imagine the resource today. In the spring and summer of 1925, the British Petroleum Company (BP) published a series of full-page illustrated advertisements for its oil and motor spirit products in the Illustrated London News1. The twelve advertisements, collectively entitled “The Persian Series”, each consist of two communicative elements: a half-page composition of painted artwork depicting scenes of Persian history, geography, and culture, and several paragraphs of text that describe the artwork and tell stories about the British consumer’s special relationship with Persia, Persian oil, and BP2. These vignettes of oil are pedagogical in nature, and they provided the urban readers of

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1 The Illustrated London News began publication in Britain in 1842, and was the world’s first pictorial weekly newspaper [2].
2 The twelve advertisements were also published by BP in a large hardcover volume entitled “In the Land of the Shah: Being a Series of Announcements Issued by the British Petroleum Co. Ltd. 1 January 1925–25 December 1925” [3].
the *Illustrated London News* (ILN) with a wide range of information about oil—a relatively new and exotic source of energy that was radically changing the ways in which many Britons lived, moved, and interacted with each other. In addition to this educative role, the advertisements of the “Persian Series” also worked to create an imaginary world of oil in which wild and exotic geographies inhabited by barbaric peoples produced energy for civilized, urban, British consumers. From beneath the jagged and barren Zagros Mountains of Persia, the advertisements exclaimed, oil was extracted, piped, refined, and carried away. The Persians who inhabited this desolate geography were treated in a similarly imaginative manner, represented by BP as exotic and mysterious nomads who lived among animals in the desert, eking out meager existences in chaotic market bazaars and worshipping in ancient pagan temples.

In this wild and remote place, readers were told, “British pioneers” had brought the many “miracles of modern British industry” to bear upon the challenging Persian landscapes that confronted them in their search for subterranean oil [4,5]. As a result of “British enterprise, capital, and industry”, BP had unlocked “unlimited supplies” of energy in Persia, which promised to improve the lives of locals and Britons alike [6–8]. Equipped with privileged knowledge of Persian geography and geology, and employing a vast arsenal of advanced technologies of extraction and transportation—prime among them the pipeline, that “vein of steel” that connected the disparate spaces of extraction and consumption—BP claimed to have bridged “the great gulf of the centuries” that separated the prehistoric world in which oil was formed and the modern world in which it was consumed [5,9]. By discovering and extracting this remote oil, BP had triumphantly overcome the challenges of the natural environment and the disjuncture between the ancient and the modern, the wild and the civilized, the Persian and the Briton. In doing so, the company had brought to all “not the prosperity...won by the sword in distant days, but that which is based on a genuine contribution to the welfare and needs of the world.” [8]. And, of course, this benevolent extraction of oil for the benefit of humanity was something that readers of the “Persian Series” could be rightfully proud, because BP was “that great all-British enterprise” in which “the capital is British, the labour is British, and the petrol is British—and best.” [7,10].

In 2012, the Canadian oil sands company, Cenovus, published a series of energy advertisements that were strangely reminiscent of those published in the *ILN* almost a century earlier. One such commercial, entitled “Canadian Ideas at Work”, provided consumers with a wide range of information about Northern Alberta’s rugged wilderness and the exotic source of energy that was trapped beneath the province’s challenging landscapes [11]. In the sixty-second commercial, audiences are shown scenes of Canadians encountering the natural environment, while a narrator tells stories about the urban consumer’s relationship with Albertan oil and Cenovus. In addition to this educative role, the video vignette of oil also worked to create an imaginary energy world in which wild, exotic, and barren geographies produced fuel for civilized, urban, Canadian consumers. Like its British counterparts of nearly a century earlier, “Canadian Ideas at Work” presents several landscape scenes that depict jagged mountain ranges, vast arctic plains, and endless boreal forests. In this wild, remote, and seemingly empty place where oil had been discovered, “pioneering” Canadians had used advanced technologies to tame the challenging landscapes that confronted them in their search for precious natural resources. As a result of such “conviction, tenacity and determination”, Cenovus had found success in “unlocking the potential in the oil sands” for the benefit of Canadians and global oil consumers alike [11]. Equipped with privileged knowledge of Northern Albertan geography and geology, and employing a vast arsenal of advanced technologies of extraction and transportation—prime among them the steam-assisted gravity drainage technique, the “first commercial SAGD operation” in the world—Cenovus claimed to have bridged the gulf that existed between urban energy consumers and “one of Canada’s great natural resources.” [11]. And, of course, this benevolent extraction of oil was something of which

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3 The words “Britain”, “British”, or “Britannic” appear over 70 times in the “Persian Series”. 
Canadian audiences could rightfully be proud, because Cenovus was “A Canadian Oil Company” that was “putting Canadian ideas to work in the oil sands today.” [11].

Reading and viewing these apparently different advertisements together produces conflicting senses of the anachronistic and the contemporary. The “Persian Series” and “Canadian Ideas at Work” are separated by eighty-seven years, and were produced in different countries, by different companies, for different audiences. At base, BP’s advertisements are serialized documents published in a newspaper; while Cenovus’ advertisement is a video commercial presented on television, movie theatre, and computer screens. One is physical, the other digital. Indeed, one might expect these acute differences to be manifest in the advertisements. Yet, a closer reading of these documents reveals that they are two sides of the same coin: both narrate the extraction of oil as a great game of commercial conquest, whereby exotic natural prizes trapped beneath wild and empty landscapes are unlocked by oil companies for the benefit of all. How could two advertisements that appear so radically distant feel so close? If “Canadian Ideas at Work” had been published in 1925, would British audiences have found it out of place? Conversely, if the “Persian Series” were published in a Canadian newspaper today, would readers sense its historicity? Put simply, why are these advertisements not different?

This article will engage with such questions by critically deconstructing and comparing the imagined worlds of oil presented in “The Persian Series” and “Canadian Ideas at Work”, focusing on the ways in which BP and Cenovus rendered oil-bearing landscapes as wild, empty, and remote spaces defined exclusively by the exploitation of oil resources. These two advertising series do much more than simply convey product information and increase brand awareness. Rather, they provide windows into the ways that BP and Cenovus imagined (and continue to imagine) the world of oil and, more importantly for this study, how these companies wanted consumers to interpret the complex implications of oil extraction and consumption. Advertisements contain a vast and densely packed reservoir of data, which can be used to glean insight into the attitudes, experiences, imaginations, and knowledges existent within a particular society or culture. As communicative tools that work to educate audiences about what oil is, where it is found, how it is extracted, and by whom it is consumed, advertisements can be understood as corporate efforts to “narrativize” oil and its daily use. Specifically, the imaginary petro-worlds that are rendered in both these advertising productions construct oil as an exotic subterranean prize held captive beneath wild and inhospitable landscapes, but which in “modern times” and with “modern technology” had been unlocked by companies that wielded technology as their weapon and consumerism as their mandate to extract ever increasing amounts of oil. In this teleological story of discovery and exploitation, the “modern consumer” is configured as the central character, and the deserving heir to the buried natural treasures sitting idly beneath wild and empty landscapes. Through a comparative analysis of the visual and textual representations of wildness and emptiness that are presented in the “Persian Series” and “Canadian Ideas at Work”, this article will also demonstrate how both advertising series endeavour to represent Persia and Northern Alberta as peripheral spaces that harboured immense quantities of a magical prize, ripe for exploitation—Oil. It was simply ‘there for the taking’. Using Said’s astute observation concerning western feelings of entitlement to natural resources as a point of departure, this article will contend that the “Persian Series” contributed to an imperialistic discourse of oil that was saturated with notions of western cultural superiority, technological hegemony, and unrestricted license to dominate the natural environments where oil was found. Working in the same vein, the article will then demonstrate how “Canadian Ideas at Work” presents an imagined geography of oil that contributes to a similarly imperialistic discourse of oil—one that exhumes petro-narratives from the distant past and reifies their imaginary binaries of the ancient and the modern, the wild and the civilized, the urban and the empty. The ultimate goal will be to show the ways in which the oil cultures of the past are alive and well in the present, and to suggest how they might be extracted from the oil cultures of the future.

