

## MOUNTAINS OF THE CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN DESERT

By M. HOSFORD

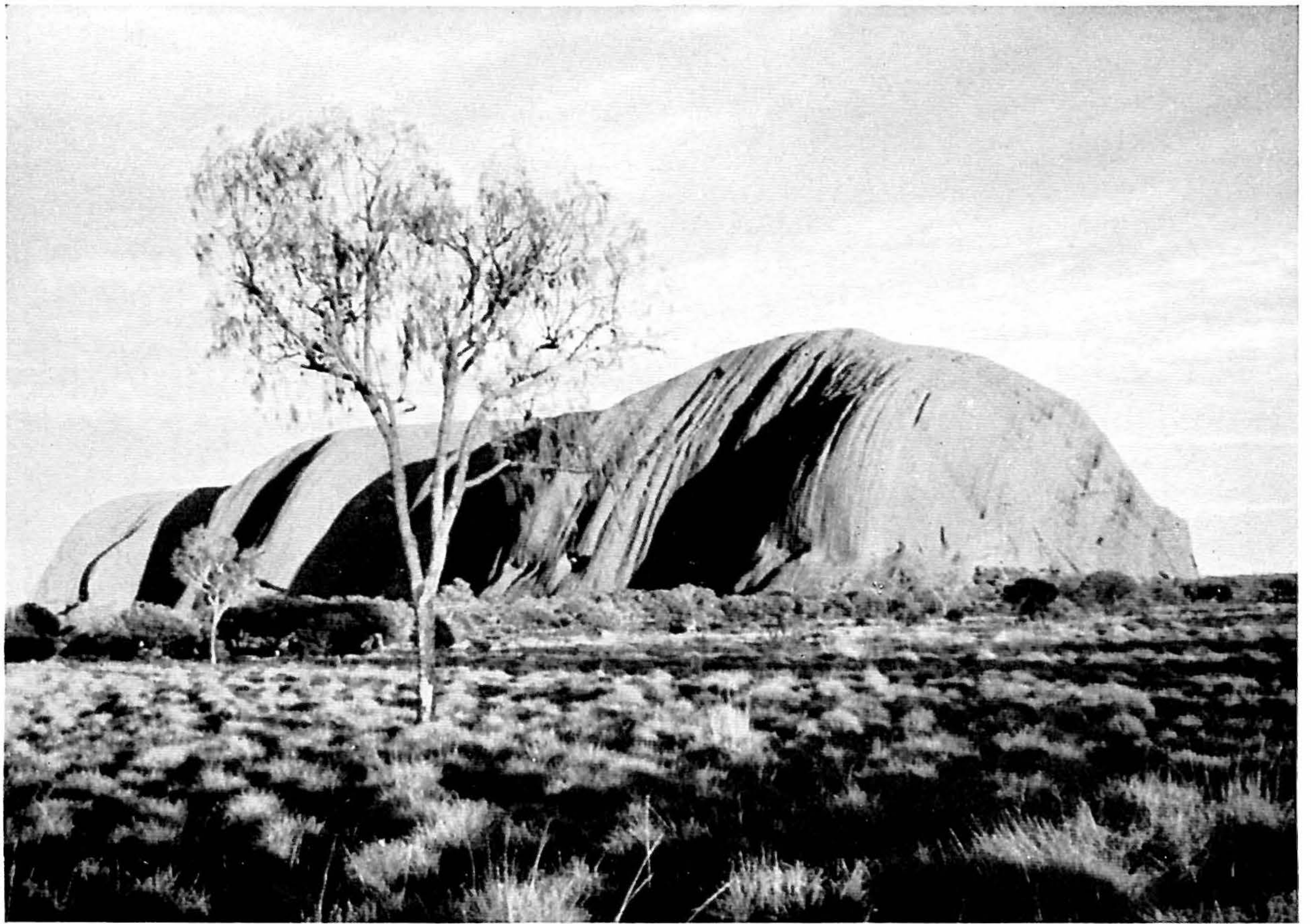
**T**HIS route from Port Augusta to Alice Springs is very rough and hazardous. Overland travellers are advised to rail their cars from Quorn to Alice Springs, from whence the road to Darwin is a first class bitumen highway.' My interest aroused, I read elsewhere and was further encouraged to find that: 'As no garage facilities are available in the event of breakdown between Port Augusta and Alice Springs (860 miles), the car should be in first class mechanical condition. The driver should have a thorough knowledge of his vehicle and also be capable of carrying out running repairs. A complete tool kit should be carried as well as essential spare parts—the following list could act as a guide. . . .' The list represented nearly a whole car!

