

THE EARLIEST BIOGRAPHIES OF DON BOSCO AND THEIR ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

Arthur Lenti, SDB

Don Bosco owns the distinction of having been revisor and editor of his own biography

INTRODUCTION

Don Bosco owns the distinction, almost unique in hagiography, of having been the subject of several published biographical essays during his lifetime. And the fact that in at least one such instance he himself acted as his own revisor and editor may well be an absolute first. Some of these early biographies appeared in English translation almost immediately; and in this essay I propose to give a brief review and evaluation of them and of their forebears, in the belief that such a presentation will be of interest to English-speaking students and admirers of the Saint.

1.0.0 EARLY SKETCHES

In his masterful work, *Don Bosco Educatore*, Fr. Pietro Ricaldone, Don Bosco's fourth successor, produced a survey of the biographical literature on the Saint which, without claiming completeness, has not been superseded to this day.¹ Among hundreds of

¹Pietro Ricaldone, *Don Bosco Educatore*, 2 vol. Colle Don Bosco (Asti): Libreria Dottrina Cristiana, 1952, vol. II, p. 631-705.[cited as **Ricaldone, DB Ed**]

Other titles cited in this essay are as follows:

Ceria, Eugenio, *Memorie Biografiche di san Giovanni Bosco*. Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1833 (vol. 14), 1934 (vol. 15), 1935 (vol. 16), 1936 (vol. 17), 1937 (vol. 18). [cited as IBM] English translation: *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, by Rev. Eugenio

titles in over two dozen languages we find listed a number of early, modest biographical sketches of Don Bosco and his work that were intended for, or seem to have reached, only a limited readership--and that, in any case, never reached the English-speaking public in translation.²

2.0.0 DR. CHARLES D'ESPINEY'S DOM BOSCO AND ITS ENGLISH-LANGUAGE COUNTERPARTS

In 1881 Dr. Charles D'Espiney published a short anecdotal biography of Don Bosco in French, the first "serious" biographical essay on Don Bosco to appear in book form. It achieved immediate and notable success, and went through numerous reprintings and no less than ten editions within Don Bosco's lifetime--the thirteenth and last edition coming as late as 1924.³

Ceria, S.D.B., An American Edition Translated from the Original Italian, Rev. Diego Borgatello, S.D.B., Editor-in-chief. New Rochelle, New York: Salesiana Publishers, 1985 (vol. 14), 1988 (vol. 15). [cited as **EBM**]

Cavaglià, Piera, "Don Bosco lettore della sua biografia. Osservazioni al volume di A. Du Boys, *Don Bosco e la Pia Società Salesiana* (1884)," *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 22:2 (1984) 193-206. [cited as **Cavaglià**]

McPake, Martin, *Some Reflections on the English Biographies of Don Bosco*. Unpublished typescript. [cited as **McPake**]

Stella, Pietro, *Don Bosco: Life and Work*, translated by John Drury. New Rochelle, New York: Don Bosco Publications, 1985. [cited as **Stella, DB:L&W**]

_____, *Don Bosco and the Death of Charles*, An Appendix to *Don Bosco: Life and Work*, translated by John Drury. New Rochelle, New York: Don Bosco Publications, 1985. [cited as **Stella, Charles**]

²Cf. Ricaldone, *DB Ed.* Omitting a number of published birthday offerings, and several funeral orations and obituaries published on Don Bosco's death in 1888, the following may be cited: Bardessono dei Conti di Nigra, *Don Giovanni Bosco*. [?], 1871; [Count] Carlo Conestabile, *Opere religiose e sociali in Italia*. Padova: Tipografia del Seminario, 1878; [Bishop] Antonio Belasio, *Non abbiamo paura! L'Opera di Don Bosco, miracolo dell'Apostolato Cattolico (Letture Cattoliche)*. Torino: Libreria Salesiana, 1979; L. Mendre, *Dom Bosco, notice sur son Œuvre*. Marscille: [?], 1879. Luigi Biginelli, *Don Bosco*. Torino: Tipografia G. Derossi, 1883; L. Aubineau, *Dom Bosco, sa biographie, ses œuvres et son séjour à Paris*. Paris: Josse, 1883; [Un ancien Magistrat], *Dom Bosco à Paris, sa vie et ses œuvres*. Paris: Librairie Ressaire, 1883 [119 p.]; [Bishop] Marcelo Spinola, *Don Bosco y su obra*. Barcelona: Tip. Católica, 1884 [111 p.]; Johannes Janssen, *Don Bosco und das Oratorium von hl. Franz von Sales*. Steyl: Missionsdruckerei, 1885.

³Charles D'Espiney, *Dom Bosco*. Nice: typographic. et lithographic Malvanon-Mignon, 1881 [cited as **D'Espiney 1881**].

In reviewing the tenth edition of 1888, Fr. Louis Cartier wrote: "The close and constant relationship that M. d'Espiney has always enjoyed with Don Bosco himself, with Fr. Rua, Don Bosco's vicar and now his successor, with Father Durando and the entire Superior Chapter of Turin, and with the *Patronage Saint Pierre* in Nice, gives his account an air of authority on which the reader can rely." [*Bulletin Salésien* 10 (1888) 97, quoted in Stella, *Charles*, p. 4, n. 15.] Dr. Charles D'Espiney, "a Catholic gentleman of the old school", was a practicing physician in his native Nice and in the Crau d'Hyères, near Toulon and Marseille. His acquaintance with, and support of, the Salesian work in France dated back practically to its founding in Nice in 1875. However, he first appears in the Biographical Memoirs in 1879 in connection with the cure by Don Bosco of Count and Countess de Villeneuve, both patients of the doctor's at Hyères [cf. EBM 14, p. 19, 22f. and IBM 14, p. 696f.]. In 1881, during another

2.1.0 Biography in the Miracle-Oriented, Laudatory Tradition

Dr. D'Espiney's biography of Don Bosco was a small-format book of 180 pages. A substantial introductory chapter provided a historical outline of Don Bosco's life and work, and was followed by two short chapters dealing respectively with the Salesian Cooperators and with Mary Help of Christians. These reveal the character of the book, the purpose of which was, on the one hand, to gain supporters for Don Bosco and his work in France,⁴ and on the other to show the hand of God, through the miraculous intervention of Mary Help of Christians, at work in Don Bosco's life. Consonant with this latter purpose, the larger portion of the book (some 100 pages) presented under a series of headings, a number vignettes which related "miraculous" cures and other "extraordinary" events.

