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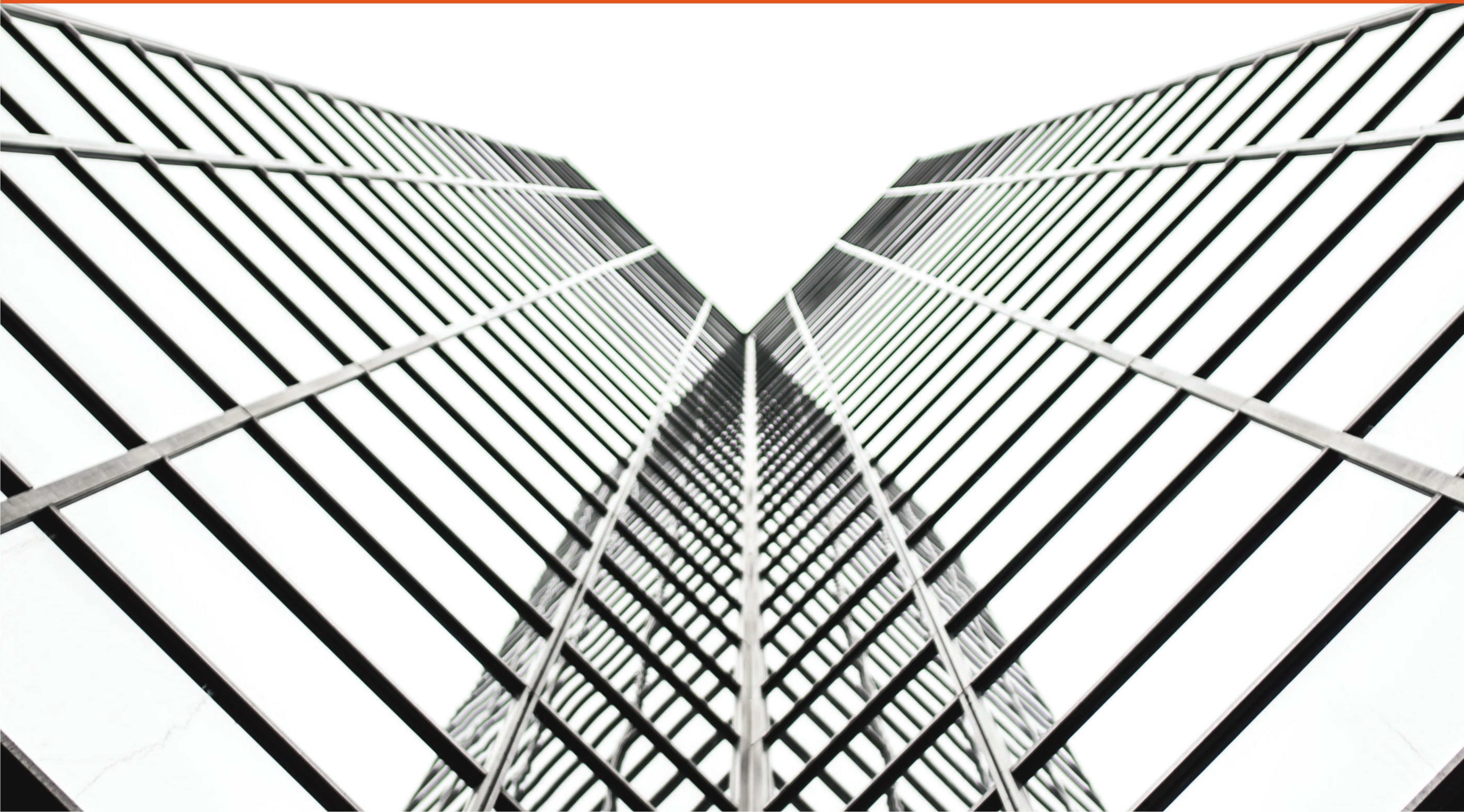

You Can Be Sure of Shell: Oil, Empire, and Landscape in Interwar Britain

Tobah Aukland-Peck

During the 1930s, Royal Dutch Shell Oil commissioned a group of prominent artists and designers to create posters for a nationwide advertising campaign in Britain. The slogans ran "To Visit Britain's Landmarks, You Can Be Sure of Shell"; "Everywhere You Go, You Can Be Sure of Shell"; "See Britain First on Shell", all of which were set against painted backgrounds of rivers, fields, churches, and castles. Through the latter half of the interwar period, these large posters traversed the nation stuck to the sides of the trucks that delivered Shell oil.[1] The broadsheet images acted as peripatetic windows onto the historic buildings, landscapes, and scenic villages of Britain, encouraging motor travel by reinforcing a sentimental connection to the British landscape. Yet in doing so, the series elided the reality of the landscape as a site of ideological conflict. In the decades following World War I, this space had become disturbed by political upheaval and placed at the center of debates over industrial modernization.