On my arrival at the Royal Australian Naval College, Jervis Bay, for a two year appointment I had two ambitions: to crew in a Sydney to Hobart yacht race and to climb in the New Zealand Alps. Luck was with me, for within twenty-four hours of first meeting the skipper of the ketch *Archina* I was given charge of a watch and the helm for the start of the race. Before navigating *Archina* on the passage back to Sydney I was given an aerial view of some of the rather inaccessible mountains of south-west Tasmania. Of the New Zealand Alps my strongest memories will always be of the colourful beauty of the thickly vegetated scenery around the Franz Joseph and Fox glaciers rather than of the climbs on peaks above the great Tasman glacier. I had four other academic leaves to use to full advantage and, rather ashamed with my ignorance of lands other than my own, I was exploring maps and school geography books when some descriptions of strange mountains in the centre of Australia reminded me that Mr. D. F. O. Dangar had mentioned them to me before I left England. Imagine my reaction when I learned a few weeks later that there was a possibility of the Navy Board giving authority for a party from the college to drive in three naval Land Rovers on a five thousand miles return journey to Alice Springs and the Centre.

Ken Fargher, a master at Jervis Bay and a major in the Citizens' Military Force, had suggested the idea years before and it had lain dormant in an in-tray for so long that he had given up all hope of this opportunity to gain a little experience in desert conditions. As the time drew near for our departure, the voices of the sceptics waxed louder and

on the last day of the winter term cynical sneers greeted the news that one of the recently serviced vehicles refused to start. The evening chill set in, forcing the small group of well-wishers to return home to cook tea, and we finally left three hours behind schedule, proceeding twenty miles with heavily laden trailers before the first breakdown occurred. For eighteen hours in the first three days Engine Room Artificer Jim Seath and I lay under the various vehicles and their trailers, wallowing in crank-case drippings and wondering what would happen when we hit the really rough tracks. Our schedule of over three hundred miles a day was maintained by dint of driving long into the night and starting again before dawn, the route being along good bitumen highways for the first four hundred miles past Sydney towards western New South Wales. Turning down the Barrier Highway we left the bitumen roads and cultivated fields behind; with long ungainly strides emus sped away from our hideous noise and kangaroos bounded along beside us intent on suicidal leaps in front of the bonnet. It was almost inevitable that on the third evening of the trip the leading vehicle should thump a kangaroo, a bullet ending her misery as she lay by the track. The pale little joey was lifted from his mother's pouch and was killed with a swift blow as he was too young to have survived alone. Despite the pestilential nature of these creatures in the sparsely vegetated west we could not but feel rather sad after this little drama, but further chilly hours repairing springs and an exhaust system provided other cares. There is the story of a car in a round-Australia motor trial thumping a really big kangaroo, which keeled over. The driver propped the body against his car, put his jacket on it and prepared to take an amusing photograph when the 'body' awoke and bounded away, jacket, wallet and all.

Mechanical troubles were left behind at Port Augusta, the 860 miles to Alice Springs causing no more wasted time. 'Woomera' is the aboriginal name of a narrow, flat board, shaped to a handle at one end and carrying a barb at the other, which is used for throwing spears distances up to three hundred feet with considerable accuracy, and this name has been given to the Weapons Research Establishment Launching Range which we passed on our northward route. The small township of Coober Pedy has but two houses above ground due to the heat and the expense of conveying building materials to this remote opal mining centre, but some of the local troglodytes have introduced a remarkable degree of comfort into their outwardly depressing dwellings. From here bare gibber plains stretched monotonously for a hundred miles until more vegetation and colour was seen together with emus, kangaroos, wallabies and sheep, with crows feasting on occasional roadside carcasses. Galahs and cockatoos fluttered overhead while a goanna was seen to cross the track and a snake to be basking in the hot sunshine. Once or



