

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CHGO-50  
Reflections on a Journey  
II: Peking to London

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Kingston near Lewes,  
Sussex, England.

September 9, 1966.

Mr. R.H. Nolte,  
Institute of Current World Affairs,  
366 Madison Avenue,  
New York 17, N.Y..

Dear Mr. Nolte,

It is now almost a year since pressure of OECD work interrupted my newsletter correspondence. My last letter left the Oldham family stranded in Peking, and several people have inquired anxiously if we ever did get out of China. Therefore before leaving the Institute to take up my new assignment at the University of Sussex I intend to bring you up to date with the story of our trip.

You may recall that in May 1965 Brenda and I, together with our four children, made our long train journey from Hong Kong to London. In retrospect it seems a dream that it should have been possible. Now, not only is the bamboo curtain closing down once again on foreign tourists, after only two years of relative freedom of access, but the railway line from Peking to Ulan Bator is closed -- apparently washed away in floods. Press reports suggest that there appears to be little effort to repair it, and that contacts between Peking and Ulan Bator are limited to one plane a week.

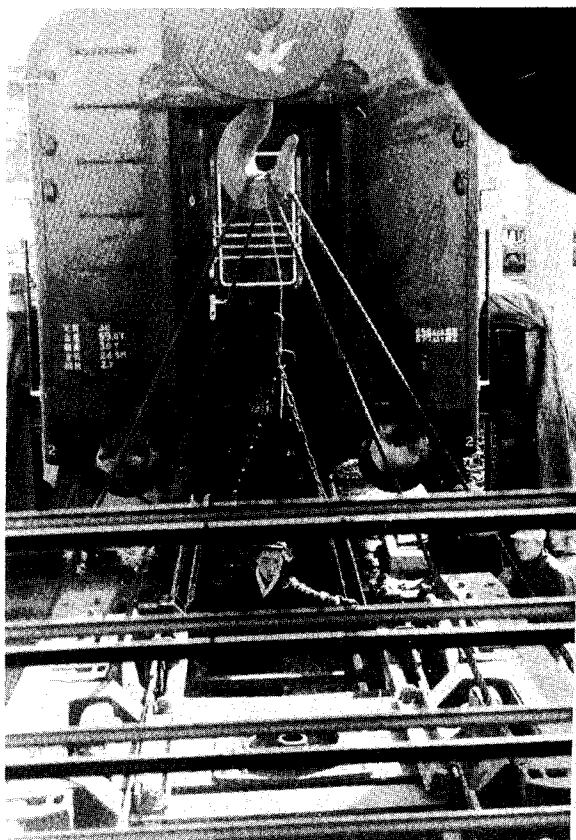
It is perhaps appropriate to reflect on the situation as it appeared to us a year ago. What indications were there, for example, of the coming "cultural revolution" in China? There was, I think, plenty of evidence that all was not well in the relations between the intellectuals and the Party, and plenty of evidence of concern about the lack of revolutionary fervour on the part of the youth of China. In fact my earlier letters on China document this. But there was no indication that the purge would take the form it has. On May Day 1965 when we came face to face with Peng Jen, then Mayor of Peking, with the venerated Chu Teh in Coal Hill Park, we thought of him as a potential successor to Mao Tse Tung. Fourteen months later he had disappeared from the scene.

Chu Teh and Peng Jen. Peking, May Day 1965.

It was more difficult to detect evidence of a possible strain in Mongolian:Chinese relations. The only slight indication was the advice from the China Travel Service in Peking that I would do better in my application for a Mongolian visa if I visited the Mongolian Embassy on my own, unaccompanied by a Chinese. The Mongolian officials turned out to be most courteous and I regretted afterwards that I had only applied for transit visas. These obtained, we were able to continue our journey by train.



Fellow ICWA-rite, Anthony Dicks, saw us off from Peking at ten oclock one evening. The train was the weekly international express bound for Moscow. It had three classes: international, soft, and hard. The international class compartments were occupied by East German women and children who were being evacuated from Hanoi. The soft class contained a motley collection of Dutch, French, Swedes, Russians, and ourselves. No Chinese. The hard class, however, was full of Chinese men, all of whom had disembarked by the time the train reached Ulan Bator.