From its roots as a nineteenth-century import-export business dealing in exotic shells, Shell was historically tied to an expanded vision of Britain's imperial geography. Shell was founded in London in 1833, and the company cleaved to its

[1] As a corporate entity, Shell Oil has gone through many shifts in governance, structure, and branding since its beginnings in the 1840s, when it was established as Marcus Samuel & Co. For simplicity, I here refer to "Shell" as the general company, encompassing both Shell Transport & Trading, its name from 1897-1907, and Royal Dutch Shell Group, its name (with some variation) from 1907 to the present day.

national roots even after merging with the Dutch company Royal Dutch Oil in 1907. Today, the company operates as Royal Dutch Shell. In both their content and physical circulation, however, the 1930s Shell posters asserted an intimate connection with the geography of rural Britain. The image campaign merged bucolic nostalgia with the visual syntax of modernism. British artists including Graham Sutherland (1903-1980) and Paul Nash (1889-1946) were commissioned to reconcile canonical landscape painting with the visual innovations of a new modernist generation. The posters included visions of medieval castles, sheep-dotted fields, and gracious country houses, all traditional conventions of eighteenth-and nineteenth-century British landscape painting. These images presented a fictional British countryside unaltered by the ravages of modernity. Underlying this visual lexicon, however, Shell was engaged with modes of commercial production that physically challenged the landscapes depicted by the Shell artists. The very undertaking of motorized exploration was predicated on Shell's exploitation of a vast system of foreign oil fields, a new corporatized imperial network that materialized just as the vision of a unified British Empire faded. I argue in this paper that the Shell advertisement series' focus on the domestic landscape as the locus of British exceptionalism minimized the reality of imperial production. The visual violence of industry, missing from the view of the British countryside proposed by the Shell advertisements, was removed to foreign soil.

This study explores the veiled presence of imperial geography in the Shell series through three modes of interaction that complicate the division between local and colonial landscapes: physical exploration, cartography, and bombardment. These terms derive from the geological survey tools used to search for oil deposits in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. I suggest, however, that each mode of interaction can be imported into the domestic British context, stretching the function of the British landscape from aesthetic to extractive. The Shell advertisements are, by virtue of their commercial form and reproducible media, numerous and disparate. With many examples from unknown or minor artists, they occupy a contested space as art objects and are often dismissed as footnotes to the careers of prominent artists. Yet the visual impact of the series drew from a rich tradition of British landscape painting, codified in the nineteenth century by artists including John Constable (1776-1837). These posters can be read as a twentieth-century reiteration of the nineteenth century retreat to an imaginary pre-industrial

Figure 1. Paul Nash, *Kimmeridge Folly*, Dorset, 1937, lithograph, 30 in. x 45. in (76 x 114 cm). Reproduced with the permission of Shell Brands International, courtesy of Shell Heritage Art Collection.

countryside.[2] This move was partly a result of the anxiety over Britain's contested global supremacy, which spurred an attempt to reorient British aesthetics back towards the type of romantic images of landscape typical at the zenith of its power.[3] Yet the return to an older form was a self-conscious assumption of rural identity that could not negate London's urban and global status. The Shell advertisements were images of a countryside not only mediated through the metropole, but perhaps more critically, through the commercial ambitions of Shell as a corporate entity.[4]

The Shell advertising series took the visual and conceptual frameworks of British landscape tradition and imbued them with commodity fetishism. Through their role as advertisements, these broadsheets translated the physical boundaries of the British landscape from abstract national fantasy to an object of physical exchange.[5] Although the series imagined the countryside as an autonomous ahistorical entity, the Shell posters promoted a product tied to commercial

[2] The nostalgic fetishization of the countryside is discussed by David Peters Corbett, Ysanne Holt, and Fiona Russell in David Peters Corbett, Ysanne Holt, and Fiona Russell, eds., *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past, 1880-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xi. Denis Cosgrove and Raymond Williams both argue that history of the landscape British landscape is tied to capitalist development and that this complicates the division between the urban and rural spaces. See Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), and Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

[3] This discourse is most notable in the work of British critics including Roger Fry, Adrian Stokes, and Herbert Read.

[4] Here, I would like to emphasize London's dual identity as both capital city of England and metropole, the administrative center of the British Empire as a whole. Although a local definition of the capital often suited the more parochial sides of English identity, London was, first and foremost, tied to the business of Empire.

[5] Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (London: Routledge, 2016), 37.

extraction, grounding them in imperial expansion.[6] Scholars have considered the version of landscape presented by Shell as part of the rediscovery of the English countryside by a newly mobile class of car owners; the historical relevance of Shell's corporate structure and the company's role in imperial growth have not been addressed.[7] I push beyond the encounter between the urban middle class and the rural sphere, instead asking to what degree depictions of the British landscape were impacted by geographic shifts during the Empire's peak and beginning decline. Here, I discuss just a small segment of the series, chosen for its representation of exploration, cartography, and bombardment. However, these images are exemplary of the conflicts of landscape, commodity, and Empire that appear throughout the larger series.