*Photo, M. Hosford]*

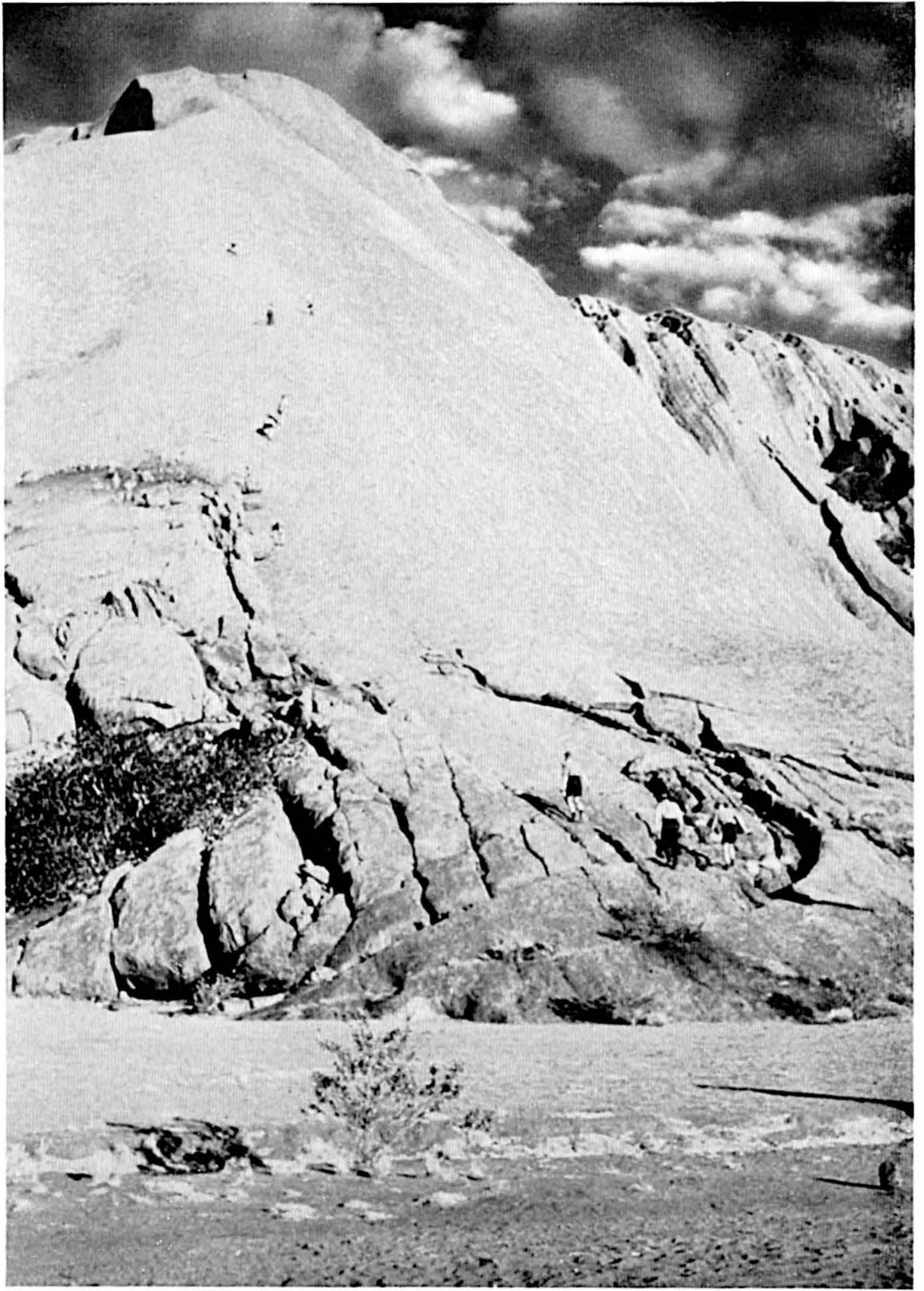
AYERS ROCK AT DAWN FROM THE EAST. DESERT OAK TREE IN THE FOREGROUND.

twice a day another vehicle was passed, the windows being rapidly closed to prevent the thick dust-cloud from filling our lungs.

Crossing the border from South Australia to the Northern Territory brought us onto miles of inches-deep bulldust which was thrown up by the wheels in thick, choking clouds that would hang for many minutes on a windless day, limiting vision to the bonnet of one's vehicle. Fortunately for us a cross-breeze cleared the air behind each vehicle as we slid and lurched over hidden rugosities in the firmer sand below. Low on the western horizon a flat-topped *mesa* revealed itself; it was one of the three tors I had come to see. On the last couple of hundred miles to the Alice the colours became brighter, though the cattle stations still looked bare and rugged, the only food for the cattle being the leaves on the small shrubs and bushes which manage to grow in the bare earth.

Alice Springs, 'capital of the Centre', is a charming little town on the River Todd whose waters seep unseen for most of the year beneath its sandy bed. Before the second World War few except scientists, prospectors and cattlemen visited the Centre but large troop movements in the area and the building of a bitumen highway from Alice Springs to Darwin by the United States gave considerable publicity, and Alice Springs, from being a railhead for the large cattle stations, has become a tourist centre with good air and rail connections to the outside world and air conditioned coaches to carry tourists to comfortable camps near the sights of the Centre. We spent but one night in the luxuries offered by 'The Alice' before lurching off in our non-air conditioned Land Rovers with the trailers groaning under their new load of fuel and water, and speculating on the reaction of the sceptics when they received our telegram boasting success thus far. The *mesa* appeared larger and closer on our left each time we crested a rise on our south-westerly journey, but our main interest lay in a mighty monolith, the largest in the world, though an American cleric was able to point out that they had a hole back home big enough to fit it in. Nearly three hundred miles from Alice Springs we reached Ayers Rock standing 1,143 ft. above the ground in a shallow alluvial basin, with a five miles walk around its base. Mount Olga, Ayers Rock and Mount Conner lie in a line from west to east, strange protuberances in an otherwise featureless plain.

