

Preface

Over the years, many friends and colleagues from different parts of the world have suggested that I should put pen to paper and describe in simple, non-technical terms the adventures I have experienced during my work as an earth scientist in some of the remoter parts of the arid and semi-arid world. My aim in writing this concise account of some of the work I have been involved in over the past 50 years is to try and convey for the non-specialist something of the excitement and fun involved in fieldwork in the drier regions of the world. My studies of the soils, landforms and the recent geological history of arid and semi-arid regions have taken me to some remarkable places in Africa, Asia, Australia and the Middle East. Not only are the landscapes themselves often stunningly beautiful, but I have always found the contact with people from quite different backgrounds and cultures an enriching experience. I have been fortunate in that my work has taken me to places far off the beaten track, whether it be the rugged mountains of Ethiopia and northern China, the sandy deserts of the Sahara and Rajasthan, or the great river valleys of Somalia, central India and the Nile. The chapters that follow are not intended to form a coherent chronological narrative, although they do appear in rough chronological order. They should rather be viewed as vignettes or brief evocative descriptions, much as in the discursive tradition of the wandering Irish storytellers or *shenachies*. Acting on the principle that it is not necessary to be solemn to be serious, my aim is to entertain as well as to instruct. If these tales encourage younger people to carry out fieldwork for themselves, then I shall be amply rewarded.

Nile Waters, Saharan Sands

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