FIRST OVERLAND

London–Singapore by Land Rover

'I think that this is the best travel book I have ever read.'
The Motor

'A classic.' Sir David Attenborough

Tim Slessor

Foreword by Sir David Attenborough

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LONDON–SINGAPORE BY LAND ROVER

Tim Slessor

Photographs by
Antony Barrington Brown

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To all those who have helped me
with my spelling—
for without that help the reading of this book
would be almost impossible
T.S., May 1957

And to my wife, Janet.
We had not long met when I wrote
the dedication above—she was one of my 'helpers'.
Always supportive, now she is gone.
T.S., August 2005

Foreword

by Sir David Attenborough.

Today they are all into their seventies—grey-haired and grandfathers every one. But when I first met them they were mere undergraduates barely into their twenties. (Come to think of it, I was not *that* much older myself.) They wanted to know if, as the producer in charge of the BBC's Exploration Unit, I could be persuaded to back them in a seemingly madcap adventure. They suggested—with, I may say, no doubts or hesitations—that they could make some 'really good programmes' if only I would go along with their idea. So I took a risk—in those early TV days one sometimes did. They got £200 (with which to buy a clockwork camera) and enough film to start them down the road. I promised that there would be more film if, when they sent back the first batch, I liked what I saw. Well, I did. And a year later, when they got home, the end-result was just as they had predicted: three 'really good programmes' for a series called *Travellers' Tales*. And a book.

This *is* that book, reprinted after half a century. Over the years it has become something of an overlanders' bible. Indeed, one might reasonably claim that both the journey and its telling are now regarded as classics of their kind. Someone once put it rather well when they said that the only good reason for not buying a copy for your son's or husband's birthday is that "he will almost certainly then want a Land Rover for Christmas." An early critic (in *Motor* magazine) put it even more simply:"I think this is the best travel book I have ever read."

In many ways the world has shrunk since the mid-1950s, but that is primarily in terms of the many advances in air travel. The

fact is that their own *landward* journey would be quite impossible today. Indeed, it has not been possible since about 1958—when it was reported that the Ledo/Stilwell Road had finally been washed away and gone back to the jungle. In any case, even if that road had survived, for the last three decades (or more) the totalitarian regime of Burma/Myanmar would never have granted visas for a land entry across the country's far northern frontier. The Indians too have long barred travellers from their side of the Assam/Myanmar border area. Further east, it would almost certainly be impossible to get permission to leave Burma across the Salween and over the Shan hills to Thailand; the Burmese army has been fighting the Shan independence movement for the last thirty years.

Elsewhere there are other problems. One thinks of the Middle East—Iraq, Iran, Baluchistan, Afghanistan… Members of the expedition are the first to point to their luck in having attempted their journey during a very short 'window of opportunity'. They also say that they were lucky in terms of the weather—they arrived at the most problematic part of their route (the many-rivered eastern side of the Naga Ranges running down to the Chindwin and, eventually, to the Irrawaddy) in what was a particularly dry year.

The only part of their route which would now be easier is the leg from southern Thailand into northern Malaya. In 1956 there was a gap of more than 100 miles. There was no road, only a railway line. They planned to bump down the sleepers. But then they heard that only a few weeks earlier some bulldozers had made a surveyors' trace through the jungle—preparatory to the building of a proper road. In one very long day they were able to follow that trace. The road itself was built three years later.

So what, I think I hear you ask, have the six young men who made that long journey been doing for the last fifty years? I too was curious to find out. So I asked them…

Not too surprisingly, two of the six, Adrian Cowell and Tim Slessor, quickly found a home in documentary television. Adrian became, first, a director on an early ITN current affairs series

called *Roving Report*; it took him from Tibet to Timbuktu, from New Guinea to the Andes. Later, he followed the freelance trail—with a particular penchant for films about the opium smugglers of the Burmese hill-country, and, on the other side of the world, about the remote tribes of the Amazon (which is where he is once again, even as I write). Many of his films—some of which have taken him two careful years to make—have been seen worldwide, and have won some of the highest awards in the business. Always a wanderer to the remotest corners, he still seems to have no fixed abode—just an e-mail address. Even then, as he says (if one can find him), "I'm not often within range of a cyber café."

Tim Slessor joined the BBC before he had even finished writing the expedition's book. He too became a traveller—making documentaries from the Outback to the Arctic. Over the years he developed a particular interest in the United States. Indeed, at one time he 'upped sticks' (with his wife and children) and went to work for a year in Wyoming—which, perhaps, is why he takes particular pride in an award from the Cowboy Hall of Fame for two films about The West made for Alistair Cooke's *America* series. Later, he became a London-based series editor. "That was mainly sending other people out to have the fun—interesting. But I much preferred to be out there myself." So, in the end, he too went freelance—more travelling. More recently, and now retired, he enjoys sailing his boat, from the Hebrides to Biscay. And he has just written another book: an investigation of the dissembling and half-truths coming out of Whitehall.

Antony Barrington Brown, (always known as BB) was the cameraman—for both film and stills. On getting home from the expedition, he ran his own photographic business in Cambridge until, he says, "a road-widening scheme saw my studio flattened." So, ever adaptable, he turned a hobby into a profession; he became an inventor. His designs ranged from a novel and very economic way of house building ('get the roof up first') to a quick way of erecting exhibition and industrial shelving. The latter is now in use all over the world, and had BB invented it on his own account

rather than for his employer he would be a very rich man. As it is he had to be satisfied with a gold medal: "Nice, but it didn't pay the rent." So he went off to his beloved Wiltshire to start his own company—solving problems, building more 'inventive' houses, and making industrial furniture. Lately, now semi-retired, he works with and for his wife, an acclaimed sculptor. Last year, he was awarded the MBE for myriad services to his local community. And he has recently been elected a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society—a life-long ambition.