The study of oil has traditionally focused on three general avenues of investigation: explaining the composition and geographical origins of oil, describing how oil is used in a myriad of applications, and identifying the political, economic, scientific, and military repercussions that are associated with
its consumption. Curiously, and somewhat inexplicably, few studies of oil have approached the resource as a phenomenon which has been constructed by and through cultural processes. Indeed, as the editors of a special volume on contemporary oil cultures in the *Journal of American Studies* lamented in 2012, “the humanities have not had much to say about oil until recently” [19]. In the past several years, however, a new phase of multidisciplinary research has sought to situate oil within its many cultural contexts by moving away from assessing oil through the metrics of barrels of production per day, prices at pumps, the number of motor vehicles on the road, or the cost of oil wars, and turning instead toward analyses that posit oil as a contested and socially constructed phenomenon that is made as much as it is found, and that is as imagined as it is real. This new cultural approach to oil is being undertaken by a broad spectrum of scholars who are working within the burgeoning field of Energy Humanities. Cultural historians and geographers, in particular, have been actively revising oil narratives in recent years. Critical geographers Simon Dalby and Matthew Paterson, for example, have investigated the discursive legacies of petro-imperialism that exist in contemporary car advertisements—including geographical domination of distant places and assertions about the inherent right of consumption [23]. Cultural theorists interested in oil and its multiple pasts, such as Imre Szeman and Stephanie LeMenager, have investigated the historical origins of oil discourses, specifically those which circulated within North America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, raising searching questions about the ontology of oil and the different ways that people have come to understand the resource as being both a physical object and a cultural imaginary [24,25].

Another important recent contribution to research on the culture of oil is Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden’s edited collection of essays, *Oil Culture*, which marks the emergence of a new body of literature “attentive to oil’s cultural presence in the various social, economic, and political realms that constitute the global petroleum system.” [26]. As Barrett and Worden aptly note, scholars studying oil from within the humanities must work to disentangle the “many dimensions of oil’s cultural existence” by assessing the resource “as both an industry and a culture, a business and a set of aesthetic practices, a natural resource and a trope...” ([26], p. xxi). That is, oil must be configured as an inherently unstable and unfinished artifact that is constructed by the consumer and the culture in which they exist—as something that is brought to life through discourse rather than drilling, through conversation rather than chemistry. A leitmotif of Energy Humanities, then, is what Frederick Buell has identified as the scholarly “gap between energy and culture”, and research within the field has centred upon closing this distance through interdisciplinary investigations that take oil as a constellation of ideas rather than a system of things [27].

2. Analysis

2.1. Imagining Persia and Petroleum

On 28 May 1901, His Imperial Majesty Muzaffar al-Din, the Shah of Persia, granted to British oil prospector William Knox D’Arcy the right to search for and extract oil from a massive tract of land in southwestern Persia [28,29]. The concession, which covered three quarters of the country, was

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[4] For scientific and technical studies of oil, see [12,13]. Studies with a focus on oil consumption include: [14,15]. Studies with a focus on militaries and global conflict include: [16–18].

[5] Barrett and Worden note that the special issue represented “the first comprehensive account of ‘oil culture’, the broad field of cultural representations and symbolic forms that have taken shape around the fugacious material of oil...”.

[6] On the development of Energy Humanities, see [20]. Boyer and Szeman write that “Energy humanities’ is a rapidly emerging field of scholarship that overcomes traditional boundaries between the disciplines and between academic and applied research. Like its predecessors, energy humanities highlights the essential contribution that the insights and methods of the human sciences can make to areas of study and analysis that were once thought best left to the natural sciences.”

[7] See for example [21,22].

purchased for roughly £40,000 and extended across 1.2 million square kilometres. D’Arcy struggled for several years to find oil and to fund his explorations, but on 26 May 1908, his team discovered a large underground reservoir of oil 1180 feet beneath the Zagros Mountains. At a place named Maidan-i-Naftun, meaning “Valley of Oil”, some two hundred kilometres inland from the Euphrates delta, Persian oil shot out of the ground in a spout twenty-five metres high. After several more significant oil discoveries in the region during subsequent months, D’Arcy cashed out and sold his concession rights to the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), a British exploration and extraction organization that had been created specifically to exploit the nascent Persian oilfields. After a successful public offering of shares in 1909, APOC picked up where D’Arcy had left off and continued to search for and extract oil resources in southwestern Persia.

In the years immediately following the First World War, APOC significantly increased its drilling operations for Persian crude oil as British demand for the resource increased exponentially. In 1914, the company produced 391,000 tons of oil; in 1925, the amount of oil extracted from Persian soil by APOC amounted to 4,703,000 tons—a more than twelve-fold increase over an eleven year period. Much of this oil was converted into motor spirit and naval fuel at the large APOC refinery at Abadan, Persia, an island city on the shore of the Shatt al-Alar river. Persian oil was also refined in Britain at the much smaller but state-of-the-art refinery at Llandarcy, near Skewen, South Wales. APOC marketed, distributed, and sold its refined oil products in the United Kingdom through a subsidiary entity called the British Petroleum Company, or BP, which possessed an extensive and rapidly-growing network of rail cars, delivery trucks, and pumping stations across England, Scotland, and Wales. According to BP’s official historian, the advertising and distribution activities of the company were immensely important to APOC and its ambitions for selling Persian oil to British consumers, for it “represented the missing link, marketing, in the Company’s chain connecting the oil well to the customer.” According to BP’s official historian, the advertising and distribution activities of the company were immensely important to APOC and its ambitions for selling Persian oil to British consumers, for it “represented the missing link, marketing, in the Company’s chain connecting the oil well to the customer.”