Exploration

The Royal Dutch Shell's pectin shell logo alludes to the role of imperial exploration in the company's early days of existence. The business began as an import-export company in London's East End called Marcus Samuel & Co. Originally producing souvenir shell boxes for Britain's seaside towns, the company later dealt in rare and exotic shells brought home by the ships running commercial itineraries around the British Empire.[8] From the beginning, Shell was defined by an object that owed its value to both a physical connection with the domestic landscape and the power of international trade. The import of foreign seashells was predicated on a mediating commercial network, a dynamic distinct from the individual connection to landscape that seashell collectors sought on British beaches. Seashells fascinated early naturalists, who traveled to the shores of Britain's Jurassic coast to gather fossil specimens and abundant local shells. The demand for shells rose among wealthy collectors, who valued both domestic and imperial varieties, with British specimens prized alongside those from the Pacific Islands.[9] Seashells embodied a tension

[6] For more on domestic commodity objects in the metropole and experience of Empire, see Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[7] Previous scholarly treatments of the series include Rosemary Shirley, *Rural Modernity, Everyday Life and Visual Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016); John Hewitt, "The 'Nature' and 'Art' of Shell Advertising in the Early 1930s," *Journal of Design History* 5, no. 2 (January 1, 1992): 121–39; Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[8] Robert Henriques, *Bearsted: A Biography of Marcus Samuel, First Viscount Bearsted, and Founder of "Shell" Transport and Trading Co*. (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), 1.

[9] For a history of seashells and British naturalists, see Beth Fowkes Tobin, *The Duchess's Shells: Natural History Collecting in the Age of Cook's Voyages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

between an inherent reference to the natural landscape and their function in carving, furniture, and household décor. They were both autonomous object and raw material.

Marcus Samuel & Co. was implicated in the same mutability between the natural and the utilitarian as the seashell in its logo. When Japan opened to the West in 1853, the business expanded to exporting machinery, textiles, and tools, also buying Japanese rice, coal, silk, and ceramics. Later, Marcus Samuel & Co. incorporated the functional and mechanical by leveraging existing trade routes to build a global commercial enterprise. [10][11] The company focused not on the natural landscape of the colony from which the seashell was collected, but on the goods that could be produced by its exploitation. The seashell, a tangible connection to the natural landscape of the colonies, gave way to commodities produced through the extraction of natural resources from the land. Yet despite the pivot towards the commercial products of empire, the romantic imagery of the seashell as aesthetic specimen was codified in the company brand. In 1897, the company changed its name to Shell Transport and Trading Company, a nod toward its new focus on oil and kerosene. The name maintained, however, the reference to the company's roots in seashell trading.[12] This branding leveraged nostalgia as an expression of imperial power, harkening back to the image of the curious collector rather than the violence of commercial extraction.

By comparison, the exploration presented in Paul Nash's Shell poster *Kimmeridge Folly* (1937) relates more to local naturalism than imperial trading (fig. 1). Nash, a British neo-romantic and Surrealist artist, depicted an 1830 tower on the Dorset coast, appearing at the top of a crumbling hill which rises above the sea. A discrete ray of sunshine that breaks through the clouds above draws the eye directly towards the circular architectural folly. Though the slogan of the poster reads "To Visit Britain's Landmarks You Can Be Sure of Shell," Nash presented this landmark as a small part of the landscape. The folly was a foil for the drama of landscape, borrowing from earlier Romantic imagery such as John Constable's 1829 *Hadleigh Castle*, which similarly showed a dynamic interplay of light and color between sky,

[10] For other histories of Shell Transport & Trading Company and Royal Dutch/Shell Group see F.C. Gerretson, *History of the Royal Dutch* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1955); Stephen Howarth, *A Century in Oil: The "Shell" Transport and Trading Company 1897-1997* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997); Joost Jonker, J. L. Van Zanden, Stephen Howarth, and Keetie E. Sluyterman, *A History of Royal Dutch Shell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[11] Henriques, *Bearsted*, 31-32.

[12] From 1900, Shell Transport and Trading Company boasted a mussel shell as its logo, changing it to a pectin shell in 1904. See: "Our Beginnings," Shell Global, accessed December 22, 2020, https://www.shell.com/about-us/our-history/our-beginnings.html.

land, and sea. In *Kimmeridge Folly*, however, Nash chose to foreground the stony beach, arranging large stones, watery shadows, and curling seaweed. The lifelike quality of these materials, which coalesce into a surrealist still life, provided a modernist interpretation of Constable's classic canvas. The man-made structure is subsumed into the arrangement of natural forms that Nash located on the stony beach. The composition turns the viewer into a beachcomber, as the eye searches for recognizable shapes among the lines and swirls of mineral and vegetal objects.

In photographs of Kimmeridge Bay that were conceivably taken in tandem with the creation his work for Shell, Nash trained the camera lens towards the beach (fig. 2). The high cliff, folly, and sun-streaked sky are absent, reducing the picture plane to a jagged interplay of stones. Both the photographs and *Kimmeridge Bay* force a consideration of the landscape as separate layers of discontinuous objects, rather than a unified, traditional balance of the picturesque. In two photographs, Nash mimicked the act of discovery. Here, objects are centered on top of the gray expanse of beach rocks, a line of seaweed in one, and a man-made metal spiral in another (fig. 3). The objects, mysterious and tactile, arrest the eye and provoke the impulse to pick up and study them. Nash was absorbed by the geological traces of Britain's natural history, and amassed a collection of local seashells, stones and sticks, material forms that reappeared through his sculptures, photographs, and paintings.[13] Nash's interest in found natural items stemmed from the existing connection between amateur collecting and knowledge of the British landscape, where the search for local shells was a means of communing with the span of native history. Likewise, the exotic shell, long a popular addition to the discerning collector's cabinet of curiosities, brought the armchair explorer closer to lands otherwise grasped through the abstraction of maps, travel narratives, photographs, or popular engravings. The shell became a metonym for a personal experience of empire, supplanting a more intimate consideration of natural objects as a conduit to British history, geology, and, ultimately, identity. Moreover, the physical act of gathering was a key aspect of Nash's understanding of British terrain, a fascination with the hidden layers of landscape evident in *Kimmeridge Folly*.