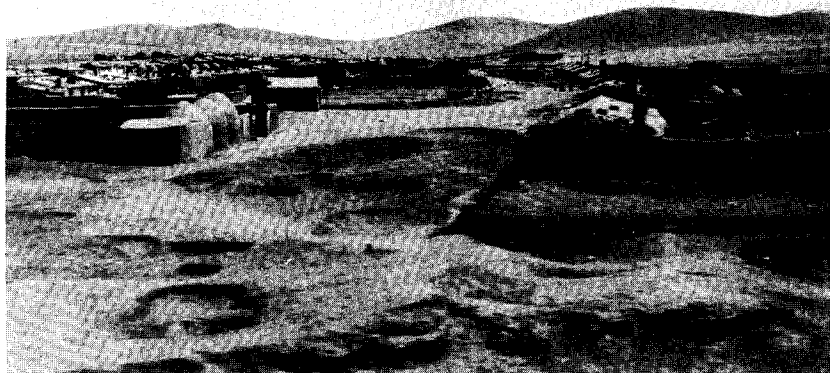
Changing to broad gauge bogeys  
at Tsining

By eight the following morning we had arrived at Tsining and here the train coaches were switched to broad gauge bogeys. It was interesting, and perhaps significant, that the change to broad gauge occurred at the junction between China and Inner Mongolia, rather than at the border between Inner and Outer Mongolia. The process of changing the bogeys was quite fascinating. All passengers were kept in the coaches which were shunted into position on the inner two rails of a four-railed track. Each coach was separated from its neighbours and then raised by four powerful jacks. The narrower gauge bogeys were pushed out from under the coach, lifted away by means of a crane, which then swung a wide gauge bogey onto the outer rails. These were pushed under the coach, the jacks lowered and the bogeys secured. The whole process took about one hour. It wasn't until the Polish-East German frontier that the reverse procedure took place.

From Tsining the train began to cross the Gobi Desert. The scenery became increasingly desolate and the heat and dust gradually more uncomfortable. We wondered what the reactions of the Chinese must have been at being posted to one or other of the isolated towns in the Desert. We were aware of the campaigns to persuade young Chinese to

help with the construction of their country in the remote frontier regions, but surely the most zealous must have flinched at the first sight of these towns.

A more amusing memory was our encounter with the Chinese money changer. It is forbidden to take Chinese money out of China and, provided proof is given to show that the Yuan were obtained by changing travellers' checks, they can be reconverted to hard currency. The money changer came round the train shortly before the Mongolian border and apologized profusely because he did not have sterling, and asked if I would accept U.S. dollars in exchange for my Yuan. I agreed, whereupon he pulled out a thick wad of single U.S. dollar bills and carefully counted out and handed over eighty-nine of them. Is there any place in the world where the greenback is not viable currency? (At the crossing into the Soviet Union



A small Chinese town in the Gobi Desert

from Mongolia I gave the small Soviet bank at the station a U.S. \$100 bill. A book was produced which had photographs of all the world's currency. The \$100 bill was carefully compared with its photograph, and the roubles handed over.)

The Chinese border town of Er Lian was similar to several other apparently newly constructed Chinese towns we saw in the Gobi Desert. The buildings were arranged in neat rows with the houses end-on to the prevailing wind. When we arrived in mid-May the wind was hot and full of dust, rather like those days in Southern California when the Santa Ana wind blows dust from the Mojave Desert into every nook and cranny, but a Swedish diplomat who had come on the train from Moscow to Peking two weeks earlier said that then the wind had been biting cold. The train waited in Er Lian for about half an hour while the engines were changed, and our children passed the time playing table tennis with two Chinese Young Pioneers in the station waiting room.

### Mongolia

At the border a mile or so down the track we passed the Mongolian lookout post and noted a soldier by the side of the track looking under the train as we passed. Another mile or so and we were in the Mongolian frontier town, a much more colourful place than Er Lian, with many gaily painted wooden houses. Here we had to wait a further two hours to complete customs and immigration formalities. The train also acquired a Mongolian dining car and diesel engine. Throughout China we had been pulled by coal burning engines, and through much of the Soviet Union we had electric engines.

