The preceding paper was read at the Evening Meeting of the Society on 4 October 1948.

Before the paper the President (Sir Harry Lindsay) said: Last year Mr. Thesiger described to us his first crossing of the Rub' al Khali desert in Arabia in 1945–46, and to-night he is going to describe his crossing in 1947–48. I may add that this month he will be leaving England for his third crossing of the Arabian desert. These crossings have had as their object new knowledge about a little-known part of Arabia and more information as to minerals, fauna, flora and so on. In making these journeys Mr. Thesiger is continuing the work he previously did in the Middle East. There he won his D.S.O. for his activities with the Special Service groups. After the war he joined the Middle East Anti-Locust Unit, and some of his earlier explorations in Arabia were carried out in the course of his work for that institution. In the summer of this year Mr. Thesiger was awarded the Founder's Medal of the Society for his Arabian explorations.

Before calling on Mr. Thesiger, may I remind you that this is the twelfth Asia Lecture. The Asia Lecture was instituted in 1924 through the Dickson Foundation and the first lecture was given by Sir Aurel Stein. The lecture is given every two years at the first meeting of the new Session.

Mr. Thesiger then read his paper.

The President: We have several distinguished visitors here to-night, but first may I say how much we all deplore the absence of His Excellency the Saudi Arabian Ambassador, Shaikh Hafiz Wahba, who is in Paris attending the United Nations Assembly. M. Shaher al Samman, Chargé d’Affaires at the Saudi Arabian Embassy, is taking the place of His Excellency. I would in the ordinary course have invited him to take part in the discussion but he has asked me not to do so because he has only been three weeks in London and feels that his English would not see him through. However, we have Colonel Cheesman with us, an old Arabian traveller and the first European to visit the Jabrin oasis.

Colonel R. E. Cheesman: I speak as one who knew Arabia a quarter of a century ago and you can imagine that in those days the central desert of Arabia was a different proposition to the Arabia of to-day. When I got to Jabrin the whole of the south was a complete blank. I was interested to-night to hear of the Sa‘ar because I lived with the Mahra, a northern tribe, and when I tried to find out about the tribes to the south and mentioned the Sa‘ar I was always told that they were very bad men, and that was all I could get to know about them. Where their actual area was I could not ascertain. Therefore this lecture has been especially interesting to me, because I now know a good deal about the Sa‘ar. Thanks to Bertram Thomas, Philby and our present lecturer, the unveiling of Arabia has reached a stage at which there is little of the veil left to lift.

I conclude with a word of praise for our lecturer. I take great pride in him because I stood on the steps of the Addis Ababa Legation in the year of the Coronation when he was a guest and a very young man. He then said to me: "I want to do some exploring. Is there anywhere I could go?" I told him he was rather late in the field; that areas round the North Pole and the South Pole were all that had been left. He said he was not interested in cold countries. I then reminded him that there was a nice hot spot down in the Danakil desert and that nobody had explored it to find out where the Awash river went to. He said very little, but in a year or eighteen months he had crossed that desert and told us all we wanted to know about it. I next heard of him in the Tibesti
mountains, again on camels. In that regard I have a bone to pick with him. He found some fish in a pool in the Tibesti mountains and up to now I have never heard what fish they were. In any case, it was extraordinary to find fish there. I next heard of Mr. Thesiger in the Sudan. I was in the office of the Khartoum Ethiopian Bureau and he came with the idea of joining Colonel Sandford who was running a commando in the middle of Abyssinia. All we could do was to refer Mr. Thesiger to Movement Control. Each day he appeared round the corner of my house and asked “Any news?” I had no news to give him. Then one day I saw him no more and later I heard of him with Colonel Sandford. Somehow he had got a camel and had gone over the mountains and down the dale to the middle of Abyssinia. Whether Movement Control is still trying to arrange that journey, I do not know! In any case Thesiger reached his objective, with the result that there was a wonderful capture at Ajibar of an Italian army by a handful of English, Ethiopian and Sudanese troops. Thesiger had been given instructions by Wingate to stop that army getting over a defile across the mountains. He stopped them and the whole lot surrendered. It was a wonderful story which has not yet been told. Thesiger well deserved the D.S.O.

I congratulate him on the work he has done and am glad to hear that he saw the tahr, which was first reported by Dr. Jayakar a great many years ago when he sent skins to England where they were identified, so that we have, for the first time, corroboration of Dr. Jayakar’s skins.

The President: It remains for me to thank Mr. Thesiger on your behalf for his lecture this evening.