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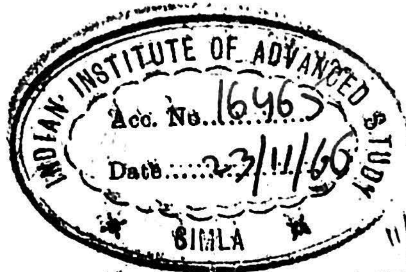

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THOMAS WAGHORN AND THE OVERLAND ROUTE

BY HERBERT ADDISON

I ... s ago a ceremony was conducted near ... ther improbable just now. The date ... ce was the boulevard at Port Tewfik tha ... outlet of the Suez Canal. Here, in a rail ... bronze bust of a sailor. The inscription ... Universelle du Canal de Suez a élevé ce monument au Lieutenant Waghorn . . . dont le devouement, la persévérance, et l'energie ont ouvert la route de terres à travers l'Egypte pour établir la communication postale entre l'Occident et l'Orient." On this day, one hundred years after Waghorn's death, the British and Egyptian flags and garlands of evergreen adorned the statue; in the presence of the Egyptian governor of Suez, the French consul, and a representative of the Suez Canal Company, the British Consul at Suez laid a wreath on behalf of the British Ambassador in Cairo, Sir Ronald Campbell.

Since that time the Canal has suffered rude and violent attacks. The statue of de Lesseps at Port Said, far more majestic than Waghorn's at Suez, has been overthrown. For months on end de Lesseps' route was completely out of action. Perhaps, then, the time is opportune to reassess the struggles of the pioneer: for if de Lesseps in effect stood on Waghorn's shoulders, yet the magnanimous inscription at Port Tewfik shows that he was Waghorn's warm friend and admirer.

Why was so much devotion, so much perseverance, and so much energy necessary before a postal route through Suez could be established? In principle, various possibilities presented themselves to overland travellers who wanted to hurry to the Orient. Having reached the eastern Mediterranean, they might make for Aleppo, cross the desert to the Euphrates, float down the river to Basra, and then sail through the Persian Gulf to India. Further south there was a trade route up the Nile and through passes in the eastern desert to the Red Sea. In dynastic and especially in Roman times, ships sailed from ports such as Myos Hormos and Berenice to Arabia, East Africa, and doubtless to India. As for the third—and apparently the most direct route, the one through Suez, unfavourable winds in the Gulf of Suez made it impracticable for months on end. From July to September the wind blew undeviatingly from a northerly quarter. Only ships of the desert, camels, were untroubled by the north wind, and that is why the Moslem pilgrimage from Cairo to Mecca avoided the sea, and why the wavering camel tracks can be seen near Suez today.

That was the general picture when Waghorn was born at Chatham on

February 20, 1800. If, at that time, a pertinacious traveller from India had found a favourable wind and had penetrated into the Gulf of Suez—inadequately surveyed and wholly unlighted—he would have disembarked at an unkempt and insignificant village. Suez had neither a proper water supply, terminal facilities, nor accommodation for travellers. The ninety miles of desert onwards to Cairo might be beset by marauding Arabs. The city itself was subject to recurrent plagues. Having at last reached Alexandria, an obscure town of a few thousand inhabitants looking over a deserted sea, the travellers would have to await the arrival of such occasional ships as touched there.

When Waghorn died fifty years later, westbound passengers at Calcutta could embark in one of the best-equipped steamers in the world. An admirable organization looked after their transit from Suez to Alexandria. Regular mail steamships carried them onwards to Marseilles, Southampton or London.

Of course, one man alone could not, single-handed, have brought about this transformation. But of the thousands of men with whom he co-operated, none had a more unquenchable sense of mission than Thomas Fletcher Waghorn. No one was more firmly convinced that an overland route was feasible or was more ready to show by personal example that all difficulties might be overcome. It was, in fact, a personal encounter that brought revelation to him and made of him a dedicated man. When the *Enterprise*, the first steamship to make the passage from London to Calcutta, arrived at the mouth of the Hooghly in 1825, it was piloted up the river by Waghorn, then a young officer of the Bengal Marine pilot service. He was fascinated by what the ship's master told him; for although Lieutenant Johnston had brought his little steamer round the Cape, he had on a previous trip crossed the isthmus of Suez.