Nigel Newbery was the youngest of the crew and the only one from Oxford. Indeed, unlike the others who were all fully-fledged graduates by the time the expedition set out, Nigel still had another year of studies to go. So, inevitably, (as this book explains) he took some stick from his Cambridge 'superiors'; indeed, it is said that they sometimes introduced him as "Our young undergraduate friend from Oxford". But he took it in good part and, anyway, as the others now acknowledge, "Nigel, even then the embryo wheeler-dealer, is probably worth as much as the rest of us put together." He first went into advertising, but became disenchanted working out "which balloon should go into which cereal packet". So, with a partner, he set up a company with (he decided) a novel twist to 'boil-in-a-bag' catering. All went well until a much bigger company saw profit in the self-same novel twist. So Nigel took off to build an abattoir in Bechuanaland. When he came home, he started in venture capital—which, as he says, "is mostly about risking other people's money." But then, as he goes on, it seemed simpler to get involved in actually managing some of the ventures himself. One thing led to another and, in time, he became the CEO or chairman of slew of successful companies, a director of others, and what he calls a 'consultant-handyman' to yet others. Now semi-retired in Cumbria, he can return to an earlier passion, the piano. And, between times, he goes trekking in the Himalayas with his wife.

By all accounts, as the expedition's linguist and visa campaigner, Pat Murphy developed into his own self-propelled, one-man diplomatic corps. Indeed, he evidently so impressed at least two

British ambassadors along the way that, on the expedition's return, he was recruited by the Foreign Office. An early posting was to communist Poland where, as he tells it, he began a formative interest in the totalitarian regimes of eastern Europe and Russia—an interest which would, over the years, grow to a considerable expertise and, no doubt, play a part in his eventually being awarded the CMG. But, back in those early days, no sooner had he perfected his Polish than he was (typically?) posted to the other side of the world, to Cambodia. Later, as he ascended the diplomatic ladder, he served in Germany and Austria where, once again, the countries to the East engaged his attention. But when communism finally collapsed in the late 1980s, Pat was over the hills and far away; he had become a political advisor to the Sultan of Oman. Finally, since retiring from FO he has developed a whole new career. He works for a development agency (a sort of 'senior' VSO) which arranges for retired experts (in medicine, health, education, engineering, etc.) to help third-world countries and, also, to advise some of the emerging economies of eastern Europe. So nowadays Pat spends much of his time back in his beloved Poland. Indeed, he takes as much pride in the Officers' Cross of the Order of Merit, recently awarded him by the Polish President, as he does in that earlier CMG.

Once on the road (and quite often off it), the expedition was more dependent on Henry Nott than anyone else. He was the mechanic. The others say that no matter what the problem, he just quietly got on with it. 'No fuss' was his motto. So, I am told that in 32,000 miles the two cars hardly missed a beat. But Henry's practical skills were later to broaden well beyond the intricacies of carburettor adjustment, grease nipples and rear wheel-bearings. As a young man he bought a rundown farm near Rugby and, over the years, he and his wife turned it into a successful, indeed a model business. On the side, he converted derelict cowsheds into modern cottages, and rebuilt an old school. Later, he became chairman of the parish council, he served as a church warden, he got involved with the NFU. Between times he walked 600 miles on

a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, he sailed the Atlantic, and he went to Nepal to advise on cows and dairying. Then two years ago, quite unexpectedly, he died. After his memorial service—so crowded was the village church that people were standing in the doorway—one of his expedition friends (they were all there) said that Henry was "as modest a person as one could ever meet—a very quiet Englishman—a gentleman who just got on with it—no fuss." The expedition think that he would have been rather pleased with that epitaph.

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Tim Slessor says that they are sometimes asked if they are all still friends and do they still see each other. He answers 'yes' to both questions. "But we become terrible bores when the talk gets 'expeditional'—which it does almost immediately. 'Do you remember this?' 'Do you remember that?'

'What about old So-and-So?' Our wives had heard it all before—many times. So they just smile in the way that wives do, and push off to make a pot of tea in the kitchen."

Perhaps understandably, their wives have had enough. But, for the rest of us, it seems to me that this tale of a most unusual adventure is just as fresh and just as much fun as in the year it was written.

David Attenborough
June 2005

Preface

I suppose that an author who has told his story well should not really need a preface. I need a preface.

On our journey we did so much, saw so many things, met so many people, and drove so far that I have found it impossible to include more than a thin part of the whole. My main problem has always been one of deciding what to leave out. Often I have just had to take pot luck and hope for the best; sometimes I have chosen wrongly—but it is too late to go back now. Nevertheless, the reader has some right to know what he will not find.

The most serious omission of all is the story of the second half of our journey, six months out of twelve. Those six months were the drive home from Singapore, and they included more than half of our field-work. But I have decided to leave them out (apart from a brief Appendix summary) because, although on reaching our outward destination *we* had to turn round and come back, it occurs to me that it is expecting too much of the reader to do likewise—even though the return was made by a different route. However, I take the chance to point out that our *complete* journey (London—Singapore—London) led across twenty-one countries, and covered 32,000 miles.

There are other omissions as well, and just because, for example, I do not catalogue our impressions of the New India, or discuss our field-work in more detail, or make more mention of the many friends who helped us on our way, it does not mean that we went about with our eyes shut or are ungrateful. It means that it has not been possible for me to include these various topics and, at the same time, combine brevity with reasonable continuity. My endeavour has not been to include something about everything,

but to turn what for us was a wonderful journey into what for the reader will be—I hope—a passable story.