All the foreign passengers, except the East Germans and ourselves, had brought food for this twenty-four hour Mongolian section of the trip -- such was the reputation of the Mongolian dining car. However, the boiled mutton was quite tasty and the fried eggs sufficient to carry us through until we picked up the Russian diner. One noticeable contrast with the Chinese trains was the fact that



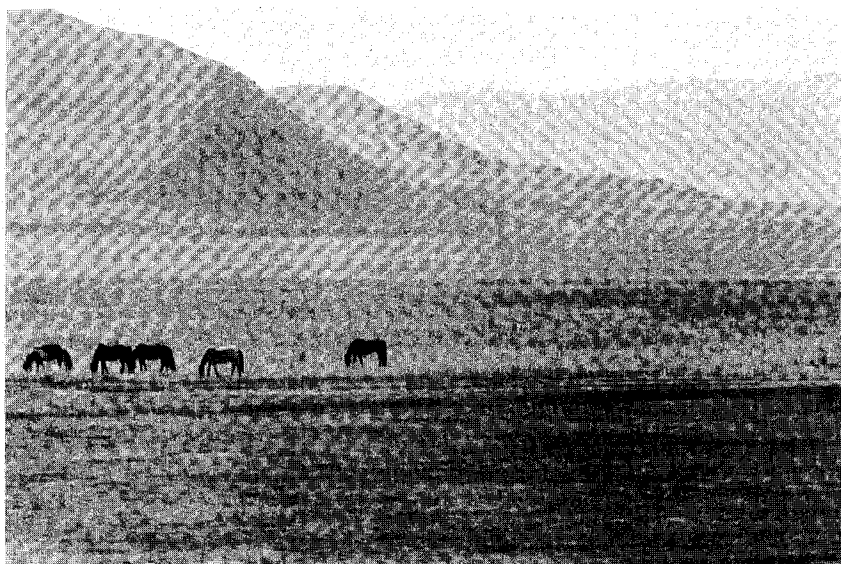
A tent city in  
Mongolia

the Mongolian waitresses wore bright lipstick and earrings.

The crossing of Mongolia was certainly one of the highlights of the journey. The factories belching forth smoke in the small towns, the roads, several trucks and motor cycles, were all evidence of greater prosperity than appeared to be the case on the Chinese side of the border, although in all fairness to the Chinese it must be admitted that they had more of the Gobi Desert to contend with, and by the time we woke in the morning in Mongolia we were up into the rolling grasslands. I made the following entry in my diary notebook:

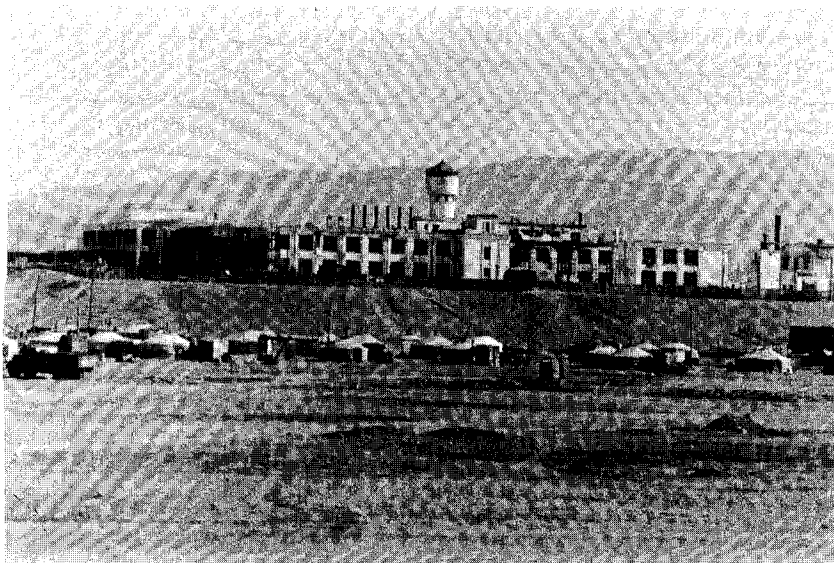
8 May:

Awoke early. Train crossing rolling hill country with occasional herds of horses and camels.