Ayers Rock and the Mount Olga Range lie in the south-western Aboriginal Reserve which can be entered by non-aborigines only if they are the holders of special permits issued by the Native Affairs Branch. Nearing the rock we came across Bill Harney, the ranger, sitting outside his tent. Deeply sympathetic with the palaeolithic aborigines who have been severely affected by the coming of white man's civilisation, though always for the worse, he has devoted much of his



*Photo, M. Hosford]*

**'THE CLIMB', AYERS ROCK. (NOTE THE VERTICAL GROOVES ON THE RIGHT.)**

life to their cause and has published several books on their folk-lore. He suggested a good camping site, well remote from the tourist site and its decadent modern comforts, and we set off for 'The Climb' before sunset. The rock walls are nearly vertical for hundreds of feet, but at the western end of this kite-shaped pebble is a ramp sloping at between twenty and thirty degrees which provides a steep but safe walk in rubbers. A few of us scorned the suitable steady trudge by racing to the cairn, with its inevitable visitors' book, to take photographs before darkness fell. A group of thirty-one giant monoliths to the west stood as blue silhouettes, as the sun sank behind them throwing its golden rays onto the walls of Mount Conner further to the east. To the north and to the south in South Australia were to be seen ranges of hills low on the horizon beyond the interminable scrub and occasional white salt pans.<sup>1</sup>

The Great Western Plateau covers much of Western Australia, the Northern Territory and the north-west of South Australia, its average elevation being about 1,000 ft. above sea level. Along the Tropic of Capricorn the MacDonnell Ranges rise to nearly 5,000 ft. and to the south of these ranges are a series of parallel east-west ridges of folded sedimentary rocks which rise abruptly from the wide, alluviated valley plains which separate them. The furthest north of these is the Heavitree Range with Alice Springs nestling at its foot, and to the south of the Musgrave and Everard Ranges in the north of South Australia the land deteriorates to sandhills, sparsely covered with mulga and mallee, and the gibber plains. Some of the ranges are pierced by gaps eroded by the Finke River and its tributaries which flow south-east to Lake Eyre, a vast salt pan lying 39 ft. below sea level which is a remnant of a much larger Pleistocene lake.

Ayers Rock is over one and a half miles long from west to east and is about a mile wide from north to south, its component being coarse arkose; the summit is 2,610 ft. above sea level. The Mount Olga Range consists of thirty-one great dome-like masses of boulder and pebble conglomerate due to the erosion along joint planes of a once continuous ridge. The plain surrounding Ayers Rock and the Mount Olga Range is swept clean by local storms created by the massifs themselves. Few white men have stood near Ayers Rock during heavy thunderstorms and have witnessed water plunging in single leaps of 800 ft. from the gullies, some 20 ft. deep, that score the top and delve

<sup>1</sup> The first ascent of Ayers Rock was made on July 20, 1873, by W. C. Gosse and the camel driver Kamram. The second known ascent by a white man did not take place until 1931, and by as late as 1949 there had only been some thirty ascents.

Gosse also made an attempt on Mount Olga but after ascending nearly 1,000 ft. turned back in case he would not be able to force a descent if he went any higher.—D.F.O.D.

between lightning-scarred ridges to the vertical, red sunbaked walls of the Rock, sudden deafening sounds rending the stillness. Numerous rock holes are the centres of aboriginal legends, and soaks at the foot of the Rock remain filled with water months after the last rains, especially on the southern sides which see little of the sun owing to the proximity of the Rock to the tropic. Caves, mostly at ground level but some high on the sides or slopes, have been formed by large pieces becoming detached from the Rock. Thin, flat flakes, one or two inches in diameter and from an eighth to a quarter of an inch in thickness, can be seen to be separating from the Rock in all directions and along no definite plane or set of planes. Large flakes are lying against its base having slipped from a higher level, and immense blocks have peeled off from the mountain. In a few places large blocks can be seen detached sufficiently to allow sunlight to pass between them and the main mass but still they are not entirely separated. The largest of these, known as the 'Kangaroo Tail' and standing near the northern corner of the rock, is 8 by 5 ft. around and 200 ft. high, being joined to the main mass at the top. Others are only about 60 ft. and 20 ft. high.

