DISCUSSION

Before the paper the President (Colonel Sir Charles Close) said: Mr. Thomas, who is to lecture to us to-night, is the Financial Adviser of the Sultan of Muscat, and is a student of ethnology and of languages. He is to describe to us the south-eastern borderlands of the Rub' al Khali, the great southern desert of Arabia which has an area of some 250,000 square miles. It may be approached perhaps most easily along the southern coast of Arabia, along that great length of about 1000 linear miles which stretches, roughly, east-north-east from the neighbourhood of Aden. That great desert has never been explored, but its borderlands have just been touched. There have been a considerable number of travellers who have, since 1835 and onwards, entered on the outskirts of the desert and have learnt a little about it. The first in that neighbourhood were two naval officers, Lieutenants Cruttenden and Wellsted, who in 1835 were allowed to leave their ship and do some exploration near the coast. Von Wrede was in the neighbourhood in 1843, and Colonel Miles in 1876; in 1893 Hirsch was there, while the remarkable journey of Mr. and Mrs. Bent was made in the same year. Then quite recently we have had a very excellent account of the geology and physical geography of South-Eastern Arabia by Dr. Lees, and that account gave us some idea of the complexity of the geological conditions. We also had, a year or two ago, a lecture by Major Cheeseman, who approached that great desert from the north in 1923.

Now Mr. Thomas is going to describe to us his attempts—and very successful attempts—to get into touch with a part of the country we know so little about, and I ought to say before I sit down that Mr. Thomas went, not as an official, but privately. He lived as the natives in that country do, I understand somewhat uncomfortably—no tobacco and no alcohol. I commenced by saying that Mr. Thomas was a student of languages and an ethnologist, and if you add to that that he is a geographer and that he has studied under Mr. Reeves in this Society, I am sure you will realize he has ample qualification for the task which he set himself.

Mr. Thomas then delivered the lecture printed above, and a discussion followed.

Sir Denison Ross: I have attended many delightful lectures in this hall, but never before has the Society been so hard up for speakers as to call on me! I do not know why I have now been called on, but I can only say that as the lecture went on I became more and more thrilled, because nothing could interest me more than to discover that the country of Mahara and Shiha contains people who are probably totally different from the Arabs and most likely non-Semitic. That is perhaps the least-known part of the familiar and near world, as far as Europe is concerned.

It is a curious thing that the main body of the Hyderabad contingent of cavalry was recruited from that strange land, and the Mahars were the finest cavalrymen in the Hyderabad contingent which took part in the campaigns in South Africa and Egypt long before the Great War. At any rate, the history of the connection between Abyssinia and Arabia has yet to be gone into. The Red Sea lies between them. We all know that even with our 50,000-ton steamers we are cowards at sea to-day, but in the past people frequently went from the coast of Arabia to China in boats of 20 to 30 tons and thought nothing of it till they reached their destination—and still less if they did not!

The connection between Abyssinia and Arabia is a very curious one. When we think that apart from the inhabitants of the country of whom the lecturer has spoken who were obviously quite different from the Arabs who supplied troops to a European army, and when we think that during the fifteenth and
sixteenth centuries some of the greatest leaders and generals in India were men who came from that country and from Abyssinia and the islands of the Red Sea, we realize that we know very little of the world about which we think we know so much. What I would like to see is an expedition conducted into that country which has received so little attention. It is ridiculous to think how little we know of the Rub‘ al Khali—that big empty space in the Near East. We have aeroplanes, motor cars and submarines—even these might be useful—and this huge expanse of unmapped country. Who knows that we may not, if we explore it, come across an enormous population speaking a language nobody has ever heard, or even possessing a literature? Why should the Rub‘ al Khali, which means “empty quarter,” remain empty?

Sir Percy Cox: It is nearly thirty years since I was in the part of the world Mr. Thomas has been telling us about, so that I feel rather a fossil, but I can throw a little light on one or two points. On one occasion I travelled from the Trucial Coast, along the back of ‘Oman, and then down into Muscat, via the Jebel Akhdar Range, the crest of which is a plateau about 7000 feet high and from 30 to 40 miles long. From that elevation I probably got a better view than any one living has had, of the Rub‘ al Khali from the east. I could see the Wadi Halfain and the Wadi Andam emerging from the foothills of the central range and winding out into the desert until they were lost to sight.