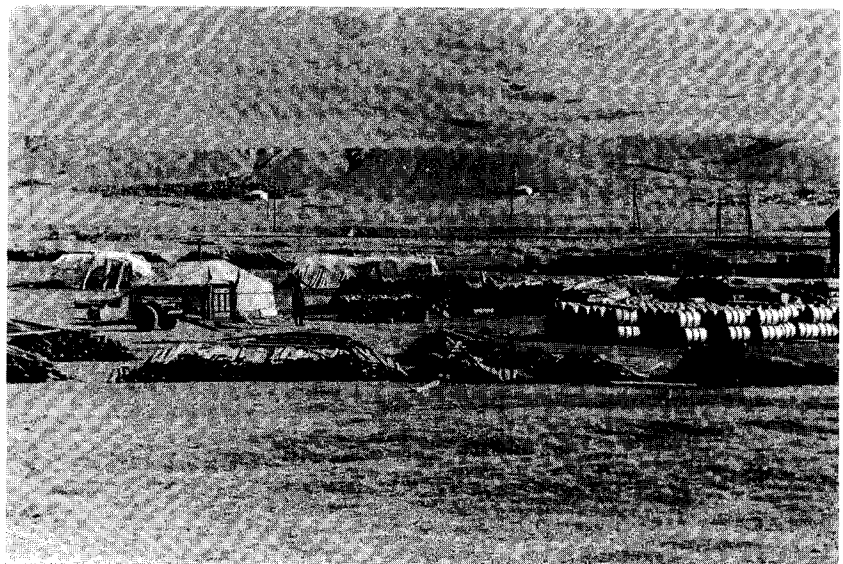


Mongolian family on  
a railway station



Industrial growth on  
the outskirts of  
Ulan Bator

Storage depot: view from  
train crossing Mongolia



8.15 a.m. Arrived in Ulan Bator. Very colourful. Seems more like some of the more remote Central and South American capitals, Tegucigalpa and La Paz. Two British Messengers left train with diplomatic bags for British mission in Ulan Bator. City is spread out with several large tent encampments. Train continues through beautiful country. Sun shines and occasional patches of snow and ice add to beauty. Train winds through valleys gradually losing altitude and we see an occasional tree on hill-sides. First for a long time. By 10.30 a.m. countryside has changed a great deal, now more hilly and more trees.

1.10 p.m. Arrive Darhan. Industrial town. Many Russians here on technical assistance jobs. Many join the train, most travel hard class, a few, soft. All factories obviously active, in contrast to similar small towns in China where factories sometimes looked unused. One factory had date "1964" above doorway. Also see a few Russian soldiers. Mongolia seems relatively prosperous. Would like to know more about its economy.

4.00 p.m. Arrive at Mongolian:Soviet Union frontier. Stopped two hours on Siberian side. Soviet customs most interested in literature. Search all books and papers. Presumably looking for anti-Soviet propaganda which abounds in China. After customs inspection a handsome but unpleasant looking character with long scar on his cheek searched compartment. (Smersh type from a James Bond novel): Pulled berths to bits, went through every nook and cranny. It would have been impossible to have smuggled anything into the Soviet Union.

### Siberia

9 May:

Jon awoke me to see sunrise over Lake Baikal. Train skirts southern tip of this, the deepest lake in the world. Mountains rim shores. Again reminded of South America, and Lake Titicaca.

9.30 a.m. Arrive Irkutsk. Met by attractive young Intourist girl. Today is the twentieth anniversary of Victory in Europe Day. It is a public holiday, celebrated with a parade of students and athletes.





Irkutsk is a fascinating frontier town with new industries, a busy airport and a new university complex burgeoning around the nucleus of the old Tzarist exile town. With Lake Baikal on its doorstep it also seems likely to become a major tourist center.

We did the usual tourist sightseeing during our three days there: We joined the crowds milling the streets for the Victory Day celebrations. The cheerful holiday atmosphere was reminiscent of a north of England mill town. Groups of girls "torted up" followed by wolf whistling youths. Predominantly young population. Many people spoke to us, usually mistaking us for Czechoslovaks or East Germans, but response and attitudes very friendly and we got a good deal of ribbing because we knew no Russian whereas many of them knew some English. That evening I went for a stroll on my own. Saw several boarded up churches. In small park noticed a girl sitting on her own. Three youths approached her and began teasing and then molesting her. Had a few anxious moments wondering whether to interfere and what the consequences might be. Fortunately they decided to leave her.

We visited Lake Baikal: Ice flows and grandeur. Excellent scientific museum. Hotel and swimming pool being built for tourist industry.



