

Deserts, Cars, Maps and Names

Encountering traces of Claud H. Williams M.C. Author of the One hundred and seventy-one page secret *Report on the Military Geography of the North-Western Desert of Egypt*, published in 1919.

Jim Harold (University of Northumbria)

Introduction

During the Spring and Summer of 1915, a thirty-nine year old sheep farmer, Claud H. Williams, travelled from New Zealand by way of the USA to Britain. On arrival in Britain he enlisted in the British Army and in particular the Pembroke Yeomanry and by April 1916 found himself stationed in the Egyptian desert. He was promoted to Captain and seconded to The Light Car Patrols (which may be considered to be a fore-runner to the Long Range Desert Group of WWII). He was to remain in Egypt until 1919. Whilst this desert sojourn was a source of much frustration - kept, as he saw it, away from the action - by the end of hostilities in Egypt he had amassed a huge knowledge of the desert and motorised desert travel. Williams was awarded the Military Cross for his notable work which was to lead, just before his demobilisation by the middle of 1919, to the publication of his *Report on the Military Geography of the North-Western Desert of Egypt*. This was a one-hundred-and-seventy-one-page secret report with accompanying new and accurate maps of the desert terrain, which outlined the very serious potential for the use of motor vehicles in the deserts of Egypt. This document was to remain classified by the British Government until 18th October 1963.

Williams's *Report* is a large, well-considered, stand-alone supplement to an earlier document: *Military Notes on Western Egypt*, 1915-16, compiled by Dr. John Ball of the Survey of Egypt. It discusses immediate military matters, minutely details car routes tested or pioneered by the British Army's Light Car Patrols between 1916 and 1919, and gives maps of the topography of the north-western desert of Egypt.

The *Report* gave a very tangible textual form to those areas where, at the time, little or no mapping of terrain had occurred. This remains true today. The document covers a huge near-triangular swathe of desert country south of the Mediterranean coast and into the desert. It covers the desert lands from Wadi Natrun (just to the north and west of Cairo) across to Siwa in the west, then south and east to Bahariya Oasis, before returning north via the Fayoum to Wadi Natrun and back to Cairo. The *Report* was a mix of strategic commentary and speculation, topographic examination, mapping, and a discussion of the logistics of motorised travel in the desert. It is both a manual for desert travel in cars and a collection of route guides.

In a very real sense, Williams's *Report*, albeit driven by the necessities of what has now to be seen as a 'modern war', helped to confirm the role of the car as a 'new' component in warfare and as a mode for desert exploration and travel. The *Report*'s publication became a significant 'way-marker' for the major paradigm shift that was occurring in desert travel. This was the change in western approaches to desert travel, moving from what we might view as the 'romantic' - walking and the use of camels - towards the 'modern' - the use of the motor-car and then the aircraft - the latter used by desert explorers like Bagnold, Shaw, Almsy, Prince Kemal el Din and others.

This paper will look at Williams's *Report*, the contribution that it made to our knowledge of the north-western desert of Egypt, and its importance as a guide book for motorised desert travel. It will also touch upon the problems of the naming of topographic sites in the absence of local knowledge.

As well as those sources noted in the bibliography, many of Claud H. Williams' s own papers and documents have been consulted. A copy of his once classified *Report* is held in the National Archives at Kew, London, and a photocopy of a typewritten version of his unpublished *Desert Memories* has been collected in the archives of the Imperial War Museum, London. In addition to these sources I have been able to work from Williams's original

hand-written copy of *Desert Memories* and personal letters that were sent home during his time in Egypt.¹

On the Black Hill and by the Englishman's House.

To travel south and west of Cairo to Bahariya Oasis (the southern-most point covered by Williams's *Report*) along the modern desert road built in 1969 gives the modern traveller only a slight sense of the reality of travelling 350 kilometres across open desert terrain. For much of the route to Bahariya the modern road holds roughly to the course of earlier routes across 'good-going gravel', as plotted and marked in Williams's *Report*. Early travellers frequently write of the difficulties of gaining access into these desert regions. Their accounts lay great stress upon the slowness and the hardships of travel by camel across the great gravel plains and the occasional dune-fields. During WWI, a new breed of soldier/explorer was, however, beginning to realise the potential of the old caravan routes and to utilise them and, in a very real sense, to write a new chapter in desert travel. They were mounted, but not on camels or horses. Instead they had been organised by the military to use cars.

