

A Critique of “Under the Surface: Fracking, Fortunes, and the Fate of the Marcellus Shale”

Review

Tom WILBER

Under the surface: fracking, fortunes and the fate of the Marcellus Shale.
(2012): Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

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“Under the Surface: Fracking, Fortunes, and the Fate of the Marcellus Shale” by Tom Wilber presents a thorough and original account of the fracking industry in and around the Marcellus Shale. The author draws on his journalistic experience, traveling back and forth between Northern Pennsylvania and Southern New York, to trace the development of the shale gas industry, as well as its social, political, economic and environmental implications.

In Chapter 1, Wilber begins his investigative journey in the small community of Dimock, Pennsylvania. Through the stories of locals such as the Carters and the Lockharts, Wilber creates a contrast between Dimock before and after the arrival of landmen, a foreshadowing element which develops in later chapters. After discussing the tactics used by oil industry representatives to acquire drilling rights, Chapter 2 focuses on community efforts which spawn across Pennsylvania and New York to educate landowners and level the playing field in their negotiations with the landmen, the agents employed by gas companies to secure leases of mineral rights and land for drilling. This chapter features characters Jackie Root in Pennsylvania and Arshur Terwilliger in New York State who spearhead movements in their respective regions to unveil the suspicious practices of newly arrived landmen. Chapter 3 takes us back to Dimock where the “Gold Rush” of Shale gas is fully in motion, and the animosity between landowners and energy companies continues to accrete. The epitome of this conflict is embodied by Ken

Ely, an early supporter of gas development whose interactions with Cabot Oil in his property escalate to a formal complaint with the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The role of the DEP takes center stage in this chapter, as both the exponential growth of the industry and the rising concerns of Dimock residents turn to the governmental institution for support. Chapter 4 sees Wilber delve deeper into the scientific scholarship surrounding fracking and the Marcellus Shale. Wilber presents arguments from pro-fracking and anti-fracking parties and dissects their claims, allowing these findings to speak for themselves yet confronting those which he believes are invalid with examples that support his rebuttal. Chapter 5 picks up the thread of Chapters 1 and 2, heading back to Dimock and zooming in on a group of “accidental activists” organizing to take a stance against the unlawful practices of oil companies in their backyard. On the other side of the border, Wilber attends a pro-fracking rally in New York State and emphasizes the societal divide and partisanship that natural gas development spurred. Chapter 6 explores the political implications of the ongoing battle taking place in Dimock, taking a broader approach to the conflict and analyzing how a local debate had national ramifications. This chapter shifts the attention from individual residents to political organizations, politicians, and national agencies all entangled around the question of fracking in the Northeast corner of the U.S. In Chapter 7, Wilber continues to delve into the political and legal battles that spring at the national level regarding the development of the Marcellus Shale. He explores debates taking place in Congress, in the Departments of Environmental Protection in NY and PA, and finishes up the chapter where it all started: in Dimock. The final chapter of the book, Chapter 8, reigns in the national debate around natural gas development and focuses on two contrasting resolutions in New York State and Pennsylvania. In Cooperstown, NY, Wilber examines the small town’s successful history of fighting back against industrial development. Much like the residents of Dimock, activists in Cooperstown band together and achieve a decisive victory in the courts of law impeding state regulatory laws from superseding the local zoning restrictions which formerly prevented industrial development in the region. Though residents of Cooperstown get their happy ending, things don’t quite pan out the same way in Dimock. Wilber contrasts the local success in New York with the more controversial and disputed resolutions in Pennsylvania, where the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the DEP fail to come through in their investigations against Cabot Oil. In the end the oil company ends up settling the dispute for an undisclosed yet unsatisfying amount and Wilber leaves the reader with the bitter taste of defeat.

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and the Fate of the Marcellus Shale”*

In a field of research dominated by partisan arguments, Wilber’s ability to establish a firm middle-ground makes this book a must-read for those looking to make an informed assessment on the advantages and drawbacks of hydraulic fracturing or “fracking.”

This even-handed approach is made possible by the vast array of voices he incorporates into the narrative, allowing landmen, geologists, politicians and landowners to make their case. On the pro-fracking part, Wilber mentions several notable people: geologist Terry Engelder (affiliated with Pennsylvania State University), James Underwood (a landman employed to secure leases of mineral rights and land for drilling), Ken Komoroski (a spokesman for Cabot Oil and Gas), Scott Kurkowski (a lawyer representing natural gas companies), Timothy Considine & Robert Watson (authors of the “Penn State Report”) and Tom Corbett (former governor of Pennsylvania who ran on a platform aiming at reducing taxes and regulations on natural gas industry). The main motivations beyond the pro fracking side included: the fight against fuel dependency, the decline of other extractive industries, important economic opportunities or “avenues of wealth” and, above all, the promise to bring new jobs to destitute areas.

On the side of moderates and centrists, several key actors are cited: geologist Pearl Gertrude Sheldon, John Holko, the secretary of the New York branch of the Independent Oil and Gas Association, New York Governor David Paterson, Jackie Root and Victoria Switzer, both activists trying to bring the parties involved together to find solutions. The main motivations of those taking a moderate stance included the desire to uncover the truth about the process and to achieve fairness and transparency. Other goals involved accountability and rightful compensation from companies, an optimistic desire to get the best of both worlds (economic developments and environmental conservation) and a great interest in finding fuel alternatives to fight climate change, where fracking has been seen as a promising solution.

Lastly, the anti-fracking debate is also supported by important players: community leaders such as Ashur Terwilliger and Chris Denton, Ken Ely, a landowner involved in a series of negative events with the oil company, the Sautner family, who had to move away from Dimock, Michelle Kenned, the author of a local ban on shale oil drilling, the geologist Tony Ingraffea who believes that shale gas may even be worse than other fossil fuels, Walter Hang (environmentalist and pollution researcher) who documented the dangers of drilling by looking into government investigations, newspapers, and unofficial

complaints. Their main motivations had to do with the goal to protect drinking water supplies, species and ecosystems and to avoid hazardous spills, explosions or leaks. Furthermore, in central and southern New York state many communities and businesses rely on tourism and the natural landscape and did not want to risk their livelihood to the environmental consequences of fracking.

Regardless of industry officials' resistance to interviews, Wilber recognizes this gap and goes above and beyond to make up for it, further cementing his role as a reporter. A factor which differentiates "Under the Surface" from other books on the subject is how seamlessly Wilber interweaves personal accounts, making a story about geological formations seem novelesque. "Under the Surface" achieves what many books in its category have failed at: to create a comprehensive and unbiased guide to understand fracking and its implications. Wilber provides a voice for those to whom fracking impacts the most, and helps the reader understand the different facets which natural gas development affects. From an organizational standpoint Wilber's narrative flows seamlessly between Pennsylvania and New York, establishing a clear channel between the two locations. The final chapter is a testament to Wilber's skill as a writer with his decision to conclude with the events in Dimock rather than in Cooperstown. This offers some insight into the author's desire to create a sense of defeat and unfairness in the reader's mind.

References:

1. Wilber, T. (2012). *Under the surface: fracking, fortunes and the fate of the Marcellus Shale*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.