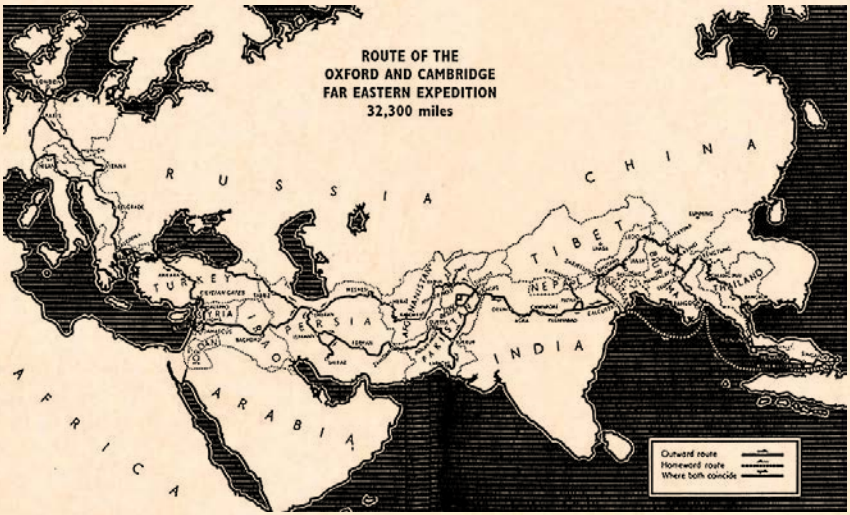
Why did we go? I am not going to be drawn into a discussion of whether we did anything useful. We went because, if I may coin a cliché, we wanted to. I will not try to explain our motives more deeply, but that does not mean that they were merely superficial. Nevertheless, perhaps I might make a point by mentioning a few random names: Baalbek, Baghdad, Katmandu, Ledo, Mandalay, Bangkok, and Trebizond. These, and

a few hundred more, are no longer just names. To me they've become *places*—because I've been to them. That, then, is my own very brief philosophy of travel. I count myself very lucky, since, if I should never again travel farther afield than the ways London Transport can provide, I have enough recollections to make me a thundering bore for the rest of my life.

I must, of course, acknowledge the deep debt that we owe to all those who helped us, both before we left England and then all along our route. Particularly we thank our Home Team, for they did much of the work while we had all of the fun. Without their help we might be driving yet.

One more thing. Whatever else the reader is tempted to think that we did, there is one thing that we did not do. We did not 'gallivant'—please. The Expedition has a deep and particular aversion to that verb.

T.S.
May 23, 1957


ROUTE OF THE
OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE
FAR EASTERN EXPEDITION
32,300 miles
RUSSIA
CHINA
TIBET
NEPAL
INDIA
PERSIA
TURKEY
SYRIA
ARABIA
AFRICA
THAILAND
Outward route
Homeward route
Where both coincide

1.
The Idea

"YES, old boy," I said paternally, "a fine scheme, but the milk is boiling over."

It began, like almost everything else at Cambridge, late at night over gas-ring coffee. I lived on the same college staircase as Adrian Cowell, and I had gone up to his room one winter evening for a nightcap. He started talking of an idea he had for a combined Oxford and Cambridge overland expedition to Singapore.

"Well, no one else has ever done it—so why shouldn't we?"

"And you'll pay for it," I suggested heavily, "by digging a chutney mine somewhere in deepest Asia?"

But Adrian went on. He got out the atlas and talked more about the idea and its problems. When I left his room some hours later there were two of us with that idea. "The expedition was born." (These words are almost traditional to all expedition stories!)

• • •

Why Singapore? If one gets out an atlas, as we had done, one will see that the farthest point from London on the Eurasian land-mass is Malaya. One looks south-east over land for ten thousand miles, from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Every year one reads of motorized parties leaving London for the Far East. Some, with a steaming radiator, or lack of funds, or both, get no farther than the Old Kent Road. Others, more fortunate, may reach the Middle East, and some, the organized few, eventually make the long and dusty road to Calcutta. But no one had ever gone on from there—though a few had tried.

Five hundred miles north-eastward from Calcutta, up beyond the tea-gardens of Assam, rise the tangled mountains of the Patkai and Naga Ranges. Jungle-covered offshoots of the Himalayas, they form one of the

world's great natural barriers. No permanent road has ever crossed them. But in wartime 1944 two roads were cut and bulldozed through to Burma, and for a short time they were held open. Then, with the Japanese defeated, the need for these strategic supply-lines was gone.

During our inquiries we were told that neither road had been used since the War's end. It seemed that they would be overgrown and derelict, that their once graded surfaces would have been lashed by ten years of the heaviest monsoon rains in the world. But to go on by land from Calcutta there was no other way. This was the problem—and the reason—to "why Singapore?"

• • •

I have written that in Adrian's room the expedition was 'born.' More accurately, I should have written that it was 'conceived,' for, as with most other ventures, an expedition does not just suddenly occur by some process of spontaneous generation. The gestation from obscure idea to illogical fact is a long and complicated one. No money, no equipment, no cars, no political permission, and the failure of all previous attempts to complete the overland drive—these were some of the pre-natal problems.

Sometimes, however, it does not pay to look too hard before one leaps. Rather, it seems better to have a little confidence and then look and leap simultaneously. Anyway, we had nothing to lose. We made inquiries; we started preparations.

