Preface

Arabian Sands describes the journeys I made in and around the Empty Quarter from 1945 to 1950, at which time much of that region had not yet been seen by a European. I returned to Arabia in 1977 at the invitation of the Oman Government and Emir Zayid of Abu Dhabi.

Even before I left Arabia in 1950, the Iraq Petroleum Company had started to search for oil in the territories of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. They soon discovered it in enormous quantities, and as a result the life I have described in this book disappeared for ever. Here, as elsewhere in Arabia, the changes which occurred in the space of a decade or two were as great as those which occurred in Britain between the early Middle Ages and the present day.

I was aware before I returned to Oman that considerable changes, both economic and political, had taken place there. In 1954 Muhammad al Khalili, the xenophobic Imam of Oman, had died. He was succeeded by his son, Ghalib, but the following year the Omani Sultan, Sayid Said bin Timur, took the opportunity to invade and occupy his domains and to abolish the Imamate. This caused great resentment and Talib, Ghalib's brother, backed by Sulaiman bin Hamyar of the Bani Riyan and a considerable following, rebelled. After their forces had been defeated in 1957 they withdrew into the almost impregnable Jabal al Akhdar; however, the British SAS Regiment, acting on behalf of the Sultan, scaled the mountain and overcame their resistance.

In 1965 a rebellion in Dhaufar, instigated and actively supported by the communist regime of the People's Democratic Republic in South Yemen, led to years of fierce fighting in the Jabal Qarra, which was finally suppressed in 1976 with the help of British and Persian troops. Meanwhile, in 1970 Qaboos had deposed his reactionary father, Sayid Said bin Timur and, as the new Sultan of

Oman, he immediately set about developing and modernizing the country.

I was anxious to see the ancient Arab seaport of Muscat which I had not yet visited, to climb the Jabal al Akhdar, the unattainable goal of my last journey in Arabia and, above all, to meet once more the Rashid and Bait Kathir who had accompanied me on my journeys; but I was filled with misgivings at going back.

In this book I have described a journey in disguise through Inner Oman in 1947 and I wrote: 'Yet even as I waited for my identity to be discovered I realized that for me the fascination of this journey lay not in seeing this country but in seeing it under these conditions.' The everyday hardships and danger, the ever-present hunger and thirst, the weariness of long marches: these provided the challenges of Bedu life against which I sought to match myself, and were the basis of the comradeship which united us.

For the three weeks I was in Oman, aeroplanes, helicopters, cars and even a launch were put at my disposal; during this time I covered distances in an hour that previously had taken weeks. Soon after my arrival in Muscat I was flown to Salala, from where I had started my journeys into the Empty Quarter. Salala had been a small Arab village adjoining the Sultan's palace; now it was a town with traffic lights. Bin Kabina and bin Ghabaisha met me when I landed. They had been my inseparable companions during the five most memorable years of my life. When I had parted from them in Dubai in 1950 they had been young men; now they were the grey-bearded fathers of grown-up sons. I was deeply moved to meet them again. I had thought of them so often. They went off next day to prepare a feast for me at their tents in the desert. Meanwhile, old friends from the Bait Kathir, led by Musallim bin Tafl, escorted me in a procession of cars, with blaring horns, up the highway to the new town on the top of Jabal Qarra, where they entertained me in the concrete houses in which they now lived, near the military airfield.

The following day I was flown in a helicopter, accompanied by a television crew, to bin Kabina's black tents near Shisur. Here the Rashid were assembled, their Landrovers and other vehicles parked behind the tents. None of them now rode camels, though some still lived in tents and owned camels. Many of them had travelled with me on my journeys to the Hadhramaut, but several of my old

companions had died or been killed. Bin Kabina had slaughtered a camel and provided a lavish meal; while we ate the television cameras whirred. I flew back to Salala in the evening, accompanied by bin Kabina and bin Ghabaisha, who remained with me while I was in Oman. Together we climbed the Jabal al Akhdar; here, too, was an airfield with jet planes and helicopters landing and taking off. I realized that after all these years and under these changed conditions the relationship between us could never again be as in the past. They had adjusted themselves to this new Arabian world, something I was unable to do. We parted before I went to Abu Dhabi, which I found an Arabian Nightmare, the final disillusionment.

