

Book Review: Half Gone by Jeremy Leggett

Half Gone – Oil, gas, hot air and the global energy crisis -
Jeremy Leggett

Portobello Books Ltd

, 2005

Half Gone stands apart from other peak oil books in combining an account of the impending peak (which Leggett estimates will occur 2006-2010) with that other fossil-fuel ugly sister, global warming. At first glance one might think that the arrival of the former might reduce or delay the latter, but Leggett points to the possibility of a peak-oil driven dash for coal increasing carbon emissions and hastening climate catastrophe. His book is essentially a heartfelt plea to respond to peak oil with climate-friendly alternative energy rather than resorting to coal.

Leggett is in an unusual position to survey both peak oil and global warming. In his former career as a geologist at Imperials College's Royal School of Mines he taught students how to find oil and consulted for oil firms. Environmental concerns later drove him into the arms of Greenpeace where he became their climate change lobbyist, sitting on the sidelines of the Kyoto negotiations and observing first hand the dirty tricks of the fossil fuel lobby. Leggett's personal experience with all aspects of the subject matter enlivens the text through numerous anecdotes and character sketches of the main figures in the peak oil and climate change worlds.

The book opens with a brief prologue in parable form describing the formation of oil and its use by humankind. The meat of the book begins with an accessible, concise and often colourful account of peak oil. It covers the essential points of the subject with economy and humour and would be a great introduction to the subject for someone coming to it for the first time. The second part of the book covers global warming, how this issue interacts with peak oil and what we might do to stave off disaster. This part of the book I found marginally less satisfying, possibly because it is hard to do justice to such a complex subject as climate change in the space available. Even so, the accounts of the climate change negotiations gave an illuminating insight into the vested interests in the fossil fuel industry and how they react to a threat to their business. It certainly drove home the obstacles that will be thrown in the way of an attempt to implement any kind of Oil Depletion Protocol.

In dealing with the global warming and peak oil issues Leggett has great optimism that fossil fuels can be replaced by the combination of

conservation and alternatives such as wind, solar and tidal power, including hydrogen for energy storage. Leggett has certainly put his money where his mouth is as he is now CEO of a solar energy company. He cites impressive examples of what can be done when the will is there, such as the small UK town of Woking which reduced emissions by 77% using a combination of renewables and local combined heat and power generation. Despite his optimism on this score, Leggett is of the view that in the short term nothing will plug the gap due to declining oil supplies and that some form of energy and economic crisis is inevitable. He sees the future outcome as critically dependent on whether we can resist the temptation to turn to coal in the dark days ahead.

Half Gone can be recommended on a number of levels. It is a great introduction to peak oil, a chilling insight into the politics of climate change, and above all it's fun to read. Personally I would have liked a more critical account of the energy alternatives, but it is hard to escape Leggett's primary conclusion that to fall back on coal in a big way would be to invite climate disaster. As I write the Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate conference has just finished. This fossil-fuel heavy "Kyoto alternative" is putting its faith in carbon capture and storage and would at best result in a "mere" doubling of carbon emissions by 2050 even if it works. Perhaps Leggett's nightmare is just around the corner.

Sherry Mayo