

REGIONAL CULTURE

ART IN SCOTLAND. By Ian Finlay. Geolrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press. Price, 15/-.

SINCE 1939. By Arnold L. Haskell, Dilys Powell, Rollo Myers, Robin Ironside. Phoenix House. Price 12/6.

(Reviewed by A. R. D. Fairburn)

IAN FINLAY is a regionalist. He believes in Scotland, and in the power of its people to create a significant art that reflects the life of their community. As a short history of Scottish art and culture his book deserves wide popularity. But it is more than that. Finlay contends at one point that the Scots are too much inclined to hide their art under a bushel. If he were satisfied with this as an explanation of why Scotland has been obscured his argument would lapse for want of a seconder. But he is much more realistic. His main contention, to which he devotes a great deal of time, is the more convincing one that Scotland has been dominated by London.

This book has, I think, a special importance for New Zealanders, for it makes a powerful appeal against cosmopolitanism in art and letters, in favour of local and regional developments. Some of the things Finlay has to say are so good that I must be forgiven for quoting at length.

"The decay of Highland culture," he says, "took the form of a complete collapse when social and economic neglect of that region followed the 'Forty-five. And the harm has not yet ended. The weakened state of her culture through long dependence on outside support has laid Scotland wide open to the operation of that disastrous Gresham's Law whereby all the English-speaking peoples are conforming rapidly to tastes current in the least discriminating parts of the United States."

With fashionable writers flocking to Hollywood, that, I feel, is right on the nail. It reminds me of something the American critic, Edmund Wilson, has just written about the class that is coming into power in Britain: "Certainly this new lower middle class, which may be destined to absorb the others, supplies an eager and growing market for the worst—in movies, radio and journalism—that the United States have to send them. Our Hollywood stars are already their stars, our best-sellers their best-sellers. To an American, these signs of Americanisation seem mostly stale and depressing. The British feed themselves on our banality without catching our excitement and gusto. Many of them now chew gum."

To return to Finlay: "Misuse of power," he continues, "is making a cultural dustbowl of the world. The values of life, like honey in the comb, can only be retained if life retains its infinite complexity. Michael Ayrton has

written that it is not by fostering a 'Pan-European' art that the European tradition will be continued, but by encouraging individual cultures and artists in each country. Scotland's contribution to the arts may be fragmentary, and, in sum, considerable. It appears to me, however, to be a contribution of some small value to-day. Dustbowls are symptomatic of this age. They indicate a devotion to purely mechanical exploitation of our resources, to the methods of the laboratory, to the urban ideal, and they are a warning to a civilisation which denies God as manifested in the mystery of organic growth. The 'irreligion' which has brought about the dustbowls extends everywhere, even to the arts."

Finlay goes on to attack certain forms of "dehydrated art" that have gained great international prestige.

Again, the concluding paragraph of the book cannot fail to evoke some response in the mind of the New Zealander: "There is a doctrine, insidiously growing, that in uniformity rather than in mere unity lies strength. The strength of Britain

in the past has lain in the fact that she is not one nation, but four. From those four nations a diversity of genius has come to feed the Commonwealth in time of need, and it seems the plain duty of each of the four to cherish and foster this diversity, not least in the arts."

MY own impulse is to agree warmly with the attitude adopted by Finlay—which is elaborated in other parts of the book. All my instincts lead me to reject the cosmopolitan work of art, however sophisticated it may be, as false and unreal. I do not doubt that later generations will reckon a great deal of our most fashionable art and literature to be as hollow as a pumpkin. But the matter, one must admit, is more complicated than might be inferred from Finlay's account of it. In the first place, there are powerful forces working towards the establishment of a world state; and some highly responsible critics have gone so far as to assure us that in any possible future we may look forward to there will be no place for minority or regional cultures. They are, of course, assuming two things: first, that the pooling of power in a world state is the only alternative to disaster; and secondly, that political and economic patterns determine cultural patterns. The first may well be true, if unpalatable. What about the second?

It certainly seems to be the case that when a concentration of economic and political power occurs, a cultural power-centre is always established in association with it. This is partly because patronage and the means of production

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