For me this book remains a memorial to a vanished past, a tribute to a once magnificent people.

WILFRED THESIGER

Preface to the 1991 Reprint

When I went back to Oman and Abu Dhabi in 1977, for the first time since I had left there in 1950, I was disillusioned and resentful at the changes brought about by the discovery and production of oil throughout the region – the traditional Bedu way of life, which I had shared with the Rashid for five memorable years, had been irrevocably destroyed by the introduction of motor transport, helicopters and aeroplanes. When I arrived at Abu Dhabi and saw the high-rise buildings and the oil refineries, spread over what had previously been empty desert, the town symbolized all that I hated and rejected: at the time it represented the final disillusionment of my return to Arabia.

I visited Abu Dhabi once more in February 1990 for an exhibition of my photographs, organized by the British Council under the sponsorship of His Highness Sheikh Zayid. On this occasion I found myself reconciled to the inevitable changes which have occurred in the Arabia of today and are typified by the United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi is now an impressive modern city, made pleasant in this barren land by avenues of trees and green lawns. I stayed in the Emirates for twelve days and I was deeply moved by the warmth of the welcome and the overwhelming hospitality I received in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, Dubai and Sharjah.

WILFRED THESIGER, 1990

Foreword

During the years that I was in Arabia I never thought that I would write a book about my travels. Had I done so, I should have kept fuller notes which now would have both helped and hindered me. Seven years after leaving Arabia I showed some photographs I had taken to Graham Watson and he strongly urged me to write a book about the desert. This I refused to do. I realized that it would involve me in much hard work, and I did not wish to settle down in Europe for a couple of years when I could be travelling in countries that interested me. The following day Graham Watson came to see me again, and this time he brought Mark Longman with him. After much argument the two of them persuaded me to try to write this book. Now that I have finished it I am grateful to them, for the effort to remember every detail has brought back vividly into my mind the Bedu amongst whom I travelled, and the vast empty land across which I rode on camels for ten thousand miles.

I went to Southern Arabia only just in time. Others will go there to study geology and archaeology, the birds and plants and animals, even to study the Arabs themselves, but they will move about in cars and will keep in touch with the outside world by wireless. They will bring back results far more interesting than mine, but they will never know the spirit of the land nor the greatness of the Arabs. If anyone goes there now looking for the life I led they will not find it, for technicians have been there since, prospecting for oil. Today the desert where I travelled is scarred with the tracks of lorries and littered with discarded junk imported from Europe and America. But this material desecration is unimportant compared with the demoralization which has resulted among the

Bedu themselves. While I was with them they had no thought of a world other than their own. They were not ignorant savages; on the contrary, they were the lineal heirs of a very ancient civilization, who found within the framework of their society the personal freedom and self-discipline for which they craved. Now they are being driven out of the desert into towns where the qualities which once gave them mastery are no longer sufficient. Forces as uncontrollable as the droughts which so often killed them in the past have destroyed the economy of their lives. Now it is not death but degradation which faces them.

Since leaving Arabia I have travelled among the Karakoram and the Hindu Kush, the mountains of Kurdistan and the marshlands of Iraq, drawn always to remote places where cars cannot penetrate and where something of the old ways survive. I have seen some of the most magnificent scenery in the world and I have lived among tribes who are interesting and little known. None of these places has moved me as did the deserts of Arabia.

Fifty years ago the word Arab, generally speaking, meant an inhabitant of Arabia, and was often regarded as synonymous with the Bedu. Tribesmen who had migrated from Arabia to Egypt and elsewhere, and still lived as nomads, were spoken of as Arabs, whereas others who had become cultivators or townsmen were not. It is in this older sense that I use the word Arab, and not in the sense that the word has acquired recently with the growth of Arab Nationalism, when anyone who speaks Arabic as his mother-tongue is referred to, regardless of his origin, as an Arab.

