

THE ROAD TO MECCA. By Muhammad Asad. (Max Reinhardt; 21s.)

This is the partial story of an adventurous life in a traditionally romantic setting. Mr Asad was born into a Jewish family in Central Europe at the turn of the century and was brought up in conformity rather than conviction. He became a journalist and travelled widely in the Middle East. Attracted by the way of life of the Arabs and their acceptance of human nature as it stands, he came to understand that Islam had both a practical and an intellectual basis and became a Muslim. He took up permanent residence in the Arab countries until he went to Pakistan, a part of his autobiography which remains to be written. For several years he lived in Saudi Arabia, continuing in his calling as a journalist and also undertaking dangerous missions on behalf of the king. The book is written in the form of flash-backs on the background of a camel journey.

Mr Asad found that in Islam 'Spirit and flesh stood', as he puts it, 'each in its own right, as the twin aspects of man's God-created life', and his book reflects the idealistic and the sensual which so often go together. The anti-Western idealism in the book is of a sort common at present in the Middle East: more has been sacrificed to it than for it. The word *zuhd*, asceticism, so common in Muslim religious literature, does not appear. The reader is left with the impression that Mr Asad has become a sincere Muslim and is trying to convey an impression of a foreign way of life which is in many ways attractive and admirable, but every scene and impression has somehow had to be inflated to make it soar. Some may ask, as a Berlin editor once asked the author: 'How do you manage to convey in half a sentence an almost mystical significance to things apparently so commonplace?' Others might begin the question with 'Why?'

PETER LIENHARDT

LETTERS TO FRAU GUDI NÖLKE. By Rainer Maria Rilke. Edited by Paul Overmuller and translated by Violet M. Macdonald. (Hogarth Press; 12s. 6d.)

This correspondence belongs to Rilke's last, Swiss, years, opening in 1919 and virtually ceasing in 1924. It covers therefore the years which immediately precede and follow the writing of the Sonnets to Orpheus and the completion of the Duino Elegies, but, warm though the friendship was, little is said to throw light directly on these two great works; Rilke sent them to her, and she, stirring our envy, 'read and re-read them many, many times at a lovely, lonely spot high up in the Dolomites . . .'. The burden of much of the correspondence is the search for a secure solitude for himself and a refuge for Frau Nölke and her children, and later for other friends, a search complicated

in the poet's case by difficulties he himself amusedly describes—'first getting to know people, and then when you're under their protection, having to avoid seeing them; and one can hardly introduce oneself to them with such a programme'. Later, 'the future of any individual seems possible only in so far as he learns a sort of hovering that can dispense with firm ground underneath!' Soon after this his own anxieties were largely dispelled by the provision of the Château de Muzot, but he suffered intensely with others who were forced to remain in Germany; it is the sympathetic friend rather than the great poet who is foremost in these letters, though we catch glimpses of the latter, his friendship with Gide, his translations of Valéry, a library, gardens, a castle, books and pictures which stir him. The notes are very informative, with one exception—the reference on page 97, 'It's anyway thoroughly German', to a letter to his wife might have been quoted in full in an English version. The notes to letters 5 and 6, which contain an account of him lecturing and reading his own poems, are particularly interesting. The Epilogue by the editor is best read as a Prologue, since it reveals how the friendship began. The whole book gives a pleasant picture of Rilke in the round, and is free enough from hyperdulia.

BENET WEATHERHEAD, O.P.

ST BERNARD: ON THE CHRISTIAN YEAR. Translated by a Religious of C.S.M.V. (Mowbrays; 10s. 6d.)

Those who have already found this translator's selections from St Bernard useful will welcome the appearance of another volume drawn from the sermons for the seasons and feasts of the liturgical year. It is difficult indeed for people who either cannot read Latin easily, or who have no access to the large editions of the Fathers, to find spiritual reading that even approaches the quality of this. Moreover the scholarly-minded, who will perhaps be disapproving at abbreviations, selections of themes, and internal divisions within the sermons, would do well to remind themselves that the making of a florilegium has the best of monastic precedents, and need not necessarily be a vulgar abuse. Our shelves have room for many more productions of this kind, at reasonable prices, provided they are prepared with a genuine respect for the original, as this one is. The texts are furnished with scriptural references and a few brief notes at the end of the book. One only misses here any passage from the many eloquent sermons on the Assumption, and the omission of even a snatch from the exposition of the Beatitudes in the first sermon for All Saints is hard to account for.

A.S.