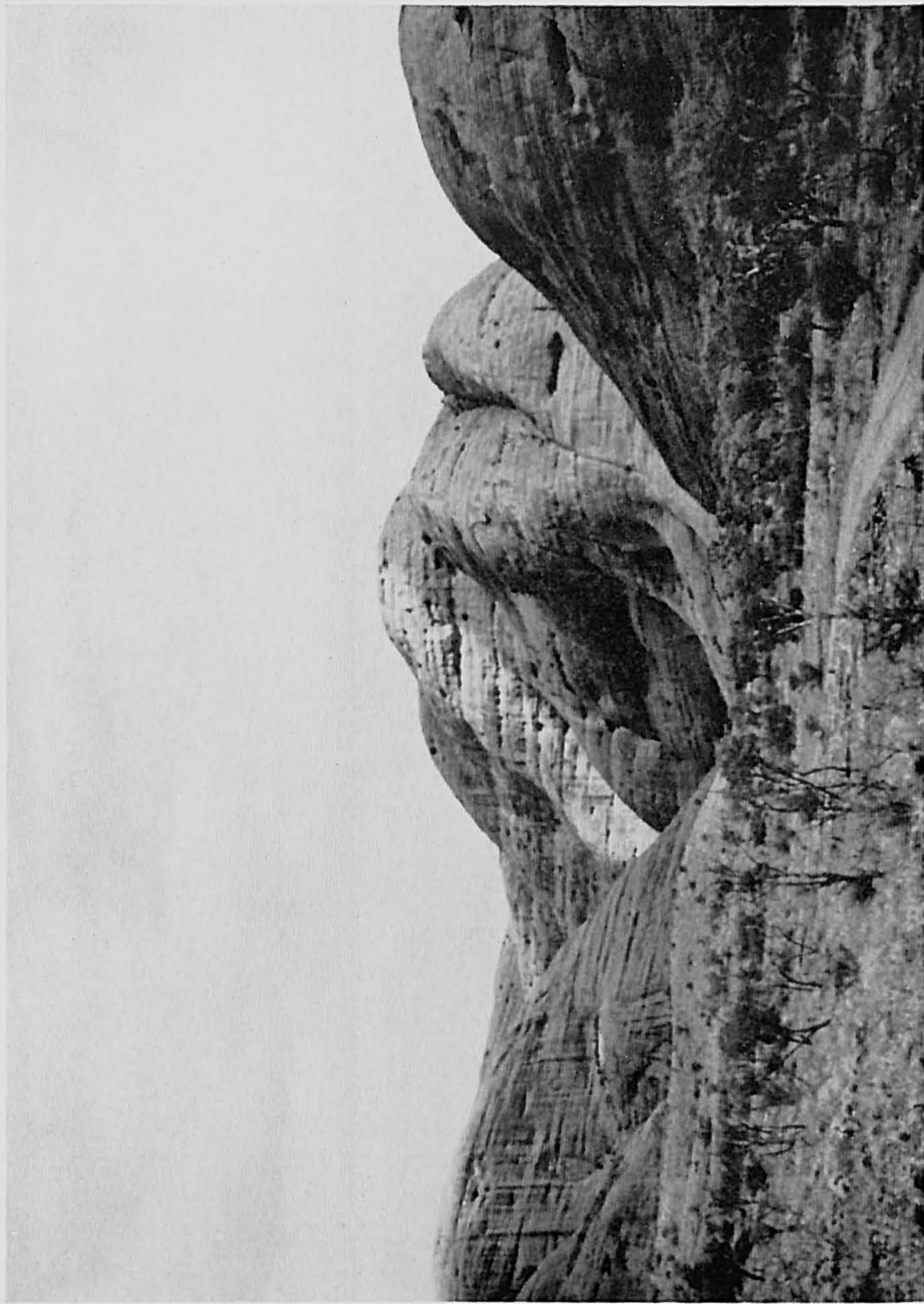
Apart from 'The Climb' at the western end of the Rock there appears to be only one other weakness in its armour, this being a deep gully near the south corner which plunges in large steps from Uluru Rock Hole to Maggie Springs. An ascent here would rely entirely on friction and pressure holds and a series of mantleshelf movements, with no rocks or projections on which to make secure belays. Despite the lack of exposure on this possible route I decided against an attempt, as it began from the pool at the bottom. Because drinking water in the so-called Dead Heart of Australia is precious, especially to the aborigines who do not have mechanical transport to convey them swiftly from one well to the next, tourists are urgently requested not to wash in the pools nor disturb them so that the waters are spoiled with sediment.

Having reached Ayers Rock our leader's only interest was to get the whole party back to Jervis Bay. To my surprise he showed no interest in the Rock itself, and even less in the existence of the Mount Olga Range and Mount Conner, and announced his intention of starting the return journey the next day; he was sorely afraid that some major breakdown during the stiff schedule set might cause a severe delay. Already resigned to my stay in this colourful region being too short for my wishes I was aghast at the thought of not visiting the other two tors at all and, expressing the disappointment of all the cadets, I persuaded Ken to relent. He agreed to spend two nights and a day at our camp among the ti-trees, desert oak trees and the tough, spiky spinnifex to the east of the Rock.

