Book Reviews.


Mlle. Henry's magnificent two-volume work on Irish sculpture was published in 1933. The present volume is much wider in its artistic scope. It covers the period from the introduction of Christianity to the end of the tenth century. By way of prologue the Celtic background is briefly but competently etched in. In a people so conservative as ours, it is not surprising to find that the Celtic ancestral tradition was tenaciously maintained. When called on to absorb new motifs from the Graeco-Roman world it responded with alacrity and with much ingenuity and success.

The result was the truly wonderful period of early Irish Christian art. Monasteries were constructed; crosses engraved on stone; manuscripts illuminated; lamps and other metal objects richly decorated. In the 7th century foreign contacts brought a further increase in vital sap. Architecture, always backward, showed a tendency to advance. Crosses began, as it were, to rise from the recumbent tombstones and stand on their own feet. Metalwork decoration became really sumptuous. The drawing and colouring in manuscripts reached a stage of excellence that has rarely, if ever, been surpassed.

A halt was called to this development by the Viking incursions. Workshops and scriptoria suffered damage that may rightly be regarded as irreparable. Scandinavians reveal the almost incredible extent to which the country was rifled of its treasures. It may be that Irish artists, consciously or unconsciously, began to turn from light and fragile to heavy and enduring material. At any rate the remarkable series of High Crosses reveal the least of little value to thief or robber, belong to this period. These, as it were, a prelude to mediaeval Irish sculpture, which shed its old individuality and became a local variant of the Romanesque style then spreading over western Europe. This final chapter, well worthy in itself of special study, is outside the scope of the present volume. It is to be hoped that some day Mlle. Henry will find time and opportunity to deal with it adequately.

Like all first class books of this kind, the text is supplemented and the views expressed in it supported by figures and plates. Readers are thus given the means of deciding for themselves whether the points made are proved or not.

A word or two may be said on some questions of particular interest. The Book of Durrow and Irish manuscripts generally show affinity with Syriac manuscripts in their scheme of decoration. So far-reaching is the similarity that Mlle. Henry postulates a close imitation in Ireland of such models, if not an Eastern master. This, perhaps, is to squeeze a little too much from the evidence. Architecturally, the Anglo-Saxon type known to have existed in Ireland was the original small edifice at Rahan. It is more than likely that all such influence came to Ireland rather indirectly from Gaul than directly from the East. In the 5th century the cities of Gaul swarmed with Syrians, occupied mostly in business, as Salvian records in his "De Gubernatione Dei." Their number was still great towards the end of the next century, as we learn from Gregory of Tours. When King Gunther of Orleans entered Orleans in A.D. 585 the Syrians of that city kept shouting in their own tongue "God Save the King!". The name in Gaul then was used generically for Orientals, as distinct from Franks, Gallo-Romans and Jews. Their coming into that country dated from the days of the Roman Empire. Their influence for long was considerable but then by the marked Oriental flavour of the early Gallic liturgy. It should also be borne in mind that between Irish civilization and that of the simpler Oriental peoples there would be many parallels. Thus an Irish monastic settlement and a Coptic monastic settlement would look very much alike, though there was no direct or continuous intercourse between the two countries. Thus, again, if we wish to secure a fair idea of what an ancient Irish monastery looked like, we have to visit the Coptic monasteries that survive in Egypt. But for any specific detail of Oriental influence that appears in Ireland we need hardly look further than Gaul.
Mlle. Henry thinks that Round Towers were built in the 8th century. The argument rests on the clear-cut quality of the masonry, which is similar to that of some well-known 8th century doorways. But if the main purpose of the Towers was, as it seems to have been, defensive, then the builders had of necessity to lay stress on strength and solidity. Ninth century masons may thus easily have adopted and extended, with a special eye to defence, an older style.

The classical criticism of Irish art is, of course, that it failed to imitate Nature faithfully. In such lovely works as the "Book of Kells" there are men and beasts who were never seen on land or sea. This fact was as well known to the artists as it is to us. Had they set out to imitate, it is quite likely that they would have done so brilliantly. Their attitude towards the whole subject was therefore based on principle. Was it a silly principle, as moderns are so prone to assume? Those who think so would do well to read what Plato says in the famous tenth book of his "Republic." "This," he declares, "is the conclusion to which I wished to lead you when I stated that, on the one hand, painting and in general every art that consists in imitation is far removed from the truth of that which it produces; and on the other hand, that that part of ourselves with which we enter into relation with such art is itself far removed from wisdom, and inspires nothing that is true and enduring. Imitation, therefore, being bad in itself and being joined to that which is bad in us, can produce nothing but bad effects." No less a thinker than Plato, therefore, though he wrote at a time when some of the finest masterpieces of the world were being produced at Athens, had no great admiration for imitative art. And Aristotle’s view was fundamentally the same. These judgments now sound scarcely civilized. The subject may be discussed endlessly. It is enough here to indicate that if Irish artists felt the urge to rise above mere imitation and achieve something which, however crude, at least aimed at the creative, they could appeal in justification to minds of the highest distinction.