Looking at the surface of the desert now, especially in the remoter regions of the oasis, is to come face to face with the remains of a complex history of movement and travel. The extraordinary persistence of these tracks is truly amazing: from the meandering but distinctive lines of camels walking in caravan, to the parallel tracks of cars. All of these remain, after so many years, etched eerily in the surface of the land. A record of the human history of travel, trade and exploration, from the old caravan routes, *masrabs*, through to the metalled road and the motor-car tracks that criss-cross the open desert.

From the road as it now cuts across the floor of Bahariya Oasis, the remains of a small building are just visible on the rim of the depression.

¹To complete this stage of my research members of his family allowed me free access to the original version of *Desert Memories*, to Williams's own letters and to many photographs taken in Egypt. I am grateful to them for their help.

This ruin, known locally as ‘The Englishman’s House’, stands now as a melancholic broken-tooth, silhouetted against the skyline atop the ‘Black Hill’ and is in fact the remains of a First World War building that owes its origins in part to Capt. Claud H. Williams. The building seems, too, to have served as the headquarters for operations in the area after the 1916-17 campaigns against the Senussi who held Siwa Oasis to the west and who occupied Bahariya Oasis for a brief ten-month period. They were driven out late in 1916 by a combined force of British and Sudanese soldiers.

The lookout post’s location is a work of military cleverness as, from it, it is possible to watch relatively large swathes of the oasis floor. It is also set on an easily defended promontory. The look-out was, as Williams was to argue in his *Report*,² part of a line of posts set at strategic points from Moghara and Wadi Natrun (to the north), down through the Fayoum and finally to Bahariya, thereby assuring security for the Nile regions, Cairo and the northern seaboard. A careful eye was, therefore, cast onto the routes that entered and left the oasis. Those entering from Siwa and what is now Libya to the west, from which direction the main threat was perceived to come, and those smuggling routes emanating from the Sudan via Kharga and Dakhla Oases through Farafra Oasis.³

Cars in the Desert.

The effect of the car on desert exploration and warfare has been huge. Whilst this text concentrates in the main upon their early physical presence, I would like to comment, just briefly, on the philosophical shift that their increased usage was to bring to our perception of desert exploration and travel. The Light Car Patrols (LCPs) and Captain Williams’s *Report on the Military Geography of the North-Western Desert of Egypt* stand, in a very real sense, at the point of change between one paradigm of desert

²Capt. Claud H. Williams, *Report on the Military Geography of the North-Western Desert of Egypt*, (London: HM Government, 1919), p. 150.

³André Von Dumreicher, *Trackers and Smugglers in the Deserts of Egypt* (London: Methuen, 1931), pp. 156, 159.

exploration and another. I would suggest that the LCP's experiences and William's *Report* might actually have helped to accelerate the change from what I will cautiously term as a 'romanticised' ideal of desert exploration into modernity; a point that would seem to be underlined by the number of references to the LCP and the *Report* found in the writings of the 'modern desert explorers'. These include experts and explorers like P.A. Clayton, who was a member of the Geological Survey and who worked with the LCPs, R.A. Bagnold who arrived in Egypt in October 1925, and W.B. Kennedy Shaw, all of whom used Model 'T' Fords.

Anthony de Cosson, a government official working for the railway system in Northern Egypt and friend of Wilfred Jennings-Bramly (the desert traveller), was to write of the LCP in his 1935 book on the Mareotis region:

These intrepid motorists travelled thousands of miles from 1915-16 onwards, through country hitherto unfit for cars - and in cars, which would be museum pieces today.⁴

This was a dynamic, if uncertain, period and, driven by the imperatives of war, knowledge of the desert terrain, mapping and the development of the use of cars became priorities. Cars like the heavy Rolls Royce were actively used as tenders and armoured cars but due to their weight they were limited in the kinds of terrain that they could cross. By contrast the Model 'T' Fords, used by the LCPs, fitted with 'oversized' three-and-a-half-inch wide tyres, were able to traverse much more uncertain surfaces whilst carrying personnel, loads and armaments.