The expedition, the two of us agreed, should consist of five or six people, but if Adrian and I had any pompous ideas about forming a two-man selection board to assess the worthiness of applicants they were quickly dispelled by "B.B." He had heard of our plans through the Cambridge grape-vine, and, having sought us out, announced that he was coming too.

His full name was Barrington Brown, but this was too long for any but the most formal use and, consequently, he is always called by his initials. Having graduated three years before, he had set up his own photographic business in Cambridge. The expedition had thus gained an expert cameraman, which, we reckoned, should somewhat raise its non-existent assets. Now there were three of us.

In the Royal Geographical Society's useful book *Hints to Travellers* one finds that "the only general principle is that the cost is enormously increased if the expedition requires a ship of its own." As our journey, with the exceptions of the Channel and the Bosporus, was intended to be entirely overland, the last thing we required was our own ship. But we did require two cars, for our chances of success would be greatly increased with two cars working in mutual support. Once these were in our possession we should really be able to call ourselves an Expedition—they formed the essential base on which to build. Much of the terrain east of Calcutta would be extremely difficult, and this was, in fact, one reason why no one else had ever made the journey—if it was possible at all. A tough four-wheel-drive vehicle with low-ratio gears was essential; relatively little discussion led to the conclusion that the cross-country Land Rover was the only car suitable. We needed two, and they cost £600 each. We had possibly £200 between us.

Adrian, looking as he leapt, opened up correspondence with the Rover Company. In this he was helped by the fact that in the previous year he had been the 'home representative' of the Oxford and Cambridge Trans-African Expedition. That party, using two Land Rovers of their own purchase, had driven to Capetown and back in the four months of the summer vacation. On their way they had created considerable interest in their vehicles, and we now hoped that from this example the Rover Company might recognize that undergraduates can—sometimes—have serious objectives, and the organization to carry them through. Perhaps they would lend us two Land Rovers? Maybe we could make a film for them? Perhaps and maybe. But we already knew that the

Company received similar requests from almost every one who was going anywhere, and, as Rovers were clearly not in business for philanthropy, we waited pessimistically.

Meanwhile Adrian got in touch with various petrol companies. After an interview Mobilgas generously replied that if the Expedition could get the cars they would ask their associate companies along our route to help us with petrol supplies.

We called ourselves "The Oxford and Cambridge Far Eastern Expedition," though as yet there was no one from 'the other place' taking part.[1] A network of contacts and undercover-men was alerted, and Adrian got in touch with all the Oxford colleges and relevant societies. While he was about it he also sent circulars to forty American universities. Why not an Oxford and Cambridge versus Harvard and Yale long-distance motor rally? To Adrian nothing was too obscure; he permanently wore a pair of long-range spectacles to bring far-fetched ideas a little closer.

B.B. was talking of films and photos. Why not a film of the journey for Television? He hurried off to London, and on returning announced—B.B. usually 'announces' rather than 'says' things—that the B.B.C. were interested. What about writing a book? Letters (on the Expedition's new headed notepaper) went off to various publishers. We were going from strength to strength, but were, to coin another cliché, building an Expedition without any foundations. We had no cars.

A few days after the beginning of the Easter vacation Adrian phoned me to say that a letter had arrived from the Rover Company. I saw him off for Birmingham a few days later.

Exactly how that vital interview went Adrian has never said. But he must have persuaded some one that we were capable of doing what we talked about, for, when he returned two days later and I

[1] Our title should not be taken to imply that we were in any way sponsored by our Universities. It is not the policy of either University to sponsor expeditions, but, in so far as the members of an expedition are members of the Universities, the powers-that-be raise no serious objection to the use of their names.

met him in a London pub, he said, "Well, we've got them." Those were some of the best words that I have heard.

On returning to Cambridge for our final term, it was decided that the Expedition would not leave England until three months after we had graduated; until September. Thus time was allowed for exams *and* adequate expedition preparations. Departing in September also meant that we should not arrive on the Burmese frontier until the start of the dry season. This was essential if we were to stand a chance of getting into that country by land.

Now that the cars were certain, and our plans had some sense to them, another important object was added to that of 'overlanding' to Singapore. The Expedition would carry out some irrigation studies and research in Pakistan and India. The idea of some practical geographical field-work had been in our minds for some time, but until now—when it seemed that the Expedition would at least leave England—there had been little point in pursuing it.

One other matter was pressing. There were still only three of us, all from Cambridge. True, there had been faint inquiries from Oxford, as also from America, but they had all faded out. Meanwhile Henry Nott, the Secretary of the C.U. Auto Club, was keen to come, and by reputation he was a first-class mechanic. We went round to see him, and then there were four.

Just when all faith in Oxford had been lost a telegram arrived from some one who signed himself Newbery. He came over to Cambridge the following Sunday. Nigel was a second-year man at Worcester College, and thought it might be possible to obtain a year's leave to come with us—especially as our proposed fieldwork would be of some value to his course in Economics. He had the advantage of being a free-lance mechanic (i.e., he did not own a car), and, having explained our plans to him, we gave him a week to decide. At the same Sunday tea-party was a friend of mine, Pat Murphy. Pat and I both read Geography, and he was particularly interested in the intended irrigation work, for, as he put it, "I know about irrigation." He had spent the previous summer studying various French schemes in Morocco.

Nigel let us know two days later he could come. Pat was with us too. The 'team' was complete. Admittedly, Nigel was the only Oxford person, but when we suggested deleting 'Oxford' from our title he objected vehemently. So Oxford stayed.

For the next few weeks the tempo of things expeditional slackened while heads were bent to learn some of the facts necessary to satisfy the examiners. Even so, the Wool-trade of the Middle Ages and Erosion Cycle Theories rode uneasily in our minds alongside the Distances between Persian Petrol Points and How Much Water Six Men Drink in a Day.