Even to get a steamship to Calcutta at all was a feat that had involved years of unremitting effort in India, in Egypt and in Great Britain. There had been public meetings, debates in the House of Commons, surveys of the Red Sea by Royal Navy ships, pioneering efforts of marine engineering. . . . Steam was the foundation that supported all the hopes of the merchants in Bombay and the manufacturers in England. Steam alone would deliver them from their bondage to the leisurely East Indiamen that might take a year for the round trip to England and back. Nothing but steam would defeat the monsoons in the Indian Ocean and the north winds in the Red Sea. Yet, judged against this background, the maiden performance of the *Enterprise* was undeniably disappointing—the steamer's voyage had taken nearly four months.

New enthusiasm, new impetus were demanded. Waghorn supplied them generously. At a great public meeting in Madras in 1828 the Indian Government commissioned him to go to London to press still more vigorously for a quick and reliable steam service between India and England; and so effectively did he interpret these instructions that in October, 1829, the East India Company in London entrusted him with despatches for personal delivery to Sir John Malcolm, the Governor of Bombay. It was a heroic journey. When, having reached Suez, Waghorn did not find awaiting him there the promised steamer, he set off south in an open boat, and

by the time he arrived at Jeddah and made contact with a British naval vessel he was in a high fever which kept him inactive for six weeks. Nevertheless, the despatches, carried overland, did eventually arrive at Bombay. Waghorn could afford to ignore the taunt of Freeling, the British Postmaster-General, who pointed out that during the whole of his journey from London to Bombay this passionate advocate of steam transport had in fact only travelled in a steamship across the English Channel from Dover to Boulogne.

In Waghorn's mind, steam or no steam, the Cape route no longer counted: he resigned from the Indian pilot service so as to be free to devote the whole of his energies to establishing an overland mail route through Suez. He addressed meetings at Manchester and Liverpool. In London he attacked incessantly the obstructiveness of the British Post Office and India House, who between them were at that time responsible for the mail service to India; and as if two bureaucracies were not enough, there was the Admiralty also to be taken into account, for all overseas mails were then carried in Admiralty packets. Like all bureaucracies, these had excellent reasons for deliberation. How did Waghorn know—how did anyone know—that the Suez route was in all respects the best? In 1834 widespread interest was attracted by an account of an overland journey by the Nile valley and Kosseir published by the Royal Geographical Society. At the same time, the British Government voted an additional sum of £20,000 for more detailed exploration of the Euphrates-Persian Gulf route; but, as this expedition nearly ended in disaster, it indirectly supported Waghorn's choice.

In fact, the battle was already won. By 1835 regular monthly mail steamers left Falmouth for the Mediterranean, and from Suez the East India Company's mail steamer *Hugh Lindsay* continued onwards to India. The remaining task, the organization of the land route in Egypt, was specifically allotted to Waghorn. In June, 1837, the East India Company appointed him as their deputy agent in Egypt, with the particular duty of superintending the transit of mails. After he reached Egypt the next month, " full of zeal, energy, alacrity, perseverance, enthusiasm," he tackled one by one the outstanding problems. Of these, perhaps the supply of bunker coal was the most formidable: it required camel caravans from Alexandria to Suez. To ensure the safety of the mails during the desert crossing, Waghorn and the British Consul had a most successful audience of Mohammed Ali, the Pasha of Egypt and its undisputed autocrat. Because of the Pasha's benevolent interest so secured, Waghorn could announce in later years that not a single passenger had suffered violence on the route. Along the ninety miles of the desert track there arose stone signal towers, so that semaphore signallers could rapidly transmit to Cairo the news of the arrival of mail steamers at Suez. In turn, posthouses were built where horses could be changed, and even a half-way house with eating and sleeping accommodation. Yet although by these means the transit time for the India-England mail had been reduced to an average of 60 or 70 days, the volume of passenger traffic was insignificant; by the end of the 'thirties only a few hundred travellers yearly used the overland route.