Beginning in the early 1920s, BP launched a comprehensive national advertising campaign in British newspapers and magazines geared toward raising consumer awareness of APOC’s pioneering

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9 The concession contract was valid for a period of sixty years, and stipulated that the Shah was entitled to receive £20,000 sterling upon the discovery of oil, £20,000 in shares in the first company to successfully extract oil, and sixteen per cent of all future revenues derived from Persian oil. Notably absent from the Persian concession agreement were five northern provinces near the Caspian Sea, which were excluded due to their proximity to Russia, another expansionist empire seeking to exploit Persian oil.

10 When D’Arcy discovered oil at Maidan-i-Naftun, he promptly renamed the location Masjid-i-Suleiman, meaning “Temple of Solomon”. This act offers a telling glimpse of the imperialistic and crusading mentality that D’Arcy and other British oil explorers possessed toward Persia.

11 For a detailed examination of APOC’s founding and its early relationships with British and Persian governments, see: [33,34].


13 Between 1912 and 1925, APOC production of Persian crude oil rose from nil to 3% of total global production. As BP’s official historian wrote of the company’s dramatic expansion during the early twentieth century, “The growth of the Company in the two decades from 1900 to 1928 was a remarkable phenomenon...” ([30], p. 632).

14 The refinery at Abadan was constructed in October 1908 to process oil extracted at Maidan-i-Naftun. The site functioned as an important rail and shipping hub for crude and refined oil products in the British Empire. By the mid-1920s, Abadan was one of the largest refineries in the Middle East. The APOC refinery at Skewen, in South Wales, was named Llandarcy in homage to both its Welsh location (the prefix Llan identifies a “village” or “lawn” in Welsh) and to oil explorer William Knox D’Arcy. Construction on this plant commenced in 1921 on “a waste of rabbit warren and low-lying bogland”, and finished a year later. Llandarcy was the first large-scale oil refinery in Britain, and produced oil products until it closed its doors in 1998 ([30], p. 135; [35]).

15 The British Petroleum Company, or BP, was initially formed in London in 1906 to act as the local marketing and distributing agent of the German oil company Europaische Petroleum Union. By 1914, BP had become the second-largest oil distributor in Britain. At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, BP was classed as an enemy concern and was placed under public trust. Eventually, in May 1917, the company was sold to APOC for £2,650,000. For the remainder of the interwar period, BP functioned as the local marketing and distribution agent of APOC’s Persian oil in Britain ([30], pp. 219, 291).
activities in Persia and the special oil products that it offered to Britons. At the conclusion of several lengthy meetings in late-summer 1920, BP board members determined that the company would conduct an all-out marketing assault on British consumers—as the oil executives agreed, “our advertising must be on a very extensive scale indeed.” [38]. The company acted quickly to fulfill its ambitious marketing goals, and by February 1921, BP had deployed throughout England and Wales over 12,000 colourful enameled-iron signs, 1500 branded railcars, and thousands of billboard and poster advertisements—all adorned with the company’s distinctive green and yellow shield logo [38]. In addition to these permanent and semi-permanent marketing efforts, BP also deployed a mobile advertising strategy in the form of small, 2-gallon motor spirit cans, which customers purchased from private garages and that were conveniently reusable. By 1925, there were estimated to be over two million of BP’s colourful green cans circulating in Britain, which were being filled and refilled at the company’s 6000 roadside petrol pumps [39,40].

The most concerted effort undertaken by BP to market Persian oil to British consumers, however, was the daily stream of print advertisements the company published in British newspapers and magazines. Even a cursory reading of London’s quality print media during the period, particularly The Times and the ILN, reveals that BP’s goal was, indeed, to bombard urban British readers with images and stories about Persian oil. From 1922–1927, BP spent an average of £150,000 per year producing a variety of creative and engaging print advertising materials related to oil, including crosswords, rhyme booklets, and mail-in contests [41–43]16. BP also published several serialized advertisement collections that ran in newspapers over a few days or weeks, many of which contained colourful artwork and elaborate stories about oil, Persia, the British motorist, and the burgeoning relationship that was forming between them. These serialized advertising productions permitted BP to develop and sustain more complex narratives about Persian oil and, as such, they were employed frequently throughout the 1920s as tools for educating urban audiences about what oil was, where it came from, and what its consumption meant for Britons. With their capacity to tell stories about Persian oil, rather than to just display BP’s logo, these serialized advertisements served as crucial intermediaries between the oilfields in Persia, the executive boardroom in London, and the British consumer. As such, BP invested heavily in this form of advertising, with the goal of providing the British consumer with an archive of images, stories, and ideas about Persian oil and the curious cultures and peoples that lived where it had been found.

The centrepiece of BP’s serialized print advertising campaign during the 1920s was the twelve-part “Persian Series”, which was published in the Illustrated London News during the spring and summer of 1925, and illustrated by the renowned British artist and illustrator, Christopher Clark17. As a whole, the series strives to explain to British consumers what Persia was like, and to inculcate a specific way of thinking about the local geographies from which oil was extracted. To do so, the series renders an imaginative and romanticized portrait of Persia in which the country is represented as a ruggedly inhospitable space, devoid of contemporary life or culture, and staggeringly far from the civilized urban spaces where Britons consumed oil. The result of these representational efforts is an imagined world in which Persia finds meaning as a space that was radically and irreconcilably different from Britain—an exotic and alien geography defined by wildness, emptiness, and oil.

The “Persian Series” is saturated with the theme of wildness, which functions as a motif that ties together all twelve of the advertisements. Throughout the series, Persia is depicted and described as a wild, unpredictable space that presented an array of challenging natural obstacles to both local Persian inhabitants and British wildcatters searching for oil. To be sure, the mountainous landscape from

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16 The company’s expenditure on advertising becomes even more staggering when one considers that BP’s overall profits for the fiscal year 1924–1925 totaled £323,000.

17 Christopher Clark was a well-known ‘Black & White Man’, a group of artist-reporters that drew or painted weekly images depicting news events and general interest subjects for British magazines and newspapers during the interwar years. Clark’s work was published frequently in the Illustrated London News and The Sphere magazine.
which BP extracted oil was unfamiliar to British readers, and decidedly different from the geography of London or southeast England. Yet, the advertisements go much further than simply drawing distinctions between “there” and “here”. Rather, the “Persian Series” frames the oil-bearing region as a threatening and hostile space that was so wild that it was lethal. For example, in the artwork of one advertisement entitled “Transporting Pipe Line in Persia”, two Persian workers are shown directing a team of donkeys along a narrow, winding mountain footpath. The pack animals are each laden with long and heavy sections of oil pipeline on their backs, together with sacks of supplies and other gear. At the edge of the path, just inches from the bare feet of the workers, the mountain plunges steeply into a black abyss, suggesting to the reader that even walking through this landscape was dangerous and potentially deadly [5]. Another perilous mountain scene is depicted in the artwork of the advertisement entitled “150 Miles of Pipe Line”, in which several dozen local Persian workers and pack animals labour to assemble pipeline sections at the bottom of a rubble-strewn valley, accompanied by a handful of British overseers who stand watching, dressed in white [44] (See Appendix 3). In this dramatic scene, workers are depicted as tiny, dark and barely recognizable figures juxtaposed against the towering mountains that dominate the image, their craggy peaks casting foreboding shadows upon the labourers. The message presented in this advertisement is that the Persian landscape represented a powerful, almost extra-terrestrial force that challenged the ingenuity of those who traversed its mountainous surface. As the text of the advertisement entitled “The Petroleum Beacon” confirmed to readers, Persian geography was a larger-than-life landscape that “loomed” over all who dared trespassed there, “mysterious and menacing” [10].