Given their relative manoeuvrability in the desert, the Model 'T' was a good reconnaissance vehicle. Their drivers and crew learnt to read the complex and illusive surface of the desert and to extricate themselves from difficulties whilst on patrol. Much of this day-to-day knowledge formed the backbone of Williams's *Report*.

⁴Anthony De Cosson, *Mareotis, Being an Account of the History, Topography and Antiquities of the North-Western Desert of Egypt and Lake Mareotis* (London: Country Life, 1935), p. 170.



A Light Car Patrol in the desert⁵

These patrols covered great distances of unknown waterless and lifeless country as a normal routine... amongst other things they succeeded in mapping, with the aid of speedometer readings and compass bearings⁶ a greater part of the northern desert, with its ranges of sand dunes, between the Nile and Siwa. Their exploits, with the crude vehicles they had, were astonishing.⁷

The very real successes of the LCPs helped to confirm the car's later role in desert travel. Amongst their many duties the LCPs acted as combat groups, police, scouts, and as reconnaissance and intelligence gathering units. The LCPs not only traversed the deserts between the Mediterranean to the north and the desert regions between Bahariya and Siwa Oases; they also entered what has now become the Egypt/Libya border territory. They followed the

⁵This photograph is loaned by Claud H. Williams's family.

⁶This was a system developed by Dr. Ball of the Survey of Egypt and central to it was the relation between the use of the speedometer and a compass. The best compass for desert usage seemed to have been the Sun-Compass. R.A. Bagnold notes in a paper, *Journeys in the Libyan Desert 1929 and 1930*, given to the Royal Geographical Society (April 1931) that his version of the Sun-Compass was modified from one designed by Dr. Ball. Williams' own account of the compass, termed as a sun-dial, appears in his *Report*, p. 128. There are also a reference in Williams's unpublished *Desert Memories*, p. 53.

⁷R.A. Bagnold, *Libyan Sands* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), p. 13.

existing caravan roads between the oases centres as well as pioneering some new routes across open desert. Most importantly for military intelligence, they exhaustively and accurately mapped large swathes of previously uncharted territory.

The Report and its Detail.

It is a drab, faded, little book, bound in one of those unattractive colours which seem to be the reserve of the publications of His Majesty's Stationary Office. On the outside cover is a stern warning about keeping it in safe custody and disclosing the contents only to authorised persons.⁸

For all its unprepossessing aspect, the *Report*, with its three detailed maps, was an extremely valuable and influential document. The military were very clear about its potential as a tool of intelligence and, therefore, as a point of advantage in any conflict within the region. The *Report* itemised, described and mapped the best routes for vehicular travel, the relative compass bearings and distances between key landscape features or settlements, the types of terrain and 'going', and availability and access to water, as well as the basics of safe desert travel. It is no wonder, then, that as W.B. Kennedy Shaw noted, access to its contents was carefully controlled by the military authorities.

Williams's task of compiling topographic data began as a supplement to a 1915-16 document entitled *Military Notes on Western Egypt* and was carried out from 1916 up until his own report's publication in 1919. Williams's introductory text frequently takes the reader back to the earlier document by way of cross-reference and cites other key texts including a descriptive pamphlet on Siwa Oasis by a Captain Stanley, R.A.M.C., published in 1912.

The *Report* is a very pragmatic document written in a clear and authoritative prose. It offers a brief textual account of key topics such as

⁸W.B. Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group* (London: Collins, 1945), p. 11.

desert rainfall and water supply, population, vegetation and animal life. It then enters into a detailed description, area by area, of the topography of the plateau area north of what is now known as the Qattara Depression.⁹ Whilst Williams's maps chart only the northern line of the Qattara Depression, showing no detail beyond a caravan route that ran at the base of the escarpment, it is clear that he understood the defensive significance of this geological feature.¹⁰

The *Report* goes on to describe the various oases and the connecting 'native caravan-routes' or *masrabs*. It is in this latter section that Williams's obsessive and careful eye for detail and description balances his rather desiccated but effective prose. It is clear that Williams is not using hear-say evidence but his own first hand observations.

The *masrabs* consist of wavy camel tracks a few feet apart, running parallel to one another, and vary in number from 5 or 6 to 50 or 60 according to the importance of the route. In one case 120 distinct camel tracks were counted and the *masrab* was consequently over 100 yards in width.