The Bedu are the nomadic camel-breeding tribes of the Arabian desert. In English they are usually called Beduin, a double plural which they themselves seldom use. I prefer Bedu and have used this word throughout the book. They generally speak of themselves as '*al Arab*', and when referring to them I have used Bedu and Arab indiscriminately.

In Arabic, Bedu is plural and Bedui singular, but, for the sake of simplicity, I have used Bedu for both singular and plural. So as not to confuse the reader, I have done the same

with the names of the tribes: Rashid, singular Rashdi; and Awamir, singular Amari.

I have used as few Arabic words as possible. Most of the plants mentioned in the book have no English name and I have called them by their local names in preference to the Latin equivalents; for most people, *ghaf* is easier to remember than *Prosopis spicigera*, and as intelligible. At the end of the book is a list of the Arabic and scientific names of all the plants mentioned.

Inevitably, this book contains many names which will sound strange to anyone unfamiliar with Arabia. I have included in the text, in addition to the large folding map at the end of the book,* several sketch-maps showing the places mentioned in the accounts of each journey, and I have also included at the end a list of the chief characters.

The maps were specially drawn by K. C. Jordan, and I am grateful to him for all the care and trouble he has taken. He compiled the large one from those drawn by the Royal Geographical Society from my traverses in Arabia, and used some information derived from Thomas and Philby. I decided not to correct or amplify this map from work done since I left Arabia.*

Any transliteration of Arabic words leads to dispute. I have tried to simplify as much as possible and have consequently left out the letter ' *Ain*, usually represented by '. In any case, few Englishmen can pronounce this letter correctly; to the majority of readers the frequent recurrence of this unintelligible ' would be both confusing and irritating. For the other difficult letter, *Ghain*, I have used the conventional 'gh'. Experts say that this soft guttural sound is pronounced like the Parisian 'r'. This letter occurs in the name of one of the chief characters in the book, bin Ghabaisha.

Only I know what my mother's interest and encouragement have meant to me. I was nine months old when she took me from Addis Ababa to the coast, the first of many long childhood journeys with camels or mules. Having herself known the fascination of African travel before it was made easy, she

* This folding map is not in the Penguin edition.

has always understood and sympathized with my love of exploration.

In writing this book I owe a great debt of gratitude to Val ffrench Blake. He read the first chapter as soon as it was written, and since then has read the whole typescript, not once, but many times. His understanding and encouragement, as well as his excellent advice and criticism, have been invaluable to me. My brother Roderic has also read the text with the greatest care and patience and offered many valuable suggestions. To John Verney and Graham Watson I also owe much: John Verney for invaluable advice, and Graham Watson for his faith in the outcome of the task on which he launched me. W. P. G. Thomson of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names was kind enough to check and approve the spelling of the Arabic names. I am most thankful to him for doing so. I am also extremely grateful to James Sinclair & Company, of Whitehall, for the great trouble they have taken over my photographs for many years; some of the results are to be seen in this book. I also wish to thank the Royal Geographical Society for the help and encouragement which they gave me before I started on these journeys.

Although it would be pointless to thank them in a book which none of them will ever read, it will be obvious that I owe everything to the Bedu who went with me. Without their help, I could never have travelled in the Empty Quarter. Their comradeship gave me the five happiest years of my life.

Prologue

A cloud gathers, the rain falls, men live; the cloud disperses without rain, and men and animals die. In the deserts of southern Arabia there is no rhythm of the seasons, no rise and fall of sap, but empty wastes where only the changing temperature marks the passage of the year. It is a bitter, desiccated land which knows nothing of gentleness or ease. Yet men have lived there since earliest times. Passing generations have left fire-blackened stones at camping sites, a few faint tracks polished on the gravel plains. Elsewhere the winds wipe out their footprints. Men live there because it is the world into which they were born; the life they lead is the life their forefathers led before them; they accept hardships and privations; they know no other way. Lawrence wrote in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 'Bedouin ways were hard, even for those brought up in them and for strangers terrible: a death in life.' No man can live this life and emerge unchanged. He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert, the brand which marks the nomad; and he will have within him the yearning to return, weak or insistent according to his nature. For this cruel land can cast a spell which no temperate clime can match.