

HEROIC SONG AND HEROIC LEGEND, by J. De Vries; Oxford University Press; 10s. 6d.

This book is described in the preface as a general introduction to heroic epic. Its author, Dr De Vries, hopes it will stimulate the non-specialist reader to a 'closer acquaintance' with this poetry, but however fascinating his discussion of the problems of authorship and evolution which occupies the first eight chapters of the book, this can only make sense to those who have already read and enjoyed the epics and have some idea of heroic and epic material. The synopses included in the text are not sufficient to replace this knowledge and without it the meaning as it stands is, in several places, lost or obscure.

What then is the book? It surveys a large section of the field of heroic epic, with emphasis on the European examples. First of all instances from specific countries are discussed. These range from the Old French 'Song of Roland' to the Indian 'Mahabharata' and the 'Kalevala' of Finland. The last five chapters deal with the common ground of heroic epic, the concept of the hero related to history, mythology and religious life, and the poets and reciters whose work and livelihood the epic is. All this is interesting material but the breadth of the survey means that it is incomplete in detail and leaves one with a sense of frustration. This is sharpened by the occasional tortuousness of the language, possibly a fault of the translation. However, one is frustrated chiefly by the absence of an obvious pattern in the whole thought of the book and an introductory chapter which would guide one's mind through the discussions and set out the intermediate and final objectives would do a great deal to make this a more appetising work.

CHRISTINE THIRLWAY

Shorter Notices

THE CONCISE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ENGLISH AND AMERICAN POETS AND POETRY, edited by Stephen Spender and Donald Hall (Hutchinson; 50s.) is well-produced, informative and almost impossible to put down. Its general articles provide a useful background to something like three hundred individual poets, the notices of whom vary in length according to an objective assessment of their importance and are free from axe-grinding; they are signed with the initials of the contributor and one of several valuable indexes at the back allows one the added interest of identifying them. The poets included bring one up to the contemporary scene, though here perhaps the editors have slipped up in omitting the American William Stafford and the English Charles Tomlinson.

B.W.