Across the Empty Quarter: Discussion

Lord Rennell of Rodd; B. P. Uvarov; Wilfred Thesiger


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undertaking this laborious task which he alone possesses the requisite knowledge to perform.

I also wish to acknowledge the assistance of R.A.F., Aden Command, in providing stores, transport to Salala, and accommodation and much help while in Salala.

*Note on the maps by K. C. Jordan*

Both maps are based on Mr. Thesiger's compass traverses plotted at his estimated speed of travel. The first part of the route to the Rub' al Khali, from Salala as far as Ma Shadid, coincided with that of his previous journey and no bearings were taken. The position of Ma Shadid was thus accepted from his earlier map and the traverse up the wadi Ghudan was fixed on the established position of Shisur with little adjustment. From Shisur to Matki and Al 'Ain the new traverse corrects the position of Marsaudid and Al Barsa', the established position of Matki being accepted. North from here through the Rub' al Khali no previously mapped feature was encountered until the wadi al 'Ain was reached and the first intersections on Jabal Kaur were made, suggesting that the rate of travel through the sand area was slightly over-estimated. The traverse was adjusted in accordance with the established position of Jabal Kaur and to the south it was tied almost without adjustment on Table Mountain (Mazka Kabir) of Bertram Thomas, Khaur Wir on the coast, and Andhur well of the previous journey.

From Salala to Mukala the former route was followed as far as Habarut wells, the position of which was accepted. From here the traverse runs through unmapped country to Ingram's position for Qabr Nabi Hud in the wadi Masila, and then south to the wadi above Shihir.

**DISCUSSION**

Before the paper the President (The Rt. Hon. LORD RENNELL OF RODD) said: This evening, the first meeting of the session, we are to have a paper by Mr. Wilfred Thesiger in which he will give an account of his second journey into the Empty Quarter of Arabia, one of the last great land areas almost unknown to us, but not of course unknown to those who live there and to those who are represented to-night by the Saudi Arabian Chargé d'Affaires, whom we are particularly glad to welcome in this Society. He represents one who for twenty-five years has believed in us, who has stood by us without any alliance and without any reason except that he believes, as we believe, in the standards of life that ought to govern people. It is therefore particularly appropriate that H. E. King Ibn Saud's representative should be here to listen to Mr. Wilfred Thesiger.

Mr. Thesiger's second journey, as his first, was made possible by the Anti-Locust Research Centre, an international organization centred in London. Although some of what Mr. Thesiger will have to say is not new to those who read the Society's *Journal*, it is a long time since we have had the pleasure of welcoming him in person to speak of the many journeys for which he is too little known.

*Mr. Wilfred Thesiger then read the paper printed above, and a discussion followed.*

The Saudi Arabian Chargé d'Affaires (Sayed Jamil Dawoud el Mussallamy) spoke of his appreciation of Mr. Thesiger's paper and of his pleasure at being with the Society.
Dr. B. P. Uvarov (Director, Anti-Locust Research Centre): The journey which Mr. Wilfred Thesiger has so well described was only part of a very large programme designed to bring about the control of the desert locust and to discover its main habitats. In 1942, when the military situation in the Middle East was not too favourable, there loomed on the horizon another enemy—the desert locust. We knew sufficient about this insect to realize that if allowed to breed unchecked it might constitute a most serious menace to the economic stability of the Middle East and various parts of Africa which were exceedingly important both economically and politically. Therefore it was decided to organize a large-scale motorized campaign in an attempt to control the desert locust. With the aid of the military forces and with the backing of the State it was possible to plan an investigation on the large scale necessary; and it was possible to accomplish what we set out to do because of the friendly and ready cooperation of other nations, especially Saudi Arabia. H.M. King Ibn Saud himself understood well that in this battle with the locusts a great deal of work had to be done in his country, and we were not only welcomed there but helped at every turn. Obviously there were many corners that could not be reached, and we had to find somebody who would go into those corners. In Mr. Wilfred Thesiger we found such a person. In spite of all the difficulties, which Mr. Wilfred Thesiger very greatly understated in his paper, we have obtained as a result of his investigation a fairly good knowledge of which areas are dangerous and which are not. I am very glad to hear that in addition he found time to investigate many other problems and to bring back other data which have increased very materially our knowledge of this part of Arabia.