Dr. D'Espiney's charming and breezy style, as well as the enthusiastic love for his subject evidenced on every page, account for the book's popular appeal and for its remarkable success. It brought Don Bosco to the attention of the French public and, by fostering sympathy and veneration, prepared the way for his triumphal visit to Paris in 1883 and for the subsequent establishment of the Salesian work in the French capital.

2.2.0 Criticism of Dr. D'Espiney's Biography

While Dr. D'Espiney's work delighted readers in France and elsewhere, it could not fail to draw criticism from certain quarters and to cause embarrassment to Don Bosco and the Salesians in Turin. This is

long visit of Don Bosco to France, Dr. D'Espiney, "a staunch friend of Don Bosco", organized a successful fund raiser in Nice, at which a poem composed by him in praise of Don Bosco and his work was read to resounding applause [cf. EBM 15, p. 49]. He acted as Don Bosco's personal physician on the latter's frequent visits to the Salesians and benefactors in Southern France, and provided the expert medical care that enabled the Saint, ill as he was, to withstand the strain of his journeys [cf. e. g., IBM 17, p. 42]. Dr. D'Espiney was without a doubt one of Don Bosco's closest and dearest friends in France. Don Bosco showed his appreciation in various ways. In 1884 he obtained from Leo XIII the cross of the Order of the Knights of St. Gregory the Great for Dr. D'Espiney, cited as "a fervent Catholic and a skilled physician," always ready to provide "medical care without charge to poor people who ask for his services, in particular to the little orphans of our hospice of St. Peter in that city [Nice]" [IBM 17, p. 104; cf also pp. 400, 403]. On his last visit to France in 1886, Don Bosco wished to recognize Dr. D'Espiney's services with a special dinner held especially in his honor at Nice [cf. IBM 18, p. 50]. Dr. Charles d'Espiney died at Nice on April 13, 1891.

⁴Dr. D'Espiney himself remarks: "People everywhere are asking about Don Bosco's congregation; each inquirer is a potential Salesian or cooperator. A letter would not suffice to tell the whole story, and Fr. Mendre's leaflet is somewhat inadequate" [D'Espiney's letter to Count Cays, Nice, June 21, 1880, quoted in EBM 15, p. 52]. For Fr. Mendre's pamphlet cf. note 2.

understandable when we consider its many inaccuracies regarding dates, places, names and the shape given to some events; and its unmitigated laudatory tone and easy, almost credulous, appeal to the miraculous.

Fr. Michael Rua, though generally favorable to the idea, had already raised objections to certain aspects of the book, when in 1880 Dr. D'Espiney sent the manuscript to the Salesian, Count Carlo Cays, in Turin for review and suggestions. We know that Fr. Rua suggested changes, but we have no way of knowing what these were specifically, and whether any were actually made. The work went to press in 1881.⁵ After publication, among the numerous objections raised against the work on the grounds already referred to above, two instances in particular are deserving of note.

In the first place, a protest was lodged by Count Francesco Viancini di Viancino,⁶ regarding an episode related by D'Espiney which involved the count as protagonist. The episode in question figured as one of the vignettes related under the heading, "*La providence est une bonne caissière*" ["Providence is a Good Banker"],⁷ and told the story of how Don Bosco received the gift of a large sum of money unexpectedly in a moment of great need. The gentleman in question is referred to as Count Vianichino, and the facts of the case are inaccurately stated and altered almost beyond recognition. The count demanded that the passage be either stricken or rectified.⁸ Don Bosco begged the Count to overlook Dr. D'Espiney's "tall tales", and assured him that he would talk to the doctor on his next visit to Nice.⁹

⁵Fr. Rua's critical remarks regarding the work appear as annotations to a letter by Dr. D'Espiney to Count Cays, July 15, 1880 [cf. Stella, *Charles*, p. 3, note 7 and EBM 15, p. 52].

⁶Count Francis Viancini di Viancino, "justly honored as the outstanding Catholic layman of Piedmont" [EBM 6, p. 82], and his wife, Countess Louise, were among the earliest, most loyal and most generous benefactors of the Oratory. For numerous references cf. IBM, *Indice*, p. 617.

⁷Cf. D'Espiney 1881, p. 136.

⁸The Count had promised Mary Help of Christians to give Don Bosco one tenth of a large sum of money owed to him if he could recover it. Recover it he did, and he fulfilled his promise on March 7, 1869, as the feast of St. Francis de Sales, over which he presided, was being solemnly celebrated in the recently dedicated church of Mary Help of Christians [cf. EBM 9, 258f.].

⁹Letter of December 18, 1881: "Dr. D'Espiney is a good Catholic, but his book aims at telling some tall stories at Don Bosco's expense. So do not be surprised if you find that it has certain inaccuracies and downright errors. However, [...] I shall not forget to ask him to delete or at least emend some of the stories [...]!" [EBM 15, p. 53]. According to Fr. Ceria [cf. EBM 15, p. 5] the episode no longer appeared in the revised edition of 1883, but not according to Stella [cf.

In the second place, the episode of the raising of the young man Charles from the dead drew a protest from Don Bosco himself. It was thought to be inappropriate, not only because of Don Bosco's reluctance to publicize such a story, but also because of the scenario created to enhance the dramatic character of the event.¹⁰ The factual accuracy of D'Espiney's narrative was also questioned.¹¹ Don Bosco took Dr. D'Espiney to task for having reported the incident, though he never denied its having taken place.¹² And so, the story of the raising of Charles no longer appeared in the revised edition of 1883.

