

FRANCIS: A Biography of the Saint of Assisi, by Michael de la Bedoyère; Collins; 28s. od.

There are two points of view from which one might describe a saint—the natural and the supernatural. One of the most written-up of all saints is St Francis of Assisi, and almost simultaneously appear two further contributions. One is from the pen of Professor David Knowles; the other by Michael de la Bedoyère. Strangely enough each takes the opposite point of view. Father Knowles frankly admits from the beginning that the saints 'have lived on a different plane from others, seeing man's life *sub specie aeternitatis* with a simplicity and directness of vision withheld from ordinary man'. Michael de la Bedoyère, on the other hand, brings to life the figure of Francis as a man of flesh and blood, living amid all the normal reactions common to ordinary man.

Mr de la Bedoyère has studied the official sources and made of them a life that is readable and not obscured by controversial details nor innumerable references. One might sometimes think that he has made these sources too much his own; but a biographer has a right to interpret, so long as he does not brush aside too easily the statements of contemporary authorities. Here the author wisely sifts the evidence and gives the conflicting backgrounds against which it appears. He argues often from the silence of chroniclers, a dangerous practice in less skilful hands. The low standards of morals in twelfth century Assisi is a well-established historical fact; but is it right to assume that the young Francis must have played a full part in these immoral and luxurious revelries? Also, a later element, from the New World, seems slightly to have influenced the presentation of the Francis-Clare episodes. Mr de la Bedoyère rightly strives to break away from what he calls the 'pious streamlining traditions of hagiography'; but there are equal dangers at the other end of the scale. For purposes of edification, hero-worshippers have doubtless added to, or elaborated, the miraculous incidents. The present biographer can certainly not be accused of that fault. He whittles down the supernatural element to a minimum; and even where the acceptance of the miraculous is inevitable, he moderately introduces his conclusion by saying, 'It is hard not to believe . . .', as though one did not really want to believe. The reason for this may be that his book is mainly written for the large non-Catholic audience who love St Francis. Even so, the author might perhaps more frequently have had a greater confidence in the well-established sources.

The book is beautifully written and produced. It is enriched by many excellent reproductions of all the best Franciscan masterpieces, as well as by a number of photographs of contemporary Assisi. I who know, or should know the story so well, found the reading of this book engrossing and the whole scene flashed by all too quickly. It is not an easy task to attempt still another life of a saint who abounds in 'Lives'; but here is a study of the most loved of all saints, which will take its rightful place among the vast Franciscan bibliography.

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