BP’s attempt to artistically represent Persia as a place defined by wildness is further supported in the textual components of the “Persian Series” advertisements, where the quixotic and threatening oil-bearing geography from the artwork is narrativized through stories about BP and its adventurous encounters with Persian landscapes and peoples. Tying together the stories depicted in the twelve advertisements is a narrative of British explorers encountering a forbidding wilderness that presented many obstacles, while searching for a mysterious and potentially unlimited source of power that Britons needed to survive. Several advertisements recount stories about the “small body of British pioneers” that had first surveyed and then penetrated the formidable mountains of Persia looking for hidden oil [5]. The character of William Knox D’Arcy, the original owner of the Persian Concession, is frequently invoked as a symbol of the unequal contest between the intrepid British explorer versus the vast Persian wilderness. The advertisement entitled “Petroleum as a Weapon”, for example, described a harrowing confrontation between the “great English oil-pioneer” D’Arcy and the “desert plains, deep gorges and mountain passes” with which his team had to contend [45]18. Running between the lines of these stories is the narrative that Persia was a place where Britons did not belong and should not go; a landscape that was hostile to the civilized, urban oil consumer. To even the most experienced and intrepid adventurers, such as D’Arcy and his successors, Persia offered nothing but “difficulties innumerable”—a wild terrain harbouring “privation and hardship, and often serious danger” [5,45].

To strengthen the claim that Persia was synonymous with rugged wilderness, BP assigns similar qualities to the local people who inhabited the mountains from which the company extracted its oil. Although several advertisements pay homage to the “glories of ancient Persia” and the “magnificence and splendour” that characterized Persian cultures of the past, the depiction of contemporary Persian life and culture is markedly less reverential [6,8]. The artwork accompanying “A Persian Bazaar”, for example, presents a particularly chaotic and wild market scene, in which locals conduct their commerce “midst a babel of tongues, a miscellany of merchandise, odours and cries” [46]. The advertisement boldly proclaims that this raucous scene represented the very essence of Persia—“Nothing is more typical of the east than the bazaar.” The implicit message in these lines is that the Persians were as wild, unpredictable, and potentially dangerous as the geography that they

18 Stories about D’Arcy’s early twentieth-century exploits are also presented in [7].
lived upon. Yet, the advertisements go beyond the suggestion that Persians were simply different from Britons or that they were somehow less “civilized”. Instead, they seek to equate the Persian subject with the wild animal, and to suggest that they were merely an additional layer of wildness etched upon the oil-bearing landscape. Eight of twelve advertisements feature images of Persians living and working among animals, purposefully blurring the distinction between Persian and beast, the natural and the unnatural, the civilized explorer and the nomadic local. Take “A Persian Bazaar”, for example, in which donkeys and dogs surround locals exchanging “goats and gramophones, candles and camels” [46]. In the artwork of “A Persian Wedding”, another canine is shown at the feet of a large and boisterous procession; in the text, readers are told a story of how the bride’s wedding gifts are carried to her “on gaily caparisoned mules” [7]. Animals and Persians interacting is central to the artwork included in “Ferry-Boats of the Tigris”, as well, which features a Persian family with young children crowded into a traditional gufa—a small wicker boat—alongside a donkey, two chickens, and a cow [9]. In “A Land of Leisurably Travel”, several other Persian families are shown squeezed into haphazard carriages made of sticks and cloth, perched atop camels as they caravan across a mountainous desert [47]. The artwork included in “The Petroleum Beacon” is, perhaps, the most vivid and evocative depiction of wildness in the series: against a pitch black background, somewhere in a vast and empty Persian desert, a lone night watchman stands guard over his sleeping family [10]. The foreground is lit by a single oil-burning torch, which casts a dim glow over a campsite shared by the watchman’s family, several camels, and a horse. This vignette of Persia drives home the narrative of a wild and challenging geography, a place of exotic danger and mystery.

The explicit ‘wilding’ of Persians that is evident throughout BP’s advertising series was part of a much larger representational project of erasing and redefining Persia and Persians during the 1920s. An article published in BP’s staff magazine in May 1926, for example, described the Bakhtiari, the local nomadic inhabitants that lived in the Zagros Mountains of southwestern Persia, as “an out-door animal and a mountain dweller.” These tribesmen were uncivilized and wild, the article concluded, radically different from the British oil consumer and “therefore apt to be a noisy companion in a drawing room” [48]. The following year, in 1927, BP invited a reporter to tour the company’s Persian operations and to recount his stories in a book intended for British audiences. The effort to stamp wildness upon Persia and Persians was pursued here, as well. The final publication, entitled In a Persian Oil Field, presented a story of British conquest over Persian landscapes and people. The author wrote that one of the greatest challenges the company faced in the search for oil there was the local “nomadic material”, which etched out meager lives upon the mountainsides. Similar to the “Persian Series”, the book melds the contemporary Persian subject with the natural environment, in effect erasing them from the imagined geography of oil being created in the mind of the British reader. “The character and habits of these tribesmen”, the author wrote with a sense of mystery, “presented human and sociological problems as peculiar and as complex in their own ways as the physical and chemical problems raised by the nature of the crude oil obtained from below.”

A second major theme inscribed upon the artwork and narratives of the “Persian Series” is that of emptiness, which works in conjunction with the theme of wildness in order to construct an image of Persia that was antithetical to the metropolitan sites of oil consumption in Britain. Scattered throughout the series are visual and textual messages about Persia that define it as a remote and peripheral landscape that was so wild that it was uninhabitable. In scripting Persia as an infertile and empty geography, BP strengthens the narrative of a modern, adventurous, and daring company capable of overcoming nature’s most challenging obstacles in the wildest parts of the world. At the

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19 Although violently dismissive of the Bakhtiari tribespeople, Williamson did discuss at some length the ways in which Persian labourers were being trained and put to work in myriad roles within the company, including as machinists, specialized craftsmen, and general tradesmen. Williamson draws a sharp distinction between urban and middle-class Persians, who were being trained to “work for” the company, and “the simple nomads” with which the company seemed to always be “working against” ([49], pp. 121, 145).
same time, an empty Persia meant that BP could assert supreme knowledge of and control over the region, while eliminating any sense of local resistance to oil extraction and its effects upon daily life. As one advertisement proclaimed with some hubris, the “miracles” of British science and technology had overcome the extreme wildness and emptiness that had defined Persia for millennia, and in doing so had restored life and fulfillment to the dormant landscape: “over the mountains and deserts of Persia, for countless years traversed only by camels and the slowly moving caravan, to-day there flows the crude oil which is the basis of ‘BP’, the British Petrol” [44].