Landscapes of oil production, lacking the picturesque elements favored for depicting imperial land, were excluded from the Shell advertisements. Nash's *Kimmeridge Folly* privileged the immediacy and intimacy of domestic exploration. In the advertising series, Shell aligned its corporate image with British tradition, appealing to those longing for a fantasy of pre-war imperial power and pre-industrialization. Its call to "See Britain First on Shell" presented the exploration of

[13] The Surrealist tradition of the *objet trouvé* is also an influential aspect of Nash's collecting practices, collages, and photography.

Figure 2. Paul Nash, *The coast at Kimmeridge, Dorset*, c. 1935–6, black and white negative, 3.5 in. x 4.7 in (8.9 × 12 cm). Tate, London (© Paul Nash, Photo © Tate. Licensed under CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported). https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/items/tga-7050ph-947/nash-black-and-white-negative-the-coast-at-kimmeridge-dorset)

Figure 3. Paul Nash, *An* objet trouvé *on Kimmeridge beach*, n.d., black and white negative, 3.1 in. x 5.2in (8.1 × 13.1 cm). Tate, London (© Paul Nash, Photo © Tate. Licensed under CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported). https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/items/tga-7050ph-949/nash-black-and-white-negative-an-objet-trouve-on-kimmeridge-beach)

the local as an extension of this nostalgia. With Shell, one could experience the wonder of discovery within the confines of the nation, a necessity given the growing instability of Britain's territorial reach. Though the moment after World War II formed the primary push against colonial power, the territorial peak of the Empire was in 1921. The following years saw tensions with Ireland, the rise of independence movements in India, the end of the British protectorate in Egypt in 1922, the naval parity treaty with the United States in 1922, and the 1923 legal foundation of the commonwealth system, all of which destabilized Britain's identity as the invincible global producer and enforcer.[14] Yet Britain, the series implied, could expand to fill the void left by the Empire's slow political and territorial dissolution.[15]

Cartography

The series proposed a second mode of geographic knowledge: abstraction of the landscape into cartographic signs. Shell was known for producing countryside maps for British travelers, further imbricating its corporate identity with motor travel and British tourism. Tristram Hillier's 1936 *Tourists Prefer Shell* foregrounds the function of these maps for the class of travelers targeted by the advertisements (fig. 4). In Hillier's stylized beach scene, necessities for the modern traveler—a pipe, a hat, a map of the British coast, and a box camera—are strewn across a boardwalk. Mapping performed a significant role in domestic exploration, but was also a necessity for oil production on foreign shores.[16] In the interwar period, the sudden realization of oil's financial potential led to a scramble to ascertain the location of new oil reserves.

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[14] This is not to say, however, that Britain lost its influence in these locations. Economic entanglement and military treaties maintained imperial power structures even after the putative independence of many colonies or nations.

[15] This imperial dissolution in the lead up to and during the interwar period is detailed in publications including Richard Davis, ed., *British Decolonisation, 1918- 1984* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013); Richard Shannon, *The Crisis of Imperialism, 1865-1914* (St Albans: Paladin, 1976); Andrew S. Thompson, ed., *Britain's Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[16] For more on mapping as a mode of colonial control, see Terry Smith, "Visual Regimes of Colonization: European and Aboriginal Seeing in Australia," in *Empire of Vision*, eds. Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 267-79.

Figure 4. Tristram Hillier, *Tourists Prefer Shell*, 1936, lithograph, 30 in. x 45. in (76 x 114 cm). Reproduced with the permission of Shell Brands International, courtesy of Shell Heritage Art Collection.

In the late nineteenth and earlier-twentieth centuries, Shell established large oil fields in the Middle East and Asia.[17] *The Diamond Jubilee Book* of the Royal Dutch Petroleum Company, a history of the company published to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary in 1950, described this development: "In this first period only geological surface mapping was carried out. In the more or less remote regions covered with virgin forests the so-called natural exposures of the strata […] were examined […] In those days a geological party consisted of a graduate geologist with an assistant geologist. The latter's chief duty was to arrange the tasks of the native workers."[18] Oil spurred, in many respects, a renewed colonial process. Centuries of colonial production were collapsed into years, with initial exploration, exploitation of local labor, and commodification of natural resources achieved in a few short decades at the turn of the century. Oil extraction necessitated a significant disruption of the visual landscape through cutting, digging, and blasting. Yet the British motorist's

