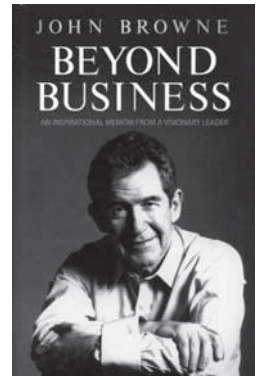


# Beyond Business

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by John Browne



■ reviewed by James Allcock OBE

**R**eviewing this book I must first declare two different kinds of

**interest.** First I know the author. This gives rise to a question about the objectivity of my view because the author used to smoke foul-smelling cigars at breakfast-time meetings and I found that hard to forgive! (He tells us now that he has given up smoking.) The second is that this book obviously interests me because it deals with the 50-odd years that I was myself involved in the energy business, principally with natural gas but later with oil.

It is described as a memoir rather than an autobiography, since it is an account of his business career at BP. But important aspects of his autobiography become relevant as the story unfolds. The last chapter, and in a way the most interesting, is really an essay expounding his views about the consequences for energy supply of climate change, and the roles of government and industry respectively in rebalancing the energy sector.

But this book should interest a much wider audience than those who have been involved in the energy business and that for four different reasons. First, it is an example of the irrepressibility of talent. Talent will out. Secondly it is a first-class advertisement for the worthwhileness and the absorbing interest of a career in industry. Thirdly it is a

very topical monument to the right of us all to a private life. And fourthly of course it is a morality tale.

Browne's father met his mother in Germany just after the war. He was English and she was Romanian, Jewish and had spent two years in Auschwitz. On leaving the army his father ended up working for BP in Iran and young John became a boarder at The King's School Ely. From there he goes to St John's College Cambridge with a scholarship and the award of a BP university apprenticeship. After first-class honours in Physics he is off to join BP in Alaska. There he pioneers the use of computers to map reservoirs and from then it is an unstoppable progression from Alaska to New York, San Francisco, London, Cleveland and Beijing, taking in the Stanford University Sloan programme along the way. So he continues climbing the ladder steadily and, as he says, never applying for promotion but just being moved quickly up the ranks to the top. This is refreshing because many young people are cynical about the promotion business in industry. Isn't it who you know more than what you know? This book reminds us reassuringly that talent will show itself and will be rewarded. In this case unusual talent led to great reward.

But at Cambridge the author ran into the prejudice about whether an industrial career was worthwhile. With a first-class degree it was simply assumed he would engage in research and take up an academic career. ►►

▶▶ One of his professors introduced him to a colleague with the words “This is Browne. He’s going to be a captain of industry. Isn’t that amusing?” (p.22). (There is a well-known version of this prejudice in the Christian World. How can any Christian worth his salt want to work in industry?) Well, I recommend this book to any young graduate wondering what to do. There is everything here. Tough intellectual analytical problems, difficult commercial judgments, financial planning, product promotion, the skill of managing people, extensive travel, geopolitics, ethical conundrums and much else besides. I don’t know how anyone could read this and not understand the challenge and absorbing interest of this kind of industrial career.

Of course there is more to be said. His main contribution to the company was to expand it hugely by acquisitions. He bought Amoco and Arco, both middle-sized US oil companies. Was this necessary for BP’s survival, as he argues, or was it largely *hubris*? Is it possible that expansion became more important than safety? Readers will have to judge. His views about the objectives of a company are also interesting. Running one of the biggest companies in the oil industry, he might be expected to be a thoroughgoing ‘bottom-line’ man. But he insists that a company’s responsibility is much wider than the maximisation of shareholders’ return.

His comments on the security of the supply of fossil fuels in the future are of particular interest to me. He points out that most of the world’s oil and gas is found in Russia and the Caspian, the Persian Gulf, Iran and Africa: areas which are ‘politically unstable or have testy relationships with large consuming countries’ (p.243). In the eighties I unsuccessfully urged the British Government to import gas from Norway to at least delay the time when our gas would be imported from ‘politically unstable’ areas. There are reasons quite apart from climate change for changing our reliance on fossil fuels.

I happen to read this book when there is much talk about the right of an individual to privacy. The author is homosexual. (It never occurred

to me that he was. His mother was a formidable presence in his life and after the death of her husband she lived with her son for the last 20 years of her life. I met her on a few social occasions and assumed that John was a man somewhat dominated by his mother or that he felt a great obligation to stay with her after the death of his father.) But my point is this. It was apparently well known in the company that he was homosexual (the author says so) but that did not stand in the way of his promotion. It was regarded as a private matter which had no bearing on his performance in the company and was no one’s business but his own. That is how it should be. I had loyal and able colleagues at British Gas whose private lives were not attractive to me as a Christian but their ability, integrity and loyalty to me were never in doubt. Their private lives were not my business so long as they did not impinge on their obligations to their employer.

But lastly the book is an old-fashioned morality tale. From the giddy heights of Chief Executive Officer of the largest British company and the second largest oil company in the world, he comes crashing down to earth. When nothing less than the absolute truth would do, he flinched. Neither intellectual ability nor massive experience could save him from the consequences. His lie was exposed in court (though he did not lie on oath) and his resignation followed immediately. The details you can read. I think we do well if we read it humbly. Which of us would not shade the truth if we thought something shameful about our private lives was about to hit the newspapers, lose us a prestigious job and ruin our reputation? It seems to me possible that he would not in any case have survived the Baker Report on the Texas refinery accident. The report concluded that ‘it was a process safety accident which could have been prevented’ (p.205) but the issue was overtaken by much more personal problems.

The book is subtitled ‘An Inspirational Memoir from a Remarkable Leader’. Well, advertising hype of course, but I think fair enough. ■

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