Lake Baikal, May 1965  
Ship is oceanographic survey ship. Edges of lake are still frozen.

In Irkutsk we saw a school; a college of mining; an enjoyable workers' performance of a Tchaikovsky opera in a theatre built in Tzarist exile era; More, poignant reminders of those times in the museum. The Spring weather alternated between sunshine and snow flurries.

One noticeable contrast between China and the Soviet Union was the shop window displays. They were painstakingly intricate in China. Also there seemed to be a much greater variety of goods for sale in shops and department stores in China, especially of consumer goods such as radios, bicycles, and sewing machines. The probable explanation is that fewer Chinese workers can afford to buy these relatively luxury class items than their Russian counterparts.



Staff and pupils talk to Janice during an English lesson at a school in Irkutsk

Another contrast between China and the Soviet Union was the efficiency of their respective travel services. In China everything was organised to the last item; often to an irksome or embarrassing extent. Cars were always ready and waiting. We had the best seats for the theatre and a place reserved in the viewing stand for May Day fireworks. Hotel rooms were always ready and good. Service always excellent and food delicious. In Irkutsk and later in Moscow it was the opposite. Cars were only provided when it was strictly necessary and we walked for miles in Irkutsk. Nowhere had the correct hotel reservations been made, and the Russian service, or lack of it, at mealtimes is too well known to need further comment. We always took books to read in the dining rooms. If the efficiency of other government organisations is in any way comparable to their respective travel services, then China will surely outstrip the Soviet Union!

Leaving Irkutsk we began our longest single stretch on a train. It was three days and four nights, and was to prove quite a nightmare for Brenda. On the second morning she woke with a temperature of 104°F. We had some antibiotics with us from Hong Kong, and these brought the temperature down but produced violent stomach cramps. For the remainder of the journey to Moscow it was a question of whether we should get off the train and try to find a doctor in Omsk or Novosibirsk, or some place, or whether to go on to Moscow. The problem was aggravated by the fact that there were no English or Chinese speaking travellers on the train and we could not communicate with the Russian attendants. Finally our coach attendant realized Brenda was quite ill and at the next stop, Kirin, she brought a woman doctor onto the train. She could not speak English either, but gave us some drugs and her approval for us to continue to Moscow. During her examination the train started and our attendant leapt from the train and ran alongside frantically waving her red flag. Finally the train halted and the doctor was able to complete her diagnosis. This episode made all the passengers curious and it seemed as though every single one filed passed and peered in to see the cause of the emergency stop.

Apart from Brenda who continued to feel ill and weak all the way to Moscow, the rest of us found that time passed pleasantly enough.





Keith celebrated his 7th birthday on the train.

For much of the journey electric engines are used and over one stretch one of the drivers rested in the next compartment to ours. He kept the children occupied for hours on end communicating with them by drawing amusing sketches with remarkable facility. There were chess games among most of the men in the coach (our eldest was quickly trounced), and the family spent hours playing travel scrabble, reading, doing gymnastics on the bunks, and waiting during meals. The latter were far from exciting and my chief recollection is of using up meal coupons on bread, caviar, and vodka. The menu was impressive until one learnt that most items were not available.

Moscow -- more trouble over hotel rooms. We were given one room for the six of us to begin with, with two beds and a piano. Brenda still ill; doctors; mustard packs; the Bolshoi Ballet; jokes about Mao Tse Tung from the Intourist guide; the great clown and the bears at the circus; amused feeling of deflation at being one of many ordinary tourists again; and hours

spent waiting for meals. These are my chief recollections of Moscow. Plus a vigorous argument with the manager of the hotel (the "Peking") over whether I should pay for a damaged wardrobe which had crashed down, narrowly missing Janice in the children's bedroom. He became quite insulting, so I threatened to sue him. Although

The Trans-Siberian Express





Red Square, Moscow

he was not impressed by my arguments, the local manager of Intourist who had been called in, was, and after the manager insisted I pay, Intourist suggested we go halves!

After a few days Brenda recovered sufficiently for us to continue on the Moscow to London train, and it was on this, the final leg of our journey, that the trickiest situation occurred. I had obtained East German and Polish transit visas in Moscow, but none for West Germany. I knew that with a British passport no visa was necessary for West Germany. We crossed Poland and part of East Germany without incident. Then late one evening we were in East Berlin. About midnight the train crossed into West Berlin and there was the excitement of seeing the lights of West Berlin, the illuminated Reichstag, and the soldiers. All very dramatic.