Don Bosco's objection on this and other grounds is most likely the reason why Dr. D'Espiney's work did not win acceptance in official Salesian circles until the completely revised and chronologically arranged tenth edition of 1888.¹³ It is also the reason why an Italian translation, by Fr. Dominic Ercolini from the eleventh French edition, did not appear until 1890.¹⁴

Whatever criticism might be leveled against Dr. D'Espiney's book, it is a fact that not only did Don Bosco never quite disavow this biographical sketch when it came under attack, but he even recommended it,¹⁵ though with some reservations and with the

Charles, p. 43, note 105]. The English translation from the French revised edition of 1883 only mentions a Countess V. [cf. D'Espiney-McMahon, p. 133].

¹⁰The story of the raising of Charles is used as a "fitting" conclusion to the book, and is dramatically entitled, "*Lève-toi!*" ["Arise!"], recalling the drama of the raising of Lazarus and of other miracles of Jesus, as related in the gospels. Cf. Stella, *Charles*, pp. 2ff. 12ff. 33f.

¹¹For an exhaustive discussion of the historical facts of the case cf. Stella, *Charles*, especially p. 20-28.

¹²Fr. Louis Cartier's letter to Fr. Ceria, Marseille, April 23, 2940 states as much: "[...] Don Bosco complained to Dr. D'Espiney about his having reported the incident. The doctor replied to him: 'If the fact is a mistake, I will suppress it. But [...] tell me outright that the resurrection did not take place.' Don Bosco replied that there should be no talk of it. [...] Asked [...] to say that the miracle had not taken place, Don Bosco merely kept his silence. [...] His silence is an admission" [Stella, *Charles*, p. 44].

¹³Charles D'Espiney, *Dom Bosco [...], dixième édition entièrement refondue et enrichie d'un grand nombre de faits inédits. Ouvrage approuvé par les Salésiens* [Work approved by the Salesians] et orné du portrait [...]. Nice: Imprimerie et Librairie du Patronage St.-Pierre, 1888.

¹⁴Cf. EBM 15, p. 53 and IBM 18, p. 8.

¹⁵In a letter to Fr. Joseph Ronchail, datable to shortly after the publication of the book in 1881, Don Bosco writes: "Get in touch with Fr. Bologna and have copies of D'Espiney's book sent to some of our benefactors [...]" [EBM 15, p. 382].

preference given to the more serious biography by Albert Du Boys,¹⁶ to be discussed below. And, as already indicated, Dr. D'Espiney's book has the distinction of having been not only the first widely circulated biography of Don Bosco, but also the first to reach the English-speaking public in translation.¹⁷

2.3.0 Dr. D'Espiney's *Dom Bosco* for the English-speaking public.

2.3.1 Miss McMahon Translation of 1884

In 1884 Benziger Brothers published an English translation of Dr. D'Espiney's work from the revised French edition of 1883.¹⁸ That the translation is from the 1883 French edition is clear from the fact that it reflects the revisions introduced into the 1883 French edition, and from the fact that it possesses certain features that are characteristic of that edition.¹⁹

Except for the revisions mentioned above, content-wise, the Benziger-McMahon English edition, like its French counterpart, does not differ greatly from the original text of 1881. It even retains roughly the same format (6 by 3.5 in.) and pagination (182 pages). An opening chapter of 72 pages summarizes Don Bosco's life and work along traditional lines, from his ordination on, including a brief but good presentation of the Salesian educational method (pp. 72-75). It also contains a note on the cures obtained through the intervention of Mary Help of Christians that characterize Don Bosco's activity (pp. 76-80);

¹⁶When a juvenile hall was being established in Barcelona in 1885, the authorities approached the Salesians about the project and requested information on Don Bosco and his educational method. Fr. Giovanni Branda, director of the Salesian house of Sarriá, provided copies of Dr. D'Espiney's biography. Don Bosco said to him: "In such cases, Du Boys' work will better serve the purpose. D'Espiney's work is suitable for the devout and helps loosen the purse strings. Du Boys, on the other hand, gives a good account of our method and has grasped the spirit of our Society" [IBM 17, p. 596].

¹⁷As implied above [cf. note 16] it also reached the Spanish-speaking public early on, and, according to Ceria, "practically every civilized nation." [IBM 18, p. 8].

¹⁸*Don Bosco: A Sketch of His Life and Miracles* by Dr. Charles D'Espiney, translated from the French by Miss Mary McMahon, ["Praise be to Our Lady Help of Christians"]. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1884 [cited as D'Espiney-McMahon].

¹⁹Cf. D'Espiney-McMahon, title page and frontispiece. Below the title is found the prayer, "Praise be to Our Lady Help of Christians." The frontispiece shows a sketch of Don Bosco in the familiar full-face pose of the Schemboche portrait of 1880 [cf. the study of this photographic portrait in Giuseppe Soldà, *Don Bosco nella fotografia dell'800: 1861-1888*. Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1987, p. 145ff]. Under the sketch in Don Bosco's hand, appear the invocation, "*Maria Auxilium Christianorum, ora pro nobis*," and the signature, *Abbé Jean Bosco*--all of which is characteristic of the 1883 revised edition.

and, by way of conclusion, a list of the principal "works" established by Don Bosco is appended.²⁰ This substantial historical summary is followed by a 7-page chapter on the Cooperators and a 10-page chapter on Mary Help of Christians. Here the Church of Mary Help of Christians and its role as source of graces is given pride of place. The second part of the book (pp. 99-179) is devoted to the "miraculous" and the "extraordinary" in Don Bosco's life, and recounts, under twenty-six headings, cures and other remarkable events. The work closes with the verses written by Dr. D'Espiney in honor of Don Bosco and declaimed on the occasion of the fund raiser of 1881--passably translated in rhyme.²¹ This then is the shape of the first biography of Don Bosco to reach the English speaking public.

