

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