SOLOMON’S TEMPLE MUSJID-I-SULEIMAN & THE QUEST FOR OIL IN THE MIDEAST

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In 1901 an Englishman, William Knox D’Arcy, was awarded a concession to explore for oil in an area that covered three-fourths of Persia, today’s Iran. D’Arcy had become wealthy from investments in a gold mine at Mount Morgan, Queensland, Australia, and from a friend had heard about the potential of oil in Persia. He hired a middle-aged engineer, George Bernard Reynolds, to run the operation. Drilling in southwestern Persia was challenging. Summertime temperatures reached 125F degrees, hostile tribes were a constant threat, guards to protect the workers and equipment were inadequate, and drilling with cable-tool rigs 150-miles from the coast posed logistical and mechanical difficulties. After three years and two non-commercial wells, D’Arcy was out of funds, heavily in debt, and seeking investors. He approached the Rothschilds and Rockefeller companies, but when the British Admiralty learned of his entreaties to foreigners, the Admiralty encouraged an agreement between D’Arcy and Burmah Oil Company, a successful English public company. Burmah Oil set out to drill four wells, but after four years and expenditures of hundreds of thousands pounds sterling, they, too, were ready to quit the project. But before a letter from the home office arrived in Persia instructing Reynolds to halt operations and wrap up the project, on May 26, 1908 the No. 1 Musjid-i-Suleiman came in flowing 297 bopd, the first commercial discovery of oil in the Mideast.

Following the discovery and limited additional drilling, Burmah Oil formed a new public company, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), and raised two million pounds sterling in one day. Funds were used to re-pay Burmah Oil and D’Arcy for their costs, to purchase the remaining interest in the concession, to further develop the property, and to build a pipeline and a refinery. Three years later, APOC was nearly out of funds, the high-sulfur crude proved difficult to refine, and the company faced problems marketing its products.

By 1905 Germany’s naval build-up challenged Britain’s hundred-year old supremacy at sea. First Sea Lord Admiral John Arbuthnot Fisher early-on recognized that Britain would eventually fight a war with Germany, and had converted much of the British fleet from coal to fuel oil because ships which ran on fuel oil were faster and did not require coaling stations around the world. However Britain had no secure source of fuel oil. The Admiralty considered reaching an agreement with Lord Cowdray, whose Mexican company El Aguila had discovered vast quantities of oil in the Golden Lane near
Tampico. But Mexico was in the American sphere of influence, and Persia was in the British sphere, and was especially important to buffer and protect India, Britain's jewel in the crown. German intrigues and investments, including the Berlin-to-Bagdad railway, already represented a threat to Great Britain’s supremacy in the Persian Gulf.

Charles Greenway, managing director of APOC, recommended that the Admiralty subsidize APOC in some manner to secure a dependable source of fuel oil for the navy. In 1911, thirty-six year old Winston Churchill was appointed First Lord of the Admiralty. A few days after his appointment, Churchill consulted with Admiral Fisher, who had retired the previous year. Admiral Fisher convinced Churchill of the German threat to the Empire, and of the strategic requirement to secure the British Navy a source of fuel oil. With Fisher’s prompting, Churchill carried the bill for the British Government to purchase a fifty-one percent interest in APOC, which was passed by Parliament two weeks before World War I began. Following the war, APOC’s name was changed to British Petroleum.

Solomon’s Temple is a historic novel that tells the true story of the dramatic birth of the Middle East oil industry. All the characters were real people, and all the events actually happened.