[17] Shell focused on Baku in modern day Azerbaijan, and Royal Dutch established itself in the Dutch East Indies, including Sumatra in modern-day Indonesia. See: Joost Jonker, J. L. Van Zanden, Stephen Howarth, and Keetie E. Sluyterman, *A History of Royal Dutch Shell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 65-79.
[18] *The Royal Dutch Petroleum Company: Diamond Jubilee Book* (The Hague: Nijgh & Van Ditmar N.V., 1950), 24.

discovery of the pristine countryside envisioned by the posters was facilitated by petroleum, a substance derived from a commodity network that ravaged imperial terrain.[19]

Innovations in aerial mapping, based in military reconnaissance research, made aerial photography an excellent method of gathering data about the landscape. If early oil production necessitated a large expeditionary group made up of geologists and local laborers exploring the landscape on foot, these new militaristic technologies allowed for a detached study of the land. *The Diamond Jubilee Book* celebrated this modernization:

> A first trial with air mapping was made in 1925, to chart an area of 13,600 square miles… to the astonishment of all concerned it was found that, notwithstanding the fact that the area was covered with tropical jungle, the majority of the geological structures which were already known were clearly apparent from the photographs… It can now be safely assumed that no important exploration project is undertaken unless air photographs of the area in question are available.[20]

Aerial photographs expanded territorial knowledge by overcoming natural obstacles that would have been insurmountable to human surveyors.[21] Using this technology, oil companies could target oil-rich subterranean sites. From the perspective of the corporation, photography negated the threat of the land's surface, whether that "danger" included indigenous peoples or nature.

In a 1920 Shell advertisement, five planes bearing the letters S, H, E, L, and L approach the viewer, zooming over a British landscape dotted by neatly organized fields, woods, and a meandering river (fig. 5). The composition aligns Shell with the industrial innovation of flight, and the military tactic of reconnaissance. Created in the same decade during which Shell pioneered the use of aerial photography for this purpose, the image of a systematic deployment of planes over rural England appears as a metaphor for the triumph of aerial mapping as a mode of topographical control. If aerial reconnaissance allowed for an easier extraction of natural resources in the imperial landscape, it also facilitated the mapping of Britain. The aerial field

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[19] Britain itself also had large industrialized areas (chiefly, extensive mining enterprises) and the tension between production and the rural landscape is a discourse that reaches back well into the eighteenth century. The Shell series obscures this part of the British scenery. This domestic division is, however, notable, and I expand on it in my broader dissertation work on art and mining in twentieth-century Britain.

[20] *The Royal Dutch Petroleum Company: Diamond Jubilee Book*, 39.

[21] For more on the simultaneous development of aerial photography, vision, and war, see Hanna Rose Shell, *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Animal Skin and the Media of Reconnaissance, 1859-1945* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2007).

of vision reduced the landscape to a set of quantifiable symbols, making Shell's cartography more than just a convenient tool for tourists. By expanding the range of urban motor car owners into the countryside, Shell unified and standardized knowledge of the geography of Britain, presenting the beauty of rural Britain as a commodity to be extracted.

Britain itself was not insulated from the corporate reach of Royal Dutch Shell as a multinational corporation. Despite the visual turn in the 1930s towards advertisements that emphasized the potential for personal discovery, Britain did not prevail as a sovereign center in Shell's reorganization of imperial geography. A 1950 map of "The Spheres of Operation of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group of Companies" presented Shell as a new kind of global empire no longer adhering national boundaries (fig. 6).[22] The map recodes cartographic convention. Instead of designating colors based on political boundaries, it uses swaths of yellow and gray to organize space based on markets and production. Though England and the Netherlands were home to manufacturing plants, bunker stations, and research laboratories, these symbols also appear across the United States, South America, the Middle East, Australia, and Indonesia. This map displayed the company as a decentralized power, a modern, mercantile kingdom that took the place of Britain as a sovereign nation. The United Kingdom is depicted with the same gray color as the surroundings nations, subordinating its sovereignty to corporate reach. The advertising campaign lent Britain's geography a degree of exceptionalism, a comforting veil thrown over the growing irrelevance of England on the world stage.

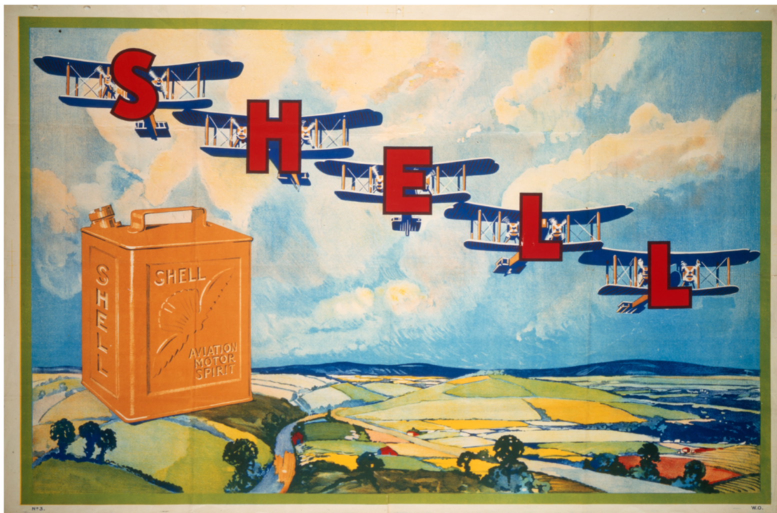

Figure 5. *Shell Studio, Five Planes*, 1920, lithograph. Reproduced with the permission of Shell Brands International, courtesy of Shell Heritage Art Collection.

