

OXFORD JUNIOR ENCYCLOPAEDIA; VOLUME XII: THE ARTS. (Oxford University Press; 30s.)

The primary intention of the editors of the *Oxford Junior Encyclopaedia* has been to provide a basic work of reference for school libraries, and the volumes already published have established the work as wholly indispensable both for the authority of its information and the excellent way in which it is presented. The latest volume, devoted to the visual arts, music and literature, is likely to find many readers who can scarcely be called junior, for, wisely, the only concession made is to ensure that the writing is clear and free from the jargon by means of which specialists too often evade the discipline of making their meaning plain. In the case of the visual arts, the writer's work can be greatly assisted by being illustrated (and in this respect the Encyclopaedia is richly endowed with hundreds of photographs, admirably chosen and reproduced), but throughout the work one is impressed by the contributors' success in re-considering the premises of their subjects so that the ordinarily intelligent reader may be effectively informed. Thus one turns to 'Harmony', and finds it intelligibly and freshly defined: 'When two or more musical sounds of different pitch are sung or played at the same time, and are chosen so that the result is euphonious and sounds well, it is called harmony'; or 'Greek Art': 'Greece is a land of brilliant outlines and hard contrasts of light and shade. It is natural to the Greeks, therefore, to dislike haziness and in art to insist on proportion and the importance of line and pattern'.

In an encyclopaedia, one has a right to look for objectivity and a clear relation of the work described to its historical and cultural background. In this respect the *Oxford Junior Encyclopaedia* is wholly successful. One notices how sympathetically such subjects as 'Plainsong', 'Hymns', 'The Divine Comedy', 'Gothic Art' and 'Church Architecture' are treated, not archaeologically but with a lively sense of their religious meaning and their continuing validity. There is no book that can be so warmly recommended as an ideal Christmas present for boys or girls in their last years at school, though their beneficent elders will probably end by buying a copy for their own use as well.

I.E.

EARLY CHRISTIAN IRISH ART. By Françoise Henry. (The Sign of the Three Candles, Dublin; 2s. 6d.)

MISERICORDS. By M. D. Anderson. (Penguin Books; 3s. 6d.)

It is to be hoped that discerning purchasers will this year pass by the displays of expensive and ephemeral greetings-cards and light upon one or other of these two volumes, models of contemporary book-illustration, which in their general availability might almost persuade

the most ardent supporters of the primitive and the home-spun that there are some advantages to the machine-age.

The Irish volume will have a special appeal for those who like their art to have its own distinctive integrity. With exceptional skill and sensitiveness Mlle Henry traces the evolution of those internal criteria which enabled the Irish artists of the eighth century to assimilate a diversity of local, continental and even oriental influences and subordinate them to a unique and, at its noblest, unerring aesthetic vision. Her approach is at once informed and full of insight. 'The jewellers, illuminators and sculptors of Ireland were above all preoccupied with combinations of lines and colours whose rhythms pleased them. Their art is sometimes pure plastic dialectics, an intellectual exercise which owes nothing to the outside world. . . . A repertoire appears of strange forms which suggest plants, animals, human beings—a whole world parallel to ours and which, nevertheless, has its own rules—a world of singular creations, which the artist bends, spins out and interweaves at will, where in a moment, by a mysterious insinuation, a form passes to another form and unobtrusively becomes different. In all this, reality plays no part. It is the idea of the animal, recreated according to the fantasy of the mind, which is the essential.'

The illustrations which accompany this short commentary are extremely good. Those of the metal objects succeed in demonstrating their delicate contours; the details of illumination enable one to appreciate points which might escape an inexperienced eye; and finally a liberal selection of stone crosses, whose design reflects the work of both metal-workers and limners, completes the display of an era of achievement which is today peculiarly satisfying to our sensibilities.

With the King Penguin *Misericords*, we enter a rather different world; one which has a more homely intercourse with life and literature, by turns mundane or lyrical, witty or grotesque. The forty-eight plates not only illustrate a wide range of subjects treated by the unknown makers of misericords, but also show different solutions of the problems of technique. The commonest develops the central corbel, leaving the supporters to terminate in inconspicuous sprays or flower-heads. But occasionally, as in the musical monsters at Lavenham (pl. 29), the supporters carry the design. On the other hand, at Ely the corbel and two supporters give us the complete story of the death of the Baptist in three little scenes. Among the less familiar illustrations two particularly bold and lively examples from St David's—one of St Govan's journey to Rome, the other of boat-builders sitting over a drink (plates 34, 35)—deserve a special mention.

A. S.