A few historical misconceptions may be noted. It is surely false to say that as a monastic settlement Skellig Mhichil, with its little beehive cells in stone, was "in no way exceptional." Whatever the explanation may be of the exceptional excellence of sculpture, metalwork and illumination in the century preceding the Viking incursions it is not the change from disorder to comparative peace. The picture of chieftains, deprived of their warlike glamour, cutting rather a poor figure, while the Arts flourished, is charming, but, alas, unreal. In all those centuries the anomaly of intense spiritual and artistic development side by side with battles and chronic strife, keeps recurring. To place Eriugena in his youth at Clonmacnoise is quite arbitrary. We have no idea of where he received his early education. It is also most unlikely that all "Disert" sites are to be connected with the ninth century reform. What of Disert Caimhghin at Glendalough and Disert Declain at Ardmore, to take but two obvious examples? Nor should it be overlooked that the notion of "desert" and "anchorite" was extremely familiar in the Irish Church centuries before this reform was contemplated.

By comparing this book with Miss Stokes’s "Early Christian Art in Ireland," published in 1887, a good idea is gained of the progress which half a century has brought. The study of background and origins has shown the greatest advance. On the other hand, many things which were taken as proved in Miss Stokes’s day have returned to the melting pot. Mlle. Henry does not claim to have said the final word, but, once again, she has made Ireland her debtor by a contribution of the first importance towards the understanding of our ancient art.
PREHISTORIC COMMUNITIES OF THE BRITISH ISLES. By V. Gordon Childe, D.Litt., D.Sc., Edinburgh, 1940. 20s. net.

Professor Childe is a prehistorian of international repute and works like the "Danube in Prehistory" are used as text books in many of the archaeological schools of Europe. It is then only natural that one's expectations of good things from his latest book are realised.

Prehistoric Communities, like The Prehistory of Scotland, is well written and extremely readable, a point which is likely to commend the book to a very wide public. Its approach is similar to that of the Scottish work in that it deals with archaeology not from the museum standpoint nor from that of the collector, but rather from the human and geographical angles. Professor Childe has a pleasant facility for making people live and allowing us to follow them in their various wanderings, in their contacts and their triumphs.

Fundamentally the book gives the history of Britain and Ireland up to the end of the prehistoric Iron Age, and the account is based not so much on personal research (though the author is responsible for a very great amount) but rather on the opinions and published reports of others. Thus Professor Childe very cleverly allows us a picture, not only of archaeology in Britain to-day but also a very good idea of the chief workers in every field and consequently an invaluable bibliographical guide. The work that the author has done in welding the very varied material into a readable and lucid whole can be judged by a rapid glance at the chapter headings, which provide a fine chronological scheme in themselves.

Professor Childe has certainly not spared himself in his efforts to make the book as authoritative as possible, as can be appreciated by anyone who had the privilege of meeting him in the course of his exhaustive travels and investigations in this country in the summer before the publication of his work. The book is one worthy of the highest praise, and if here and there a few points are chosen for critical remark, it should be understood not as casting doubt on Professor Childe's statement of facts, but rather as putting forward for consideration other possible interpretations (especially possible from the Irish point of view) of the evidence available.

For instance, with regard to the geographical background, it seems a pity that Professor Childe did not apply more fully to Ireland Fox's Lowland-Highland idea. Indeed, the position of Ireland in this scheme has never been clearly indicated. In Lowland Britain foreign cultures were imposed, in the Highland zone they were absorbed. This definition cannot, however, be applied absolutely to Ireland: this country must be looked upon as being partly Lowland, partly Highland, in that the Atlantic route from the Continent imposed cultures on the south and west, whereas the northeast, and possibly the east, were probably Highland areas of absorption from England. Again, the stream of influence at least, from the centres of metallurgical culture in Ireland to England has never been taken into account in the history of the origin of the Bronze Age in Britain.

The most original part of the book is the chronology established by Professor Childe. It is a brave attempt to make a scheme fit many diverse regions. Such a scheme was necessary to give chronological cohesion to a general book, but in spite of its obvious excellence and necessity, there are several points open to question.

