

# Oil from the JUNGLE



If you have any sort of fellow feeling for the man who saw a giraffe for the first time and didn't believe it you'll know how *The Listener* felt the other day when William R. Roff, who came back not long ago from a visit to the biggest oilfield in the British Commonwealth, told us that on the whole it didn't look much like an oilfield at all. Seria oilfield is in British Borneo, and it's one of a group of oil installations in that area and in Australia that Mr. Roff visited at the invitation of the Shell Company late last year. He took with him two tape recorders and brought back 45 tapes of material—enough to run for close on 10 hours. A little of this has already been heard in a programme about the Sea Dyaks of Borneo, and the best of the rest will go into six programmes to be broadcast from YA stations and 4YZ at 9.30 a.m. on Sundays—starting with one on Brunei on May 6.

When Mr. Roff set out on his trip last November he first went by air to Singapore, where he stayed five or six days, partly learning something about the city, partly doing some recording at the receiving, blending and distribution installation on Pulo Bukom Island, which is in Singapore Harbour, about five miles off the city. "Pulo Bukom is about three miles long by about a mile wide, and its 4000 people form a self-contained community—they have their own schools, clubs and other facilities," Mr. Roff said. "The total 'throughput' is 840,000 tons of oil a month, which is handled by 150 ocean-going tankers."

From Singapore Mr. Roff flew across to the international airport on Labuan Island, the air gateway to British Borneo. Then a company plane took him down to Seria. "If you visit Seria you arrive at the small airstrip at Anduki, at the top end of the oilfield," Mr. Roff said. "If you drive down by car to the hotel at the other end the first thing you notice is that on the whole the oilfield doesn't look like an oilfield at all. On one side is the sea, on the other the jungle, and between them is a mile-wide strip of land eight miles from end to end. Within this strip is concentrated a web of well-made roads, spacious houses and gardens, shops and offices, a hotel, schools, clubs and cinemas. It's like a garden suburb under a hot sun, except that the houses are perhaps better spaced."

The oil is, of course, underground, but there is evidence of it in silver pipes running alongside the roads, in

the tanks over against the jungle, and in the over-sized aluminium laboratory called the "gas plant." And it spurts quietly through the little tangles of pipes and valves called "Christmas trees" that are to be found everywhere in backyards. These are the oil wells, and there are 400 of them producing 225,000 gallons an hour—which is enough to run the family car for 5,500,000 miles.

Mr. Roff told us that 25 years ago Seria was a small Malay village on a creek—now it is one of the 20 largest oilfields in the world. "When you find oil in this quantity you don't stick a pipe into the ground and run it off to the nearest city," he said. "You build your own city. There are almost 13,000 people, from a great variety of races, in the Seria area—Malays, Chinese, Indians, Dyaks, Swiss, French and, of course, English and Dutch, and my first programme tries to give some idea of the sort of life they live. Oil has brought enormous wealth to the little Sultanate of Brunei—its income has increased from about 1,000,000 Straits dollars in 1937, to about 100,000,000 last year—and this wealth is fast changing it from an agricultural to a technological state." Mr. Roff added that he was able to make some comparison when he went into neighbouring Sarawak and visited the Dyaks living their exceedingly simple life in jungle long-houses.

Exploration is going on all the time on any oilfield, Mr. Roff explained, and it was when exploratory drilling was being done that derricks were to be seen. Exploration at Seria has for some time been extended into the waters off the coast, and he was able, by helicopter, to visit one of the four platforms with derricks which are already producing oil a mile off the beach. The second programme will deal with this and other exploration, and the third with production, which is

chiefly a matter of ensuring a regular flow of oil from the field and the maintenance of existing reserves and wells. Oil from Seria is piped 40 miles across the Sarawak border to Miri, where there is an older oilfield and a small refinery. Almost half of the oil is given first stage refining there, and all of it is loaded into tankers at near-by Lutong by means of sea pipelines three miles long. Mr. Roff visited Miri and the programme will include something about the older oilfield. The fourth programme gives a picture of the Pulo Bukom installation and an impression of Singapore.

"From Brunei I flew back to Singapore and a week later joined the 8000-ton tanker *Dromus* for the voyage to Australia," Mr. Roff said. "We sailed through the famous Sunda Strait between Sumatra and Java where, incidentally, we had a look at Krakatoa."

Mr. Roff's fifth programme gives an im-

OIL production entails a host of other activities—for example, technical training of native people, such as this Dyak survey worker (right), and jungle road-building, seen here in progress at the Seria field

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pression of everyday life on the tanker—it includes items like the endless crib contest of the master and the chief engineer, which he picked up as he went about the ship with a tape recorder hung around his neck. On the voyage he also recorded the mandolin playing of one of the firemen, which is heard as a signature tune to all six programmes.

The voyage of the *Dromus* ended at Geelong, and at the refinery there the material for the last programme was recorded. Opened in 1954, the refinery has cost £22,500,000 to build. "At present its intake is 1,750,000 tons of crude oil a year, and when that's refined it represents 428,000,000 gallons of motor spirit, diesel fuel and fuel oil. This, with other recent refining developments in other parts of Australia, has gone a long way to ease fuel problems in this part of the world—for Australia particularly, but also for ourselves. The refinery is an incredibly complex conglomeration of tanks, pipes, retorts and columns, although the basic processes, I was told, are relatively simple. Geelong is a splendid example of a modern refinery. Having been built from scratch, which isn't true of many others, it is laid out in exactly the way that modern techniques require." Mr. Roff said he thought one of the most interesting things about it was its extensive use of automatic controls. This meant, for example, that the enormous catalytic cracker could be operated by two or three men and a vast assemblage of instrument panels.