Here again, BP seeks to erase and redefine contemporary Persian life and culture through the use of images and stories about the past that were familiar to the British audience. Several advertisements refer to the “dignity and beauty” of ancient Persia during the “early history of mankind”, while others explore such topics as the “Glories of Ancient Persia”, “The Tomb of Khusru Pharviz”, or “When Petroleum was used as Cement.” [6,8,50]. The advertisements’ treatment of contemporary Persia, however, suggests that the rich cultural traditions of the ancient and classical periods had simply withered and disappeared. The legacy of Persia’s impressive past had vanished, leaving behind only “ruins” and “those treasures of mineral oil once held sacred by the Fire Worshippers of ancient Persia.” [4]. According to one advertisement, “The early glory of Persia was succeeded by centuries of inactivity and depression”, suggesting that contemporary Persia and the people who lived there had remained untouched by “modernity” or the “oil age” [8]. Indeed, the word “ancient” is used to describe Persia a total of thirteen times in the “Persian Series”, making it one of the most frequently-used words in the corpus. As another advertisement confirmed to British audiences with a tinge of satisfaction and superiority, the highpoint of Persian culture had risen and fallen, eclipsed by more powerful, more modern oil-burning empires: “Gone are the captains and kings. Their citadels are crumbled to dust” [45].

Collectively, the “Persian Series” advertisements present a narrative outlining Persia’s deterioration from being a richly productive and bustling region to a place that was arid and fallow. As several advertisements made sure to note, Persia was a “barren country”, comprised of “barren wastes” and “desolate and barren valleys.” [5,44,50]. Indeed, BP employed the themes of barrenness and emptiness in other advertising and marketing products released during the period, as well. An article published in the company’s staff magazine in 1926 described Persia as “a desolate, rocky region, entirely devoid of any of the resources of civilisation” [51]. According to the author, Persia was an inherently wild and empty place—“sparsely inhabited by a few tribesmen, [who] had no other material resources than oil” [51]. As these depictions of Persia demonstrate, one of BP’s primary marketing goals during the mid-1920s was to construct an imagined geography of oil that was wild and empty—an historic yet peripheral space that was of little use but of immense value. As one advertisement reflected on the ebbing fortunes and worth of Persia: “It is a striking commentary on the changing destinies of empires that a land so full of ancient custom and tradition should to-day largely owe its prosperity to the very antithesis of its customary modes of travel—the motor car” [50].

Although at first glance the “Persian Series” appears to offer a broad spectrum of information about Persian history, culture, and geography, a closer reading of the advertisements reveals that the images and narratives employed by BP actually strive to create a carefully constructed view of Persia and the people who live there. By rendering Persia as a wild and empty space unsuited for civilized life, BP transforms the entire region into a resource supply site from which Britons were entitled to search for, drill for, take away, and consume oil. Indeed, this imperialistic attitude toward Persia and its oil resources was not only a driving theme in the “Persian Series” and much of BP’s advertisements during the 1920s and 1930s, but also a central tenet of the company’s corporate ethos and raison d’être. The original concession contract signed by D’Arcy in 1901, for example, granted him the exclusive rights to “search for, obtain, exploit, develop, render suitable for trade, carry away, and sell” Persian oil [52]. Twenty-four years later, the same language of discovery, penetration, and removal is apparent in the “Persian Series”, where words such as “exploit”, “develop”, “furnish”, and “reaping” are used
to describe the ways that BP acquired its supplies of oil. The combined effect that the themes of
wildness andemptiness have on the narrative of oil presented in the “Persian Series” is a sense that the
modern, urban, technologically advanced British consumer was entitled to the oil resources of distant
lands simply because they had found them. According to the stories told through its many newspaper
and magazine advertisements, BP had brought the “miracles of modern British industry” to bear upon
the wild and remote spaces of Persia and, in doing so, had tamed one of the most dangerous and
unruly oil-producing landscapes. As the “Persian Series” made sure to underscore in nearly every
advertisement, BP’s commercial conquest of Persia and the “unlocking” of its natural resources was a
triumph not only for the company, but for all oil-consuming Britons. Thanks to distinctly British senses
of “enterprise and foresight”, BP had transformed what was once a barren and desolate region into a
great “British national asset”—a magical and seemingly unlimited source of energy that all Britons
were entitled either to own or to expend, or both.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1925, British readers of the Illustrated London News were
provided with exuberant stories about the extraction of exotic oil resources in rugged, wild, and
empty lands. The “Persian Series” explained to modern British consumers the ways in which BP
marshaled advanced technology and privileged knowledge to successfully conquer and tame the
Persian wilderness. British ingenuity, determination, and skill had unlocked the plentiful natural
resources trapped beneath this far-flung landscape, which provided energy for all Britons and, as the
advertisements asserted frequently, all Persians. The exploitation of Persian oil resources illustrated
the achievements of BP and APOC as companies operating in difficult regions of the world, but also
of the power and prestige of Britain as a nation confronted by the natural environment. The British
people had engaged the Persian wilderness and won—their prize a steady flow of crude oil.

2.2. Imagining Exotic Prizes and Empty Wilderness in Northern Alberta

Nearly a century later, in a different country on a different continent, Canadian audiences viewed
a television and movie theatre commercial entitled “Canadian Ideas at Work”, which echoed many of
BP’s narratives of exotic prizes, empty wilderness and commercial conquest. The video commercial
was created in 2012 by the oil sands company Cenovus, and aired extensively “on television and in
movie theatres across the country, and in a variety of Canadian consumer magazines.” Similar to
BP’s marketing strategy of the 1920s, “Canadian Ideas at Work” was created as an educational tool for
consumers to gain a greater awareness of the geographical spaces of oil extraction and the modern
technologies used by Cenovus. According to the company, “our advertising...provides information
about the oil sands and the value oil brings to our lives.” Yet, as with BP’s print advertising series
of the previous century, the advertisements presented by Cenovus strive to accomplish much more
than simply convey product knowledge or to explain to audiences how necessary oil products are
to their daily routine. Rather, “Canadian Ideas at Work”, provides consumers with a specific way of
thinking about and imagining oil: as an exotic prize discovered deep in the wilderness and unlocked
for the benefit of all Canadians. The advertisement constructs an imagined world in which oil exists
somewhere ‘out there’ in the remote wilderness of Canada, buried beneath forbidding landscapes and
accessible only to the most daring and adventurous of extraction companies.