Twice I just touched the fringe of the Beni Bu Ali country. On one occasion the Sultan (father of the present Ruler) had received some small pieces of coal from this part of the country and thought it possible that coal-mines might be developed in his territory. I was then Agent to the Government of India, and the Sultan asked, through me, if this piece of territory could be examined for coal. I was accordingly deputed, with a geologist, to go and try and get some samples. We got near the place, which was about three days’ march inland, but there we were held up for six weeks in the middle of the hot weather, endeavouring to get through to the coal-bearing hills. I was quite determined to get there, but finally I had to wait for the Sultan to come down and square the unruly shaikhs, and we were at last able to go on. We continued, however, to meet with extraordinary difficulty and obstruction, and finally the geologist and I were only able to dig one bag of coal, and being sniped all the time! We agreed that it was not quite a favourable atmosphere in which to geologize, and got away with our bag. It proved to be quite good coal; but in face of the lively objections of the Arabs of that part of ‘Oman to foreigners coming into their country and the absence of practical communications it has not been commercially possible to export the coal. I tell you of this experience in order to make clear what a difficult task it is to travel in that country, and how much credit is due to Mr. Thomas for carrying through the journey which he did.

I have been very sorry to hear recently that his two chief friends, the Shaikhs of the Beni bu Ali and Janaba, have since got into trouble with the Government of India and are under a cloud, so that it looks improbable that Mr. Thomas will be able to get back to that locality as one hoped he would. He is to return to ‘Oman in a few weeks’ time, and I know he would like to continue his exploration work, but I fancy he will have to look at the Rub‘ al Khali from a different point.

I mentioned that it was nearly thirty years since I was there, and at that time there were none of the amenities that Sir Denison Ross has referred to. I then had ideas myself of probing the Rub‘ al Khali and discussed the problem seriously with some friendly Al Wahiba Shaikhs, the possibility of crossing from Muscat to Aden. They were confident that it could be done, as far as they were concerned, provided one had a good bundobast for relays of water;
but they feared what might happen from the tribes they would meet on emerging
the other side, and suggested that I should go round to Aden and cultivate the
tribesmen on that edge of the Rub' al Khali and bring some of them back to
Muscat so that they could accompany us across. I give Mr. Thomas that tip for
what it is worth.

I was interested to hear Mr. Thomas's explanation of the word "Dhufar." We
had a lecture a year or so ago before another Society, in the course of which it
was suggested that Dhufar was a contraction of "Ed-Ophir," the "ed" being
a local form of the Arabic article "el"; but I then expressed the opinion that
such an explanation would not bear examination (from an etymological point of
view). I think Mr. Thomas's suggestion that the word may well be "Afar"
with the Arabic prefix "Dhu" before it, which would give the meaning "Red
one," and be equivalent (to any here knowing Hindustani) to "lal-wallah,"
referring to the general red colour of the landscape, is quite a reasonable one.
But if he is able to get to that part of 'Oman again I hope he will go specifically
into the question of the site of Ophir which has puzzled geographers for so
many centuries.

As regards the Rub' al Khali, it seems to me that before anybody attempts
to trek across it we need to fly over it. I cannot believe that there is anything
important in it, because nothing whatever comes out of it; but it would be a
great advance if we could fly over it so as to see generally if it is pure desert, or
whether there are oases in it, as of course there may be.

The President: We congratulate Mr. Thomas on the skilful accomplishment
of his very difficult journey and thank him for the account he has given us. We
are sure that he has added materially to our knowledge of that little-known
country. I was interested to hear his remarks as to the lack of rain there. A
friend of mine who was in a desert part of Africa remarked to a shaikh that as
there were so many heavy clouds it was probably going to rain, whereupon the
shaikh said that it was not likely to; in fact, it had not rained for thirty-seven
years! Mr. Thomas described the country where the frankincense grows, and
how many of those who use incense—as some do in England—have to use a
commercial substitute, which is, as a fact, sandalwood. That ought to be
brought to their notice. And talking of incense reminds me of smoking and that
in the printed proof of his lecture Mr. Thomas says that those who smoked
amongst the puritan tribes were beaten until they repented. That is not at all a
bad idea. We thank Mr. Thomas very much for his lecture