Nevertheless, we managed to obtain reasonable degrees—though, long before the results came out, our preparations had begun in earnest again.

2.
Preparations

ACCORDING to his passport, Adrian was born in Tongshan (China) in 1934. This made him twenty-one, and the youngest member of the party. He had come straight up to St Catharine's College from school as a History Scholar. With his China coast connexions, he spent his first year organizing the Cowell Oriental Trading Agency, which imported Chinese porcelain figures, straw hats, and cheap ivory chopsticks from Hong Kong and sold them to undergraduates or shops in Chelsea. The energies he devoted to this enterprise rather affected his exam results. The consequence was that, at the end of his first year, his scholarship was reduced. So Adrian, taking on a partner, expanded the business and used the profits to make up the difference on his college fees.

Anything that smacked of commerce was an immediate attraction to him. Adrian was the only undergraduate I knew who could genuinely excuse himself from an engagement on the grounds that he had to see his accountant. It was natural that he should become the Expedition's Business Manager and Cashier. In addition to his 'long-range spectacles' he also had a very fertile imagination, and could write wonderful letters about the terrors of the 'burning sands and steaming jungles' that lay ahead. Many of these phrases found their way into our 'blurb sheets,' of which he was Editor-in-Chief. Blurb sheets were what one would expect them to be—roneoed sheets of blurb about the Expedition. There were 'academic blurb sheets' about our intended field-work which went to various learned bodies and societies; there were 'diplomatic blurb sheets,' which were sent to Embassies and Consulates along our route in order that they might make suggestions or comments

on our plans; there were 'general-purpose blurb sheets'; 'commercial blurb sheets'; 'address-list blurb sheets'; and new editions of old blurb sheets. In fact, on more than one occasion the things got a bit out of control. In the commercial blurb sheet, for example, we said that "we shall be particularly happy to carry any product which, due to its distinctive shape or colour—such as an electric razor or a packet of soap-flakes—would be easy to incorporate and publicize in our T.V. film without actually mentioning its trade name." We were most concerned to discover that a 'distinctive shape' blurb had been erroneously dispatched to a well-known Trust Fund. No doubt the Trustees considered that there was nothing particularly distinctive about their shape or colour, and perhaps that is why we never had an answer.

In appearance Pat Murphy is rather of the crape-soled Latin corespondent type. He says he was born in Ireland, and he speaks fluent French, good German, a little Spanish, can get by in Italian, and was educated in England. His vacation habitat was definitely Continental, usually Spanish. He claimed to be on first-name terms with the head waiters of almost every night club between Paris and Casablanca, he was a practising *toro aficionado*, and had mastered at least three major chords on the guitar. With this obviously international background, he was given the task of negotiating all our visas and passport endorsements. As our route was to cross twenty-seven international frontiers, Pat became a one-man Foreign Office and our No. 1 Form-filler. Armed with six passports, he campaigned with a dozen different Embassies for the next three months.

He had done his National Service with the R.A.F.; he never talked about it much—perhaps it was rather 'hush'? Perhaps that was the idea. Anyway, besides dealing with passports he was also the Navigator, and collected over fifty maps and followed every possible contact for information about the route. Although he was a pilot in the University Air Squadron, he was, strangely, the only person in our party who could not drive. Two of us used to take him out in a borrowed car to a disused air-field near Cambridge.

He treated the car like an aircraft, and it was some time before we persuaded him that the gear lever was not, nor was worked like, a joy-stick. He also had trouble, he told us, in "getting used to this foot-throttle idea."

Pat and I were responsible for working out the Expedition's field-work programme. Irrigation was an obvious subject to choose, for, apart from Pat's previous experience, there were in our party two Geographers (Pat and myself), a Geologist (B.B.), an Economist (Nigel), an Agriculturalist (Henry), and a Historian (Adrian). Between us we covered quite a range of subjects, and would each, therefore, have something specific and different to contribute to the intended studies.

It was hoped that the Royal Geographical Society (to whom we were submitting our irrigation plans) would consider them worth while, and recognize us with a grant towards expenses incurred on the work. Pat and I had a sympathetic hearing from the Director of the Society, who forwarded our plans to the Awards Committee. They generously gave us £100.

B.B. was older than the rest of us. He had graduated in Natural Sciences three years earlier, and was, in fact, an M.A. This, he claimed, gave tone and respectability to the Expedition. His National Service in the Royal Armoured Corps was something he only vaguely remembered: "It was in the days when the War Office lived in a tent." This, he had us believe, was some time in the dim and dark middle 'forties. Since graduating he had taken up photographic journalism with a studio in Cambridge; his small flat became our H.Q. during the summer after the Colleges had closed.

He was—and is—not an easy person to know. He has an acid wit, and non-existent tact; if an idea does not meet with his approval it is "bloody awful." He was—and is—usually right, which sometimes does not please anybody. This take-it-or-leave-it-but-don't-push-me-around attitude is designed to intimidate. He would not agree that his bark is worse than his bite, and he will bark my head off when he sees this in print.

B.B. is one of the most practical and thorough persons I know; the sort of person who addresses and stamps an envelope before he has written the letter, and who can be absolutely relied on to get up in the morning an hour before anybody else. Besides being our "professional photographer and cameraman" (he likes the full title), we made him The Doctor. After all, it was reasoned, he had rows of antiseptic-looking flasks in his darkroom, and a degree in Natural Sciences. Obviously there was a connexion between drugs and developer. He saw it differently, and, in writing for advice to the University Health Service, began the letter with "Sir, I have been appointed to look after the medical side of this expedition solely by virtue of my chemical knowledge, which is, of course, quite irrelevant."