The French origin of the text is apparent, but chiefly only through the retention of some French usages, such as: *abbé*, *Salésian*, *Barthelemy Garelli*, "Thus was the *Oeuvre Salésienne* begun", *Madame Magaret, St.-Pierre-es-Liens* (for *St.-Pierre-en-Liens*, St. Peter in Chains), *St. Bénigne, Marie Auxiliatrice* (as part of a proper name, otherwise always *Mary Help of Christians*), *La Providence* (for the *Little House of Divine Providence* of St. Joseph Cottolengo). Some of D'Espiney's peculiar inaccuracies are retained: "Murielando de Castelnuovo [...] where his family owned a small property called *Les Becchi*" [p. 35], "Las Piedras, in the parish of St. Isidore, near Montevideo" [p. 65] (the parish of St. Isidore in Las Piedras, near Montevideo), "Most of the parish priests of Italy, especially of Northern Italy, came from the Oratory" [p. 71]. Generally, Miss McMahon turns out a good translation, a smooth and readable text, one that does justice to the bright style of the original author.

No information is available on the circulation of the Benziger-McMahon biography. It appears that it never rivaled the popularity of its French prototype. Notice of, and some favorable comments on, the book appeared in the *Dublin Review*.²² But no information on how it was

²⁰Four "works" are listed: "1. The Salésian Association, with its priests, laymen, and missionaries. 2. The Institute of the Daughters of Marie Auxiliatrice. 3. The Society of Marie Auxiliatrice, for helping young men studying for the priesthood. 4. Finally, the Co-operators of St. Francis de Sales, a pious Association, of which we will give some details" [D'Espiney-McMahon, p. 81].

²¹Cf. note 3 and related text.

²²Henry D. Harrod, "Catholic Boys' Clubs. Don Bosco. A Sketch of his Life and Miracles. New York: Benziger Brothers. 1884," *The Dublin Review*, Third Series, 13:1 (Jan-Apr 1885) 107-123. From the title one would expect a discussion of Don Bosco and his work, and a review of the book. The article, however, discusses youth work and its problems in London and similar cities, with only a short comment on Don Bosco and a passing reference to the book: "When at the jubilee of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul last year in Paris, the vast church was

received and reviewed in America is available to this writer. One would imagine that a perceptive critic would come down pretty hard on the kind of enthusiastic hagiography that pictures a saint as breezing miraculously through one scrape after another, almost untouched by the realities of life. But one never knows.

2.3.2 Mrs. Barker's 1885 Adaptation of D'Espiney *Dom Bosco*

In 1885 a biography of Don Bosco authored by Mrs. F. Raymond Barker was published in England.²³ As the subtitle of the book indicates, the material is derived from D'Espiney's work almost in its entirety. The author indicates one other source, an article on Don Bosco by Lady Herbert of Lea published in *The Month* from which she takes her account of Lord Palmerston's visit to the Oratory.²⁴

Mrs. Barker's biography is a small book (ca. 5.5 x 3.5 in.) of 112 pages. Her presentation is continuous throughout and almost entirely

thronged with men and boys to assist at the Low Mass said by Don Bosco, there was given again the consoling testimony that never, when the Church has need of a man [...], is that man wanting to her need. But, alas! not one Don Bosco will suffice, we want hundreds. We do not propose here to give our readers any account of the life or the miracles of Don Bosco; we would for all that refer them to the little book, the name of which stands at the head of this article. We propose rather for a moment to consider his work, and then proceed [...] to our present emergency" [p. 111f.]. But again Don Bosco's work for poor and abandoned boys receives only a passing mention.

²³[Mrs] F. Raymond Barker, *Don Bosco and His Work -- Some Account Of Don Bosco And His Work, Gathered Chiefly From The Narrative Of Dr. Charles D'Espiney* -- Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1885.

As the book is not available to this writer, all information on the Barker biography (not other incidental information) is derived from McPake.

²⁴[Lady Herbert of Lea,] "Don Bosco," *The Month* 31 (Jan-Apr 1884) 44-63.
Note 1 states: "The greater portion of the facts in this article are taken from the *Bollettino Salesiano*, published at Turin, and from the *Life of Don Bosco*, by Dr. Charles D'Espiney." The article is concerned chiefly with tracing the development of Don Bosco's work for poor and abandoned boys, from 1841 on, and with little else. (Only the last three pages are devoted to "extraordinary" incidents, including some *Grigio* episodes.) And a quick comparison shows that it is based on D'Espiney's historical introductory chapter to a much greater extent than on the *Bollettino Salesiano* (which had been running the well-known articles by Fr. Bonetti on the history of the Oratory). It lists Don Bosco's four "works" as set down by D'Espiney [cf. note 20], with some revision of the language. It also retains some French usages and a few of D'Espiney's peculiar inaccuracies--such as: "Murialdo de Castelnuovo, [...] where his family had a little property called "Dei Becchi" [p. 50]. In connection with her description of the Salesian educational method (after D'Espiney) Lady Herbert gives an account of Lord Palmerston's visit to the Oratory and of his amazement at witnessing the results of the Salesian educational method [p. 59]. This is the "English Cabinet Minister" (of "I shall tell it in London" fame) whose visit to the Oratory was described in a footnote to the section on the Preventive System in the Salesian Regulations (until its removal in 1967) [cf. McPake, p.2, note 3.] Contrary to McPake's statement, however, Mrs. Barker takes her account of the miracle that decided the Salesian vocation of Count Carlo Cays [cf. EBM 13, p. 160f.] from D'Espiney.

anecdotal--a string of miraculous tales, drawn from the second part of D'Espiney's narrative. In the last few pages she gives some statistical information (again taken from D'Espiney) on the extent of the Congregation, as well as a short account on the Cooperators.