Bombardment

Rural Britain was also implicated in what Isaac Frederick Marcosson called oil's "bloodless conflict," writing that "The world struggle for oil [..] is perhaps the most significant bloodless conflict now being waged. […] We have come to the era when

[22] Ibid.

oil is a supreme necessity, ranking with transportation and agriculture, and essential to both."[23] Over the interwar period, the focus on oil led to the invasion of foreign landscapes and the British countryside alike in search of oil. This "war" utilized modes of physical bombardment in which explosives were employed to gather geographic data. In the early-twentieth century, geologists hunted for oil by setting off ground penetrating detonations to determine subterranean geography. This method was first used in World War I to locate enemy trenches. Marcosson's focus on oil as the driver of conflict is notable given the clear comparison to one of the most significant and bloody conflicts of the century: The First World War. Shell's role in World War I is a critical aspect of the imperial subtext of its 1930s visual culture for three primary reasons: the etymologic and material connection between explosive shells used in battle and Shell's brand; the overlap between artists who depicted the battlefields of the war and painted the British countryside for the Shell advertisements; and the technological overlap between oil exploration and military infrastructure.

The image of the exploding projectile eclipsed the Shell logo, lending the otherwise-nostalgic image of the seashell a violent overtone. Shell manufactured TNT used to fill military shells by using byproducts from the refinery process. If the oil derived from Shell's refineries exerted power through fueling industry and transportation, the explosive chemical reaction inside the military shell eradicated all in front of it, fulfilling the violent potential of the company's imperial reach. Shell occupied a contested position during the war, allied with British interests, yet also

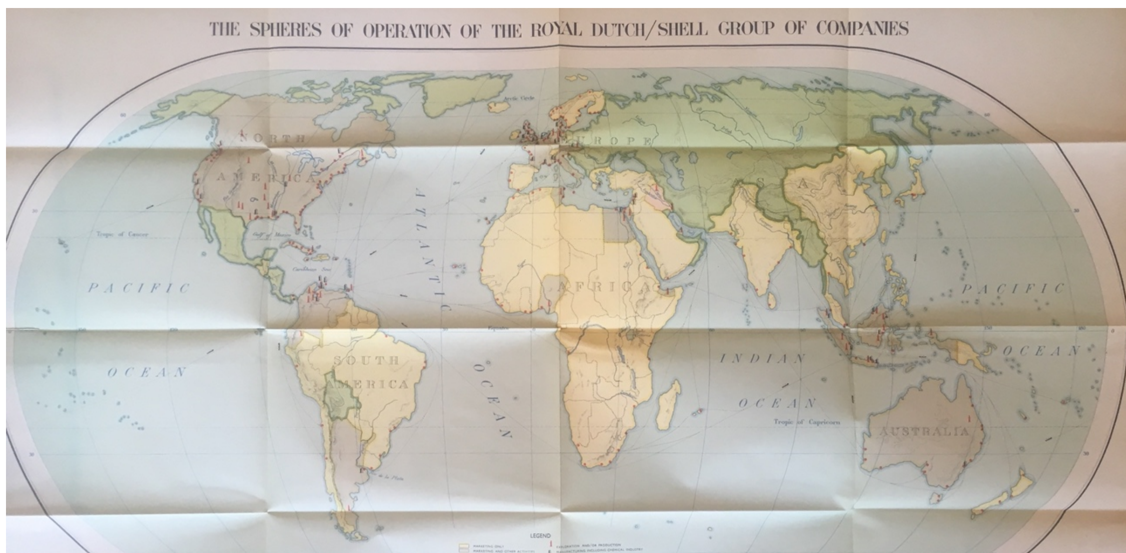

Figure 6. *The Spheres of Operation of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group of Companies*, insert in *The Royal Dutch Petroleum Company Diamond Jubilee Book*, 1950. Photograph by author.

[23] Isaac Frederick Marcosson, *The Black Golconda: The Romance of Petroleum* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924), 1-2.

Figure 7. Alexander Stuart-Hill, *Mousehole, Penzance*, 1932, lithograph, 29.3 in. x 43.1 in. (74.3 cm x 109.5 cm). Reproduced with the permission of Shell Brands International, courtesy of Shell Heritage Art Collection.

concerned with the company's ongoing profits. The use of Shell petroleum to run British tanks, transport trucks, ships, and planes blurred the lines between government and private corporation. As the British Empire came to depend on Shell, the company ascended as its own imperial entity. World War I marked oil's shift from a domestic convenience to a multinational political necessity. It was this realization of oil's true potential that catalyzed Marcosson's "bloodless conflict" of the 1920s.