However, the job was tackled with characteristic thoroughness, and a comprehensive medical chest assembled. He 'clued up' in several books which, he morbidly announced, were of the opinion that for most tropical diseases we were liable to suffer "treatment is unavailing and the disease is almost invariably fatal."

For each of us he arranged a medical check, a visit to the dentist, and a course of twelve preventive injections. It was during a 'jabs week' that the Expedition, writing arms hanging useless, had to hire two shorthand typists in order that the 'secretarials' should continue uninterrupted. Planning, conferences, and arguments stopped for nothing,

Henry was the Chief Engineer. He had built several Austin Seven Specials, and raced them successfully at Silverstone Club Meetings. But, contrary to many of the sports-car set, he did not wear a flat cap, a bow tie, or cavalry trousers. In fact, Henry was very quiet—though he warmed considerably to the mention of king pins, gear ratios, or power drifts. In spite of being Secretary of the University Auto Club, he lavished his pride on a decrepit old van, about which the most satisfactory thing that could be said was that it sometimes started first time.

During the journey Henry's duties were obvious, but they began a long time before that. More thought and discussion centred on

the cars than on anything else, for we were going to have to live in or around them for nearly a year. To pack twelve months' equipment into any car is a problem, but it was greatly increased for us by the variety of conditions we expected to meet, by limitations of space and pay-load, and by the multiplicity of functions the vehicles would have to perform. They had to be mobile cook-houses, workshops, camera tripods, pantechnicons, and even, if the need arose, ambulances. All this they had to be, and yet still remain capable of tackling some of the world's toughest terrain. They had to be warm in Persian frosts and cool in Indian heat, they had to get through mud or sand, and still be drivable at good speeds along the tarmac. Even Rovers were doubtful. "You don't want a cross-country vehicle; you want a cross-country miracle," they said.

Henry and Nigel (the second mechanic) went off to Rovers in Birmingham for a 'works course,' and to be present—like the skippers of new ships—at the fitting out of the cars. It was a great day three weeks later when the two cars, new, shiny, and with the Expedition's name painted on the doors, arrived in Cambridge. Everybody got in, out, under, and on top of them at least a dozen times, and then in turn drove them round and round the town until after midnight. We debated what to call them, but as one was painted dark blue and the other light blue they simply became known as "Oxford" and "Cambridge."

On each front bumper was a powerful drum winch (driven by the engine) and two jerry-cans for water. Inside was a heater, and, as well as the normal dials, oil-pressure and water-temperature gauges. Each car could carry fifty gallons of petrol in built-in tanks, which, at an average of twenty miles per gallon, would give us a range of one thousand miles. A sun-visor and roof-rack (which bolted right into the body) were fitted, and a sliding roof-hatch over the passenger's seat would keep the car cool or, with some one standing through it, it could be used for photography or guiding the driver below (when travelling across sand). A heavy tow bracket, a vice, and a quick-release fire-extinguisher were bolted to the rear of each car. For nearly all these modifications,

and for many others, such as searchlights, oversize tyres, and high-frequency horns, we were drawing on the invaluable experience of our friends from the earlier Trans-African Expedition.

Nigel came in for a certain amount of harsh treatment when he first came to live in the H.Q. The rest of us—all Cambridge men in the first flush of our degree status—used to introduce him as "our young undergraduate friend from Oxford." But he gave as good as he got, and as an ex-Paratrooper he had plans for us all to learn judo. He was also the knowledgeable possessor of a book called *Mysteries of the Orient—Pagan Rites* (I think that was the title—anyway, it became compulsory Expedition reading!).

Besides being second mechanic, Nigel was the Quartermaster. This was one of the biggest single jobs of them all, and he took it on because, being the last to join us, he got no choice. He may have lacked choice, but the rest of us gave him no chance to lack advice. In conferences which lasted from early afternoon until midnight we would argue whether we should have paraffin or petrol stoves, whether space allowed a wireless, how much food and water should be carried at a time, what sort of clothes should be taken, whether sand mats (to stop the cars getting bogged) were a good idea, and how much they weighed, how many shovels should be carried, whether wool or cotton socks were best in the tropics—all these and dozens of other problems were finally hammered out. Then Adrian and Nigel would sit down and type letters of inquiry to various firms.

We had very little money, and could afford few items of equipment at retail prices. Why many firms to whom we wrote should have helped us with the reduced price, loan, or gift of their product one can only guess. I think there are three possible answers.

First, there were those concerns interested in the publicity that a 'first overland' might produce. This was probably true for most motor-accessory companies, or those with trade connexions in the Far East.

Second, there were those manufacturers who wished to know how their equipment stood up to the journey. It might be of

interest to know, for example, that one component of an otherwise excellent article was very susceptible to dust or vibration, which could be easily remedied by firmer installation or packing. Another firm could make use of the information that in tropical heat and damp the lids of their containers warped, and therefore leaked.

A third motive was generosity. As they sometimes wrote, "We rather like the idea." But it is impossible to separate one motive from another. Generosity was clearly one reason for almost all our supplies. I take this opportunity to express our deep gratitude to those many, many firms that helped us. Without that help we could never have left England.

But ready cash was still a problem. Each person had placed what he had in the Expedition's account, and, between the six of us, this came to £600. In addition, we had grants from the R.G.S. and other bodies towards the field-work, and there was also the possibility of selling the advance rights for the book and film. We also hoped that during the journey it would be possible to make some pocket money through the sale of articles and photos. B.B. and I went down to London to negotiate over the book and film, and, after various discussions, sold the rights on both projects. It was good to know that other people were prepared to put some confidence in us. In the case of the film, the advance payment was immediately swallowed up in buying a cine camera with which to take the film for which we had just been paid!