Next morning two Land Rovers, feeling light and unstable without their accustomed loaded trailers in tow, raced in hot pursuit along the

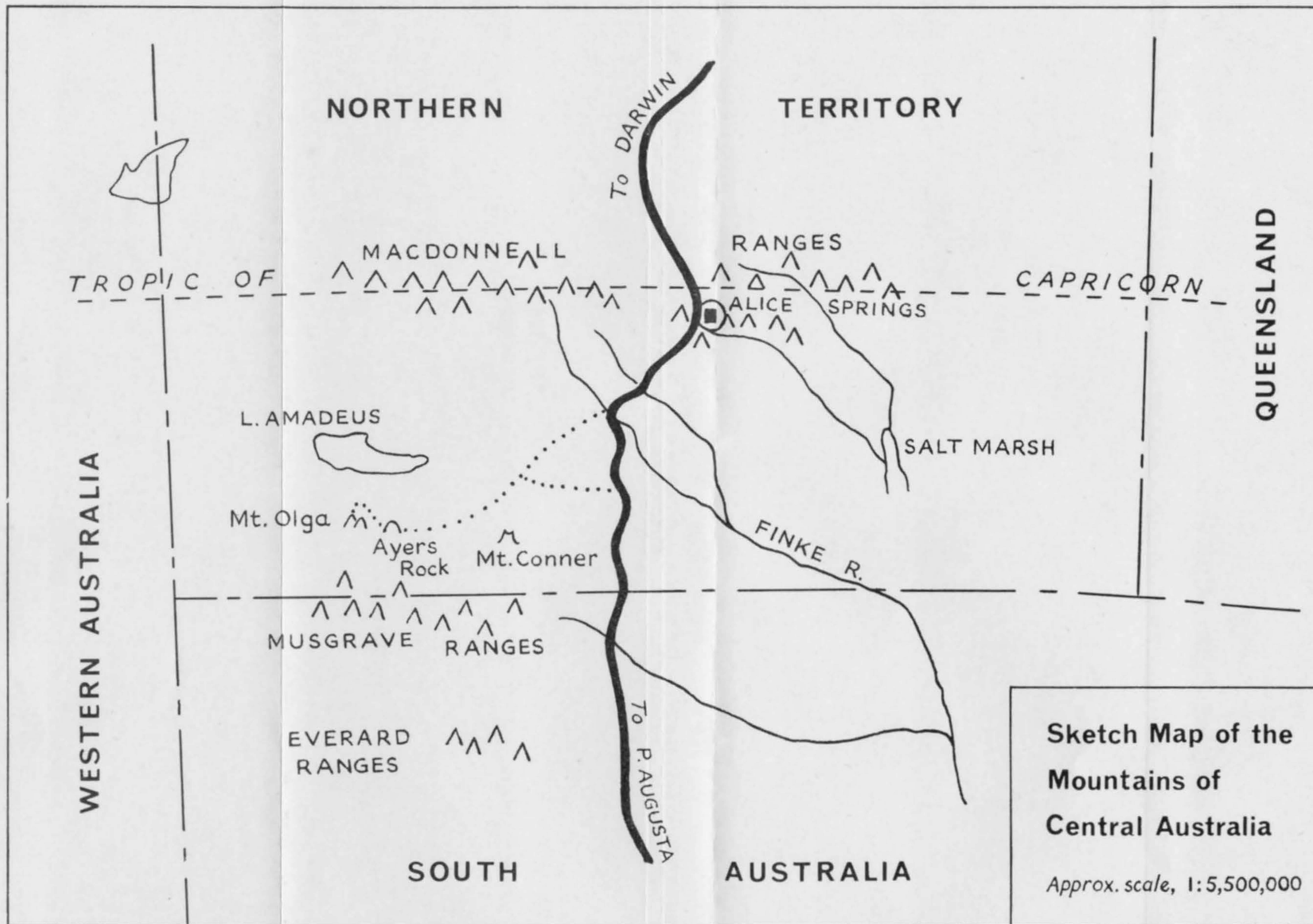
winding and undulating track that curved round to the north-west of the Olgas. The dull, cloudy skies were no indication of imminent rain, but they spoiled the beauty of the scene, especially for the colour photographer. The track passed between some of the smaller peripheral monoliths of the range and seemed to bring one into a new world shut in on all sides by rough domes which contrasted strangely with the sense of unending space in the plains outside. Dark mulga, with wood so dry that it will burn as soon as it is broken off a living tree, gave way to a more tender vegetation with brighter greens. The tallest of the monoliths, called Mount Olga, rises nearly 1,500 ft. above the surrounding plain and 2,600 ft. above sea level. It has been climbed from its south-west side, but I spent too little of our short time there to be able to find the feasible route. Few of the other domes, each one of which is named, showed any appreciable weaknesses and the sides I saw of Mount Olga were quite impossible. The majority of the cadets tired after a little exploring and settled to bask in the sun now that the clouds had begun to disperse, but I found a companion in Bruce Draper who had done a lot of rambling in his Victorian bush and in Tasmania. Both of us felt that time could not be wasted in this strange little world within Australia and, scrambling swiftly up and down the stone gullies between the massifs, enjoyed the richness of the rough, red walls contrasting with the bright green of the shrubs and bushes in the brilliant sunshine. Reluctantly we then kept our rendezvous with the other cadets at the Land Rover, knowing that the few brief hours we had spent there could be multiplied into days before we could feel that we knew these towering boulders which are scarred with large rock holes and seamed with occasional discoloured shallow grooves.