The militaristic destruction wrought by shells may seem remote from the rural calm of the advertisements, but many modern artists commissioned to create these images of the 1930s were deeply familiar with the violence of World War I. The visual construction of many of the Shell images was a testament to the company's identification with modernism as the movement of the future, fitting evidence of their concern with the profits of mechanical innovation. The fractured picture plane lends some images an alienating quality which undermined the familiarity of domestic British scenes. The barren shell-scarred landscapes of the war seep into the frame. Alexander Stuart-Hill's *Mousehole, Penzance* is an example of a 1930s

return to the visual lexicon of Vorticism (fig. 7).[24] Stuart-Hill experimented with the geometric lines common to the movement, turning his image of the quaint Cornish harbor into a queasily steep drop onto gray jagged rocks. The ocean waves are standardized, while the road twists unnaturally, stymying the progress of the would-be traveler. Nash's work during the First World War included *Shell Bursting, Passchendaele* (1916), in which he represented the heedless destruction of shelling, with tree stumps, broken brick walls, and a fountain of debris shooting into the air (fig. 8). This chaotic scene of debris echoes the scattered stones of *Kimmeridge Folly*. Although evident only in a small subset of the 1930s advertising series, the presence of visual responses to war within the pastoral nostalgia brings the inherent brutality of oil into England's domestic space, literally a "bloodless conflict."

Just as the explosive power of Nash's *Shell Bursting, Passchendaele* was predominantly legible in terms of war, oil prospecting in the mid-twentieth century can be understood as laying siege to nature's fortifications. A *British Pathé* feature

Figure 8. Paul Nash, *Shell Bursting, Passchendaele*, 1918, lithograph, 17.4 in. x 224.4 in. (44.2 cm x 570 cm). Imperial War Museum, London (© IWM Art.IWM ART 1604).

[24] Vorticism was a movement in the United Kingdom in the years leading up to the First World that wanted art to express the speed, violence, and dynamism of mechanical creation. This group is most well-known for the publication of the short-lived magazine *Blast* (1914-1915).

from 1948 filmed a group of engineers snaking a line of explosives deep into the ground in Dorset, England.[25] The engineers retreated to a waiting van and stared transfixed as the blast shook the earth around them, unleashing a stream of dirt into the air. The landscape appears bleak, dotted only with barren trees and a metal oil tower, a markedly different view from the luscious greenery depicted in many Shell advertisements. Geologists asserted their scientific dominance over the land by treating their craft as warfare, amassing a company of men to root out earth's latent oil. This method was, according to the *Diamond Jubilee Book,* derived from "experiments made during the first World War with a view to recording and measuring the vibrations caused when guns were fired and hence to determine the position of enemy artillery."[26] In searching for oil in Britain, the landscape of home became a warzone.

Oil derived from British land was extracted via militaristic and commercial violence. The hunt for oil, with its promise of wealth and physical power, replaced the pursuit of hidden enemy lines, becoming a dark parallel to the motor tourism encouraged by Shell. These intentional eruptions were deployed in tandem with aerial reconnaissance missions, which likewise used methods of discovery honed by the military. The implementation of these devices, was a striking act of violence on Britain's native soil—a violence the empire had previously reserved primarily for vanquishing the dense forests and inhabitants of oil-rich colonies. Dorset, noted for its natural beauty and significant historic sites, including the romantically-inspired vista of Nash's *Kimmeridge Folly*, seemed an unlikely venue for such militaristic encroachment. As the two World Wars revealed the military's dependence on oil to run its airplanes, tanks, and ships, the pursuit of petroleum spurred oil companies to reevaluate the potential for extraction in mainland Britain.[27] Although this assault on

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[25] See *Oil Prospecting* (Britain: British Pathé, 1948), accessed December 22, 2020, https://www.britishpathe.com/video/oil-prospecting.

[26] *The Royal Dutch Petroleum Company: Diamond Jubilee Book*, 28.

[27] The strategic importance of domestic oil reserves was evident in the nationalization of oil fields by the 1934 Petroleum Act, which centralized oil drilling licenses under government jurisdiction. The Petroleum (Production) Act of 1918 had attempted to spur development in an acknowledgement of the strategic importance of oil realized by the First World War. There was debate in 1918, however, as to the nature of mineral ownership, and the act left open the question of whether mineral deposits were tied to private land holdings. In 1934, the government clarified that oil deposits were the property of the Crown, and owners of the aboveground terrain would receive compensation for drilling forays on their land. This was the subject of contentious parliamentary debates. Drilling on British oil was often viewed as a measure of national self-reliance. The United Kingdom, however, would continue to heavily rely on foreign exports of oil.

the land was a constant of the English relationship with its colonies, it was an unanticipated destabilizing force when applied to domestic geography.

A Prehistoric Landscape

With growing demand for oil after the First World War, companies like Shell turned to strategies of imperial domination—exploration, surveillance, and bombardment—on British soil. The Shell poster series was dedicated to excising the violent techniques of oil production from the public mind, replacing them with a vision of a pre-industrial past. Simultaneously, Shell was building a twentieth-century version of the mercantile Empire, a corporate entity that would push Britain-as-nation from its place as economic center. This modern imperial subtext haunted the advertisements' cozy scenes.

