Recently I came across an article on the joys of re-reading. All the contributors waxed lyrical on its pleasures. It appeared to be of little relevance, feeling I had neither the inclination nor indeed the luxury of time to re-read. Once read, it was on to the next volume sat waiting for me, or, so I imagined.

Later that same day, however, whilst visiting friends just outside London, and during a convenient break in the afternoon, I was left in the drawing room facing a cabinet of antiquarian books. Unable to resist, I cast my eye over the treasures contained therein. On spying one of the titles, the aforementioned article returned to my mind, and it was at this point the realization dawned that for years I had in fact been re-reading. And, with that, I opened the glass-fronted door and reached for Introduction to the Devout Life.

Pause here, just for a moment, and consider the publication year: 1609. This was the date when that classic text by the then 41-year-old Francis de Sales was published. Across the Channel, King James I continued to rule having recently foiled the Gunpowder Plot, while Shakespeare was still busy at the Globe Theatre having just staged A Winter’s Tale. In Rome, Galileo had demonstrated the first telescope. Elsewhere, this time across the Atlantic, it was the year that Henry Hudson set eyes on a piece of land that would one day become New York. Introduction comes from another world, one long since gone. But it also comes from a world all too familiar to us, that being the struggle in each soul of concupiscence and grace.

It is a short book. But like all really great ones, it is not a sentence too long, its short themed chapters never outstaying their welcome. I have only ever read it in English, but am reliably informed that the French of de Sales is as graceful as the sentiments expressed therein. Even in translation, and if the book was devoid of any other qualities, it has one quality that is enough to endear it to any reader, namely, charm. It is not the affected charm of certain writers whose mannered attempts at this trait merely mask other aspects of their character. No, this is the real thing, and more besides, for sanctity has its own charm. Of course some saints had character faults, just like the rest of us, but a characteristic common to all of them was something as compellingly attractive as it was indefinable—a certain "something." Now, we know that the source of that is not of this world—if still recognized by it—nevertheless, the Introduction is essentially this "something" in written form.

The topics tackled are perennial: overcoming our fallen nature, our lusts and angers, our pettiness and pride, our misplaced longings and our wrong headedness. Thus its acumen and application remains relevant, needed today just as much as it was in the seventeenth century, perhaps more so.

It never fails to edify. The style with which it is all knitted together enhances its effect. Of course, as one would expect, there are many, very many, scriptural references. Often unexpectedly used, they are as pertinent as they are, at times, obscure. It makes one wonder if in bygone centuries the average educated individual had an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of even the most arcane corners of Holy Writ. How ironic that Introduction and its many Scriptural allusions come two years before the appearance of the King James Bible—with its claims to making Scripture so much more accessible—by which stage de Sales’ work was already an international bestseller, and soon to appear in English.

It is not just from the Bible that de Sales quotes though. The early Church Fathers and Classical sources are liberally laced, gracefully and eloquently, throughout. So too are references to the natural world, both flora and fauna, and especially the world of bees. Some of this has been questioned by later experts in
those fields, but for the layman the intricacies of such matters are of little consequence, as, in the end, these illustrations only serve to add greatly to the overall effect which is one of harmony: of ancient and early modern, of peasant and prince, of birds and flowers, of Old and New Testament. *Introduction* is a world, and an education, in itself. It is even more so when combined with the spiritual wisdom contained in its pages. Suffice it to say, it is a work of genius.

There seems little point in giving examples. There are too many—the whole book is jammed full of quotable passages: pointed and striking, memorable and informative, uplifting and helpful. This is a book of applied asceticism, as spiritual as it is practical. One finds in it a learned teacher who is as compassionate as he is firm, as insightful as he can be wise, as understanding of the predicament of those in the world as he is holy. Like the man himself, the writing is as simple as it is urbane. In light of this, is it any wonder that countless numbers for centuries now have returned time and again to its wisdom, and no doubt in the future shall continue to do so.

When one admires a piece of writing there is a natural curiosity about its author. By happy coincidence, this brings me to another book which I realized I had also been returning to endlessly: *The Spirit of St. Francis de Sales*. This was published in 1641, 19 years after the death of the former Bishop of Geneva. It was written by Jean-Pierre Camus, the former Bishop of Belley whose diocese adjoined Annecy where de Sales lived, a happenstance that made it possible for the two to spend a great deal of time together. What we have been left by Camus is an altogether invaluable record.

Socrates had his Plato, Johnson his Boswell, and even Holmes his Watson, and so also de Sales was to have his Camus. The most important trait of any such biographer is one of observation, to say nothing of a good memory. Camus had both and, therefore, missed nothing. His need to understand the spiritual genius before him went to extremes at times, however, even boring a hole in a bedroom wall so he could observe the saint in private. But that was an unusual example of his *modus operandi*. Mostly, his role was simply to live alongside his subject, engaging him in conversation whilst listening intently to his replies; he watched his reactions to things and people, sitting passively as de Sales interacted with those around him; keeping a record of everything, he became the saint’s chronicler as well as his friend. He noted how he spoke, how he walked, his mannerisms; in the end, so much so that Camus began to imitate these outward traits only to be gently corrected by the saint himself, and reminded that for all Christians there was only one Model to imitate.

In the large corpus of works on the lives of the saints, some are well written, some less so, some are pious, some overly so, others are fragmentary with an over emphasis on one aspect of their subject’s life to the exclusion of other parts. This is to be expected, any life is hard to capture in a single work, the saint’s doubly so, especially when so much of it takes place on the inside. Understandably, few such attempts bear the test of time. Camus’ work is in a different class, however. It has its flaws, it is said that the original text was overly long and repetitive in places, all forgivable given it was the culmination of the writer’s notes taken over many years. Nevertheless, its author is a good writer, his touch is light when necessary, and never centre stage, always allowing de Sales the floor. That is not to say his own interventions are not illuminative, and even on occasion amusing, but always in reaction to or as a reflection of the main actor. In this double act, Camus knows exactly how to bring out the best in the other. Also, what it has is immediacy; it is a first hand account after all. And as such, it is as if the reader is able to ‘play’ Camus’ part, or rather, on re-reading one finds that it is he who is playing that part for us. In fact, this book becomes an increasingly more-subtle, and, therefore a more interesting, piece of writing when re-read, until, eventually, as if re-paying one’s efforts, a saint from four centuries ago walks, living and breathing, from its pages.

Once more, there are just too many examples to quote. In any event, it warrants discovery, and enjoying in its own right, again and again. Try a few pages, I suspect you may be surprised by it even if you already familiar with the life of St. Francis de Sales.
On that trip out of London, having had time to sample again a perceptive passage or two, and as my hosts rejoined me, reluctantly I replaced *Introduction to the Devout Life* … Needless to say, later that same winter day, I retrieved my own copy, and with the light burning amidst the gloom, sat long into the night to re-read the classic anew, grateful for its words, yet more grateful still for the saint who created them.