Brigadier R. A. Bagnold: I was most interested in Mr. Thesiger’s photographs of the sands of the Rub’ al Khali. They are the first photographs which show in any kind of detail what the shape of the sands is really like. It has been interesting to me this evening to be able to compare the appearance of the dunes in the Rub’ al Khali with those with which I have been familiar in the Libyan desert. In the map of Arabia with the sand depicted in yellow you saw a great sweep of sand dunes coming down from the north; there were two vast lines of two chains of sand dunes, starting off from the north in a south-south-easterly direction, then turning due south, and then sharp to the south-west. There is exactly the same great sweep of dunes on the other side of the Nile, away in Libya.

Since the orientation of a dune chain in any part of the world is a function of the strength and direction of the wind which moves the sand and of little else, and since the orderly growth and marshalling of dune chains on this grand geographical scale must have been exceedingly slow, it is clear that we have here a record of the wind regime running back perhaps 50,000 years into the past. The interpretation of this record is not yet possible. It will need the collection of more data on the rate of growth and movement of the dunes.

The shapes of the dunes of which we saw pictures reminded me very much of the shapes of the dunes along the southern end of the Sand Sea which separates Egypt from Libya. There the northern sands appear to have crept southwards along the great curved sand route, driven by the prevailing wind, till the advancing dune chains have entered an area where strong winds blow from the opposite direction for a period of the year. The advance of the dunes begins to be checked and is ultimately halted, and the sand is banked up into complex forms of folds and pockets such as we saw in the slides to-night.

It was mentioned by the lecturer that when rain fell on the dunes, any vegetation that happened to be there remained alive for some years afterwards. In my experience that depends on how the various layers of sand in the surface have been deposited. If the dune has been creeping on by successive avalanches
of sand down the steep lee slope, the internal structure of the dune is stratified at an angle of about 33°. When the rain falls on such a dune, it tends to seep downwards along the strata and can penetrate a foot or more below the surface, where it remains for long periods without evaporating. Where however sand is deposited evenly on a smooth streamlined sand surface, the dune is built up in strata which lie parallel to the surface so that when rain falls it spreads over the surface and does not sink. Thus it evaporates immediately afterwards. You do not get vegetation on that type of dune structure, though you do get it on the type which has been built up by avalanching. The former sand structures are always firm underfoot, and the latter are soft.

I would, in conclusion, like to ask Mr. Thesiger exactly what he meant by the quicksands he mentioned towards the end of his lecture. Were they actually dry desert quicksands or were they the usual quicksands where sand is partially under water? If they are the dry type of quicksand and remain so in spite of the fact that people have walked over them and flattened them down, the answer must be that gas is coming up from underneath and is loosening the grains and keeping them disturbed, just as wet quicksands are due to upflow of water from underneath.

Mr. Wilfred Thesiger: The quicksands to which I referred are the Umm al Samin which are not dry but wet quicksands. In a sense, they are not in the sands at all; they are on the steppes against the edge of the sand at the end of the wadi al 'Ain, the biggest of the wadis which come down from the Oman mountains. I am told that the quicksands cover an area of 400 square miles and that they are indistinguishable from the gravels or salt-pans all round them. You never know when you are in the quicksands until the sand starts breaking up behind you. From talking to Arabs who have seen sheep engulfed in them I have no doubt they are liquid. There has long been a tale from the other side of Arabia of a place in the western sands known as Bahr al Safi, and there the quicksands are dry and powdery. I have never heard that name used by the Arabs but it is mentioned in a number of books. We need a good deal more confirmation of that before we accept it as true. The only sands I know to be dangerous are those of Umm al Samin. In the coastal areas there are other quicksands which are not dangerous.

The President: We have heard the story of what is perhaps the hardest piece of travelling that any member of this Society has undertaken up to date, at any rate in that part of the world. The standard of life of the people among whom Mr. Thesiger lived is hard. That he should have shared that, and indeed have persuaded them to endure an even harder life, is a tribute to Mr. Thesiger's endurance and perseverance. Above all however his life there is a measure of the love that he bears to the people among whom he has travelled, without which he never would have been able to do what he has done. I ask you to join with me in thanking Mr. Thesiger and wishing him very good fortune on his next journey.