The original exploration of this area is linked with the names of Ernest Giles and W. C. Gosse. Giles, who was born at Bristol in 1835 and educated at Christ's Hospital School, London, sailed to South Australia in 1851 to join his parents, and in the following year started work in the Victorian goldfields before joining the G.P.O. in Melbourne. He was no lover of town life and began exploring in Queensland and the Territory, making the first record of the Mount Olga Range and of Ayers Rock when he saw them from the north of Lake Amadeus in 1872. He tried to reach them but could not find a route around Lake Amadeus, and when he did reach them in the following year he found the tracks of W. C. Gosse of the Surveyor General's Department of South Australia who had been there two months earlier. Gosse gave the name of Sir Henry Ayers, Premier of South Australia, to the single monolith, and Giles wished to name the group of rocks after his patron, Baron F. von Mueller, who lived in Victoria. However Mueller persuaded him to name the range after Queen Olga,



Photo, M. Hosford]

MOUNT OLGA.



wife of King Amadeus of Spain. Giles likened the Olgas to monstrous pink haystacks leaning for support against one another, but in these days of mechanical farming aids and the rectilinear construction of baled hay stacks the description is no longer apt.

With bright blue skies sometimes flecked with little white clouds, red earth, the peerless white bark of the beautiful ghost gums, the white and buff trunks of the other eucalypts and the darker mulgas, ti-trees and desert oak trees, the Centre is a blaze of colour. The gay pink, white and grey galahs and the rosellas all add to the brightness of the scene, a colour photographer's paradise. But it is at the sunrises and sunsets that the eye is most delighted, with golds, reds and purples following each other in swift profusion. After my sprint to the deeply furrowed summit plateau of Ayers Rock I swiftly descended to view the Rock from a distance in the light of the setting sun. The terracotta colouring became deeper until it was a burning red, the spiky spinnifex turning from greenish yellow to a deep gold. The reds transformed into purples and in the clear air with little twilight the Rock soon became a massive cold black shadow. The aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira, who spent most of his life in this part of the Centre and whose paintings made him famous, has captured these colours in his unique style.

On the morning after our visit to the Mount Olga Range we were under orders to start our return journey. Up well before dawn I asked Ken to allow us to strike camp and prepare the vehicles before sunrise and then delay our departure until after the expected glories of the sunrise had been viewed and recorded on film. Standing well away from the camp and over a mile from the rounded eastern end of the Rock I watched it turn from a dark silhouette to deep purple in the light reflected from the high grey clouds while as yet there was no sight of the sun. The mountain then paled to a salmon pink as the rays of the sun fell on its upper slopes and crept down the steep walls; hard, purple shadows outlined irregularities in the structure and the grey clouds had a tinge of pink. The desert oak trees around me were still in shadow, but as the horizontal shafts of light began to fall on them and on the cruel spinnifex around my legs the whole scene became a bright gold which contrasted strongly with the cloudy sky which had once more become a uniform pale grey.

In a few minutes the colour sequences were over and the Rock assumed its usual terracotta hues which from a distance seem almost purple. Rather sadly we began our long trek home and I at least was regretful that we could not visit Mount Conner, the third of the unique trio of tors. Seventy miles east we swung left on to the track which would lead us to the route from Alice Springs south to Port Augusta. We were travelling second in the convoy with one of the cadets at the wheel

when my glances back down the track ceased to be rewarded with glimpses of the third vehicle. We slowed down and in a few minutes stopped altogether, and after a few more minutes we reversed into the mulga bush and motored back along the trail. Ken, who had been leading this stage like the Duke of Plaza-Toro, was standing by the trailer which had lost one wheel and he was clearly close to boiling point. His humour did not improve when the cadet driving my vehicle failed to make allowance for the sand on the track, inducing Ken and his crew to leap for safety. His anger was not unjustified for we should have slowed down immediately Ken failed to appear round the previous bend, and should have returned to investigate the delay as soon as it was apparent that they had stopped. We unloaded the trailer and turned it upside down to remove the broken axle. Not till then did the leading vehicle reappear on the scene, but Ken's wrath had subsided and he found it difficult to maintain a sufficiently severe manner for their dressing-down.