As with Persia, oil has played an important historical role in Alberta for centuries. Indigenous
peoples used the thick, sticky tar found in small surface pools as pitch for canoes and houses, as did the

20 “Furnish” appears in [10]; “reaping” appears in [8]; “provides” appears in [7].
21 In addition to “Canadian Ideas at Work”, Cenovus produced several other video advertisements that were presented
to television and movie theatre audiences from 2012–2014, including: “Fuelling Our Lives”, “Rising to the Challenges”,
“A Different Oil Sands”, and “More than Fuel.” See [53].
22 According to Cenovus external communications manager Leanne Deighton, “Canadian Ideas at Work” and other
commercials from this period were produced in response to negative public opinion about the oil sands. In an interview in
July 2012, she stated that “People don’t really need to know the ins and outs of our business...They just want to know why
you need oil and gas and in the simplest way, how we’re developing it in the most responsible way that we can” [54].
European explorers who settled in the area during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1875, the Canadian Geological Survey officially registered oil sands deposits in Northern Alberta, which was followed by a flurry of exploratory activities in the region. The commissioning of a transcontinental railroad by the Government of Canada in 1881 led to even more interest in the geography and resources of Alberta, where the Canadian Pacific Railway company acquired some 25 million acres of land and vast subsurface mineral rights as part of its construction contract. Railway crews discovered natural gas in Alberta in 1883, marking the province’s entry into the “petroleum era.” Less than a century later, in the 1960s and 1970s, several major international oil companies were mining Alberta’s oil sands, producing tens of thousands of barrels of petroleum per day. Today, the oil sands make up 97 per cent of Canada’s total oil reserves—and roughly 10 per cent of the oil known to exist in the world.

Cenovus Energy is a company born out of the legacy of Alberta’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century experiences with oil. Similar to BP and APOC’s central role in developing Persia’s oilfields in the 1910s and 1920s, Cenovus’ corporate genealogy is inextricably linked with the historical development of Alberta’s oil sands. Indeed, as the company states on its website, “Cenovus is a new company but has a long history.” In 2009, Encana Corporation split into two separate enterprises, creating a natural gas company that maintained the original Encana name, and an integrated oil sands extraction company renamed Cenovus Energy Inc. Headquartered in Calgary, Alberta, Cenovus currently operates four extraction facilities in Canada—two of which produce conventional oil and two that produce unconventional oil sands products. In addition to these operations, Cenovus also owns a 50 per cent stake in two American oil refineries. For nearly two decades, the company has been drilling in Alberta’s oil sands using a “repeatable, cookie-cutter approach” that, in 2015, produced more than 66,000 barrels of conventional oil and more than 440 million cubic feet of natural gas per day. Thus, with nearly 4000 employees, $2 billion in commercial investments, $20 billion in net revenues, and operating a land surface area of approximately 7 million acres—nearly the size of Belgium—Cenovus is by all measures one of the most successful companies in the Canadian oil sands extraction industry, and promises to be so for decades to come.

In ways similar to BP and APOC, Cenovus’ advertising leverages the company’s long history, dramatic encounters with the natural environment, and technological triumphs in order to present itself as a company that had unlocked Alberta’s natural resources for the benefit of all Canadians. “Canadian Ideas at Work”, for example, features several dramatic scenes of wild and dangerous landscapes that are reminiscent of the “Persian Series.” Throughout the one-minute commercial, viewers are presented with images of jagged mountain ranges and plunging valleys, pristine and blindingly white arctic plains, and vast boreal forests free of any sign of human activity. In the first five seconds of the commercial, the audience is transported into space, perhaps the wildest and emptiest of places, which quickly establishes the two overarching themes of the video. Immediately following these

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23 The first recorded European encounter with Alberta’s oil sands is James Knight’s 1715 account of the free flowing ‘gum’ that he witnessed seeping out of the banks of the Athabasca River. Later, in 1788, Sir Alexander MacKenzie recorded his encounter with “bituminous fountains; into which a pole of twenty feet long may be inserted without the least resistance.” See [55].

24 In 1967, Great Canadian Oil Sands Limited (later Suncor) began producing oil at 32,000 barrels per day. In 1978, Syncrude began operations producing 109,000 barrels per day [56].

25 Encana Corporation was itself comprised of two historical oil sands companies of the twentieth century: PanCanadian Energy Corp. and the Alberta Energy Company [58].

26 Cenovus’ conventional oil facilities are located at Weyburn, southeast Saskatchewan, and Pelican Lake, 300 kilometres north of Edmonton, Alberta. The company’s unconventional oil sands facilities are located at Christina Lake, 150 kilometres south of Fort McMurray, Alberta, and Foster Creek, 330 kilometres northeast of Edmonton, Alberta. The company’s co-owned refineries (with ConocoPhillips) are located at Wood River, Illinois, and Borger, Texas. At the time of writing, Cenovus had acquired further regulatory approval for three additional projects: Narrows Lake, Telephone Lake, and Grand Rapids [59].

27 As Cenovus states on its website, the amount of natural gas produced by the company “is enough to heat almost 1.7 million average-sized single detached homes in Canada for an entire year”.

28 By comparison, the tract of land that William Knox D’Arcy was granted concessionary rights to in Persia was nearly 300 million acres—40 times larger than Cenovus’ concession footprint in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Cenovus predicts its reserves of oil will last for 24 years [59].
breath-taking views of the earth slowly spinning below, the commercial then “zooms in” on footage of Canadians living and working in challenging natural environments. The audience is introduced to a team of lumberjacks using pike polls to unblock a log-jammed river, and then to another group of workers using long, heavy-toothed saws to carve out and extract blocks of ice from a frozen lake, suggesting that Cenovus’ extractive activities in Northern Alberta were simply new episodes in the age-old narrative of struggle between Canadians and the natural environment, between “us versus the wild”.

The camera then “zooms out”, showing the audience more images of wild and uninhabited geographies. The viewer’s gaze is held by an aircraft, which surmounts a jagged mountain crest to reveal a panoramic image of a vast snow-peaked mountain range. The rubble-strewn and uneven surfaces of the range are reminiscent of those presented in the “Persian Series”, as are the dark plunging valleys and the complete absence of local life, human or animal. Indeed, both BP and Cenovus rely heavily on the trope of the mountain range as a vehicle for representing wildness, but they also use scenes depicting peoples traversing and conquering wild landscapes to strengthen the narratives of adventure and conquest over such spaces. With the right amount of courage, knowledge, and skill, the natural environment could be tamed, and its natural resources unlocked for all to use. In the “Persian Series”, BP expresses this theme through images of people walking along narrow mountain passes or working at the bottom of steep valleys. In “Canadian Ideas at Work”, these narratives are presented in remarkably similar ways. In one segment, the viewer looks down from an aircraft circling above a jagged and rubble-strewn mountain peak. Atop the highest point, a lone man stands gazing triumphantly out into the steep valley below. This proud mountain man is pictured as a small and barely-recognizable figure against the commanding landscape, echoing the lone night watchman of BP’s “The Petroleum Beacon.” Both men stare out into an expansive and foreboding landscape—part conqueror, but also part captive to the immense natural forces that loom “mysterious and menacing”.