And now, in 1840, there came an event that marked the final triumph of Waghorn's dreams, and yet within a few years had consequences that drove him out of Egypt. The newly formed Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company won the contract for carrying the Royal Mail between Great Britain and Egypt. When, two years later, the company also secured the mail contract between India and Suez, it meant that the P. & O. had virtually a monopoly of passenger, mail and fast freight traffic between East and West. But the P. & O. still had to win their share of the passenger traffic carried by the slow but luxurious sailing ships round the Cape, and to this end they built specially for the India-Suez run their magnificent *Hindostan*.

When passengers from a ship like this had to face the rigours of Egyptian travel, what would they think about it? They could hardly be expected to romanticize the horse-drawn canal barges and the two donkey-power steamer that carried them from Alexandria to Cairo. On the desert route they might escape mishaps to their two-wheel or four-wheel carriages and they might be served with a tolerable meal at the half-way house; but equally probably they would remember only the flies, the cockroaches, the sandstorms, the winter rainstorms that washed away the track, the uneatable chickens or the dates and rice that alone remained in the rest-house larders. For all these tribulations the P. & O. were blamed—for had not the passengers booked through by P. & O.? At first the company was powerless, for the overland arrangements were still in the hands of Waghorn and his associates; and even if these travel-agents knew the difference between discomfort and comfort—being interested primarily in mail transport—they lacked the resources for converting the one into the other. Gradually, therefore, the P. & O. were compelled to intervene. By 1844, Waghorn was no longer able to compete; overland transport had largely passed out of his hands.

But his fame was undimmed. This is how W. M. Thackeray described an encounter in Cairo: " Lieutenant Waghorn is bouncing in and out of the courtyard full of business. He left Bombay yesterday morning, was seen in the Red Sea on Tuesday, is engaged to dinner this afternoon in Regent's Park, and (as it is about two minutes since I saw him in the courtyard) I make no doubt he is by this time at Alexandria or at Malta, or perhaps both."

His mission completed in Egypt, Waghorn now turned to another section of the overland route—the route from England across Europe to the Mediterranean. He believed he could prove the superiority of the Ostend-Frankfort-Trieste link over the existing Calais-Paris-Marseilles route; and, indeed, by 1845 he had made some spectacular journeys via Trieste, taking only 12 days from Suez to London and 30 days from Bombay to London. They were unprofitable, though, for the newspapers who financed Waghorn before long decided finally upon Marseilles.

Unhappily, questions of unprofitability had now begun to dominate Waghorn's whole existence. Because, so far from making any profits, he was heavily in debt, the rôle of suppliant was forced upon him. Nor was it an unfamiliar rôle. Although he had served in the Royal Navy as a midshipman and, as he believed, was entitled to the rank of Lieutenant

R.N., it was only by dint of importunity that in 1842 his application was granted. Now, in 1848, Waghorn was compelled to ask for a monetary reward for his immense services; many influential friends supported his memorial to the British Government. The response was meagre indeed—an annuity of £100, later raised to £200. These, even supplemented by additional grants, were wholly insufficient to relieve his anxieties. A final breakdown ended his activities while he was abroad, still trying to improve the Trieste route. Waghorn returned to England to die.

But the Suez road remained, and during the next hundred years it underwent some odd vicissitudes. Finding in the road an easy escape route into the quietude of the desert, the new Viceroy Abbas I constructed, nearly opposite the P. & O. passengers' half-way house, a fine new palace. This was in itself a significant development, comparable to the contemporary change of view that was converting the Alps from a forbidding region of dangers and terrors into the playground of Europe. Another local traveller along the road was de Lesseps, who said he found the journey as comfortable as going from Paris to Orleans by diligence. Then, almost overnight, steamer passengers abandoned the road. Just as one technological advance, the perfecting of the marine steam engine, had brought the Suez road into existence, so another one, the development of the steam locomotive, made it virtually useless. When the railway from Alexandria to Cairo was extended to Suez in 1859, nobody wanted to use the canal boats or the Nile steamers or the post-chaises.

