

THE SUFIS by Idries Shah. *W. H. Allen, 45s.*

On the jacket of this unusual book we are told that the full name of its author is Nawabzada Sayed Idries Shah el-Hashimi, described as 'the grand Sheikh of the Sufis'. Sprung from a high-born family in the North of India, he was himself born at Simla. He now lives in London. He has, we are told, published several books on mystical and occult subjects. It would be interesting to know what these are.

The book is sponsored by none other than Mr Robert Graves, who, in his introduction, says: 'if anyone deserves the blame for its publication, it is myself'. He explains that it is 'not addressed to intellectuals or other orthodox thinkers' – but do not dismiss the book from your mind, for he adds: 'nor is it addressed to anyone who will fail to recognise it at once as addressed to himself'.

In other words, this book is something of a challenge. The reading of it is rendered irksome and, at times, exasperating, by a great deal of superfluous detail and a style which is not always sure of itself. The author finds Sufism or Sufi influences in the most unlikely places and people, including President de Gaulle and a pack of playing cards. No doubt through a laudable desire to 'bridge the gap' between Western and Eastern thought-worlds (p. xxiii of author's Preface), he brings in a vast amount of matter which has only a superficial or incidental relationship with his main theme. Many chapters could have been cut out with advantage. Ploughing through them now leaves the reader confused and asking himself when he is going to find the sustenance he had hoped for.

The author has evidently an intimate and familiar acquaintance, not only with the authors already known to us Westerners, at least from the outside, but also with the day-to-day methods of Sufi teachers and the climate of understanding and insight they have established. In fact, here is an Indian Sufi speaking of things that are his daily food. We must be grateful to Idries Shah for having thus taken us into his confidence. The publishers have called this 'the definitive work' on Sufism. I feel sure that the author himself would never have made such a claim, for he is constantly driving home to us that Sufism does not constitute a rigid body of fixed and unchanging doctrines, that it is essentially fluid, adapting its methods and teachings to the needs of the hour and the mentality of the men of each generation.

Among the most useful chapters are that entitled (somewhat disconcertingly) 'The Book of the Dervishes', which contains an excellent summary of the teaching of Sheikh Suhrawardi in his 'Awarif el Ma'arif' ('Gifts of Wisdom'), and the following one on 'The Dervish Orders'. Then there is a series of chapters giving a very useful account of the writings of Mulla Nasreddin, Sheikh Saadi of Shiraz, Farid uddin Attar, Mawlana Rumi, el Ghazali, Omar Khayyam and (less satisfying – can it be that he has been over-estimated?) the Andalusian Ibn el Arabi.

By this book Idries Shah has pushed aside a curtain and let us see Indian Sufism at work. At the same time he has revealed himself to us as a sound and engaging Master of The Way.

*Cyprian Rice, O.P.*

THE PERMISSIVE MORALITY by C. H. and Winifred M. Whiteley. *Methuen, 15s.*

The Whiteleys have set themselves an ambitious task: they survey the ways in which life has changed since 1900, and assess the effects on the quality of human experience and the moral attitudes commonly accepted in our society. Inevitably, in a book of 140 pages, the authors mix broad generalizations and personal inter-

pretations, some commonplace, some perceptive, some disputable. They find that while our material standard of living has risen, our moral lives have been attenuated. They attribute this, not primarily to modern philosophy or psychology, but to the erosion of responsibility by the mechanization of industry and by dependence on the mass media