Nigel was full of money-making ideas. He had heard of a film subsidiary which offered £25 for the best household tip of the week. Nigel's contribution to this organization was a method of toasting crumpets on a paper clip, but no acknowledgment, let alone £25, for this revolutionary device was ever received. So instead Pat and I went off and took jobs for a part of the summer. Pat became a barman in a Cornish hotel, while I drove round the seaside resorts of England publicizing South African oranges!

Meanwhile work at the Cambridge H.Q. went on as usual. By this time over one thousand letters had been picked out on the typewriters, but it was to be nearer one thousand five hundred

before we left. Parcels and crates were arriving every day, and B.B.'s work-shop looked like a contemporary Aladdin's Cave, with piles of everything from sulpha drugs to spark-plugs, toothpaste to a tape-recorder, medical kit to machete knives.

The layout of the cars' interiors and the loading was worked out by a 'logistics sub-committee' of Henry and B.B., in close liaison with the Q.M. Some people might say that we were too military in our approach, but there were good reasons—although we did not take them all too seriously. Six people travelling self-sufficiently in equipment and belongings in two cars for a year cannot live in comfort without some organization. Any fool can be uncomfortable, and, as a result, ill-tempered—and a Land Rover is a very small place. But the details of loading will be explained later, for it was not until we had experimented under 'operational conditions' on the road that we came to the best and final arrangement.

Besides the Logistics Sub-committee, there were others to cope with the field-work plans, the design of the tent, and our route inquiries. The route as far as India seemed fairly straightforward—one drove down to the Bosporus, east through Turkey and Persia, then across Pakistan and into Delhi. Actually, we decided to diverge from this route and dip down into the Middle East in order to visit and film some of the historical sites in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. But the route eastward from Calcutta was almost as vague as ever. We had read all the Burma Campaign books, chased obscure wartime maps in Ministries and libraries, and written or talked to anyone who had ever been near Northern Burma. We had exchanged letters with tea-planters in Assam, with the High Commission in Delhi, with the Embassy in Rangoon, with people who had tried the journey before, and with every relevant motoring organization of which we had ever heard. But nowhere was there any reliable or modern information. Some people advised us to take a ship from Calcutta, which to us, with our specifically overland intentions, seemed like telling a mountaineer to take an aeroplane. By others we were condemned, and compared to people who "go rock-

climbing in sandals." Others were more encouraging, and, thinking a route might be possible, gave hazy details and wished us luck.

Looking far ahead, our plan was to get up into Assam soon after the end of the monsoon rains, and to try either of the old wartime roads from India across the Naga Hills to Burma. If we failed to get through it was intended to return to Calcutta and ship to Singapore in time to make an overland attempt in the reverse direction before the end of that dry season. But, in any event, it seemed that we should have to leave England in the hope that, as we got nearer to the problem area, the information would become more definite. Perhaps in Delhi or Calcutta we should find out more than in London.

On the question of whether the Expedition should have a leader there was some controversy. If it did then he would have to be elected, and this would be rather invidious; besides, there was no one who stood out beyond the rest in his display of 'officer-like qualities'! On the other hand, without a leader there was no one to 'carry the can,' and before anything could be done everybody had to be told about it. This would—and had already—slowed us down considerably. But in the end the matter was dropped; each person was responsible to the rest for his own department. Therefore, we had no leader, or, alternatively, we were all leaders—depending on which way one looked at our uniquely democratic system!

It was decided that B.B. and I would travel in the Oxford car with Nigel, while the other three went in Cambridge. We did not intend to stick too rigidly to this arrangement, but it was obviously better to have one mechanic in each car, and it simplified loading if the rest of us did not have to switch our personal kit (trunks and sleeping-bags) from one car to the other any more than was necessary. Thus B.B. and I came to be Oxford men by proxy.

One other facet of the planning has still to be mentioned—the Home Team. It was essential to leave an 'administrative tail' (to use the Army phrase) in England. Two or three friends were needed who were thoroughly familiar with all our plans; who would forward and answer mail; who would deal with inquiries and

pass on our news to the firms and individuals who had helped us; who would, in fact, act officially on our behalf. Three people who had already given us much help, John Deuchars, Peter Wills, and Gethin Bradley, accepted the responsibility. No one at that stage realized how much work it would involve.

The only person who has not yet been introduced is myself, but, rather than risk inviting the written remarks of another member of the Expedition, I think it would be better to let this book speak for itself!

September 1st had been fixed as the starting-date a long time before, and in the last few weeks of August things became very busy. Nigel claimed to have developed a weal on his thumb from pressing piles of coins through the slots in phone-boxes while chasing last-minute items of equipment! (This is obviously an occupational disease, and might be known as "Expedition Thumb.") While the rest of us crossed our fingers, Pat took and passed his driving-test. If we lived anywhere in the last week it seemed to be in a fast train or car rushing up and down between London and Cambridge. There was even one occasion when Adrian typed urgent letters seated in the locked lavatory of the *Fenman Express*. But at last, with the cars run in, we optimistically decided we were ready—or as ready as we ever should be.

Our departure was hardly in the nonchalant tradition of most expeditions. During the morning we assembled at the Grenadier, a small mews pub just behind Hyde Park Corner. It would have been impossible for any onlooker to have claimed afterwards that "They took it all quite calmly." In fact, we flitted about in various stages of excitement while taxis were dispatched on important errands, urgent phone messages were taken or sent, and last-minute stores were packed into the cars.

