Using Geertz’s Verstehen/Einfühlen distinction, this article begins with an overview of the travel writing and anthropological work about Oman, concentrating on the southern region of Dhofar. The article then situates Wilfred Thesiger’s classic Arabian Sands ([1959] 1991) within these two genres as an example of a writer who is able to show understanding for and empathy with his Bedu traveling companions. Thesiger’s Verstehen is demonstrated through comparing the details he gives of Bedu culture with current manifestations. His Einfühlen is shown through his overarching concern for his companions and his respectful descriptions of their life, avoiding the typical Victorian condescension toward “natives” and the self-absorbed gushing of many modern travel writers. Based on seven years of studying the culture of southern Oman, the article argues that Thesiger’s writing shows a rare combination of accuracy and empathy, which elevates his book to a model of both anthropological and travel writing.
with food, listening to the wireless and dependent on cars to take me through Arabia." Arabian Sands, brief interruptions only, Thesiger spent in and around the Empty Quarter, the half million square miles of one of the cruellest deserts of the world. Before him, no other traveller European or Arab – apart from the Bedu who live there – had twice dared to cross those empty wastes. 'The crowning touches have been placed on this exploratory activity in Arabia by Wilfred Thesiger who is probably the greatest of all the explorers' ST JOHN PHILBY. 'This splendid book, magnificently illustrated with the author’s photographs, is a feast.' DAILY EXPRESS. 'Wilfred Thesiger is perhaps the last, and certainly one of the greatest, of the British travellers among the Arabs' LT GEN. SIR JOHN GLUBB, 'Sunday Times'.