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BOOKSHELF

Book Review: 'Seven Elements That Changed the World' by John Browne

BP's former CEO ruminates on the wonders of carbon, gold, silver, silicon and other vital substances.

By MARC LEVINSON

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John Browne was always a bit of an odd duck as CEOs go. In his dozen years at the helm of British Petroleum, he startled his peers and his investors by calling for the oil industry to face up to climate change, endorsing an anticorruption measure to make poor countries disclose how they spend their oil revenues and, in 2001, renaming his company BP, as in "Beyond Petroleum." Even as he invested heavily in renewable energy and strained to present BP as the most sensitive of oil companies, he presided over two of the industry's biggest-ever mergers and a 2005 refinery explosion in Texas City, Texas, that cost 15 lives. His departure from BP in 2007, amid accusations that he had perjured himself to cover up the origins of a personal relationship, did nothing to clarify his reputation.

Seven Elements That Changed the World

By John Browne

Pegasus, 279 pages, \$27.95



The pigment titanium dioxide is responsible for the bright white of both Wimbledon's court markings and the players' attire. *Getty Images*

"I do not intend to spend my life on the golf course," Mr. Browne declared before his retirement, and he seems to have lived up to that promise. He has a day job running a private-equity firm. He chairs the board of the Tate galleries in London. He occasionally takes his place in the House of Lords. And somehow he finds the time to write books.

Befitting its author, "Seven Elements That Changed the World" is a rather odd book. Mr. Browne uses his chosen elements—iron, carbon, gold, silver, uranium, titanium and silicon—to frame a wide-ranging look at scientific progress. The conceit isn't original; a few years ago, Tom Standage used tea, beer and four other beverages in much the same way to craft "A History of the World in Six Glasses." But Mr. Browne provides his own twist, adding reflections on life in the oil industry to produce a book that is part history and part memoir. It's also a lot of fun.

In his chapter on silver, Mr. Browne ranges from the Spanish conquest of Peru to Bunker Hunt's attempt

to corner the silver market in the late 1970s, with a stop in Washington Square Park for a young [John Browne](#) to take photographs of chess players with silver-based film. When he gets to iron, the author ponders why Andrew Carnegie and Alfred Krupp earned lasting renown for making steel, while Henry Bessemer—the Englishman who invented the steel-making process that made their enterprises possible—is all but forgotten. "Titanium" takes us to Wimbledon, where tradition requires competitors to wear white attire, today often whitened with titanium dioxide. In "Gold," a single paragraph sweeps from the giant Cusiana oil field in Colombia to the Museum of Gold in Bogotá to the author's personal collection of pre-Columbian art.

Nowhere do the personal, professional and historical threads mesh better than in the chapter on carbon, the element to which Mr. Browne owes his career. In the course of 56 pages, he takes us from Venice—carbon fuels the fireworks shot off in his favorite city during the Festa del Redentore each July—to the 16th-century metallurgist Georgius Agricola's description of "black juice" that "flows from rocks" to the discovery that more oil can be recovered by injecting fluids into an oil field.

In attacking the public fascination with energy efficiency, he corrects a widespread misunderstanding. "Energy efficiency is not the silver bullet that it may appear to be," he writes. "When something becomes more efficient people use more of it. And when people save money through energy efficiency, they spend the money on other products that use energy. Energy efficiency is not the same thing as energy conservation." Reducing carbon emissions into the atmosphere, he points out, requires using less fossil-based energy, not just using energy more efficiently.

Similarly, his explanation of why there are few pipelines between oil-rich Russia and oil-poor China is enlightening. The obstacle, he says, is not economics or geology but mistrust, confirmed at the highest level. Russian President Vladimir Putin tells Mr. Browne that he fears the Chinese wouldn't pay the agreed price after a pipeline is built, while former Chinese premier Wen Jiabao says he doubts the Russians would supply oil at whatever price they've promised. The Russians have supply, and the Chinese have demand, but the flow of crude petroleum across their shared border remains small.

There are subjects that Mr. Browne is reluctant to explore, including BP's vast investment in the Russian oil industry. When BP bought 10% of the Russian oil company Sidanko in 1997, the transaction was hailed as transformative for BP as well as Russia. Instead, it entangled BP in such intense struggles among oligarchs that at one point the company's man in Moscow was forced into hiding before fleeing the country. If you want to understand how BP got in over its head and how it may now have managed to preserve the value of its investment, this isn't the book for you. The Russian venture, one of the most consequential of Mr. Browne's tenure as CEO, merits more than the superficial discussion he offers.

The question that hangs over "Seven Elements" is how a man of such diverse interests ever got tapped to run a major oil company. Most people who climb to the top rung of the corporate ladder are obsessed by their businesses. Mr. Browne seems to have nurtured numerous obsessions totally unconnected with discovering oil. His record suggests that that is an attribute CEO search committees should value.

—Mr. Levinson's books include "The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger."

