

S. Francesco e la sua Leggenda by Nino Tamassia; From St. Francis to Dante. A Translation of All That Is of Primary Interest in the Chronicle of the Franciscan Salimbene by G. G. Coulton; The Little Flowers of the Glorious Messer St. Francis and of His Friars by W. Heywood

Review by: L. Ragg

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REVIEWS.

S. Francesco e la sua Leggenda. Dal Prof. NINO TAMASSIA. Padua : Drucker, 1906. xi + 216 pp.

From St Francis to Dante. A Translation of all that is of primary interest in the chronicle of the Franciscan Salimbene. By G. G. COULTON. London : Nutt, 1906. 8vo. vi + 364 pp.

The Little Flowers of the Glorious Messer St Francis and of his Friars. Done into English by W. HEYWOOD, with an Introduction by A. G. FERRERS HOWELL. London : Methuen, 1906. 8vo. xxviii + 202 pp.

We have to welcome a new and attractive edition of the *Fioretti* just at a moment when Franciscan criticism is beginning to take a new turn. The pioneer work of M. Sabatier has made the 'Poverello d'Assisi' a familiar figure in all parts of Europe. Neither diversity of language nor difference of creed or of communion have effectually barred the progress of his contagious enthusiasm; and for the great and growing output of Franciscan literature popular or serious, sentimental or critical, the eminent French student is ultimately responsible. But the last word has not been spoken; and there are still many aspects in which the original documents—the *fontes*—of Franciscanism desiderate a scientifically critical investigation. A fresh start has now been made by Professor Nino Tamassia, who, in virtue of his special line of study as 'Professore di Storia del diritto e di Diritto ecclesiastico' at Padua, is steeped in the hagiographical literature of Saint Francis' day, as also in that which formed the literary pabulum of the Saint's more learned contemporaries. Professor Tamassia's study of the *fonti francescani* is unquestionably a work that will have to be reckoned with by future critics. Steeped, as we have seen, in the Dialogues of Gregory the Great, the ascetic pages of Cassian, and the diverting stories of Caesarius of Heisterbach, Thomas of Celano's elder contemporary, our critic sees these and kindred writers everywhere reproduced by the 'original' biographer of St Francis. Celano is for him a plagiarist of the deepest die, a rhetorician, and a sceptic to boot, and he goes so far as to say 'siamo tratti a credere vero quello solo che, a nostro giudizio, il *verace* biografo, anche volendo, non avrebbe potuto tacere, senza alterare tanto il ritratto del Santo, da renderlo irriconoscibile!' Such a charge demands very strong proof: and indeed

Professor Tamassia produces chapter and verse for all, or nearly all, of his assertions. The foot of every page is piled up, not merely with references, but also with liberal quotations from his authorities. How far these references prove his case we must leave experts to decide; merely suggesting that if A did, said, or suffered a thing in the fifth or sixth century, that does not make it impossible that B should have repeated it in the thirteenth, especially if both A and B were confessedly striving to imitate the same model: further, if C, writing of B, finds classic phrases ready to his hand in the familiar story of A, and thinks well to employ them.....the *literary* conclusions may be more certain than the *historical*.

But, as we have said, Professor Tamassia's work is at any rate one that must be reckoned with, and should help to initiate a more severe and far-reaching criticism of the *fontes franciscani*. Yet, whatever conclusions may finally be reached as to the interrelations and the antecedents of the *Prima* and *Secunda Vita* of Celano, the so-called *Speculum*, the *Actus*, the *Legenda Trium Sociorum*, and the *Fioretti*, the last-named work will never lose its popularity. 'Original' in the literary-historical sense, it is not; but no critical analysis, however convincing, can ever deprive the book of its naïve beauty, its bloom of simplicity—an 'originality' which is independent of its literary history. Accepted in Italy for its style as a *testo di lingua*, it will always remain a classic. Of Mr Heywood's translation it is enough to say that it is worthily done. The translator has added a new obligation to those already laid by him on English lovers of Italy. In his clear and useful little Introduction Mr Howell deals with St Francis, his influence, and the early writings about him; and here he recognises the need of further critical investigation. 'The authorship, date and subject-matter of the *Speculum Perfectionis* and the *Legenda Trium Sociorum*, and the relation of these works to one another and to Celano's *Lives*, furnish problems of extreme intricacy, of which the solutions have not yet been attained.'

The hero of Mr Coulton's book is really Fra Salimbene, and not Saint Francis or Dante; but its subject is essentially Franciscan, and it shares with Professor Tamassia's essay the aim of disillusionment. Sig. Tamassia's desire is to impress on us the fact that the story of Saint Francis has been tampered with at its source; that the official biographer of the Saint was a bare-faced plagiarist, attributing to his hero words, deeds, and, above all, miracles that were simply the stock-in-trade of the mediaeval hagiographer. And all this, he holds, was done with a deep design, viz. to efface all traces of the old free, naïve, and more than half heretical Franciscanism, in the interests of that strict alliance with the Papacy whereby the Sons of Francis forfeited their birthright to win official recognition and corporate persistence. Mr Coulton's message of disillusionment is of a different kind. His purpose is to shew that the thirteenth century was not, after all, that 'Golden Age' in religion and morality and social well-being as in art and architecture, which is so glowingly sketched by those 'professional