In some ways, however, the veneer of modern Britain proposed by the landmarks accentuated by the Shell campaign is a minor moment in the larger history of England's geography. In his Shell-sponsored guide to Dorset, Nash wrote of the history and beauty of the coastline. Aware of this layered geological history, Nash qualified his observations: "But all these impressions are intangible stuff compared with Dorset's records of more distant time. These, indeed, have left indelible marks in her countenance, which is scarred and furrowed from end to end."[28] A geological map of Dorset included in the guide illustrates the presence of distant time, showing prehistoric formations that lay underneath the recognizable cities and coastlines of the district (fig. 9). In his interest in the stones, flora, and shells of England, Nash constructed a physical bridge to this unseen history; it was this map in which Shell was ultimately interested. Shell's corporate success lay in the strata of paleontological remains that defined the landscape and was only faintly concealed

[28] Paul Nash, *Dorset Shell Guide* (London: Architectural Press, 1935), 9.

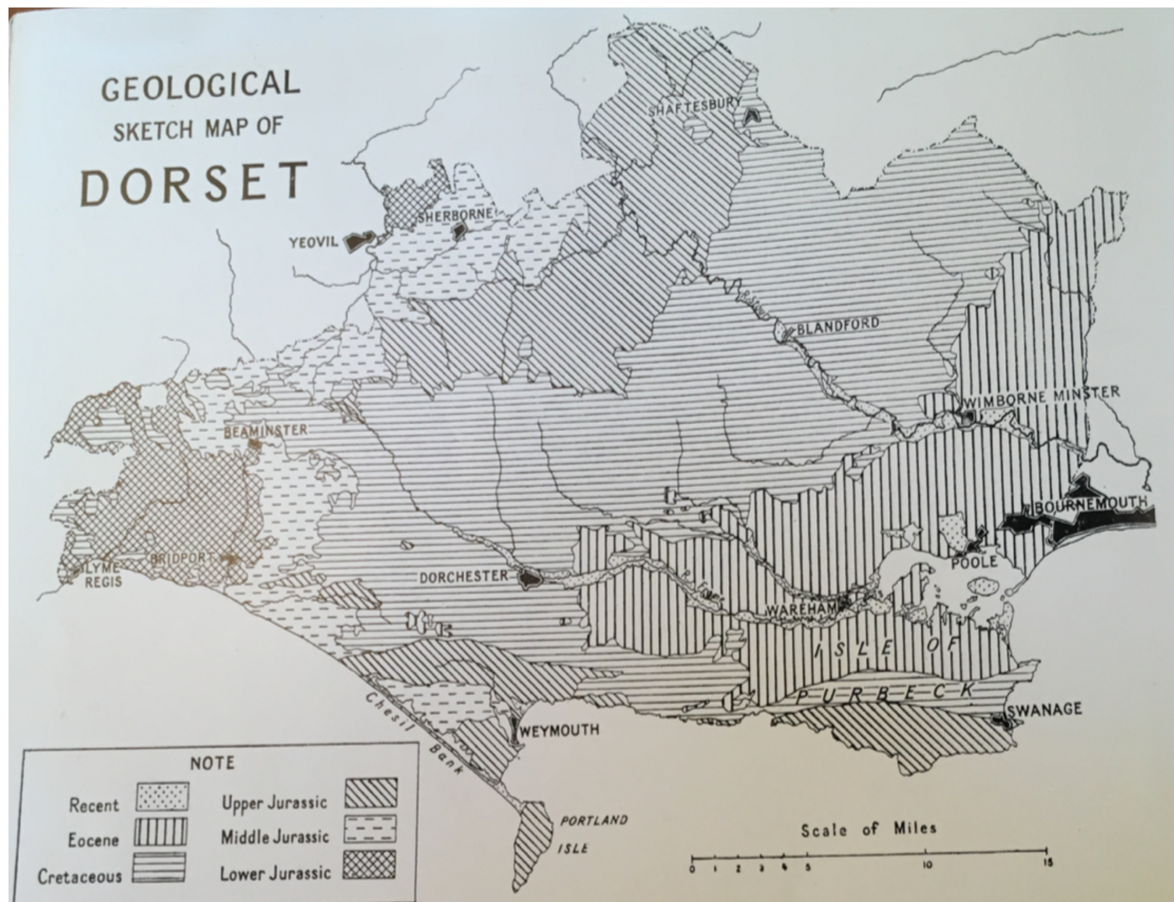

Figure 9. Geological Sketch Map of Dorset, illustrated in Paul Nash, *The Shell Guide to Dorset,* 1936, p. 20. Yale Center for British Art, DA670 D7 N3 1936+ Oversize. Photograph by author.

by tilled fields and stone follies. As the company bypassed national and individual land possession in the hunt for oil, conventional cartographic features became irrelevant.

Shell was attentive to the material that lay below the landmarks and landscapes that, through the advertising series, came to be associated with their brand. In drilling down into the layers of dirt and rock that formed the foundation of the English countryside, their search was more elemental than the discovery of the motor tourist. Instead of Shell motor tourist maps, Shell geologists would be armed with geological versions, such as the survey of Dorset. The natural inquiry pursued by oil companies sought the remnants of the prehistoric marine creatures that formed the basis of petroleum: the hidden shells of past millennia. In this search, Shell became the corporate iteration of the nineteenth-century seashell hunter, making just one more scar on an ancient countenance.