The book was accorded a short notice in the *Dublin Review* and praised as a "handy account with dates and statistics, of the life of the well-known Turin priest, Don Giovanni Bosco." Its style is referred to as lively and interesting, and only in the last couple of lines does the reviewer express scepticism on the subject of the dog *Grigio*.²⁵

Fr. McPake wonders why Mrs. Barker's book should have been so favorably reviewed, for in it (even to greater extent than was the case with Dr. D'Espiney's work)

Don Bosco seems all too easily to dream his way through difficulties and move from miracle to miracle.[...] She effectively conceals the man and his perplexities, and his agonizing efforts to steer a wise course through the mine-fields of the political and religious problems of his day.²⁶

We may assume that, like its American counterpart, Mrs. Barker's book in England made its contribution toward making Don Bosco known and loved.

3.0.0. FR. BONETTI'S STORIA AND ITS ENGLISH-LANGUAGE DERIVATIVE

Between 1879 and 1886, Fr. John Bonetti published an account of Don Bosco's work in the *Bollettino Salesiano*, of which he was editor-in-chief, under the title, *Storia dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales*.²⁷ Even though it did not reach the English-speaking public in translation

²⁵The *Dublin Review*, April 1885, as cited in McPake, p. 3.

D'Espiney devoted a chapter to the earlier *Grigio* appearances (1849-1866). In editions after 1883, the dog's last recorded appearance of February 1883 was also included. This incident took place one night as Don Bosco was walking from Ventimiglia back to Vallecrosia. Fr. Durando was walking with him, but "saw nothing". Don Bosco, however, told the story repeatedly, including once at Marseille during a dinner at Mr. and Mrs. Olive's. When Dr. D'Espiney's work was translated into Italian in 1890, Fr. Rua, who was apparently ill informed, ordered the incident suppressed, much to the author's distress [cf. IBM 16, p. 36, and note 2].

²⁶McPake, p. 4.

²⁷*Bollettino Salesiano* 3:1 (1879) 6-8 and on serially until 1886. The series appeared also in the French and Spanish editions of the *Bulletin*, in conformity with the policy established by Don Bosco of keeping the main section of the bulletin identical in all editions.

within Don Bosco's lifetime, the *Storia* is too important a development in the Salesian biographical tradition as to be overlooked. It presented a consistent account of the development of the Salesian work during its first 25 formative and creative years, from 1841 to 1865. Fr. Bonetti was singularly qualified for the task. Besides having lived "at the center" and in touch with the founder from 1855 on, he had been active as a principal chronicler and had held high offices in the young Congregation.²⁸ Moreover, he was writing under Don Bosco's supervision and had at his disposal Don Bosco's own autobiographical *Memoirs*, which Fr. Joachim Berto was transcribing from the original manuscript in those very years.²⁹

No doubt, the straightforward purpose of the *Storia*, published in the *Bulletino Salesiano*, was that of offering the Cooperators and the general public a substantial and reliable account of Don Bosco's work. But Fr. Bonetti's personal authority, as well as that of his sources, conferred privileged status on his work. So that, besides serving to complement and correct past essays, the *Storia* established itself as a guideline for future biographies.

3.1.0 Fr. Bonetti's *Cinque Lustri* and Its English Counterpart, *Don Bosco's Early Apostolate*

After Fr. Bonetti's death in 1891, the *Storia* was re-edited, with practically no changes, but with a new title, *Cinque Lustri*. It took the form of a sizable book of 744 pages.³⁰ This is the work that, in 1908, reached the English-speaking public in translation (with some

²⁸ Born in 1838, John Bonetti entered the Oratory in 1855 at the age of 17. He was a member of the Salesian Society at its founding in 1859, being elected second councilor. He was a member of the historical committee that was formed in 1861 [cf. EBM 6, 505ff.]. As one of its three principal chroniclers, Fr. Bonetti produced five chronicles and two memoirs, which served as important sources for Lemoyne's *Biographical Memoirs*. After ordination in 1864, he replaced Fr. Rua as director of the school at Mirabello. In 1877 he was appointed by Don Bosco to head the *Salesian Bulletin*, and in 1886 he was elected by the Fourth General Chapter to succeed Bishop Cagliero as Spiritual Director General of the Salesian Society and of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Fr. Bonetti died in 1891.

²⁹ Cf. [Giovanni Bosco,] *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855. The Autobiography of Saint John Bosco*, translated by Daniel Lyons, SDB, with notes and commentary by Eugenio Ceria, SDB, Lawrence Castelvecchi, SDB, and Michael Mendl, SDB. New Rochelle, New York: Don Bosco Publications, 1989, p. xxiiff.

³⁰ Giovanni Bonetti, *Cinque Lustri di Storia dell'Oratorio Salesiano di Valdocco*. Torino: Tipografia Salesiana, 1892. [Cinque lustri, that is, five five-year periods, or 25 years, from 1841 to 1866.]

adaptation) as *Don Bosco's Early Apostolate*, again a sizable book of 500 pages.³¹

Fr. Bonetti, with his easy and charming style, not always reflected in the English version, mixes straight historical account with anecdote, and takes the reader through the period of the beginnings and the establishment of the Oratory at Valdocco, the period of the liberal revolution and the unification of Italy, and Don Bosco's involvement, and into the period of the Salesian Society and its first great expansion.

3.2.0 Importance and Character of Fr. Bonetti's Biography

The importance of this work lies in the authority of its author and in the fact that it stems from the very center of the Salesian circle. It antedates Lemoyne's *Documenti*,³² and his *Biographical Memoirs*. These facts notwithstanding, the work stands firmly in the miracle-oriented, laudatory tradition; and its main purpose remains that of presenting Don Bosco as the instrument of God and Our Lady. Fr. Bonetti, perhaps to a greater degree than any other early biographer, writes with an adoring and undisguised love for Don Bosco, and in the unchallenged belief that God acted in everything Don Bosco said and did.

4.0.0 MR. DU BOYS' DOM BOSCO

As Fr. Bonetti's *Storia* was being published in the Italian, French and Spanish editions of the *Salesian Bulletin*, and was reaching the crucial period of the sixties, the French scholar Albert Du Boys in 1884 authored a popular life of Don Bosco that, because of its inherent quality and quasi-official character, was to supersede, though not displace, all previous biographies. It was a compact medium-size book of 378 pages.³³ Although Du Boys' work, to my knowledge, never reached the English-speaking public in translation, it became a kind of pace setter that cannot be overlooked in a discussion of the biographical tradition.