apologists' the poet, the romancer and the ecclesiastic, who have, as he feels, too long monopolised the happy hunting-ground of mediaeval history. Granted the grandeur of the thirteenth century in art and architecture, can we argue therefrom to religious sincerity or to purity of morals? Far from it. Mr Coulton's method is simple and convincing; he introduces us to an intelligent and, in his way, honest and impartial eye-witness of things as they were, and lets us question the immortal gossip Fra Salimbene on a vast variety of topics. And as we listen to the vivid descriptions, the enlightening stories, the life-like character-sketches of the Friar of Parma, we are almost inclined to exclaim with the translator: 'Imagination staggers at the moral gulf that yawns between that age and ours.' Frankly, the book is a controversial one, written, confessedly, with a purpose; but it suffers from few, if any, of the defects that usually mar such a book. It consists largely of a catena of well-selected and well-arranged passages from Salimbene's chronicle, translated into good English; and to these are added numerous illustrations from contemporary or nearly contemporary writers, while the more unsavoury episodes (which could not be left out without weakening the argument) are thoughtfully relegated to a Latin appendix. Many of Mr Coulton's readers may fail to sympathise with this or that detail in his attitude or his way of putting things, but with his main contention probably no right-minded man would disagree. He finds the 'Ages of Faith' absorbingly interesting, and sees in them 'the key to most modern problems,' but he holds it folly to idealise them, to close our eyes to their darker side, to wish ourselves back in them. If his book is unduly gloomy it is simply because the balance needs to be redressed; because those who follow the fashion in a sentimental idolatry of the thirteenth century need bracing by a plunge into the grim realities with which Salimbene sets us face to face.

Students of Dante will be grateful to Mr Coulton; not because he is in the strictest sense a specialist in their subject—he still speaks of the *Convito*, and has little or no doubt that 'Matelda' is the Countess Matilda—but because he makes so much of Salimbene accessible. There is no one chronicler—except, perhaps, Giovanni Villani or Dino Compagni—who has so much to say about the personages who figure in the *Divina Commedia*. Salimbene's contemporaries, in whom he was intensely interested, died just at the right time to find places in the three kingdoms of the other world before 1300, and their memory was still fresh when Dante wrote. Salimbene is, indeed, a true link between the life of Saint Francis and that of Dante Alighieri. But hitherto his chronicle has only existed in the single MS, and the inaccessible and faulty *editio princeps* published at Parma in 1857. Professor Holder-Egger's new critical edition in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*¹ is still in course of publication, and when completed will scarcely be a handy reference book for the average English reader. Something more popular is probably to be desired; but

¹ *Scriptorum*: tom. xxxii. (Hannoveriae impensis bibliopolii Hahniani MDCCCVI.).

meanwhile we may be thankful for what Mr Coulton describes—perhaps a little confidently—as a ‘translation of all that is of primary interest in the chronicle of the Franciscan Salimbene.’

L. RAGG.

Altitalienisches Elementarbuch. Von BERTHOLD WIESE. (*Sammlung romanischer Elementarbücher*, I. Reihe, 4.) Heidelberg: Winter, 1904. 8vo. xi+320 pp.

This notice is somewhat long overdue; but it does not much matter, since Dr Wiese's handy little book is probably not yet in any very wide use in England either ‘as a basis for introductory lectures’ in its subject, the language of the earliest Italian literature, or as ‘a modest guide to those who are beginning to study the subject for themselves’—as in his brief preface he summarises its aims. The lecturer on early Italian does not, so far, find his lecture-room at all uncomfortably crowded. Yet a good many people profess some kind of interest in Dante, and it is as impossible to understand Dante properly without some knowledge of the language used by the poets whom he read when he began to read poetry, as to understand Shakespeare without some knowledge of sixteenth century English. But to the *altri pochi*, if such there be, Dr Wiese's book may be safely commended—provided always that they can cope with the rather forbidding German affected by philologists. For a translation they may have long to wait; and here one may perhaps remark not without envy upon the favoured position held by the German student of the less popular branches of learning. What English publisher, one would like to know, would in his most reckless mood hesitate for a moment before declining a work of this kind? And so the vicious circle grows: no students, no books; no books, no students.

Of course one can pick holes here and there. Dr Wiese's etymologies, for example, though confident, are not always convincing. No doubt in a book on this scale a good deal of apparent dogmatism is unavoidable; but there certainly are a great many of those Latin words (or ghost words) with a star in which the modern philologist revels. At least a hint might have been given that philology is as yet far from being an exact science—certainly not a branch of physiology—and that it still needs a good deal of help from history to keep a secure footing. No doubt in a sense there was a physical reason for every sound-change; but no one who has taken note of the varieties of ‘phonetic degradation’ observable among children of the same family, of identical ‘heredity’ and ‘environment,’ in their first efforts at articulation, can suppose that we are yet near to the stage at which we can say dogmatically in every case that such and such a change was or was not possible within any given group. Dr Wiese sometimes yields to the besetting weakness of his countrymen for proving the obvious. Surely the fact of Latin neuter plurals ending in *a* is quite