

AMIGO: FRIEND OF THE POOR by Michael Clifton. *Fowler Wright Books Ltd.* 1987. £9.95.

At last a biography of Archbishop Amigo; a book about such a larger than life figure could hardly be dull and Father Clifton has had access to the Southwark Diocese Archive, which makes this biography all the more interesting. Here you feel was a man who really enjoyed being a prelate—he looked the part, dressed the part, revelled in the ceremonial attached to his office and did it all with such conviction that he was able, when occasion warranted it, to cut a dash both on the international stage and at home as a public figure. Born during a thunderstorm, dying during a thunderstorm, you get the impression that a rumble of thunder always accompanied him—an autocrat in the diocese, a martinet in the sanctuary, a man of strong opinions never afraid to voice them: this is the man who denied Tyrrell a Catholic burial and who had the temerity to tick Ronald Knox off for his prose style, the man who, when the Lord Mayor of Cork died in Brixton on hunger strike, gave him a public funeral in his Cathedral. The story of Amigo's tenure of the see of Southwark makes extraordinary reading; he has been dead less than forty years but the views which he expresses in his sermons and pastorals, his grand manner, his royal we, seem to belong to another century—indeed, one might almost say to another religion.

If you are like me, you will pick up this book thinking 'Aha, at last we shall have the inside story on that tremendous feud between Amigo and Bourne!' and indeed Chapter Five is dedicated to the 'differences' between them but although we are given a lot of detail about the sorry state of the Southwark finances when Amigo took over from Bourne, there is no convincing explanation of the decades of hostility that became the scandal of the English Catholic Church in the inter-war years when there was barbed wire along the Thames and crossing from Southwark to Westminster was a bit like going from East to West Berlin. Did all that implacable enmity really only have the mismanaged money of the turn of the century behind it? One can't help feeling that there must have been more to it than that, but Father Clifton is clearly too fond of his subject, or too discreet, to tell us—a pity, as this bland treatment of such a cause célèbre is unsatisfying. But then, I like biographies to dish the dirt.

Nevertheless we are presented with a well rounded picture of the man and Father Clifton does not shy away from Amigo's political activities, which were the subject of such controversy in his lifetime. He shows us the Archbishop taking up the cause of the Belgian refugees in the First War and of the Italian expatriates in the Second; championing the cause of Irish independence at a time when many leading English Catholics were opposed to it; and urging the overthrow of the republicans in Spain, whose hostility to religion alarmed and appalled him. His undeniable approval for the fascist régimes in Spain and Italy has made his reputation tarnished in many quarters today but he had seen the brutality that Marxism had unleashed in Spain and saw, as many of his generation did, a bulwark in fascism against Communism, which he knew to be the great heresy of the twentieth century, with which the Church could never come to terms.

When in 1927 the Irish people made him a presentation in recognition of what they termed his 'statesmanlike attitude on the Irish Question during a vital period' Amigo insisted in his reply that he was neither a statesman nor a politician—he had merely done what became him as a bishop; there you have the man—he took being a bishop very seriously; he had a high ideal of the episcopal office and strove to live up to it. When he died in 1949 Mgr Andrew Beck preached at his funeral and was forthright enough to refer to Amigo's 'foibles and mannerisms', his 'devastating comments' to his clergy, 'the appearance and trappings of severity' with which he surrounded himself; he was clearly as much the despot as the patriarch but Father Clifton does not show much of this less appealing side to the man; he has given us a timely study of Archbishop Amigo and made good use of the sources available to him at Southwark but it is a book without bite, a thing Amigo himself never was.

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