So at the beginning of the twentieth century, no less than three routes across the isthmus lay silent and desolate: the Darb el Hagg or pilgrims' track, then Waghorn's road, and finally the 1859 railway (it had been abandoned when the new line from Cairo to Suez via Ismailia, away to the north, had been opened). Probably never before, during many centuries, had this part of the desert been so deserted. Young Englishmen on bicycles who went out exploring found the signal towers and the post-houses still standing, and at night they could sleep in the crumbling railway station buildings. Only after the end of the First World War did the road begin to awake from its sleep. It had heard the sound of the internal-combustion engine. Still another technological change controlled its destinies. Motor-cars found out how to negotiate the gullies torn across the road by winter torrents sweeping down from the high country to the south. By 1926 the Roads and Bridges Department of the Egyptian Government had made the road passable from end to end. So once again P. & O. passengers rolled along it—but this time from choice, not from necessity. Travel-agents would whisk passengers from east-bound liners arriving at Port Said, they would take them sight-seeing to the Pyramids and the Tutankhamen treasures at Cairo; then the sight-seers would rattle eastwards again along Waghorn's road to Suez, where, weary and dusty, they would thankfully rejoin the *Mooltan* or the *Narkunda* or the *Rawalpindi* that had meantime made its normal transit through the Canal. Local motorists, surveying the broken spring-leaves that the corrugated surface nearly always exacted by way of toll, called the road the devil's washboard. Even these inflictions ceased in 1936. As one of the first-fruits of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of that summer, the corrugated gap between

the stretches of smooth tarmac was finally closed. You could drive luxuriously from Cairo to Suez in less than two hours.

But only just in time.

A few years later thousands of military vehicles hurried along the road, and the roadstead at Suez offered a spectacle that would have overpowered the shade of Waghorn—the man who laboured to bring steamships to Suez. More than fifty transports and cargo ships lay at anchor—and among them, immense, unmistakable, yet almost unbelievable, lay the incomparable sisters, the two Cunarder " Queens."

And what was it like on the day of Waghorn's centenary, January, 1950? The cars and the buses and the lorries and the petroleum tankers from the Suez refineries rolled along the road. All the post-houses had been torn down for road-metal, but the two remaining signal towers were visible from afar. Opposite the site of the hotel where P. & O. passengers used to enjoy roast fowls, turkeys, geese, hams and London porter, pale ale, port, sherry, Madeira and champagne, there stands a petrol filling-station and a snack-bar where you could get sandwiches and Coco-cola. Nor has Waghorn's adventurous spirit altogether faded away. There is one point on the road where the east-bound driver is particularly conscious of it. As you lose height, coasting swiftly past the precipitous flanks of the Ataka range to the south, there comes a moment when you draw clear and the view is open for forty miles down the blue water of the Gulf of Suez. It is a magical moment: it draws the imagination along the whole of the route to the Orient—to Aden and Cape Guardafui and far beyond.

Does it reveal the secret of Waghorn's immense power and influence? If you look at the bust at Port Tewfik, the statue at Chatham, Sir George Hayter's picture in the National Portrait Gallery—do any of these convey a sense of indefatigable energy? This portrait in London, mounted not far from portraits of Livingstone and Sir John Franklin, certainly does not suggest a harassed courier trying to trace Mrs. Robinson's passport. Nor is the face the face of an impractical idealist. Rather is there an air of calm confidence and authority. He could easily be, as contemporaries have recorded, a very tall man, a powerful man, and, on occasions, a formidable man. As for other memorials, the most revealing one is still visible even to travellers who have forsaken both land and sea. As the west-bound aircraft heads homeward from the airport near Cairo, passengers who seek Waghorn's monument should look below them. There, sharply outlined against the desert surface, is the straight black line of the Suez road.

If it is unprofitable to compare Thomas Waghorn with Ferdinand de Lesseps—the officer of the Bengal Pilot service with the brilliantly gifted diplomat—it is certainly worth while to remember their friendship. They had a common aim in promoting peaceful international trade and travel—for, in fact, Waghorn had proposed a Suez canal before de Lesseps did. This mutual feeling of esteem between the Englishman and the Frenchman is the more notable when set against the background of Anglo-French relations in the Middle East during the nineteenth century. From the encounter between Nelson and Napoleon in Egypt at the beginning of the century, to the encounter between Kitchener and Marchand at Fashoda at

the end, there was almost continual rivalry and antagonism. Is there a lesson for our own times here? Are not the men who contrive great projects on the spot as commendable as those who discuss the projects from afar?

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January, 1958.

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