The *masrabs* appear to be of great antiquity, for the tracks are, in some places, deeply worn into solid rock; the constant traffic over a period of hundreds of years has rendered them much firmer and more solid than the surrounding unbeaten desert.¹¹

Williams was at pains to stress in his preface that the purpose of the *Report* was to facilitate the use of cars: '...the whole subject is dealt with from a car point of view, and with the underlying idea of using cars as a military weapon'.¹² As a result, he continues his passage on the *masrabs* with notes dedicated to the ways in which motor vehicles might exploit them as routes to travel along and as points of reference in the desert's expanses:

⁹In his book on the LRDG, *The Sting of the Scorpion* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publications, 2000), Mike Morgan credits Williams with the discovery of the Qattara Depression. Whilst this may be too strong an assertion it is, however, clear that Williams's *Report* and maps do show clearly the northern most edge of the Depression.

¹⁰Williams, *Report*, p. 40.

¹¹Williams, *Report*, p. 60.

¹²Williams, *Report*, p. 2.

A little study of the map will show the system in which they [the masrabs] are laid out, and how connection can be made between almost any part of the coast and the important places in the interior.¹³

And then: ‘...they help define one’s position on the map in travelling across their course’.¹⁴

He was, of course, all too aware of the limitations of the vehicles available at the time and a good section of the *Report* covers the need for mechanical backup and careful preparation when attempting to travel in the desert. His Chapter V, *Remarks on the Use of Ford Cars in the Desert*, covers developments and improvements to car systems – water conservation, the sun compass, speedometer and lamps - and general car equipment – ropes, medical stores, tools, spare parts, etc. Williams also itemises key operational aspects of preparation, maintenance, running requirements, loading, radius of activity for cars and the use of cars for exploration and cartography.

Using water sparingly in the desert was not only a human constraint. The car’s water-cooling system had also to be modified to save valuable water. Of the many details and techniques for cars noted by Williams, was a system that he developed that allowed for the radiator water to be recycled.¹⁵ A system similar to that developed by Williams was adopted, apparently anew, by R.A. Bagnold after his expedition cars boiled over on a motor trip made to the Sinai Monastery in the spring of 1927.¹⁶

R.A. Bagnold is reserved but respectful in his tributes to the LCPs, suggesting similarities of practice rather than crediting. His book *Libyan Sands*, and the various methods described for loading and travelling, seem to extend and build upon earlier practices. The initial part of his route towards the Great Sand Sea (to accomplish the first crossing by car of this vast dune area) into Bahariya Oasis clearly capitalised on the routes that had been

¹³Williams, *Report*, p. 60.

¹⁴Williams, *Report*, p. 60.

¹⁵Williams, *Report*, pp. 127-8.

¹⁶Bagnold, *Libyan Sands*, pp. 67-68.

pioneered by Williams and the LCPs. Many of the routes around Siwa and on into Libya as far as Jarabub, the Senussi capital, that were used by the Long Range Desert Group in WWII, had been explored and tested by the little Model 'T' Fords of WWI.

W.B. Kennedy Shaw, who undertook a key expedition in the Egyptian, Sudanese and Libyan deserts in 1935, is more overt in his praise.¹⁷ The first three pages of his book on the Long Range Desert Group home directly in on the importance of Captain Williams's *Report* and the pioneering work of the LCPs.¹⁸ He notes that many of the achievements of the Long Range Desert Group were founded upon the earlier work of the Light Car Patrols. Shaw also raises a brief list of names of LCP members, Williams amongst them, that were still on the map of the north-western desert of Egypt.

Naming

Gathering the information necessary to complete the *Report* was a huge task involving many individuals. Captain Williams was careful to credit by name those officers who had worked towards its completion. Typical of the period, however, non-commissioned and other ranks were not credited by name. Rather, their names may be gleaned by looking at the maps themselves.

Those names that appear on the *Report* include that of his superior Lieutenant-Colonel Llewellyn Partridge, who was responsible for much of the early work carried out by No.5 Patrol (Williams's own patrol). Then there are the patrol leaders Captains Lindsay and Davidson, who undertook a significant amount of exploration. Lieutenant Kennett, Frontier Districts Administration Camel Corps is mentioned for his invaluable information on the sandy country south of Siwa that was inaccessible to cars. Finally,

¹⁷Michael H. Mason, *The Paradise of Fools (being an account, by a member of the party, of the Expedition which covered 6,300 miles of the Libyan Desert by motor-car in 1935)* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936).

