

then that a slim volume of poetry, set in Perpetua type, bound in Della Robbia paper boards and written by an American Dominican nun are all factors likely to make the English critic suspicious. So often in the past these factors have been synonyms for preciosity and triteness. It is with some misgiving therefore that one opens Sister Mary Jeremy's book, *A Dialogue with an Angel*: but a second glance dispels misgiving—and reticence can be thrown to the winds. Automatically one is tempted to re-echo Thomas Merton's words: 'This volume of verse . . . is one of the best to have come from the pen of any Catholic poet in America'.

Alice Finnegan, as Sister Mary Jeremy began her literary career in 1933, was never of the *avant-garde* school. Instead her poetry has always been shapely and formal; her vocabulary derived principally from Greek and Latin words; her music built up out of assonances and four-line stresses. She has vigilantly eschewed both wordiness and pure verbiage so that often her meaning is highly concentrated. She ends a poem on Hopkins:

I am gall, I am heartburn. Were. God rest your soul
and it is a line in its context, with its one-word middle sentence, which is almost telegraphic in its power. Concomitant with this power, she brings to subjects such as Christmas and Easter her own freshness of vision: a freshness whose originality is in no way dwarfed because in earlier centuries other Christian poets have travelled along the same way as herself. For instance she begins a poem on the Annunciation thus:

'Hail', says the courteous angel, 'full of grace'
and another of her poems contains the line:

All Hail I will not say, for that did Judas cry.

In each case one feels that though the originality of phrasing may have come at a moment of inspiration, it belongs to a genus of inspiration which is only achieved (and carried through) by an ardent earlier apprenticeship to technique: out of past strivings new poetic feats are accomplished. In short her talent is fastidious without being finicky; modest without being mean.

Indeed, folly as it would be to let the extravagant and hyperbolic claims of some of her American contemporaries become current on this side of the Atlantic, it would be equally unfair to let this first book pass in England without giving some more just and local hint of its quality: and for that hint perhaps the fairest indication would be to say that there are some half-dozen poems in *A Dialogue with an Angel* whose altitude of quality is such as to put them on a par with the best work of the late Lilian Bowes Lyon.

NEVILLE BRAYBROOKE.

OLD TESTAMENT STORIES. Dom Hubert van Zeller, O.S.B. (Burns Oates; 6s.6d.)

To review this little book is not a very easy task. One hesitates between praise and blame. It is excellent that the Old Testament

stories should be told to boys and girls at school as entertainingly as Dom Hubert van Zeller knows how to do it. It is useful to possess the scheme of the older revelation and of Israel's history set out so clearly. All the same, it is doubtful if the book gives the kind of introduction to the Old Testament that Catholic children of twelve or thirteen, for whom it is intended, really require. The stories are told in a colloquial fashion, though with occasional lapses, if that is the word, into a more literary style. This familiar speech might suit a series of broadcast talks, but is perilous in writing for children who are likely to imitate what they read. Besides, it destroys the dignity of Holy Scripture. No doubt the real humanity of patriarchs, kings and prophets should be brought home to us; but the story of Abraham, say, or of Moses, ought to remain at that heroic level where the Bible places it. As for the earliest narratives of all, the book is bound to make difficulties for intelligent children. It is one thing to read the inspired text itself, believing that as God's word it is true, but understanding that its human authors were men with habits of thought and expression very different from our own, and that it has not always come down to us just as it was written. It is quite another thing to have the same stories retold, with all their surprising features, in a matter-of-fact way, with a minimum of explanation, by a writer of the present day. And to heighten the verisimilitude, details have been added. Did Cain really offer bruised or over-ripe fruit? Did Noe provide fresh meat for the passengers in the ark? Genesis has not insisted on these points. (Some details have more excusably been suppressed: what can the mysterious 'something' have been that fell from a tree and blinded Tobias's eyes?). Boys and girls whose reading and listening are not at all confined to the Scripture class in a Catholic school will be puzzled when they compare the early chapters of this book with what they find elsewhere.

DOM J. HIGGENS.