³¹ Giovanni Bonetti, *Don Bosco's Early Apostolate*. London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1908; reprinted for the canonization as *St. John Bosco's Early Apostolate*. London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1934.

³² [Giovanni Battista Lemoyne,] *Documenti per scrivere la storia di D. Giovanni Bosco, dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales e della Congregazione Salesiana*. The 45 large volumes, the forerunners of the *Biographical Memoirs*, were privately printed (in single copy) from 1885 on, either at San Benigno Canavese or at Valdocco.

³³ Albert Du Boys, *Dom Bosco et la Pieuse Société des Salésiens*. Paris: Jules Gervais Libraire-Éditeur, 1884. It was immediately translated into Italian by Giuseppe Novelli as: *Don Bosco e la Pia Società Salesiana*. San Benigno Canavese: Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1884.

For the purposes of this discussion this writer has availed himself of the material in Cavaglià.

It did not in itself establish the biographical pattern that was to come down to our own day (that honor would be reserved for J. M. Villefranche in 1888), but it did make a significant contribution toward its development. To this must be added the fact that the author was engaged by the Salesians to write the biography; and he followed Don Bosco's guidelines in its composition. Don Bosco, as a matter of fact, revised the copy and introduced numerous corrections, as will be explained below. This enables us to understand why Don Bosco preferred Mr. Du Boys' book to Dr. D'Espiney's.³⁴

The author,³⁵ a learned humanist, a lover of the arts, and an experienced writer, was especially fascinated by people who expressed in their lives ideals of humanity and holiness. He was thus attracted to Don Bosco, who had already become a legend in his own time. Dr. D'Espiney's biography had added glamor to the legend. But Mr. Du Boys approached his subject, shrouded in legend though it might be, as a historian.³⁶ With this in view, he spent some time at the Oratory in Turin in order to get to know Don Bosco personally. He thus obtained first-hand information, and gained some knowledge of the spiritual and educational world of the Salesians.³⁷

4.1.0 Don Bosco's Revisions³⁸

The completed draft was immediately translated into Italian and the printed galley proofs were submitted to Don Bosco for revision and correction. The corrected copy is extant,³⁹ and one may count no less than eighty-nine additions and corrections in Don Bosco's hand,

³⁴Cf. note 16 and related text.

³⁵Albert Du Boys was born in Metz in 1804 into a monarchist family, studied law in Paris, and was then appointed magistrate at Grenoble. With the fall of the monarchy in 1830, he abandoned the legal profession and dedicated himself to the study of the arts. He authored a number of books on juridical and historical subjects, and lives of the saints. He became closely associated with Bishop Dupanloup of Orléans, with whom he shared historical and literary interests and with whom he attended the First Vatican Council—a highlight in his career. His career expressed, from a conservative standpoint but in high style, the political, religious and cultural concerns of the nineteenth century. He died in 1889 [cf. Cavaglià, pp. 193-196].

³⁶Cf. Cavaglià, p. 95, note 11 and related text.

³⁷This visit is recorded by Du Boys' biographers, but it apparently went unrecorded in Salesian circles [cf. Cavaglià, p. 200].

³⁸Cf. Cavaglià, pp. 200-203.

³⁹Cf. photostat of a sample page in Cavaglià, p. 205.

scattered over 256 pages. These appear in Part I of the book ("Don Bosco's foundations in Europe"--11 chapters) and in Part II ("The Missions in South America"-- 9 chapters). The shorter Part III apparently required no correction. The eighty-nine clearly authentic notes fall into three categories: additions of names; additions to the text ranging from 5 words to 12 lines; and corrections of adjectives, numbers, places and circumstances. Some notes involve details that only Don Bosco could have supplied, as when his relationship with Anthony, and his early involvement with local children are described. At one point, where Du Boys had written "holy priest" Don Bosco emended it to read, "poor priest". In Part I, Chapter 6, "Don Bosco's Loving Care of Apprentices at the Oratory," Du Boys had written that, when they returned for the noonday meal, they queued up "while Mamma Margaret ladled out the soup from the large pot." The addition reads, "and Don Bosco himself." Where the author describes recreational and musical activities at the Oratory, a marginal addition explains: "Don Bosco himself made it a point of learning how to play various musical instruments in order to instruct the youngsters personally in the rudiments of this art."

4.2.0 Mr. Du Boys' Conscientious Use of Sources⁴⁰

Mr. Du Boys was not satisfied with merely reporting oral traditions or transcribing the information gathered through conversations and interviews.⁴¹ He also made use of reliable written sources. In the first place, he drew on Fr. Bonetti's articles published in the *Salesian Bulletin*, and through these on Don Bosco's own *Memoirs*.⁴² He also drew on the *Regulations for the Houses*; and with reference to the Preventive System he took generous quotes from the Louis Colle biography of 1882 (attributed to Don Bosco).⁴³ The book shows that Du Boys had grasped the basic purpose of Don Bosco's work and the characteristic features of his educational method. With reference to the Salesian vocational school, he quotes the "important work by Count Carlo Connestabile,"⁴⁴ apologizing for the fact that the original was not

⁴⁰Cf. Cavaglià, 199f.

⁴¹Not only did Du Boys hold conversations with Don Bosco and other people at the Oratory, but (according to the translator, G. Novelli) he also visited the most important Salesian schools and interviewed directors, confreres, alumni and friends [cf. Cavaglià, p. 200, note 29 and related text].

⁴²Cf. note 29 and related text.

⁴³Cf. EBM 15, p. 57ff.

⁴⁴Cf. note 2.

available to him--which speaks well for the author as a conscientious historian.