The newsreel and photographic tribe arrived at opening time. Men wearing exposure meters and flat caps pulled yards of cable but from little black vans, and then crouched inside to tune our noises.

"Now tell me, Mr Nott, what gave you all the idea?"

"How long do you expect to be away, and what will be your route?" "I wonder, Mr Cowell, if you would tell us in a few words what your main objectives are?"

Then we stood about in awkward groups or climbed aboard to lean out of windows and roof-hatches waving our synthetic goodbyes to the cameras.

Friends and relatives arrived to peer anxiously inside the cars—"Oh, but how tiny! My dear, you will be careful, won't you?"—and to give us their good wishes, together with the innumerable names of god-daughters who had married Air Attachés in Kabul or brothers-in-law who were contractors in Baghdad. "You will look them up, won't you?" Eventually we went inside the pub for a drink and a Scotch Egg; some one already at the bar stood the round, and made the inevitable suggestion that it was "Just one for the road—to Singapore." B.B. replied that we did not know if one existed. Then we went outside, moved the still unpacked kit off the seats, climbed into the cars, shouted our goodbyes, and drove off.

In the lunch-hour traffic between Hyde Park Corner and Westminster we, in Oxford, lost the Cambridge car and stopped to wait for them in Parliament Square. There were maps aboard for every country from France to Malaya, but none, of course, for England. Cambridge failed to appear, and so, agreeing that the route to the Silver Cities aerodrome at Ferryfield was fairly straightforward, we went on without them.

On Westminster Bridge the milometer stood at 1844 miles; it would be reading something over 30,000 miles next time we crossed the Thames—if all went well. We bought an evening paper in Camberwell, and then went on through the North Downs and out into the country. Surely we had forgotten something?

It had clouded over by the time we wound across Romney Marsh and up to the terminal building at Ferryfield. Cambridge had not yet arrived, and we 'Oxford men' joked about our obvious superiority on this, the first leg of the journey. But there was a telephone message from the others to say that they would arrive

shortly—they had delayed to get their car weighed for Dunlop's, who were concerned that the tyres ran at their recommended pressures to cope with the load.

Presently the three of us were joined by the Home Team, who had borrowed a car to come down to see the Expedition off. Then, a little later, Cambridge arrived with a story about a policeman of whom they had asked "the way to Singapore."

There were two impatient hours to wait for the plane, but there was the usual form-filling to keep us busy. Pat, the Documents King, padded gently from counter to counter dressed in sky-blue overalls, a Basque beret, and dark glasses. He had a marked foreign accent—"warming up my gutturals for the other side." This enthusiasm was catching, and the Customs, currency, passports, air-tickets, and A.A. were dealt with in high style.

B.B. left the reception hall quite early on in the proceedings to get his cameras and photographic equipment out of bond. Presently he reappeared across the main foyer with our new cine camera atop a long tripod; he had talked about this camera for months, and now it was held aloft for all to see, and the tripod legs, extended to the full, trailed noisily across the tiles behind him. For the next hour he roamed the airport buildings looking like a cross between a medicine man with a ju-ju stick and a child with a new toy. Meanwhile Adrian donned a large slouch hat, which at that stage did not suit him at all. But his serious and official manner completely behoved an Expedition Business Manager.

Eventually the loudspeakers asked the Oxford and Cambridge Far Eastern Expedition to proceed to their plane. It stood ready on the tarmac outside, doors swung open, and the ramp was put in place for the cars. B.B. never let his totem-pole camera out of his grasp; he set it up by the plane, and we paraded back and forth from the buildings a couple of times before he was satisfied.

The cars were driven up the ramp, where it was found that they were too high to fit into the plane. This last-minute panic—"Hey, you chaps, *une grande catastrophe*"—was averted by deflating the tyres and unloading the roof-rack. Then we climbed aboard, the

door slammed shut, and we chattered about nothing at all. The plane taxied out to the end of the runway, revved her engines, and then, with a sudden roar, leapt forward. The tail lifted, the vibrations eased, the airport dropped away below, and, as Dungeness ran out into the Channel, we were on our way.

3.
Outward Bound

FIFTEEN minutes later we landed in France. Our new passports were stamped, and the Douane officials, after peering through the windows of the cars, gave an incredulous shrug of the shoulders and tore the first page from the *carnets*.

That night the Expedition made camp among the sand-dunes outside Le Touquet. But first we called at the local Mobilgas station to take *un fill-up*. The pump attendant was glad to see us, for his head office, having got our arrival times mixed up, had previously phoned him to be ready at six o'clock that morning. Accordingly, his wife had pushed him out of bed at 5.30 A.M. in order to greet "L'Expédition d'Oxford et de Cambridge à l'Extrême Orient," and he had been waiting ever since. "A l'Extrême Orient"—that sounded very good!

Among the dunes clumsy hands rigged the tent and put up the camp-beds while Pat, his vocal chords now tuned to their Continental perfection, conducted his first French lesson for the rest of us. Since his arrival in France a few hours earlier (and, in fact, considerably before) he had been shedding his English reserve, and was now in his element. He seemed to develop a typical Gallic after-shave shadow, and, while we had been at the petrol pump, he strode about purchasing *du pain*, *du vin*, *et du fromage*, and exchanging pleasantries with all and sundry. With a student bag over his shoulder, a beret on his head, and his blue trousers, he was the Englishman's idea of a Frenchman. That was, I suspect, his intention. Anyway, during the washing-up of our supper he told us that he had "worked out a few O.K. phrases for you chaps so you can know what it's all about and answer the stock questions!"