¹⁸Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group*, pp. 11-13.

Williams notes the contribution of Dr. John Ball (Survey of Egypt) who travelled with the LCP and who devised methods of measurement and calculation suitable for use under patrol conditions. Ball collected all of the data and measurements, and had drawn up the three maps included with the *Report*.

Many of the names that were appended to the topographic features shown on these maps were derived from the surnames of LCP staff, which was, in part, a pragmatic solution to an immediate lack of local information. Whilst Williams himself noted the problem of naming in the absence of local knowledge,¹⁹ he also commented that as local names were found they were substituted for the English ones. Viewing Williams's map beside those made later, it is possible to see the shift of naming from the English to (wards) the Arabic.

The appropriate use of local, as opposed to British, names on maps of the region became a focus of debate in the years following the end of WWI. W.B. Kennedy Shaw in his book the *Long Range Desert Group* (1945) was to comment with a tinge of irritable melancholy on this process of returning the Arabic names to the map.

The men who made them [the maps] are forgotten though some of their names are still on the maps; 'Williams's Pass'; 'Ball and Moore'; Owston's Dump; 'Davidson's Pass'... The others have vanished before the proper conservatism of the official cartographers who have found Arabic equivalents for the old names.²⁰

In fairness to Shaw, his sadness is to do with the loss of memorial contained in many of the chosen topographic names. But whilst we might empathise with his concern over the process of change and the consequent erasure - the loss of memorial to those he saw as his spiritual guides in the desert - his

¹⁹This knowledge was, where possible, gained from the local guides who were co-opted to travel on some, but not all, of the LCP survey journeys.

²⁰Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group*, p. 11.

comment on the conservatism of cartographers reveals a classic colonial attitude.

The need to name and the way a thing is named, whilst a part of the processes of understanding, are complex affairs that lie at the political and linguistic heart of the colonial process of appropriation. In the absence of a local name, should the topographic site be named after something to which it bears a visual resemblance: simple descriptive terms like Flat Hill, Conical Hill, etc.? Or should a recognisable name be applied, a surname for instance, as in Partridge Gap, Williams's Pass, Evan's Dune, etc.?

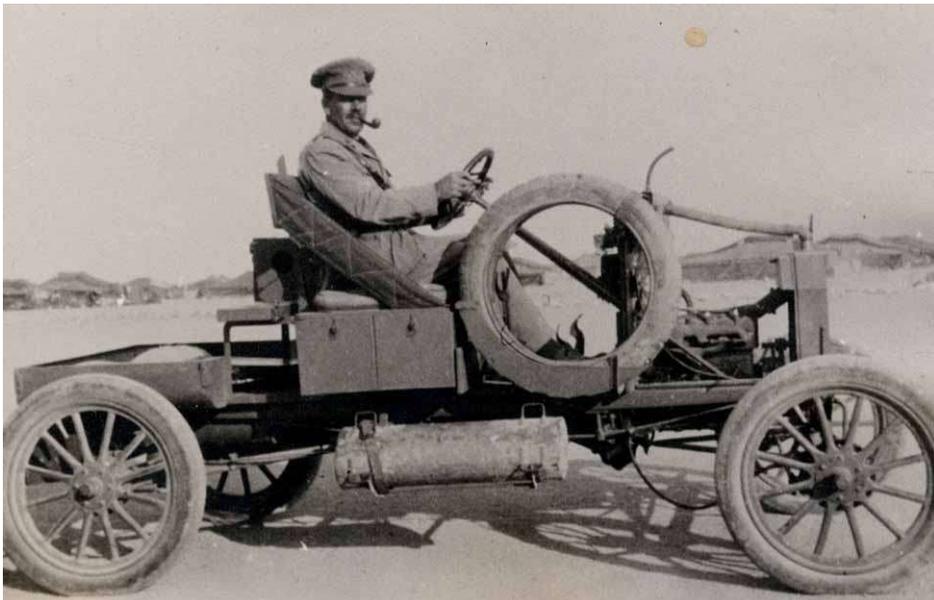
Either way, these new names gave a quasi-familiarity to what might otherwise have been encountered as an alien and disorientating world. Through their presence on the maps, the British could derive a sense of (personal) attachment and ownership. But the imperative to name and give an imposed culturally specific form to a place - locating it within the language of the coloniser - caused that place to slip away from the local peoples who had traversed the desert routes for centuries, denuding it of its depth of meaning. Returning the original Arabic names sets the sites back within the histories of the indigenous peoples.