Du Boys' account of Don Bosco and his work is informed and conscientious. But, overall, the work still stands within the miracle-oriented, laudatory tradition of his sources. True, he refrains from the anecdotal miracle parade, but he shows comparable fascination with the "extraordinary". Moreover, he had a thesis to prove--that Christian charity was not dead, but shone forth brightly in Don Bosco's extraordinary life and work. Du Boys' biography was intended to be a paean to Christian love, a song of praise to "Don Bosco as the genial poet of Christian charity."⁴⁵

Du Boys' book, precisely because of its more serious character, is less readable and charming than D'Espiney's. But, with the backing of the Salesians, it enjoyed wide circulation and became the preferred vehicle for publicizing the Salesian work.

5.0.0 MR. VILLEFRANCHE'S *VIE DE DOM BOSCO* AND LADY MARTIN'S ENGLISH TRANSLATION

In 1888 the first sustained biography of Don Bosco to appear in any language was published in France. It was the work of Mr. J.M. Villefranche. An English translation by Lady Martin appeared in England no later than February 1890.⁴⁶ The second edition was a medium-size book of vi + 342 pages, and the third edition one of vii + 302 pages.

5.1.0 QUALITY OF THE ORIGINAL WORK AND OF ITS TRANSLATION

⁴⁵Stella, *DB:L&W*, p. xiii. Quoting Du Boys [*Don Bosco*, p. 229], Stella continues: "Don Bosco was pictured as a poet no less than Dante or Milton, the Homer of the Catholic apostolate. His 150 houses in 1884 were the '150 cantos of his immense epic [...] composed of human beings instead of verses and strophes'."

⁴⁶J.-M. Villefranche, *Vie de Dom Bosco*. Paris: Bloud et Barral (Imprimeries Salésiennes), 1888.

Lady [Sir Richard] Martin, *Life of Don Bosco, Founder of the Salesian Society*, translated from the French of J.M. Villefranche. London: Burns & Oates, Ltd, [1890].

A long review of Lady Martin's book appeared in two issues of *The Tablet*, March 1 and 8, 1890, pp. 327f. and p. 369f. The publication data are given, but not the date.

Unfortunately, neither the biographical data on the author, nor the French edition of the *Vie*, nor the first English edition are available to this writer. Nor, apparently, was this material available to Fr. McPake, whose study will nonetheless guide our discussion.

The anonymous reviewer in *The Tablet* praised the work as "one of the most necessary volumes, in our humble opinion that have been issued by an English publisher for many years."⁴⁷ Lady Martin is likewise given credit for a good translation.⁴⁸ It does indeed read smoothly, but there are flaws. Some of these are pointed out by the reviewer, and are easily ascribed to the text's French pedigree. A number of them, however, whether of French extraction or not, have escaped notice and are still to be found in the 3rd edition of 1898: *Vaudois* (Waldenses), *Pignerol* (Pinerolo), *Nice from Montferrat* (Nizza Monferrato), *Magon*, etc. Further, she writes "Dominic Soave" for "Dominic Savio".⁴⁹ In speaking of Don Bosco's "course of education," she states preposterously: "He used two systems: the repressive and preventive," and proceeds to give the traditional explanation of the terms and of the method.⁵⁰

But in spite of these and other flaws the Villefranche-Martin work stands head and shoulders above all early biographies of Don Bosco. Fr. McPake writes:

In length, range, and general presentation, it is of an altogether higher order [than the D'Espiney-Barker work] [...] A quick glance at the chapter headings would make it immediately apparent to Salesians that Villefranche had already hit upon what was to be, for a long time to come, the biographical pattern of the many lives of Don Bosco that were to follow, a pattern reproduced and reinforced by Auffray in his famous book for the beatification in 1929. The writer, the printer, the miracle worker, the builder of churches, the educator, the founder of Congregations, etc., passes steadily before the reader, and the whole is generously

⁴⁷ *The Tablet*, March 1, 1890, p. 328.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* . Also, according to Fr. McPake, "the reviewer in the *Month* was hardly less laudatory. *The Salesian Bulletin* was equally fulsome and wrote on the appearance of the 3rd [English] edition in 1898: 'Villefranche's life of Don Bosco, which has run into eleven editions in the French, is charmingly written, and a vivid portraiture of Don Bosco is given therein. The gifted translator has done her work so well, that the spirit of the original version loses nothing in the English text'" [McPake, p. 4].

⁴⁹ Lady Martin, *Life of Don Bosco, Founder of the Salesian Society*, third edition. London: Burns & Oates, Limited, 1898, p. 124.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* , p. 137. This may have been Villefranche's, not Lady Martin's, misconception. The *Tablet* reviewer, in quoting the passage, was conscious of its awkwardness and hastened to add: "Of course this is not, save in very exceptional cases, Don Bosco's method of training children, wherein lay the incredible success of his work. His principle was to make the repressive element needless by using the preventive" [*The Tablet*, March 8, 1890, p. 369].

larded with many of the marvelous tales that were such a feature of Don Bosco's experiences.⁵¹

5.2.0 Sources and Character of Mr. Villefranche's Work

Mr. Villefranche achieved this new level of biographical writing about Don Bosco, by making judicious use of all previous biographical contributions. F. Desramaut notes some of these sources: Fr. Bonetti's *Storia* in the *Salesian Bulletin*, Fr. Lemoyne's *Life of Margaret Bosco*,⁵² the biographies by L. Aubineau⁵³ and Dr. D'Espiney, and writings by Don Bosco and Fr. Cerruti--to which list Mr. Du Boys' work should also be added.⁵⁴

But it should be emphasized that the level reached is that of "informative", not that of "critical biography". Mr. Villefrance and, for that matter, all that came after him, down to practically our own day, still stand well within the miracle-oriented, laudatory tradition.

The foregoing discussion of the Villefranche-Martin work marks the end of the review and evaluation of early biographical writing on Don Bosco, which this essay, within its limited scope, had set for its goal. But one question needs to be answered, and it is one which has surfaced repeatedly in the discussion, and which may also have caused the reader to wonder: What did Don Bosco think of all this?