Thus, in spite of the Maiden Castle long mound a division of the Neolithic for the whole of the British Isles into two distinct periods is, I think, not warranted at the present stage of our knowledge. The Neolithic period as a whole represents, as Professor Childe says, a "revolution," but it consists of a great number of different peoples, ideas and cultures spread over many different areas. The exact position of the "megalithic phase" has not been clarified, and it belongs as much to the Bronze Age as to the Neolithic. The most that can be said for it is that it represents a burial custom as well as a ritualistic or religious idea.

Several other criticisms might be made against this relative chronology, the most important being that for Ireland it is difficult of application: it is, in fact, for Ireland not a chronology at all. What the author has done is given us a chronology for England, but only the links which correlate Ireland with the cultures of the larger island. It seems
to me a matter for regret that Professor Childe did not work out for Ireland and Scotland the individual chronologies which are possible and which might be then linked to the main scheme for Britain.

This is all the more to be regretted in that Ireland was of great cultural importance in the early phases of the Bronze Age. Ireland, as I have said above, was then partly a "lowland" area, on which cultures were imposed from the Continent, and by which England was later influenced, that country being thus a "highland" area to Ireland. In the Bronze Age Ireland was the centre of a highly developed metallurgical culture and objects such as the lunulae, sun discs, cauldrons, shields, food vessels, etc., exercised a great influence not only on the sister island but also on the Continent, particularly on the nordscher Kreis of Germany and Scandinavia, where the lunulae gave rise to a large series of bronze collars, and the food vessels of Irish Type stimulated the manufacture of exactly similar vessels from gold. It is thus a pity that Professor Childe did not follow up the idea that England is an island of the North Sea whilst Ireland belongs to the Atlantic.

The chapter on the "Results of Fusion" is of absorbing interest, though there are one or two points which might have been amplified. The background of the food vessels has not been clarified by the author and his insistence on the part played by the Boyne megalithic phase is certainly not proven. He has not shown that a great number of food vessels occur with inhumations and that graves like the primary burial at Drimmagh, Co. Dublin, may have played a vital role.

The main objection to the chapter, in my opinion, is Professor Childe's description of a "Food Vessel Culture." It seems to represent a very dubious solution of the problem of the ultimate cultural background of food vessels and even to make the whole question more complicated. Food vessels occur all through the Bronze Age and even into the earliest Iron Age in certain parts of this country, and this applies also, though to a lesser degree, to Scotland. In most cases they occur, naturally, in different cultural contexts. As well as this it is by no means clear what particular groups of bronzes, or what habitation may be referred to this Food Vessel Culture. In other words, a Food Vessel Culture such as Professor Childe envisages did not exist. There was an Early Bronze Age, a possible though less defined Middle Bronze Age, and a Late Bronze Age Culture, to all of which food vessels of slightly differing forms were common. The food vessel is also known as a domestic utensil from sandhills, but here again in an entirely different association. Professor Childe's idea that the "Food Vessel People" had taken over from the Peterborough folk and Boyne megalith-builders the distribution of metal and other materials is, as far as one can judge from the evidence available, by no means certain; and the whole case falls to the ground if there was no "Food Vessel Culture" and no "Food Vessel People." From the Irish point of view it is clear that the food vessel spread practically over the whole country, and it is clear that this form of pottery vessel was no more indicative of a culture than is, say, a glass tumbler at the present day. It is impossible to talk of a specialised group of merchant adventurers who are distinguished by the use of the food vessel: one would expect many in the tin regions of Cornwall.

Other points in the book might be discussed, such as, for instance, the complete absence of a description of or of an attempt to understand or study the Early Iron Age in Ireland and the problems involved in it, in spite of the masterly setting out of the similar cultures in England and Scotland; one might also criticise the final chapter of the book in which the author writes, certainly charmingly, about the Germans, the Celts and the Picts. His discussion is not conclusive, and the chapter might have been considerably reduced in what is after all an archaeological work.

In spite, however, of the few points which have been singled out for special discussion it must be said that Professor Childe has rendered a very valuable service to the archaeology of these islands; and I think that the fact that his book has been able to stimulate discussion and earnest thought is one of the greatest tributes that can be paid to those who know him it is axiomatic that Professor Childe is always seeking after truth, and that he always welcomes academic discussion and new facts or interpretations which may sometimes prove his own theories wrong. I have no hesitation in very whole-heartedly recommending this book alike to the advanced student and the serious amateur.

Joseph Raftery.