At the temporal level of human affairs and histories, the land, too, like the map is a kind of palimpsest. Each layer of usage is visible. Modern car tracks have, it is true, over-written those of earlier journeys. But they have not fully cancelled them out. The traces are there: from the early caravan routes that were later followed by the European travellers, to the three-and-a-half-inch car tracks of the LCP and the 'modern' motor-born desert explorers.

Where Williams's map is, in a very real sense, a tracing of the history of the desert, frozen in 1919, the desert itself bears these and later 'real' traces upon its surface. Surveying the desert, then, from the vantage point of Williams's 'Englishman's House', the relative size and prominence of the marks that have been etched into the desert's surface begin, strangely, to echo the solid, dotted or broken lines of his map. The parallel tracks of

the cars cutting into the thin skin of rock and gravel to reveal the sands below seem to defy the elemental winds to blow them away, to rub them out. Their continued presence in the desert tells of a complex layering of history in which the land - as each new layer of meaning is placed upon its surface - becomes landscape.

The desert, however, outlives those who have left their marks there. With the end of hostilities in the desert ‘...the Light Car Patrols were gradually disbanded, their personnel scattered to the ends of the world’, although ‘...a few of the remaining cars were finally transferred to the newly formed Frontier District Administration (F.D.A.) who used them for routine work’.²¹



Captain Claud H. Williams M.C. and Model ‘T’²²

Like his *Report*, only declassified in 1963, Captain Claud H. Williams has slipped into the half-light of a relative obscurity. His seminal work, the *Report*, and his contributions to early knowledge of car usage in the desert should have placed him nearer to the centre of attention. That he

²¹These sections have been paraphrased from Bagnold, *Libyan Sands*:, pp. 13-14.

²²This photograph is loaned by Claud H. Williams's family.

has slipped to the edges of our awareness is, perhaps, a consequence of his *Report's* classification under the Official Secrets Act. Put together, however, the documentary fragments that comprise his legacy - and part of his memorial - are not insignificant.

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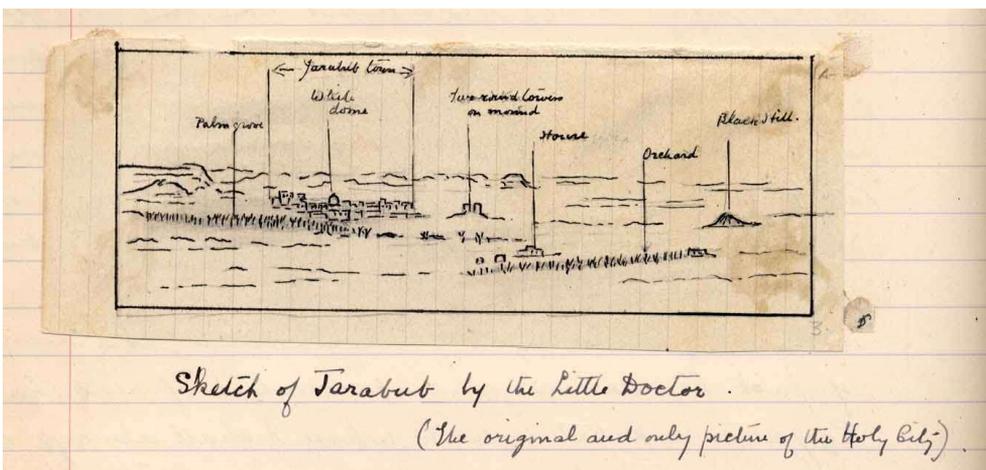
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the Williams Family. A photo-copy of a typed version of the text is held in the archives at The Imperial War Museum, London. 87/22/1 1447.