To find a replacement axle or to weld up the broken one required a trip to the Alice, about two hundred miles distant. Lieutenant Malcolm Baird who had charge of one of the vehicles drove off with a cadet and Jim Seath, leaving their trailer behind and doing much of the distance there in second gear after a clutch spring broke. Not sharing Ken's feeling of frustration at this delay I suffered the thousands of flies that plagued us with a glad heart; Mount Conner was only thirty or forty miles distant.

Next morning we travelled over little-used tracks and sand dunes in the two vehicles to the vicinity of the mountain where we stretched our legs once more. I sent two cadets in one of the vehicles back to Ken to help refill a number of the petrol jerry-cans at Curtin Springs homestead which was several miles from our camp among the desert poplars. One cadet's feet were severely blistered after walking up Ayers Rock barefoot, so he spent the day cocooned in a mosquito net in the shade of the remaining vehicle; the rest of us stormed the ramparts of Mount Conner. From afar this mountain whose summit plateau stands 2,500 ft. above sea level had seemed inviolate, the 500 ft. high talus giving ample evidence of the rotten nature of the cliffs which reach vertically 300 ft. to the level summit. Approaching from the west we saw that the cliffs here were indeed unassailable and that the top was covered with the same scrub as in the sandy plain on which we stood. Walking round to the south we attacked a group of easy ridges which finished 50 ft. below the crest of the vertical wall. Rectilinear blocks of quartzite and conglomerate swayed out from the mountain as weight was put on them and the climbers, in cold sweats from fear and hot sweats from their exertions in the blazing sun, tried to induce them to stay in their precarious positions before exploring



*Photo, M. Hosford]*

MOUNT CONNER FROM THE SOUTH-WEST: TI-TREE IN LEFT FOREGROUND.

another route. I gazed apprehensively at a cadet traversing a ledge a few feet above me which projected out from the cliff and was only a foot or two thick; was this rock as rotten as so much of the rest? The bush on the summit plateau proved to be much thicker than on the plain and the presence of rock wallabies indicated that we had not chosen the easiest way up. Two of us walked a couple of miles in a clockwise direction round the cliff top thankful to be free from the pestering flies of the plain. I had early on been reminded of Conan Doyle's 'Lost World,' and I looked almost hopefully for some vast dinosaur to photograph and astound the world until we gingerly descended a steep gully at the eastern end of the mountain, this being the first break in the cliffs we had seen in our walk round the northern half of the rim. Our steps led us over undulating sandstone and limestone ridges that seemed most prominent around the east and south of the mountain and past a gentle slope up to the southern side of the plateau.

A windmill, pumping up water from a deep sub-artesian well, induced us to drive a few miles south to slake our thirsts with the strongly mineral water that overflowed from the storage tank into a low trough for the cattle. The Mount Conner homestead nearby had been derelict for years and stood an empty skeleton among the saltbush, a symbol of the ruthlessness of nature. The nine of us having returned to camp in considerable discomfort in the confines of one vehicle, we repaired to enjoy luxurious baths at the Curtin Springs homestead. Here Mrs. Severin told us that the station had eleven hundred cattle on sixteen hundred square miles and that she was the local agent for the Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia which is run entirely on voluntary subscription. Her medicine chest was more comprehensive than those on most homesteads, but in common with all the others the drugs and medicines were numbered. When symptoms have been described over the air the radio doctor prescribes his potions by numbers only.

Malcolm and his little team returned with the welded axle in the middle of the night to enjoy a very few hours' sleep before they were rudely awakened to strike camp and get the trailer in running order once more. Aborigines at one homestead tried to sell us boomerangs and woomeras but we had been warned not to make any purchases as they had a lot of sickness among them. Camels stood lethargically in the stinging sand being whipped up in the warm wind and here and there willy-willies would form sand-eddies high into the sky. After a few more mechanical mishaps we arrived in the gentler country around Adelaide, and then Melbourne, to find the trees covered in blossom, and luxuriant greens to please the eye. There was no triumphant entry into Jervis Bay with cheering crowds to welcome the party and in the

dead of night thirteen dirty individuals crept into bed. Fifty miles behind, with Jim Seath as my companion, I nursed the vehicle I had taken over from Ken up a slope of one in twenty in bottom gear. It seemed that all its exhaust valves had burned out and I wondered if it would have enough urge to climb the slopes of one in six out of Kangaroo Valley in the Great Divide that separated us from the coast. The journey had not been as severe and hazardous as I had been led to expect, though the three Land Rovers might disagree with me, and I did not feel inclined to complain about the too little time available at the three tors after enjoying the good fortune of even getting to them.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Further information about the remarkable mountains described by Mr. Hosford may be found in *Les Alpes*, 1957, pp. 180 sqq, in an article by George F. J. Bergman, 'Montagnes merveilleuses au cœur de l'Australie'.—D.F.O.D.