The narrative of conquest over wild and empty Canadian landscapes is further strengthened in subsequent moments of the commercial, when the camera shifts to scenes depicting urban life and the use of oil to overcome the challenges of the natural environment. In the first of these shots, a young child is shown gazing out of a window on to a snow-covered residential yard, her hands spread out upon the frosty glass. The toddler’s gestures suggest that she stands, like the mountain climber before her, in awe of the harsh, powerful, and wild natural environment. At the same time, both the toddler and the mountain climber have a sense of defiance about them, as if they had each overcome the hostility of the outdoors and could now reap its rewards. In the next scene, a man cloaked in a heavy winter coat, wearing gloves and a large hat is seen struggling to snow-blow his drive-way during a blizzard. This windy and chaotic scene suggests the harshness of nature and the difficulties it poses to everyday life, but also demonstrates how oil technology could be used to conquer even the most obstinate of drive-ways. Indeed, as the narrator intones in the background of these scenes, “we’re a country that’s resilient” [11]. The winter scenes are followed by yet more images of Canadians using technology to overcome the wilderness of the natural environment. First, the audience is shown black-and-white historical footage of a team of horses plowing a rough tract of empty land that continues beyond the horizon. Next, the camera switches to an aerial view of a team of four “modern” combines harvesting wheat. Both of these farming scenes portray vast and empty landscapes being tamed and conquered by Canadians wielding technology. Even more, they suggest that with enough hard work and determination, plus the right technological “key”, difficult terrains could be unlocked to reveal valuable natural resources. In stark contrast to the remote, mountainous, and wild spaces being viewed “out there”, the everyday Canadians shown in the commercial had conquered their local, urban environment “here”—and they often did so with the help of oil.

The third and final segment of the commercial begins by “zooming out” once more upon scenes of empty wilderness. The camera returns to an aircraft, this time flying low above a vast tract of bright green boreal forest. The viewer watches countless trees race past for several seconds, after which time a small lake punctuates the carpet of trees. The lake is filled with crystal blue water and surrounded
by sandy beaches, without any signs of human or animal activity. The audience’s aerial “tour” above this pristine landscape then arrives at a Cenovus extraction facility comprised of a tall drilling rig and some outbuildings, which appear to be carved out of the dense surrounding forest. The facility showcased in this commercial is Cenovus’s Foster Creek operation, located 330 kilometres northeast of Edmonton, near the Saskatchewan border. The extraction facility began operation in 1996, and by 2001 it was the first project of its kind to produce commercial quantities of oil. The facility, and the McMurray formation of bituminous sands from which it drills, are situated within the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range, an active Canadian military base that is jointly owned and managed by Cenovus, the Canadian and Albertan Governments, and the Cold Lake First Nations [62,63]. In 2012, the year that “Canadian Ideas at Work” was published, Foster Creek produced an average of 58,000 barrels of oil per day from more than 200 individual wells, providing employment and revenue opportunities to several local indigenous communities [64].

The buildings are shown for less than a second, but in this short time they convey several important messages to the audience. First, the facility is shown from the air and at a distance, which creates the impression that the landscapes where Cenovus operated were so wild and isolated that the viewer-cum-consumer could only “visit” them briefly. Second, picturing the facility tucked among seemingly endless forests and beneath a bright blue sky suggests to the audience that Cenovus’ footprint in this region was insignificant and isolated, and that the process of extracting oil involved only small incursions into a vast, wild, and empty environment. Indeed, as the company reassures visitors to its website, “about one percent of the forest in Alberta has been disturbed by oil and gas and oil sands development”, and that, by law, all lands disrupted by oil extraction were required to be reclaimed and returned to their original state [68].

After this fleeting glimpse of the extraction facility from the air, the commercial then transitions to an entirely different mode of representing and imagining the geography of oil extraction. In a computer-generated segment that lasts for seven seconds, the facility buildings and surrounding landscape are converted into a 3-D image made up of simple white and yellow lines and grids. The many trees that had previously enveloped the facility are removed from the image, replaced by scattered clusters of triangular green pylons, with the ground and sky coloured single shades of green and blue, respectively. Here, Cenovus transforms the natural environment into a virtual, artistically constructed environment in ways that are rather similar to the representational techniques used in the “Persian Series.” That is, whereas BP used drawings and painted artwork to creatively represent Persia, its landscapes, and its natural resources, Cenovus uses equally imaginative computer-generated artwork to illustrate its commercial conquest of Northern Alberta’s oil-bearing landscapes.

In the next scene, the viewer literally penetrates the ground beneath the facility, plunging below the surface and following two parallel pipelines, one blue and one red, being drilled through the earth. In this rapid descent below ground, the audience witnesses the pipes pass through several multi-coloured layers of earth, which are measured by a scale indicating a depth of “400 m.” The two pipes eventually arrive at a subterranean pocket of oil, at which point they abruptly turn ninety degrees and begin to travel laterally through the black layer of earth. The camera then “zooms in” on a close-up section of the pipes, which expand to take up the entire screen. The red pipe, which is

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29 In a feature issue on Cenovus, AMOI Magazine reported that “In 2013, Cenovus alone spent nearly $400 million contracting with Aboriginal companies that provide oil producers with everything from camp and catering services to site security and well servicing.” See: [65].

30 BP also used aerial flyovers of its oil extraction facilities in Persia as a tool for promoting the themes of wildness and emptiness. As Henry Longhurst recalled in 1959 of his trip to Persia in the mid-1920s, “As we flew comfortably over the 120 miles which separate Abadan from the headquarters of the oilfields in the distant foothills, we looked down on a barren, sun-scorched wilderness in which the temperature in the shade, when there is any shade, hovers for months on end in the neighbourhood of 115°F” [66]. Priya Satia, an expert on British aerial campaigns in the Middle East during the mid-twentieth century, has said that “It was perceived as all tribal, all desert, all Bedouin, and that such people and such terrain could take violence that others could not. The assumptions about the people who lived there made it permissible to use planes there” [67].
now labeled “STEAM”, springs into action, releasing a white cloud of pressurized water vapor that slowly seeps up toward the surface. The blue pipe, which is now labeled “OIL”, slowly fills with a bubbling black liquid as a result of the steam pipe working above. After several seconds of footage depicting this steam-assisted gravity drainage (SAGD) process of extraction, a technique pioneered by Cenovus, the camera angles upward in the direction of the extraction plant, suggesting that both the audience’s tour and the oil they had just witnessed being “unlocked” would return to the surface and on to the urban places where oil was consumed. This segment concludes with brief footage of Cenovus employees operating the extraction facility. In one close-up shot, a man is shown sitting at a chair in a dark room observing several glowing computer screens filled with schematics and diagrams. In another, a man wearing a jumpsuit, white helmet, and white gloves is shown filling a plastic cup with a sample of thick black liquid, taken from a wall of labyrinthine pipes. The commercial ends with the screen fading to white, while Cenovus’ blue spiral logo emerges from the background to take up the entire screen. The last image to be viewed by the audience, written proudly beneath the company name and trademark: “A Canadian Oil Company.” [11].