Then we returned to our berths and the train began to cross the rest of East Germany and headed for the West German frontier. We had left passports with

the East German attendants and did not expect to be awakened until breakfast time. However, about 3.00 a.m. there was a loud banging on my door and the West German immigration official who was allowed to ride the train between the last two stops in East Germany, made it very plain that my passport was not in order, and that when we reached the frontier in about 15 minutes time I must get off the train. This would still have been in East Germany and I was expected to go back and see the police in East Berlin. He indicated that since my passport had been issued in Hong Kong it needed a visa. Brenda's passport had been renewed in London and so she and the children could go on.

I pretended I didn't understand him, and as he didn't speak English I refused to get dressed until he produced someone who could. About five minutes later he returned with an English speaking official. He confirmed what I had surmised. I then suggested that when the train reached the station they should telephone their superior and sort it all out, as I had no intention of getting off the train in East Germany, I only had a transit visa. They were equally certain that I should, and scorned the idea of telephoning their superior at 3 o'clock in the morning. "Anyway," they said, "The train is only in the station for 20 minutes."

This made me realize my only hope was to play for time, and so I continued to argue and refuse to dress until the train reached the station. By this time the official was almost apoplectic with fury. He took my case off the train and even tried to dress me. I then said that if I were forced to get off the train, my whole family would have to come with me. This produced another five minute argument, until he agreed: "All out!"

At this point I went into the next compartment where Brenda and three of the children were sleeping. I suggested they get dressed slowly, and when I returned 15 minutes later was delighted to find the children quarrelling, none of them dressed, and all our belongings strewn over the compartment. By now the train was held up for us and the West German official quite frantic. Another 15 minutes passed and the chaos continued. I showed the official David's leg, still covered in plaster from his fall and hospital visit in Peking, and said it would be inhumane to turn him out on a remote station at 3 o'clock in the morning.

Finally, when it became clear that it would take at least another half hour before they got us off the train, the official slung our passports across the compartment and stormed off. "You've won!" beamed the East German attendants, and shook me warmly by the hand. Sure enough, after they had hurriedly reclaimed my case from the platform, the train pulled away from the station.

We felt that I might be arrested at the first stop in West Germany, but this would not have been so bad because Britain has diplomatic relations with West Germany. To have been turned off in East Germany with only a transit visa could have been difficult. We also realized there might be problems in leaving Germany since the officials there would realize I had been in their country illegally. We therefore contrived to be in the dining car having breakfast when the immigration officials were visiting our coach. This ruse worked, because by the time they came into the dining car asking for me we had actually crossed into Holland. They couldn't understand why the official at the other end had let me in without a visa and explained that it was a new regulation that all passports issued in a British colony needed a visa for West Germany. But we were safe in Holland and there was nothing they could do.

It was only a month since we had left Hong Kong, but the subconscious tension that had been built up must have been enormous. Never had a continental

breakfast with fresh milk and butter tasted quite so good, never had the Dutch seemed such jolly fellows.

The rest of the trip passed uneventfully. The train took us to the Hook of Holland, a ferry to Harwich. The British immigration officials were suitably impressed with the Chinese visas, and then we arrived in London to a heartening welcome from parents.

It had been a memorable and marvellous experience. The children were never bored with the train journey, and today still talk about various incidents. I have just asked them what single recollection is the most vivid. For Janice it was the camel trains in Mongolia, for Jon the Russian engine driver who drew sketches and gave him his official badge as a souvenir, for David "the whole trip". For Brenda, Irkutsk.

For me the trip gave the personal satisfaction of finally meeting Chinese geologists and geophysicists. It gave me a fascinating and tantalizing glimpse of Mongolia, a country which I would like to know much more about. It showed the tremendous contrast in efficiency between the Chinese Travel Bureau and Intourist. And finally it showed that bureaucrats are the same whether they be Chinese, Russian, West German, or as I am now discovering, English. It also showed that obstinacy and a fight for what one considers reasonable and just, will frequently bring success. I hope the lesson will be repeated in the English situation. But more of that in another letter.

Yours sincerely,



C.H.G. Oldham.

Received in New York September 16, 1966.