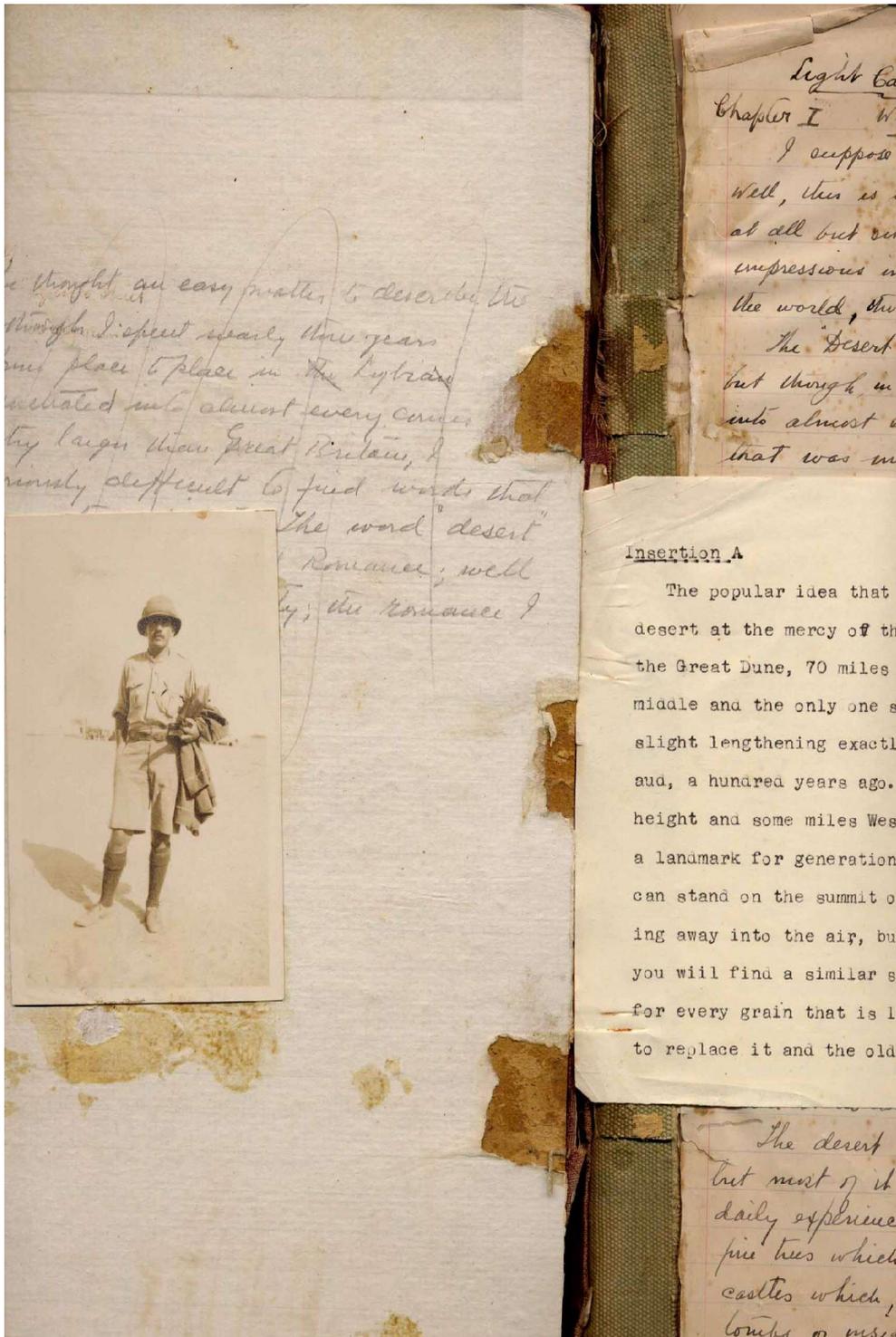
Appendix



Using a theodolite in the Desert (Photograph loaned by Claud H. Williams's family.)



Original sketch of the Senussi capitol Jarabub by Dr. John Ball pasted into Williams' original copy of his *Desert Memories*. (Loaned by Claud H. Williams's family.)



Inside cover and first page of Williams' original manuscript for *Desert Memories*. Showing a portrait of Williams, his hand-written text of 1920 and the later type written additions. (Loaned by Claud H. Williams's family.)