6.0.0 DON BOSCO'S AMBIVALENT ATTITUDE TOWARD HIS OWN BIOGRAPHY

Don Bosco fully believed that, though Our Lady's intervention, God was working in him, and that the results were "extraordinary". But he

⁵¹McPake, p. 4.

⁵²Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, *Scene morali di famiglia esposte nella vita di Margherita Bosco. Racconto edificante ed ameno*. Torino: Scuola Tipografica Salesiana, 1886.

Fr. Lemoyne had been gathering material on Mamma Margaret, perhaps in view of a biography for the *Catholic Readings*, apparently using Don Bosco as principal source. When in 1885 he began to assemble and print the *Documenti* [cf. note 32], he included all the Mamma Margaret material. On a visit to Count Colle in Toulon in 1886, Don Bosco mentioned the prospective biography, and the Count offered to defray expenses for its publication. Apprised of this development by Don Bosco's secretary, Carlo Viglietti, Fr. Lemoyne quickly wrote the book and made an offering of it to Don Bosco on his "namesday" (Birth of St. John the Baptist, June 24, 1886) [cf. IBM 18, pp. 57ff.].

⁵³Cf. note 2.

⁵⁴Cf. Francis Desramaut, S.D.B., *Les Mémoires I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne: Étude d'un ouvrage fondamental sur la jeunesse de saint Jean Bosco* (Études Salésiennes, 1). Lyon: Maison d'Études Saint-Jean-Bosco [Imprimerie Louis-Jean de Gap], 1962, p.12.

also fully believed that none of that was *his own* doing. So, obviously, he must have felt some embarrassment at what was being presented to the general public about him, especially in the case of writings that were unstintingly laudatory and that delighted in recounting "miraculous" and other "extraordinary" events.

Don Bosco did not live to read Mr. Villefranche's work, and we can only speculate as to what he might have thought of it. But we do know what he thought of Dr. D'Espiney's book, and his ambivalent attitude toward it has already been noted.⁵⁵

A development toward his acceptance of publicity as a fact of life occurred in connection with Mr. Du Boys' biography, written as it was under Salesian auspices and under his personal supervision. The fact that Mr. Du Boys' work was generally accurate and well-documented should not blind us to another fact--that it was enthusiastically laudatory and fairly well seasoned with the "miraculous" and the "extraordinary". Don Bosco's ambivalent feelings in this regard are evidenced from letters written to Mr. Du Boy at the time of his writing, and after the publication of the book.

I thank you [...] for wanting so kindly to concern yourself with me and our activities. Only I beg you, do not speak too much of poor Don Bosco and do not give him the glory that belongs to God alone.⁵⁶

In another letter, Don Bosco thanks Mr. Du Boys "for the noble, learned and important work" he had authored; and he adds:

I have, at various times during the reading of it, experienced embarrassment, for I am in no way deserving of such praise. It is out of your goodness, already proven to us in so many ways in the past, that you wished to honor our humble Congregation by this outstanding work.⁵⁷

But Don Bosco grew to accept publicity, under any form, and perhaps even to like it, provided it contributed toward advancing God's

⁵⁵Cf. notes 9, 15, 16 and related text. Cf. also Cavaglià, pp. 196-199.

⁵⁶Letter of November 19, 1882 to "the Count", in the Du Boys family archives, quoted in Cavaglià, p. 198.

⁵⁷Letter of October 2, 1884, in the Du Boys family archives, quoted in Cavaglià, p. 198.

work. In 1885, in expressing his preference for Mr. Du Boys' work, Don Bosco said to Fr. Branda:

At first I felt nothing but repugnance at the thought of allowing publication of anything that concerned me. But now that the die is cast, we must press forward. Du Boys' book, whether sold at a price or given away free, should be given the widest possible circulation., because it makes us and our work known in a way that is true to fact.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION: GENERAL EVALUATION OF EARLY BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING ON DON BOSCO

At one point, in his study of recent research on Don Bosco, Fr. Pietro Stella focuses his attention on Lemoyne and his monumental biographical work. What he writes on Lemoyne and his work is equally applicable to the whole biographical tradition of which Fr. Lemoyne was the foremost and most prolific representative. All such biography embodies a specific mentality characteristic of the nineteenth century--one that lay somewhere between the medieval miracle-oriented mentality and the modern scientific mentality. In other words, in spite of an impressive recourse to sources and documentation, the basic purpose of such biography remained that of showing that in Don Bosco's life extraordinary divine graces beyond, or even in contradiction to, the laws of nature, were clearly and continuously at work.⁵⁹

This was also Don Bosco's own conviction, as well as that of the Salesians and the young people around him, for he belonged to that cultural milieu, and lived and worked with that mentality. Stella writes:

Don Bosco himself [as well as his biographers] finds his place within that cultural ecclesiastical milieu that was supernaturalistic in tendency and effect. Working with presuppositions fostered by the semi-traditionalist theological training of the seminary, this cultural group tended to see miraculous happenings and extraordinary graces where university-trained people (such as Lawrence Gastaldi) [did not]. Opposed as these other people might be to the so called profane sciences, they nonetheless were trying to make an end of such

⁵⁸IBM 17, p. 596f. Cf. note 16.

⁵⁹Cf. Pietro Stella, "Le ricerche su Don Bosco nel venticinquennio 1960-1985: bilancio, problemi, prospettive," in *Don Bosco nella Chiesa a servizio dell'umanità: Studi e testimonianze*, Pietro Braido, ed. (Istituto Storico Salesiano, Studi, 5). Roma: LAS, 1987, p. 383.

popular hagiography as that offered by Don Bosco's *Catholic Readings*--an hagiography that still drew upon legendary and apocryphal sources, and that only met with impatience and ridicule from the modern, middle-class mind.⁶⁰

Therefore, all early biography on Don Bosco, including Fr. Lemoyne's and his successors', should be approached with the right understanding of its popular medieval religious roots. On no account ought it to be dismissed as novelized history, which it is not. On the contrary, it should be regarded as the mediator of important historical information--as a mine to be diligently worked for the wealth it holds enclosed.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 387f.