3. Discussion

Imagining the Past in the Present

There are numerous significant differences between the “Persian Series” and “Canadian Ideas at Work”—historical period, country of origin, the company producing the advertisement, the product being sold, and the viewership. Using these perceived differences as a point of departure, this article set out to demonstrate the remarkable similarities that exist between British Petroleum’s twelve-part series of print advertisements and Cenovus Energy’s one-minute television, movie theatre, and internet commercial. In this comparative analysis, the images and stories of both advertisements were assessed as tools used by their respective companies to construct in the mind of the consumer an imaginary world of oil—one comprised of wild, empty spaces somewhere far “out there”, where oil was extracted, and civilized, urban, familiar spaces “right here”, where oil was consumed. This investigation has revealed that the polarized imagined realms conjured in both advertisements are strangely familiar. According to each of these marketing productions, oil came from landscapes characterized by jagged mountains, dark valleys, rocks, and forests; places that were inherently dangerous, wild, and remote. Empty places defined exclusively by oil and ripe for commercial conquest.

The “Persian Series” and “Canadian Ideas at Work” share a common register of images and symbols in their representation of the geographies from which oil is extracted. BP’s graphic depictions of harsh, inhospitable, and larger-than-life landscapes were coupled with narratives describing Persia as a “barren”, “desolate”, and “wasted” region of the world. Nearly a century later, Cenovus wished its audience to imagine an equally harsh and inhospitable landscape of extraction: “Much of the terrain where we operate in northern Alberta is a wet and swampy landscape called muskeg”, the company states on its website [69]. By inscribing these themes of wildness and emptiness on their imagined geographies of oil—what Said understood as “denuding the humanity of another...geographic region”—both BP and Cenovus encourage the audience to interpret oil as a prize “locked” beneath idle and dormant landscapes, just waiting to be exploited [1]. In fact, both BP and Cenovus use the metaphor of the lock in their advertisements, and the storyline that each company had discovered the technological “key” required to peel back the layers of obstacles presented by the natural environment. Just as BP had “opened up and developed” Persia’s wild oil fields in 1925, Cenovus was working to “unlock the oil sands” in Canada in 2012 [8,11]31.

In the 1920s, this sense of entitlement to unlock, own, and expend the world’s oil resources was often couched in the language of imperialism, and the discovery of new oil fields became symbolic

31 This phrase appears in the commercial in a slightly augmented form, as “…unlock the potential in the oil sands.”
of western scientific prowess and mastery over the natural environment. Accordingly, much of the literature on oil from this period frames the processes of extraction as the “winning of oil”, or that oil was a prize “won from the earth”32. This sense of triumph over the natural environment is clearly evident in the “Persian Series”, as well, such as when BP asserted that “In an unending stream the crude oil comes from the Persian wells”, bringing to British consumers “unlimited supplies” of oil [41,44]. This notion of oil as the object of a great game or contest has clear legacies in present-day oil cultures and discourses. For example, according to an historian of BP, reflecting in 1995 on the search for Persian oil during the early twentieth century, “The story of BP is multi-layered. It is an adventure story, beginning with a dramatic search for oil in Persia... It is a tale of human genius and endeavour, of the development of whole new industries to exploit the hidden wealth of the globe in unbelievably harsh and challenging circumstances” [72].

A similar tone of triumphant conquest and scientific mastery saturates Cenovus’ marketing materials. As the opening line in “Canadian Ideas at Work” explains to the audience, “Canada, it’s spelled with a can, not a can’t. Because when faced with adversity, Canadians look for a way, not a way out” [11]. This defiant posturing can also be seen in Cenovus’ web content, which includes more elaborate stories and information about the company’s many projects and activities in the oil sands. “Conviction, tenacity and determination are traits that have long been associated with Canada”, reads one page, reminiscent of BP’s many assertions about “British foresight and enterprise” [10,11,47]. The notion of oil as a prize in a great game has also seeped into the official terminology used by Cenovus and others to describe the oil sands of Northern Alberta. Although not used in “Canadian Ideas at Work”, Cenovus refers to the sites where it has discovered oil as “a resource play”, and the term is widely used in other corporate publications to describe current and potential oil extraction sites. As the company states on its website, a “Resource play is a term used by Cenovus to describe an accumulation of hydrocarbons known to exist over a large areal expanse and/or thick vertical section” [73]. Thus, both portraits of Persia and Northern Alberta render an imagined world of oil in which accumulated hydrocarbons are transformed into vast pockets of magical energy, known to exist beneath exotic and remote places, and simply waiting to be extracted. Like their British counterparts, Canadians had the right qualities and characteristics needed to extract oil in difficult regions of the world, for Canada was “a nation with a will to succeed.” The rugged and hostile landscapes that had confronted Canadians for centuries would not stop Cenovus from exploiting “one of Canada’s great natural resources.” Fortunately for “all Canadians”, Cenovus had the special technology and the privileged knowledge required to “get it out of the ground” [11]. Said’s astute observation about the western consumer’s belief in their inherent right to own and to extract the world’s resources certainly rings true.

All knowledge about oil exists within a complex matrix of historical conflict, bound up and interwoven with the past in ways that are often difficult to tease apart. After a comparative reading of the “Persian Series” and “Canadian Ideas at Work”, it is clear that the oil cultures of the distant past are alive and well in the present. Indeed, as Philippe Le Billon has noted, oil and other natural resource commodities “at the outset of the twentieth century...[are] still defined as they were in early historical periods: as loot or as military strategy” [74]. Advertisements that are based on these notions of wildness, emptiness, and commercial conquest harken back to an earlier, romanticized age of oil that is increasingly at odds with contemporary experiences with fossil fuels and other forms of energy. Just as the “Persian Series” created an imaginary impression of a barbaric, dangerous, and wild Persia, “Canadian Ideas at Work” transforms the culturally rich and ecologically diverse region of Northern Alberta into a site with a singular, all-encompassing identity constituted by oil; a place that audiences are encouraged to imagine as eternally wild and empty, a place that holds exotic hidden resources

32 Much of the literature on oil produced during the early twentieth century discusses the resource as something that was “won.” Albert Lidgett, for example, wrote in 1919 that “The ancients, and even those of the last century, were content to resort to the most primitive means for winning petroleum from the earth” [70]. See also: [71].
that seem to inherently belong to the urban Canadian oil consumer. In contrast to the more balanced and self-critical oil sands literature available on Cenovus’ website, “Canadian Ideas at Work” creates a bucolic portrait of bitumen extraction that obscures its complex and often opaque socio-cultural ramifications. There is a great danger in choosing to imagine northern Alberta as a wild and empty landscape primed for exploitation. And there is an even greater danger in envisioning oil as an exotic, magical prize hidden in peripheral corners of the world. Indeed, as Cenovus itself admits, “there is more to the story.” The oil sands are controversial, and their continued exploitation promises myriad consequences for Canadians and the rest of the world alike. Using a critical and historical lens to interrogate the idealized narratives of oil presented in the “Persian Series” and “Canadian Ideas at Work”, this article has worked toward extracting the crude legacies of the past from the oil cultures of the present.

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Abbreviations

APOC  Anglo-Persian Oil Company
BP  British Petroleum
ILN  Illustrated London News
SAGD  Steam Assisted Gravity Drainage
Appendix

Figure A1. British Petroleum. “150 Miles of Pipe Lines” 1925 [44].
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